

The *Dougla* in Trinidad's Consciousness

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Introduction

Douglas, the offspring of Indo-African unions, occupy an ambiguous position in Trinidadian society. Etymologically, the word *Dougla* is linked to *dogla* which is of Indic origin and is defined by Platts (1884,534) as “a person of impure breed, a hybrid, a mongrel; a two-faced or deceitful person and a hypocrite.” In Bihar, Northern India, from where many Indian indentured labourers migrated to Trinidad, *dogla* still carries the meaning of a person of impure breed related specifically to the “progeny of inter-varna¹ marriage, acquiring the connotation of ‘bastard’, meaning illegitimate son of a prostitute, only in a secondary sense” (Reddock 1994,101). We do not know how and when the term *Dougla* became equated to the offspring of Indian-African unions in Trinidad but we may surmise that it originated in traditional Indian contempt for the darker-skinned (Brereton 1974, 24).

Recognition of *Douglas*

Wood (1968) does not recognise a *Dougla* presence in 19th century Trinidad. He trusts the official report of the Protector of the Immigrants that as late as 1871, 26 years after their arrival, “no single instance of co-habitation with a Negro existed among the 9,000 male and female indentured labourers” (1968, 138). He overlooks the 1876 testimony of John Morton, to the effect that “a few children are to be met with, born of Madras and Creole parents and some also of Madras and Chinese parents—the Madrased being the mother” (Moore 1995, 238).

Ramesar (1994) accepts the reality of inter-racial sexual relations in the early twentieth century, but seems reluctant to acknowledge Africans as sexual partners for Indians and nowhere mentions the word *Dougla*. The *Dougla* presence is instead hidden in the generic term “Indian Creoles.” Examining the statistics testifying to Indian inter-racial sexual liaisons, Ramesar argues that such relationships happened more readily in Port of Spain and in Cedros than in central Trinidad, where the majority of Indian communities were located. Yet, the demographic evidence indicates African-Indian unions even in areas dominated by Indians (Harewood 1975).

According to Ramesar, the Indian fathers of mixed-race children were “probably westernized individuals who sought educated spouses.” She concedes, however, that “changed social relationships had also affected the lower levels in society” (146). Yet, the literary works of C.A. Thomasos (1933), C.L.R. James (1929; 1936), and Alfred Mendes (1935) demonstrate that inter-racial mixing was not necessarily inspired by social climbing. In these works, *Douglas* are presented as deracinated individuals engaged, as part of Black urban lower class, in the amoral struggle for survival.

In the 2005 feature address at the launch of the Indian Arrival Day Heritage Village, Elizabeth Rosabelle Sieusarran, a University of the West Indies lecturer, said:

In our quest for establishing unity among our people, it is imperative for us to note a rapidly increasing phenomenon of westernisation of the Indian community. This has resulted in the prevalence of inter-caste, inter-religious and inter-racial marriages. The Indian community has to decide how to handle the offspring of this significant group locally referred to as douglas. Do we accept them or ostracise them? Whatever course is adopted, the fragmentation of the Indian community must be avoided (Trinidad Express 16th May 2005, 5).

Sieusarran thus reduces the problems caused by westernisation to the fragmentation within the Indian community allegedly created by exogamy. She then ignores the progeny of many such relationships and targets *Douglas* as the source of that fragmentation. While acknowledging the organic connection of the *Douglas* to the Indian communities, Sieusarran indicates that *Douglas* are still perceived as a problem by some Indians even while they advocate co-existence in a multi-cultural society.

Mixed, Other, or Not Stated

What is perceived impressionistically as a growth in the population of *Douglas* is not represented in the official censuses, which mystifies the situation of the growing *Douglas* population. According to the 1931 census, 1,713 persons were born to Indian fathers only, and 805 were born to Indian mothers only (Kuczynski 1953). The race of the other parent is not indicated. The 1946 census registers the presence of 8,406 East Indian Creoles who are defined as “persons of mixed East Indian origin, on the whole people who had an East Indian father or an East Indian mother only” (Kuczynski 339). Harewood (1975) notes that these 8,406 were included in the category “Mixed” together with 70,369 mulattoes and other people of mixed racial ancestry.

The censuses conducted between 1946, when the category “Mixed” was introduced, and 2000, when figures were last compiled, indicate a steady growth of this category (Figure 1). This increase also appears as a percentage of the total population.

Figure 1: The Growth of Trinidad’s Mixed Population (1946-2000).

Year	No. of Mixed persons	% of total population
1946	78,775	14.1
1960	134,750	16.3
1970	133,706	14.4
1980	172,285	16.4
1990	207,558	18.45
2000	228,089	20.46

Harewood (1975, 98) opines that the decline in the “Mixed” category between 1960 and 1970 “reflects the inconsistency of measurement of this group.” Abdulah (1985, 35-36) explains the decline as a function of the perception of “Blackness”, which was prompted by the Black Power demonstrations of 1970.

