



## In/Visible Native

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### **Abstract**

This essay offers personal reflections on Indigeneity in the Caribbean, constructions of gender, self-discovery, and survival. It sets these concerns within a worldview that sees our inclusive and sustainable relationship with the natural world.

**Keywords:** Human-nature connectedness, Indigenous, gender

#### **How to cite**

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I grew up in Arima, a community of relations in which we learned to shelter each other. We understood that our ancestors had already survived an apocalypse. At school, they told us we were dead. At school, they said the Indigenous population was decimated. At home, my father said: You are Indigenous. No one can tell you who you are.

The history books referred to us as Caribs and Arawaks. In these texts, First People are framed as being peaceful farmers (Arawak) and warlike cannibals (Caribs). We belonged to an organisation called the Santa Rosa Carib Community. As I grew older, and I did more reading and research myself, I learned that there were no tribes called Arawak or Carib, specifically, but these were names given by historians from European countries attempting to record their “discoveries” – historians who considered us natives.

The tension in the “native” designation is to acknowledge that one was born here, but also to suggest there is the presence of something “wild”, that may yet be “savage.” Moreover, to be “savage” is to be “uneducated” and “unruly”. To me, to be native is to be born here, and to be Indigenous is to care for the land as though it were a part of you, and you are a part of it. We are a part of nature, not apart from nature. All of nature is vital to its survival.

I moved to Port-of-Spain, and for the first time in my life, I was asked: “How do you know you are Indigenous?” They would say: “I was born here, too. That also makes me Indigenous.” It seemed as though I could only claim the title if I were prepared to wear feathers and conduct smoke ceremonies for public consumption. I had to prove who I was.

I use the word “native” in this essay to acknowledge the aesthetics of the word and claim it. But in truth, I don’t prefer any of the designations assigned to my identity.

These namings have the energy of giving and taking away.

So much has already been taken away, extracted. When Europeans first arrived in the Caribbean, their recorded first impressions bear out that our forests were considered foreboding and impenetrable. Nakedness was read as primitive: a symbol of promiscuity and sexual invitation. Indigenous body types were hyper-sexualised (large breasts and buttocks). But through the lens of the Indigenous people who lived on these islands, the forest was like a giant supermarket, a giant pharmacy where food and medicine could be found. In this communion with the land, the First People accessed and developed advanced technologies to support their survival. The colonial project, however, attempted to erase these learnings and/or adopt and claim them. The colonial intervention set a cycle in motion which has led us here, to the very crucial moment of a negatively altered environment, and, in many ways, we are finding our way back to the future.

As part of this process of finding our way – a process of collective self-discovery – I was commissioned by Bocas Lit Fest, in August 2022, to compose a written piece on Banwari woman/man, 3400 BCE: the earliest known inhabitant of the Antilles, whose remains were found at Banwari Trace in South Trinidad. The remains had been known as Banwari Man, though more recent research suggests it could also have been a woman. The commission came about as Trinidad and Tobago readied our 60th Independence celebrations. The following is an excerpt from that work titled “Unearthed”:



Tracy Assing. **Self-portrait**, Circa 2014. Multi exposure digital photo.

I am the root.

she/he

I have never been suited to your classifications.

Mmmmmmmmmmm-meaning,

You have tried to measure my story with limited instruments.

Zoology. Anthropology. Archaeology. Geography. Cartography.

Understanding evades you still.

You made your discovery, uncovered me, just west of the Coora  
River

where my footsteps ended.

Shell, stone and bone, midden upturned by your industry, you did  
not see, you walked where I tread.

When the world was young and endless we knew nothing. Content  
to witness all the wonder of the universe unfolding, as we are,  
learning.

Oooooooooohhhh—wwwweeeeee

When the world was young we flowed over the land like water,  
spoke the languages of birds, sought the kinship of rocks and  
travelled through and to the stars with the ease of breathing.

Every hunter travelled with seeds.

We could never take without giving.

Soil is living.

