“He Who Steals... My Name”: The Impropriety of the Demonym “Indian”

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He who steals my purse steals trash [...]  
but he that filches from me my good name [...]  
(Iago, Othello, 3.3.157–59).

Introduction

Iago, in the process of besmirching Cassio’s and Desdemona’s reputations, considers the value of the “good” name. Yet their individual, “proper” names lose value because of contiguity to a racial, cultural, and pseudo-national one: the Moor. What then does “name” mean? It is property, yes, but of a peculiar kind, one that can enrich only the bearer, and cannot be transferred. Once “stolen”, it disappears; it does not enrich nor belong to the thief. It is intangible property – constituting the identity and the social viability, the acceptability, of its owner. Iago is referring to reputation, to cultural capital that can be expressed as “propriety”, a noun that unites conceptions of property and of social identity. Interestingly, he poses this question in a Mediterranean world that, like our postcolonial one, raises questions of racial, cultural, political identity, as well as the right to self-naming, value, property, and propriety.

What exactly is the value of the name in the postcolonial world – where all names are improper, although some are more improper than others. Cobbled as they are out of imperial retreat and national independence, national identities are visibly and avowedly nominal approximations. An “American” is no less improper than a “South African”, an “Ivory Coaster” than a “New Zealander”. Yet, all of these improper names are viable in the international social world, recognized and acknowledged as equivalent to a singular identity. However, one of these historically created names seems significantly nonviable, even indecorous: “Indian”. In the postcolonial world, “1492” and “1947” create “Indians” who are not from India and
“Indians” who cannot claim their name, at least not without qualification. They are South Asians, Asian Indians, Subcontinentals, “Hindus” (even when they are Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, or Christians), even East Indian West Indians (when they are in the Caribbean). The name “properly” theirs on geographic grounds (the Indus river) and national citizenship (India) has been assigned to “Indians” in the Americas, West Indians of African (as well as Indian) descent, and even East Indians, that is, from South East Asia.

Names create identity and narratives of history, and in doing so provide cultural capital and reputation on which the individual can draw. What does it mean if your name is not yours alone? If the ability to name oneself is a kind of ultimate agency, then what does it mean to not be able to claim even that name that has been given to you — and given for not completely arbitrary reasons? The impropriety lies, then, not in the name “Indian”, but in its indeterminacy, the multiple identities to which it refers. It seems to me that there is no other national identity whose name simultaneously names another people, distant and unrelated from the former and from any geographic or other feature that might support such a name. For example, the English would not find another group of people in, say, Russia, who not only called themselves “English”, but whom everyone else matter of factly called “English”. Nor in Finland would an Italian be asked, “Are you Native Italian or Italian Italian?”

“Indian”, as a name, is improper because it does not signify a singular identity recognized by a social community; it requires a Derridean supplement that qualifies and clarifies it. The linguist and philosopher John Searle writes, «no remark without remarkableness» (Searle 1969:144). If a communication is sufficient, understood and accepted within an interpretive community, it need not be said at all. For instance, that human beings require oxygen does not occasion remark; it would need to be said, remarked upon, only if somehow unusual, if, perhaps, human beings suddenly became hydrogen-dependent creatures. However, because “Indian” names so inadequately, so improperly, its “unusualness”, its “remarkableness”, is its identifying characteristic. It cannot stand by itself — it is qualified, re-marked, because there is something noticeably incomplete, wrong, with it.

The United States census has named this category in various ways: “Hindoo”, “Indian”, “Caucasian”, “Other”, currently “Asian American” within the special subcategory of the “South Asian”. In this paper, I
want to examine this name as a historical and identitarian puzzle: I will look at the history of the name “Indian”; what naming itself means, linguistically and philosophically; and the consequences for the “South Asian American” in the contemporary US.