Ethnic identity is a matter of circumstance rather than a fixed state for many individuals, including those whose phenotypic characteristics reflect evidence of more

than one ancestor group. It is therefore still difficult to understand the reluctance on the part of society to acknowledge *Douglas* as a category.

Before 2011, *Douglas* were not designated in official censuses as a marginal ethnic community or even a biracial minority group. They were denied that corporate identity because of what Schilling-Estes (2004, 167) describes as the dominant culture's belief that "'authentic' tribal groups must be of homogenous rather than multi-tribal origin." The failure of the pre-2011 censuses to officially register *Douglas* as a group, leaving them to share the categories "Mixed" and "Other" with individuals of any of the numerous permutations possible, may have resulted in the *Douglas*'s failure to recognise themselves as a distinct minority. Lately, however, *Douglas* have been recognised in political polls and the census of 2011, while failing to employ the term *Douglas*, signally acknowledges a mixed African and Indian category. The long-term effects of this will be revealed with the passage of time.

The *Douglas* in the Social Structure

The ambiguous social positioning of the *Douglas* has denied them the chance to influence their social environment in the way other late-arriving immigrant groups have done. *Douglas*, who did not form a group, were marginal to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tensions when the white plantocracy attempted to constrain the emerging black and brown meritocracy (Brereton 1979).

The Black Power Revolution of 1970 symbolised the ethnic and class-based contestation between Black and White, but Indians read in this a summons for the reinvigoration of their Hindu selves (Vertovec 1992). According to Black et al. (1976, 79), Hinduism "represents a heritage; a way of life, and a feeling of cultural superiority" (see also Capildeo 1991). Regis (2002, 40) further notes that in the revitalisation of Hinduism, "'Indian' became synonymous with 'Hindu', an exclusionary identification which marginalized the urban pro-PNM Muslims and Christians." It also further marginalised *Douglas* due to their partly African heritage.

In the late 1980s, as African-Indian contestation dominated social and even cultural life, a heated controversy developed over a plan by the government of the day for compulsory national service. Indian and African purists represented the plan as a scheme for enforced miscegenation. The term *douglarisation*, the process by which *Douglas* are birthed, was bandied about as potentially the most unwelcome outcome (Regis 2002, 49-69). While this debate ignored the sensitivities of *Douglas*, more remarkable was the absence of a collective *Douglas* voice or a *Douglas* spokesperson to publicly pronounce on the issue.

Even in multi-ethnic Trinidad, group theory, based on race and ethnicity, still holds sway (Best 1991). Mixed individuals have always been free to choose the group to which they belong or which accommodates them. The absence of one ancestral land functioning as a symbolic homeland and source of consolation may have militated against the formation of a *Douglas* community. Unlike other recognised ethnic groups, *Douglas* lack an organisation and headquarters thus further contributing to their invisibility.

A major problem associated with establishing a *Douglas* identity lies in the difficulty of determining who is a *Douglas*. This is so because, in spite of the fact that the phenotype dictates that a *Douglas* is the offspring of African and Indian lineage, the degree of this mixture is always a cause for contention. The degree of Indianness, as Rahim (2007) asserts, is the major element in the ascription of *Douglas* identity.

This assertion is corroborated by fieldwork carried out for this study. Results of preliminary interviews among the sample population suggest that individuals are styled *Douglas* based on the observable degree of Indianness in their phenotype “if they do(h)[n’t] have soft, wavy hair, you might think they still mix[ed] bu’[t] not wit[h] Indian” (Informant. Interview: May 2002). There are *Douglas* who bear, to a greater extent, the distinguishing marks of their Indian heritage but there are others who have tightly curled hair, broad noses and thick lips. Hence, Brother Marvin the calypsonian, who belongs in this latter group, surprised many people in his “Jahaaji Bhai” (1996) when he confessed himself a *Dougl*a. Age, class, education, gender, regional location and sex also figure prominently in perception and self-perception and it is not certain how many of those categorising themselves in the official censuses as ‘Mixed’, ‘Other’ or ‘Not stated’ may be counted as *Douglas* by others including *Douglas*. Trinidad’s hypersensitivity to colour is another determinant. Light-skinned *Douglas* may well escape the designation, while their darker skinned counterparts (who in some cases may be their relatives of the lighter-skinned *Doulgas*), may be unable to do so.

It is also necessary to consider how *Douglas* perceive themselves in relation to either of the ethnic groups to which they are linked and how they in turn are perceived by those around them, particularly by Afro and Indo Trinidadians. In fact, it is the *Douglas*’ perception of themselves that creates the problem of identity and linkage. At any point in time, *Douglas* can align themselves to one ancestor group or the other without claiming a separate identity. On the other hand, because of personal circumstances and experiences, *Douglas* may disavow either community and declare themselves Trinidadian, thus claiming a national identity as an ethnic identity, as happens in Belize with individuals wishing to affirm allegiance to national sovereignty (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 232-243). *Dougl*a identity is therefore polymorphous and adds another layered dimension to a society described by some as plural and by others as stratified.

