

A Race of One's Own

Sabrina Mehra Furminger

“I am the sum of my parts and when some of my parts are ignored, I feel like I’m not seen at all.”¹

I wander through the Edward Hopper exhibit at the Whitney Gallery. The hall is empty and I savour this opportunity—a rare one in New York City—to peruse these celebrated paintings in silence. A security guard enters the hall. He is East Indian, the same age as my father.

The guard stops in his tracks and stares at me. I meet his inquisitive gaze with a friendly smile. After several seconds, he narrows his eyes.

“You’re Indian.” There is a tinge of accusation in his voice. “But your eyes are blue and your skin is light.”

His observation does not shock me. I’ve heard it many times before over the course of my three decades. “My father is Indian, and my mother is Ukrainian,” I explain. “I’m visiting from Canada.”

He grins, then says something I do not understand. Gujrati, perhaps. Or Hindi. I can never tell the difference.

I shrug. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I only speak English.”

The smile falls from his lips. “You must learn the language, or you’re not really Indian.” He pauses and peers deeply into my face, as if doing so will reveal some deep mystery. “Perhaps you’re not really Indian anyway. You’re a mix.”

I don’t call him a jerk. I don’t complain to his manager. I don’t inform him that his views

on race and culture are antiquated. I don’t tell him that there are millions of people like me all over North America—including the current President of the United States—so he better get used to it.

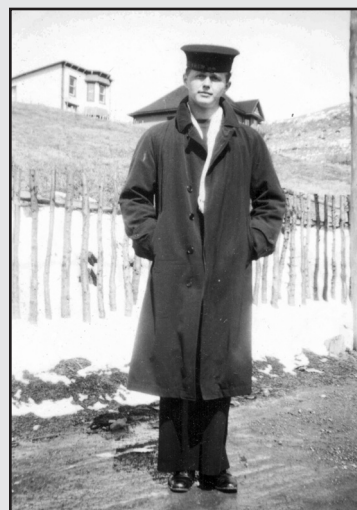
Instead, I leave the museum and hail a cab. I am awash in shame. *He’s found me out.*

I am my own distinct race. With surnames like Kiperchuk and Kostaczak, the Ukrainians who live in my family tree were farmers and cobblers, intellectuals and steelworkers. My Indians—the Mehras and the Thapars—were lawyers, accountants, and postmasters. I live in the future of all my ancestors, but my sense of belonging to any of them is fleeting. Too often I am singled out as a diluted Indian—a failure—and I resent it. On the flipside, I’ve never been singled out as a Ukrainian, and I resent that, too.

Besides my sister, I do not know anyone else who shares my race. I am racially different from either of my parents. My mother is pale and blonde and blue-eyed, born to Ukrainians in Montreal’s Slavic ghetto. My father met his Ukrainian Princess in a Montreal auditor’s office in the 1970s. Together they broke down racial barriers within their own families. My mother’s Baba informed a dinner gathering that my father, who was to be an overnight guest, did not require a bed because his people slept on floors. My father’s mother, when told of the engagement, gave her blessing, albeit grudgingly.



Sabrina's wedding



Nick in the navy

She had arranged his brief marriage to an Indian woman of questionable character. "This time, you make your own mistake." But my parents married regardless and built their own fairytale. They produced two daughters whose olive skin and jewel-coloured eyes elicited compliments from strangers. Theirs was a true Canadian success story, a living, breathing example of Pierre Trudeau's vision for a fully-integrated, multi-cultural Canada. And they all lived happily ever after.

The End.

Except that it wasn't the end. Even today people stop me on the street to investigate my murky racial beginnings.

"What are you?"

"I'm Canadian." Sometimes I stop at this and watch with some amusement as the asker frowns, considers my answer, and pushes forward.

"No, I mean... well, where are your parents from?"

"Oh, that. My dad is from India. My mother is Ukrainian." Their eyes light up with understanding.

"Oh, so you're half and half." And suddenly they turn their back on me and my multicultural patchwork quilt and depart on their merry way. Their universe still makes sense. An oddity has been explained.

I am not half this and half that. I am a confluence of both. Often I feel like my distinct brand of personhood is misunderstood and easily dismissed. Sometimes, the person doing the misunderstanding and dismissing is the person staring back at me from the mirror.