The history of the name

It is transparently clear that there is no “essential” national identity to which the name “India” refers. In this regard, modern India differs in no way from any other, perhaps longer-established nation. The British Raj and Indian nationalists (Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar) chose “India” rather than the Sanskrit “Bharat” for the new nation. However, while Indians in India now may still identify themselves to some extent by means of family, region, or language, almost seventy years after independence there is no felt need to claim, fight for, explain that they are “Indians” from a nation recognized as “India”. There are exceptions – but these are politically based; the late, great poet Aga Shahid Ali, for instance, identified himself as “Kashmiri American”. However, once the name moves out of India, that is, as it is translated from the nation to the international arena, Indian identity becomes multiple, and the understanding of it becomes astigmatic. “Indian” becomes “improper”.

Historically in Europe and contemporaneously throughout the world, “India” and “Indian” indicated a kind of vague, generic “otherness”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “India” from its beginnings denoted

an imprecisely-defined region of Asia, extending from South Asia to the borders of China, sometimes confused with Ethiopia, Arabia, etc. […] From the Old English period, the name India has been used to denote a large country or territory of Southern Asia, and […] an area lying east of the River Indus and south of the Himalaya Mountains; […] this usage was also extended to include the region further east, between that area and China (sometimes formerly referred to as Farther or Further India ; compare Old English séo firre India.

This geographic confusion accounts for the name of the turkey, ascribed to “India”, although indigenous to the Americas. Geographically, the bird comes from Turkey in English, but from India
– dindon, or d’inde,— in French. From the first half of the sixteenth century, “India” was also used in the plural, the “Indias”,

sometimes denoting the whole of South-East Asia to the east of and including India, and sometimes denoting the islands of South-East Asia. [...] As well as this, the name Indias was also used to denote the Americas, and specifically the chain of islands extending from the Florida peninsula to the coast of Venezuela.

And the OED adds, in a somewhat disapproving tone, that “[i]t is not always possible to distinguish between examples of use referring to East Asia and to the Americas”. By the second half of the sixteenth century, however, “India” referred firmly to the Americas, see for example, Antonio de Ulloa’s 1772 Voyage to South America, which notes that to gain «[a]n idea of the fertility of this country [...] a live beast [...] may be purchased for four dollars; a price vastly beneath that in any other part of India» (cited in the OED). During the period of the British raj, in an example of nominal and identitarian appropriation, an “Indian” could also be an English person who had resided in India. Simultaneously, though, an “Indian” who was not racially British could be an “East Indian”, an “Oriental”, an “Asian”, and even now the term can be used to name collectively all those from the subcontinent regardless of national identity: a Pakistani, an Afghani, a Sri Lankan, or a Bangladeshi, as well as a citizen of India – although not without objection. And of course, it also named what the OED calls the “aboriginal inhabitants” of the Americas. More surprisingly, however, from the seventeenth through at least the nineteenth centuries, “Indian” also named the “aboriginal inhabitants” of the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. Captain Bligh writes in the 1790 Narrative of a Mutiny on the Bounty, «I once before sustained an attack [...] against a multitude of Indians» (cited in the OED) – this, of course, in the South Pacific.

The term is geographically generic and categoric, but economically it was always precise. “India” and “Indian” were always connected with goods and trade, and so from its beginnings “Indian” not only indicated provenance or kind of merchandise, it also indicated value:

[...] il faut faire savoir que les Nègres qu’on achète pour être transportés aux Indes, avant que le commerce de l’Amérique fut ouvert, étaient choisis bienfaits & bien portants, de l’âge déoyus 16 à 30 ans, & tous
males. C'est la raison qui les a fait appeler pieces-d'Inde, comme si l'on difoit, esclaves propres pour le commerce des Indes (Journal encyclopédique 1768:69-70).