The *Dougl*a in Literature and Popular Culture

In creative writing, *Dougl*a identity as a social construct is not central even when major characters are *Douglas*. *Douglas* are marginal even in the Calypso, the popular song-dance complex that originated in Trinidad and is, in the words of calypsonian the Mighty Duke, “an editorial in song of the life that we undergo.” The *Dougl*a theme is largely absent, even though several *Dougl*a singers have graced the Calypso stage. This fact is even more remarkable considering Regis’ (1998, 31) affirmation that “Calypso fictions and narratives venture into vitally important areas of social discourse which because of unspoken protocol of civil discourse remain sensitive areas of darkness.” The comparatively few songs on *Douglas* contrast starkly with the 400 on ethnic issues recorded by Regis (2002).

The general indifference to the *Dougl*a question is reflected in the overall lack of public response even to popular or controversial calypsos on the *Dougl*a. One example is found in Calypsonian Dougl’a’s “Split Me in Two” (1961). The calypso highlights the predicament of the *Dougl*a individual in a situation when ethnicity was becoming more assertive and aggressive as the two major groups sought dominance in the soon-to-become independent state. The protagonist of “Split Me in Two” describes how the *Dougl*a child is isolated: “Always by mehself like a lil monkey/ Not one single child wouldn’t play with me” and physically beaten by both Africans and Indians who perceive him as a member of the rival group. In the final stanza,

however, he redeems *Dougla* identity, stating its ability to boast not one heritage but two. This calypso elevated Dougla to the national Calypso King status, the most prestigious award in calypsodom. Public recognition, however, did not promote any sustained national interest in the predicament of the *Douglas*' or the emergence of a collective *Dougla* voice.

Three later calypsos mentioning *Douglas* reinforce this marginality. In "Goodbye to India" (1971), Hindu Prince rates the ability to produce *Dougla* offspring as one of the many delights possible in a permissive Trinidad. In "Mr Trinidad" (1974), Maestro employs the presence of a *Dougla* population as a reproach to Indo-Trinidadians who boast of racial purity. In "Questions for Dr Job" (1993), Pink Panther asks, "A *Dougla* rape a woman in La Romain/Which race yuh go blame?" In this way, he urges Morgan Job, an astringent critic of Africans, to reconsider his position on race. The three calypsos share an acceptance of the *Dougla* presence and a simultaneous denial of their subjectivity; in all three songs, the *Dougla* is spoken about but does not speak.

Bro Marvin's "Jahaaji Bhai" (1996) projects *Dougla* identity but perhaps for political reasons, subsumes it in Indo-Trinidadian identity at the expense of African identity. This, and particularly his third stanza, embroiled his beautiful and popular calypso in a mega-controversy:

For those who playing ignorant
Talking 'bout true African descendant
If yuh want to know the truth
Take a trip back to yuh roots
And somewhere on that journey
Yuh go see a man in a *dhoti*
Saying he prayers in front a *jhandi*

Some Pan-African activists repudiated this stanza and thus the entire calypso, while the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, the major organisation representing Hindu traditionalists, crowned Marvin their Calypso Monarch, perhaps to compensate for his not winning the national title. In the heat of argument, Africans, Indians and *Douglas* ignored the fact that the calypso began as Marvin's affirmation of his *Dougla* identity. As in the douglarisation debate of the late 1980s, the *Dougla* voice was not invited to mediate the dispute or even to speak for *Douglas* as a group. The *Dougla* dilemma, as some term it, is not seen as a national issue.

Conclusions

This paper maps the comparative invisibility of *Douglas* in Trinidadian society in the second half of the 19th and 20th centuries. The comparative absence of *Douglas* in social history, anthropology, creative writing, and popular culture of Trinidad testifies to their relative marginality in the collective social consciousness of the country, despite the impression that their numbers are growing. There are signs, however, that this is changing. Reddock's research (1994) indicates that some *Douglas* resent the word as applied to themselves, but my own fieldwork conducted between 2001 and 2010 suggests that attitudes about the term and the people it represents are changing. *Douglas* positioned in prominent positions are now declaring their ethnicity and current social and political polls reflect the *Dougla* category. Further, the official population census of 2011, recognises *Dougla* as an ethnic group, even though the

term “Mixed-African and East Indian” is used in lieu of *Dougla*. The idea of a *Dougla* republic has also been mooted in some circles. *Dougla* is projected as a metaphor for Trinidadian nationality, and Shalini Puri (2004) has advanced a theory of “dougla poetics” by way of using the *Dougla* as a “rich symbolic resource for interracial unity” (221). All of this signals a growing appreciation of the *Dougla* presence on the social landscape of Trinidad.

Endnotes

¹ Varna is the Sanskrit word for colour, which was translated by the Portuguese, who were the first Europeans to observe it, by the word *casta*, or ‘pure’. The Aryans, who were light-skinned people with sharp features, created this distinction because they did not want to mix with the darker flat-featured people whom they conquered. As such an elaborate caste system was built. See Daly 1975:3

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