In my early life, my world was very small. I did not know that my parents were different races from each other. Race became an issue the moment my sister and I waded out into the world and began interacting with humanity at large.

"Your parents are different colours. That's weird."

"Why are your eyes like that?"

"What are you really?"

In the beginning, I took these perplexing questions directly to my mother. She did not put my angst to rest. She informed my sister and I that we were Terrans. We were people of the Earth, she said. We were beyond race or culture.

Even now I resent the implication that I must exist on the fringes of race, or that I must reject the race and cultural titles that are mine by birthright. Certainly I was raised to be a global citizen. My father has always been a lover of world cuisine and international travel. Before we finally visited India during my teens, he did not expose us to Indian culture beyond the occasional trip to his favourite tandoori and thali restaurants. His bedtime stories included char-

acters from all over the world. My father gave India the same weight that he gave every other nation and culture.

I knew even less about Ukraine.

My parents' views on race and culture are very much outside the box, and perhaps it was this global attitude that brought them together at a time when biracial couplings were controversial. But both of my parents had been given the opportunity to immerse themselves in their cultures before choosing to raise their children as Terrans. Often I wrestle with the jarring sensation that I am a fraud. Sitting in Indian restaurants with Caucasian friends and affecting an insight into the cuisine. Chatting with half-Ukrainians of my own generation and aghast

when they know so much more about the food and history than I do. Is the blood in my veins enough to stake a claim to either culture?

A couple years ago, for a brief moment, I experienced an honest-to-goodness connection to Ukraine. The moment struck more than five years after the passing of my grandfather. My grandfather—whom we called 'Didi,' the Ukrainian name for mother's father—died shortly after I graduated from university. I was his first grandchild. My uncle argued that his son, born several years after me, was the first Kiperchuk grandchild (he was the first son of a male, and a white one at that), which angered my mother to no end. But I never felt anything but love and acceptance from my Didi.

Didi never spoke about his childhood. He never returned to Ukraine after immigrating to Canada as a young child. His parents had died before my mother was born, and he rarely spoke of them; I knew little more than the English versions of their Ukrainian names. Even his last name—Kiperchuk—was an anglicized version of a Ukrainian surname assigned by Canadian immigration officials. He served in the Royal Canadian Navy in World War Two and spent forty years in a Montreal engineering firm.

It didn't matter to me that his early years were shrouded in mystery. Didi was the picture-perfect granddad. He taught me how to play cribbage and how to pick blackberries off the bush without getting my arms scratched. Together we watched soap operas and game shows and feasted on chocolate-covered raisins and Turkish Delight. He died from a sudden heart attack when I was 22-years-old. When the pain of fresh grief finally passed, a profound emptiness remained. My only connection to Ukraine was lost—until a chance visit to Pier 21.

I'd never heard of Pier 21 until I stumbled across a Halifax tourism web site while researching the city in advance of a business trip. Pier 21 is Canada's Ellis Island. Between 1928

and 1971, more than one million immigrants arrived in Halifax by steamship before boarding trains to their new home cities. The museum web site described extensive exhibitions on the immigrant experience as well as a research centre. On a whim, I emailed Pier 21's research centre with the vague information I had and asked if it was possible that Didi entered Canada through Pier 21. The research coordinator replied the next day that she'd found some possibilities in the database, and would I like to come in and take a look at a microfilm containing ship passenger lists. I found a spare hour during my trip and visited Pier 21.

As strange-but-familiar names appeared on the microfilm reader—the Ukrainian names of my great-grandparents, and my Didi, who'd arrived in Canada at the age of five as Nazary Kiperczuk—tears welled in my eyes and a fuller picture emerged. I learned that the Kiperczucs left Poland on August 14, 1928 and arrived at Pier 21 on August 26 on the Baltic American ship Estonia. I uncovered the spelling they brought with them to Canada: Kiperczuk. I discovered the town we're from: Komarowo. The records revealed that my great-grandfather

*Often I wrestle with
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Nick's family

identified himself as a farmer and had \$320 to his name.

