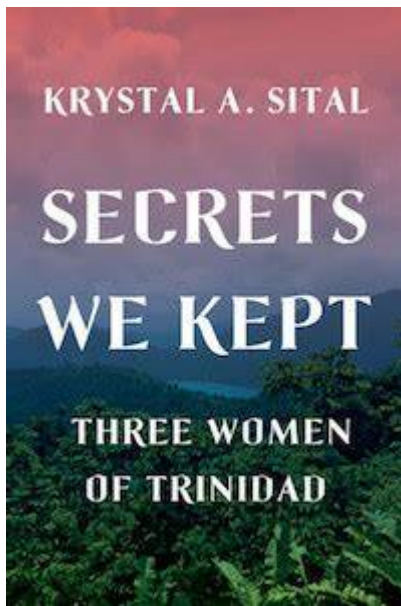


# New Memoir by Krystal A. Sital: SECRETS WE KEPT



We are of Trinidad—my grandmother, my mother, and I.

Our island is located in the Lesser Antilles of paradise, a dot on the map that is often forgotten. *It like ah drop ah oil, some say, as doh somebody forget to wipe it ahwey.*

The bodies of water that seep into the island are as much a part of the island's identity as they are a part of ours, and everywhere we have come to settle after abandoning home has been with the proximity of the seaside in mind. Perhaps the openness of the sea soothes the inner turmoil of us island women, or perhaps it shows the island's inability to contain us.

While attending school in Trinidad—*hwome*, as we will call it for the rest of our lives, though we are all now settled in America—we're taught how Christopher Columbus discovered it in 1498. That the Carib and Arawak tribes were indigenous didn't stop historians from calling it a discovery. In conversation with Americans, I've heard my grandmother and mother draw the same facts from our elementary education, the same ones I

mention to others today. *Do you know why it's called Trinidad? It's because of the three hills along the southern coast of the island—Morne Derrick, Gros Morne, and Guaya Hill. When Columbus first spotted the land on July 31 in 1498 he was inspired to name it after the three hills—La Trinidad, the Trinity.* These ternate hills that peak above the clouds in mottled greens, picturesque, majestic, form a wall that breaks the patterns of the most ferocious hurricanes, a natural protection that no other island in the Caribbean owns. The Trinity represents our most powerful guardians.

Rising with elegance along the bluffs, the supple branches of immortelle trees stretch wide, their leaves on fire against the backdrop of a perfect Caribbean sky. Native to Venezuela, just off the coast of Trinidad, these mountain trees shine emerald all year round in their natural habitat. Once they were brought to Trinidad to cast shade over the cocoa plantations in the 19th century, they too, like all else touched by the islands, changed. Their roots burrowed deep, and they exchanged their greenery for fire petals that flicker orange and red along the regions of Trinidad and Tobago. Sown into the very history of the terrain, we choose what of the island we will share with others, and so the beak of a hummingbird dipping into the beaded nectar of an immortelle flower creates the ambiance for the stories we choose to tell. And so, like the fingers of a hand skimming the water of a glassy tide pool, you touch but the surface.

What we never say is how historians call the naming of Trinidad a “historical hoax.” Columbus had every intention of baptizing the next land he found La Trinidad. Its having three hills was either mere coincidence or a miracle. It depends on how one chooses to tell the story.

Most people shake their heads in confusion when we tell them where we're from. *Where?* they ask. *Where exactly is that?* And sometimes those who have a vague familiarity with the Caribbean will say, *I thought everyone there was black.*

On our islands you will find descendants of the Carib and Arawak tribes, Europeans, Venezuelans, Chinese, Syrians, French, Portuguese, and Lebanese, but of them all, the two largest groups by far are East Indians and Africans. Centuries before Trinidad became a British colony, before Sir Walter Raleigh discovered the natural Pitch Lake that gleamed the blackest blue along spools of water on Trinidad's knee, before Columbus spotted the island, Amerindians called it home. They called it Ieri- Land of the Hummingbird. But when Columbus sailed upon them, these people were captured, enslaved, and littered along the coasts of other Caribbean islands, forced to work for Spain.

Our island changed hands, and when the British captured it from Spain, they brought enslaved Africans to work the leafy grounds of the sugar plantations. This was the only group of people to exist on the island as slaves, and when slavery was abolished in England, the wealthy landowners in Trinidad then brought indentured laborers from India to replace the Africans on the plantations.

*At least we geh pay, the Indians now say, dem niggas an dem come as slave. They know the history but continue to etch in these lines drawn for them. They perpetuate a war, the East Indians and Africans, one group thinking they are better than the other, East Indian children rhyming in the schoolyard, Nigga nigga come foh roti, all de roti done, when de coolie raise e gun, all de nigga run. And Africans taunting, Eenie meenie miney mo, ketch ah coolie by e toe, when e ready let im go, eenie meenie miney mo.*

And so this enmity between Africans and Indians led them, and others, to maintain the perceived purity of their bloodlines, further carving hatred into our islands' history. Interracial couples and their multiracial children are still shunned as they were in my mother's childhood and my grandmother's. The blended are labeled mulatto, dougla, cocopanyol. These words are hissed and spat at my family: my grandmother is mixed, my

Indian grandfather is not.

The shorelines of the islands are still unmarred by cement skyscrapers, but throngs of tourists trample lands natives can no longer afford, and boardwalks, chlorinated pools, and lobbies adorned with plastic plants have been cropping up with the image of paradise being sold.

But the republic of Trinidad and Tobago is where coconut trees rise out of the land, their backs braced against the breezes, spines curved into C's all along the shores, and coconut husks ripped from their mother trees dot the sand on every coast.

Our stories are rooted in the Caribbean, our histories woven into its bougainvillea trellises with their paper-thin petals; the lone road winding round and round the mountain like a serpent strangling a tree, coiling up and down again to the virgin beaches untouched by hotels and tourists, crowds, and money; the foliage so dense and green it's a prismatic shade of malachite, almost as though the vegetation itself is choking the life out of the island. This is a place where the intoxicating aroma of curry drapes itself around you in layers; where bake and shark sandwiches are fried on the beach; where the main ingredient for every dish is the heady bandanya, our word for culantro—no, not cilantro, it is much stronger than that. Here, people devour every part of every animal from the eyeballs to the guts and lick their fingers and pat their bellies when they are through.

The island can be traversed in a day, less than that if you know what you're doing. A mere ten degrees north of the equator, it is a place of heat so intense it can drive a person insane, and yet the waves curling against the seashore deep in the valleys between mountains and the luminous rivers that seem to fall from the sky itself can quench that same person's soul for eternity.

Trinidad is our fears and our loves. There we discovered our

beings, we dug deep and planted our roots assuming we would never leave, sucking on the armored cascadura with its silver-plaited shell, devouring the sweet flesh beneath, the only fish the legend says ties you to the land forevermore, smacking our lips when we were done. We never thought we would have to leave this place, since our mothers and fathers planted our placentas beneath mango and plum, pomegranate and coconut trees.

But in the end we choose to flee.

We leave. We do. With no intention of turning back, we embrace America for everything Trinidad was not.

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