In my writing, I talk about strengthening our connection to nature. Our fixation on control, categorisation, and standardisation outside of this notion – that is, we are part of nature – can sometimes get in the way of how we see, keeping us from uncovering deeper understandings about ourselves. Reflecting on Banwari woman/man, I think about constructions of identity and their limits. Having no care for what stood before, colonisation introduced patriarchy to Indigenous societies. This attempt to crush Indigenous beliefs, customs, language, and culture had dramatic and mostly negative effects on Indigenous women's role in society. Europeans established a social order of gender, class, and race. These designations placed men as superior to women; instituted class hierarchies; and recognised white men as being superior to Asian, Black or “savage” men. These differences of status were then encoded in religious and civil laws that regulated rights, obligations, and labour.

Many First Nations were matrilineal, meaning that wealth, power, and inheritance were passed to new generations through the mother. Women were respected as leaders because they took responsibility for caring for others. In many pre-contact cultures, Indigenous women would decide on war, distribute wealth in the community and decide who was allowed to be a member of that nation. Women and non-binary people were honoured and respected for the role they played in creating a thriving culture. Trinidad and Tobago's most established Indigenous community was also traditionally matrilineal. Most of the Indigenous population was converted to Catholicism, and with the establishment of the Santa Rosa Mission in Arima, the female leader was given the title of Queen – a lifetime appointment. Although the Queen leads the Council of Elders, it is a man, the Chief/President (a position established in 1974), who is the true leader of the organisation, representing matters at the national level.



**Queen Valentina Medina** of the Santa Rosa First Peoples (Carib) Community, Tracy Assing's aunt. Feast of Santa Rosa Day, August, 2008, taken immediately after mass at the start of the annual procession. Photograph Tracy Assing.

On record, the most notable female Indigenous leader in the Caribbean region is Anacaona (Golden Flower), a Taino Cacique born in Xaragua. Xaragua, also known as Hispaniola, was separated into Haiti and the Dominican Republic by European colonisers. Anacaona, believed to have been a poet as well as a respected military strategist, was eventually ambushed and killed. A patriarchal system lessened the traditional roles women had as leaders, treating them as less than equal to men, giving them fewer rights. Under this system, same-sex unions were criminalised.

What if “men” and “women” didn't hold fast to the definitions and descriptions tied to them? The natural world doesn't fit into binaries. Nature constantly reconstructs and reinvents itself. Organisms sense their surroundings and can even change their environment to survive. If we leave more room for imagination, perhaps we leave room for opportunities for a more inclusive and sustainable relationship with the natural world.

We live in a world where human beings see themselves at the top of the hierarchy. We continually judge things through this human lens, weighing the importance of matters on the scale of what may be important to the human being. And even then, it seems that some human beings matter more than others. The Indigenous way of life is to respect all life. We need to see nature not as an “other” but as kin. Indigenous people all over the world understand the importance of developing relationships with all our relations: the grasses, the trees, the frogs and insects, the rocks and the river – everything has its purpose. Our environment impacts our way of life, and yet we rarely include Indigenous voices, wildlife, and land rights in our reasonings.

To be native is to be born here, in a bioregion, a space understood by its ecological relationships rather than political/national borders. This comes with a responsibility. We should be wielding the language of gratitude, expressing our thanks to the other forms of life that support our existence, and recognising that we cannot exist without each other.

This language of yours begins to feel familiar.

I can see how you have wielded its power.

I had to take my story out your mouth. I had to shape the words myself.

Walk. Hike. Massacre. Uprising. Occupation. Life. Empire. Death.

Still, sometimes I prefer the language of birds.

I missed this most of all as dirt filled my mouth.

I was concerned that I would not remember the language. Not like the way I lost my tongue. I cannot utter a word without the taste of blood in my mouth, numbed by steel, thrust through my head from the chin.

Still, could not smother the fire within.

I did burn here. So, I fed the grass. You choose to sell everything that arose.

Supplanting trees and grasses for concrete and blacktop,

Building cities for cars.

Oh prodigal, your spoils are finite.

–Excerpt from “Unearthed”



Tracy Assing , **As above, so below**. Aripo River, Trinidad, 2020. Photograph.



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