I'd found Didi. I'd found the family name. Me, the halfbreed, the one who wasn't really a Kiperchuk. I passed the information on to the rest of the Kiperchuk/Kiperczuks like a returning war hero.

The joy in my discovery faded fast. I had found a direct link to the Ukraine but I was no more Ukrainian to or for other people. My Ukrainian blood was still invisible to the eye; it remained locked in a constant losing battle with my Indian blood. I struggled with this incongruity. Was this journey for myself, or for others? Did it matter what other people really thought of me if I had a clear idea of myself?

My sister seemed rattled by my journey up the Kiperczuk family tree, and speculated that I was rejecting my Indian "side" in favour of the Ukrainian "side." This unexpected accusation (which, at the time, angered me to distraction) cast a light upon my sister's own journey to reconcile her racial and cultural identities. We are the same race, but our experience of living in our unique racial skin is vastly different. We are separated by the cultures that unite us.

I was a teenager both times I visited India, and throughout both trips I was acutely aware that my cousins had more right to call themselves Indian than I. They saw me as a fraud; I was sure of it. I felt persecuted, and yet my many welcoming aunts and uncles and cousins gave me absolutely no reason to feel this way. The rich history, the beautiful sarees, the delicious food, the rousing family parties thrown in our honour, I enjoyed it all and yet a nagging inner voice continually reminded me that none of it could ever belong to me. As for Ukraine, I have resigned myself to the pathetic reality that I might never have the courage to visit. I am scared of what they'll see in me. Recently I've heard of violent racist attacks against visible minorities, against brown people and foreigners, and I fear that my Indian side will void any credibility I might hold as a Ukrainian. "But I'm one of you!" my imagined self cries as I am pummeled by a pack of Ukrainian skinheads. "I'm Ukrainian, too!" In India my blue eyes and olive skin fooled strangers into thinking I was Brahmin caste. A favourable mistake. I am an illusion wherever I tread.

I married someone like me. My husband's mother is Filipino. His father is British. Our wedding looked like a meeting of the United Nations. Depending on the situation, he is brazenly British or fiercely Filipino. He is not bothered when people can't see his British side. "I know who I am," he says breezily. "Who cares what other people think?" I envy him his clarity. I'm glad he'll be at my side when we confront race questions from our future children. I wonder if I am indeed better prepared than my parents were to tackle all the angst that is sure to arise when my children begin mixing with others. Will they feel a sense of belonging to any of the cultures from which their ancestors came? Will they resent me for the proliferation of cultures in their family tree, or because I am unable accurately to embody any one of them besides the mash-up of my own creation? Will this entire issue be moot to children whose own parents straddle racial divides? Will they live in a world that is beyond race—post-racial—be-

cause they will not be alone, because there will be so many others like them?

My journey continues. Answers are not easily reached. There are always new questions. All I can do is live an authentic life within my olive-coloured skin.

And what of Canada, the soil upon which the Kiperczuks and Kostaczaks and Mehras and Thapars arrived with bags full of traditional clothing and faded photographs and lofty dreams? Prior to my visit to Pier 21, I wasn't sure where Canada fit into my ongoing struggle to understand myself and my place in my family tree. Now it is clear. Canada is the canvas upon which I paint my life. The immigrant experience is part and parcel of the Canadian journey. Multiracialism occurs where immigrants mix. I might be racially unsteady—my cultural hybridity constantly evolving—but I'm indisputably Canadian.

Sometimes I fantasize about returning to the Whitney Gallery to confront the security guard

who rattled me. I would tell him that it is not up to him to declare who is or isn't Indian.

"I am a member of my Indian family, just as I am member of my Ukrainian family," I would announce proudly: "It doesn't matter what you think of me. I live in the futures of all my ancestors."


Sabrina Furminger is a writer and arts publicist based in Vancouver, BC. Her work has appeared in an eclectic assortment of North American trade and consumer publications, including Western Living, BC Business, Dog World, and Opera Canada. Sabrina studied English Literature at Queen's University and was editor of The Reader, the monthly literary magazine published by the Queen's Journal.

Notes

1. From the play *Mixie & The Halfbreeds* by Adrienne Wong & Julie Tamiko Manning (Newworld Theatre, 2009)

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