"Une pièce d'inde" was shorthand for a certain monetary value, originally established by a certain length of printed cotton cloth from India of about four meters. According to Ekberg (2015:157), the term comes from the Spanish pieza de India, indicating the kind of slave desired for the colonial territories. This trade good, a length of printed cotton cloth, became lingua franca for the value of an African slave throughout the imperial world, from Spain, to France, to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Illinois, and elsewhere in the New World. The 1768 Journal encyclopédique explains equivalent values of African slaves along a sliding scale of "pieces d'Inde":

Un Noir de 15 à 30 ans, fain, robuste, bienfais, & qui a toutes ses dents: Nègre, pièce d'Inde. Deux Négrillons, ou Négrites de 5 à 6 ans, valent un Nègre, pièce d'Inde. Trois Négresse de 15 à 30 ans, bien portantes, valent deux Nègres, pieces d'Inde. Trois Négrillons, ou Négrites de 10 à 15 ans, valent deux Nègres, pieces d'Inde. Trois Nègres d'environ 50 ans, deux Nègres, pieces d'Inde. [...] Un Nègre, piece d'Inde, y est ordinairement vendu depuis 1000 jusqu'a 1500 liv., &c. (70-71).

Geographically and economically unstable, “Indian” functions as a (non)denominator. It is doubly, perhaps multiply, improper as property and as propriety, dizzying in its infinite variety, simultaneously regional and local, generic and specific, a trade good, a monetary value, an idealized slave body and its faulty equivalents, Indian, African, American, American Indian.

How does a name mean?

Consequently, the name “Indian” functions as a multiple code, where identity is vacated, doubled, substituted, or redirected. Of course, it can only be claimed that it misnames, that it is an improper name, in comparison to what a proper name should properly do. Jacques Derrida defines a proper name as «the reference of a pure signifier to a single being – and for this reason untranslatable» (Derrida 1985:166). The “pure signifier” refers to a singular identity,
untranslatable and untransferable, a unique essence of being.
Similarly, for Charles Peirce, a proper name is «a Sign whose Object is a name of anything considered as a single thing» (qtd. in Pietarinen 2010), «an inward force of identity, manifesting itself in the continuity of its apparition throughout time and in space, [...] distinct from everything else, and [...] thus fit [...] to receive a proper name» (Peirce 2009:187). For Kripke (1980), it is a “rigid designation”. “Indian” has no such singularity, no “inward force of identity”, and its “designation” is pretty flabby. It certainly does not demonstrate “continuity throughout time and space”. In fact, no sooner does the Indian become a “translated man” (to use Rushdie’s phrase), than the name no longer belongs to him alone. How, then, is identity claimed if the proper name is not one’s property, and functions “improperly”?

Names can be considered in relationship to identity in terms of four categories: identification, of course, of being defined as singularly and essentially of a particular place and time, but also as performance, recognition, and property. To say “I am Indian” is a performative utterance; it does not merely describe: it enacts. It makes something happen as much as the words “I now pronounce you man and wife” creates a marriage. Such an announcement as “I am Indian” does not occur arbitrarily. These words are uttered on a very particular social stage with a predictable script that is almost like a litany: the introduction of oneself and the “getting to know you” phase of making oneself known as a singular identity in possession of a certain essence unlike other identities. In J. L. Austin’s speech act theory, a performative has «an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances» (1962:26) and «the procedure must be executed by all participants completely» (ibid.:36). In the case of “I am Indian”, the procedure is not complete, because it must be understood in the same sense as it is uttered – and because of its multiplicity, it cannot be completed without further utterance or other means of explanation.

Because identity is socially defined, there must be recognition by the other for that identity to be complete. And, of course, “Indian” alone does not suffice. A personal anecdote: an older gentleman, escorted by a younger man, stopped by a counter in my place of employment, and said, “You’re Indian”. I consented, and he asked me what tribe I was from. Realizing his mistake, but also wanting to be polite to my elder, I replied, “No, no! I’m from Andhra! [the state in
India I am from]. “Oh, I don’t know that tribe”, said he. In order for identity to be achieved, it requires the dialogic performance. Without recognition from the other, the utterance is what Austin calls “infelicitous”, and identity itself is called into doubt.

I will return to this question of recognition, but first, I will reintroduce Iago’s metaphor: to “filch” a “good name” outweighs the theft of a purse. Notice the equation of the name with property, an exclusive possession which creates the person as having value or no value. This implicitly acknowledges that one’s name is one’s property, as Madeleine Doran writes in an article about Othello: “a man’s good name is a property he was born with [...] it is a commodity that can be lost or taken away” (1967:198). But “Indian” is not so clearly a property of the Indian from India. Two more personal anecdotes that illustrate this problematic: upon encountering an Indian woman from India, a prominent American Indian scholar asked, half jokingly, “Do you mind if we share your name?” In another example, responding to an article in the Los Angeles Times about just this designation of “Indian”, an Indian from India reader ended his letter with these words: “I am proud to share my name with such a people”. In both of these examples, there is a dual claim to property. Both acknowledge the ownership of the Indian Indian, but they simultaneously acknowledge and make a rival claim. The scholar couches it in the language of community and fellowship; the letter writer in the language of magnanimity and gift-giving. That is, identitarian property claims are couched in the terms of propriety, of the inescapably social. Property and recognition are thus inextricably intertwined. Ownership exists only with the recognition of exclusive proprietorship, whether “mine” not “yours”, or “ours” not “yours”.

Conclusion: or so what?

Why does all this matter? One might reasonably say that, after all, we are all used to the smoke and mirrors of this name, and, given a few explanations, we understand well enough what kind of Indian is meant. There is a kind of “gentleman’s agreement” that “Indian” has no exclusive owner, or if there is one, it is not necessarily or primarily the person from India. There is, however, a personal and psychological cost to the Indian from India, small skirmishes on a regular basis to claim the name and the self, a never-ending and always unsuccessful
need to defend ownership of oneself. Aside from the psychological, individual cost, the confusion has larger social consequences for South Asians in the United States (notice that “Indian”, even “Asian Indian”, is no longer the usual nomenclature). The South Asian American community is fairly new in the States, and certainly in the popular imaginary. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the *Hart-Celler Act*, substantially increased the number of immigrants from India. But it was also an act of social engineering, allowing entry primarily to the professional/managerial class. Thus, unlike other minority groups in the US, African Americans, American Indians, Latino Americans, and those from East and Southeast Asia such as the Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Laotian Americans, South Asians entered the country in the middle- and upper middle-class, working in the fields of medicine, engineering, academia, and increasingly in the financial sector. Despite some downward mobility since the 1980s, in the popular imaginary they are conceived of as decidedly in the propertied classes – except in this matter of their name.

For the South Asian, the matter of property is not only about a name, but the possession of a *good* name, a valuable name. Here is Iago’s full speech:

> Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,  
> Is the immediate jewel of their souls:  
> Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;  
> 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:  
> But he that filches from me my good name  
> Robs me of that which not enriches him  
> And makes me poor indeed.  
> *(Othello, 3.3.155–61)*

Madeleine Doran points out that a good name is property, a commodity, and that reputation is necessary to «maintain [one’s] position in society»; its loss «may be seriously disabling», and it «can be taken away as surely by rumor» (1967:198) as by a proved malfeasance. The opposite of a good name, traced back to Roman law, is “infamy” and thus, I imagine, the basis for charges of libel or slander. What is at issue for South Asian Americans is the matter of a good name or of infamy.

The South Asian benefits from the “model minority myth”, certainly, in material and class terms. Yet, in the United States, the
primary rival for the name of “Indian” is the American Indian, and the South Asian risks infamy if he or she demands it for himself or herself alone. Who has the better claim to the name? If the South Asian is figured as prosperous and securely middle-class, with little known history of discrimination or oppression in the United States, the Native American’s reputation is just the opposite. Their history of dispossession, contemporary poverty, and marginalization – all undisputable – has nonetheless created a romanticized counterpoint image of a virtuous people innocent of injustice or tyranny, with a “natural” bond with the land and equitable systems of government. Robbed of their lands, they are rich in moral stature. Their name, then, alone is indeed the “immediate jewel of their souls”. The national guilt over their treatment in the past, if not sympathy for their present plight, creates a curious imbalance in the tussle over the name. If the South Asian has a better claim, the American Indian may have the better right. And indeed, there has been some desire to claim the name of Indian on political grounds, as a sign of “Pan-Indianness”. The South Asian is placed at an impasse, in a position where it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to argue for the right to the name “Indian”. The South Asian, affluent, privileged (so the myth goes), cannot and should not claim the proper name: to insist would be more than mean spiritedness or bad sportsmanship – it would be to become the face of yet another oppressive force.

And in fact, in the world of the social, it is a non-issue – and that is exactly the issue. It is, to use Searle’s telling phrase, “unremarkable”. It is perceived as amusingly or annoyingly petty, an irrelevant petitifoggery. Yet one’s own name is a matter of some moment, as one’s property, and as one’s reputation. It is in fact, a loss that may not speak its name. Jean-François Lyotard coins the name “the differend” to speak about a particular kind of wrong and a particular kind of victimage. In the language of the courts, Lyotard writes,

I would like to call a differend [différend] the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. If the addresor, the addressee, and the sense of the testimony are neutralized, everything takes place as if there were no damages. […] A case of differend between two parties takes place when the “regulation” of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom (1988:9).
The case of the Indian’s filched name is such a case – in fact, even to try to make a case seems to be overreaching. And to whom would it be made? Again, in Lyotard’s words,

[...]

It is in the nature of a victim not to be able to prove that one has been done a wrong. A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damages and who disposes of the means to prove it. One becomes a victim if one loses these means [...] when no presentation is possible of the wrong he or she says he or she has suffered. [...] the “perfect crime” [consists] in obtaining the silence of the witnesses, the deafness of the judges, and the inconsistency (insanity) of the testimony [...] everything is as if there were no referent (no damages). If there is nobody to adduce the proof, nobody to admit it, and/or if the argument which upholds it is judged to be absurd, then the plaintiff is dismissed, the wrong he or she complains of cannot be attested. He or she becomes a victim. If he or she persists in invoking this wrong as if it existed, the others [...] will easily be able to make him or her pass for mad. Doesn’t paranoia confuse the As if it were the case with the it is the case? (ibid. : 8).

Well, at the risk of seeming madness, there is a wrong being committed, and the wrong is that the Indian dare not claim the proper name. It may not be, and in fact, most would say, it is not a big deal, especially given that the Indian is doing just fine in the US (so the story goes). Yet, this is, after all, one of the tasks of the critic, to voice what has been unsaid. Again, Lyotard:

[...]

The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence. [...] This state is signaled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling “One cannot find the words”, etc. A lot of searching must be done to find new rules for forming and linking phrases that are able to express the differend disclosed by the feeling, unless one wants [...] the alarm sounded by the feeling to have been useless. What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them (ibid.: 13).

If it seems to be overstating the case to claim that there has been a wrong committed, then that in itself bears witness – there is the
differend. The wrong is unremarkable – so “natural” that it is unnoticed, untold and unspeakable.

In conclusion, a return to Othello, a wonderful text for thinking about identity, doubled and concealed, erased and revealed, imposed and stolen, for thinking about race, nation, and language. A return this time, however, not to the words of Iago the deceiver, but to those of Othello, the traduced and betrayed, duped into mistaking the good for a bad name:

Speak of me as I am [...] 
[...] one whose hand, 
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away 
Richer than all his tribe; [...] 
(Othello, 5.2.341–47)

Which “base Indian” is at issue? Critics have mostly assumed it to be the one with the “tribe”. But the play is set in the Mediterranean and a Moor is the central protagonist. Venice itself is the marketplace of luxuries from the Orient. Could the Indian be the one associated with the oriental pearl? Yet, would that Indian, the model minority, affluent and professional, throw away a pearl?

Wors cited


*Journal encyclopédique*, 1768, Bouillon, De l'imprimerie du journal, pp. 69-71.


