

## IT WAS ALWAYS THERE? LOOKING FOR IDENTITY IN ALL THE (NOT) SO OBVIOUS PLACES

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Identity is a complicated matter. Everyone has one, but rarely are we aware of how we get one. We rarely know the boundaries that we build or the symbols and language that make those boundaries stand. Somehow we forget the seeds that germinated into our perception of self. Here I will attempt to find my seeds and cherish them. In doing so I will tell you about an experience I had on the side of the road and share the thoughts that it provoked.

### The road trip

One summer recently my father and I went on a road trip. We drove through the Maritimes, spending about two and a half weeks cruising through Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick. On our way back home we ended up having car problems. We were zooming along somewhere in northeastern New Brunswick when the car stopped zooming and began to lose speed. As the car slowed, my dad pulled it over to the gravel shoulder and eventually we rolled to a stop. I remember being quite worried. The only thing I could think

about was the endless lines of trees all around us. I could not recall the last town we passed or a sign telling us how far the next one was. Thoughts of being stranded were running through my mind, as I am sure they were running through my dad's.

My dad got out, walked to the front of the car, and opened the hood. I joined him, and we both looked at the engine with curiosity. I am not sure what we expected to see, as neither of us knew much about cars. My dad smiled and didn't look too worried. He must have realized I was a bit nervous. He stood in front of the car, and as cars sped past he waved his hands. A couple of cars flew past with no signs of stopping.

Just as I was giving up hope and beginning to think about the wild animals that must inhabit northeastern New Brunswick, a pickup truck came along. My dad flagged it down and it stopped. In the truck was a man and his wife. The man walked over to our car, asked my dad what had happened, and, thinking that the problem could be the battery, asked if we had jumper cables. We did, and he pulled his truck around and tried to give us a boost. Nothing happened. The car still didn't start. When the man offered to drive to the next town and send a tow truck, we accepted thankfully.

Before the man walked back to his truck, my dad thanked him and offered his name — "Segundo Ramos." The man responded with a very Canadian question: "Where you from?" My dad answered, "Toronto." The man seemed a bit perplexed, probably because he had noticed that my father had an unfamiliar name, spoke with an accent, and did not "look white." Unfortunately, such a response represents an all too common occurrence in Canada — the constant need to ask those who don't fit our perception of *Canadian* where *they* are from. The man asked again, "Where you from?" My dad corrected himself, "Actually I'm from Etobicoke." The man looked even more puzzled, so my dad added, "It's part of the new megacity, it's really part of Toronto."

The man looked at me, and I smiled. He told us he was from the town up the highway, gave us his name, and ended by saying, "And I am a French Canadian." It seemed strange to me that he felt it necessary to mention that, but as I thought about it later I started to think that he was trying to ask my dad where he was *really* from. The man set off in his truck and soon enough a tow truck arrived. The car was eventually fixed, and we zoomed back home.

On the way back the experience on the side of the road stuck out. Even after we got back I continued to think about it. I tried to make sense of it, knowing I had learned something I had not realized before

— but I was not sure what. At first I was a bit surprised at my father's response. I thought it was interesting that he identified so strongly with Toronto. I was a bit disappointed that he didn't attach a hyphen to his name and opted to be a Canadian rather than maintain at least part of his former identity.

### The luxury of choice

I was disappointed because my father decided not to identify with his country of origin, but instead with the country he had been living in for the last thirty years. It seemed almost a shame that he didn't tell the man on the side of the road that he was originally from Ecuador. I wondered why my dad identified so strongly with Canada and why he insisted, even after being asked a second time — given the chance to change his mind — that he was from Toronto. Part of the answer can be explained through the notion of cognitive dissonance, or, as one dictionary defines it, "the simultaneous holding of incompatible ideas, beliefs, etc." In this case it can be understood as not biting the hand that feeds you/It represents the desire to identify with the dominant group, to try and acculturate or be a part of the mainstream in order to reap the profit of the dominant group. In wondering why my dad identified as Torontonians, I began to think about the decisions and choices he had made in coming to Canada.

When he arrived, my dad believed that "when in Toronto, you should do as the Torontonians." Over the years he increasingly began to change and mould himself into the settings around him. He began to follow Canadian politics, learn about different areas of the city, and eventually began taking courses in French so that he could be a "bilingual Canadian" — it was as if, speaking Spanish and English, he was not one already. My dad felt that he needed to learn the "official" languages, the ones legally and socially recognized as being Canadian, the ones that carry status and importance. He realized that language is a symbol that acts as a boundary/distinguishing between who is and is not seen as Canadian.

In trying to be a part of the mainstream he dated Canadian women and went to Canadian clubs. Eventually he met my mother, and they had me. I am perhaps a good example of his efforts to become Canadian. I once asked him why he named me Howard. He said he wanted to call me Harold, but my mother did not want people calling me Harry. He added, as did my mother when I asked her, that he wanted to name me something English, something *Canadian*, something that would allow me to be a part of the mainstream. They

saw an English Canadian name as a key that would open the door to success and stability; they associated it with mobility and achievement. My parents believed that someone hearing or seeing my name would think of me as Canadian, and that being seen as Canadian would deflect discrimination in employment and daily life. They saw *Canadian* as being Anglo, and they thought that if I could not be Anglo the next best thing would be to have an Anglo name, at least in part.

My father's decision to join the mainstream was a way of gaining upward social mobility. Although he did not realize it, he was trying to avoid being trapped in what John Porter (1969) called the vertical mosaic. Porter argued that new immigrants' mobility was confined to the limits of their ethnic community and that the highest levels of success tended to be reserved exclusively for English and French Canadians. My dad was able to see that success as a mainstream Canadian was different than success as an immigrant or as a part of a minority group. He wanted access to all the things that made Canada different from his home country. He wanted to see me break past class and ethnic barriers, achieve my wishes, and more importantly have a stable and financially prosperous life. My father wanted us to get a piece of the Canadian pie.

In identifying with Canada or Toronto and trying to "do as the Torontonians when in Toronto," my father avoided being trapped in an ethnic enclave. By and large his strategy worked. When he moved to Toronto he lived in the downtown area, renting a room in a boarding house. After he met my mother and I was born, the family moved into a house on Dufferin Street in the west end of downtown Toronto. When we moved there, the neighbourhood was mostly Portuguese, Italian, and South American immigrant families, though in time the ethnic demographics changed. My father worked hard at his job, often taking classes to improve his skills as a telecommunications hardware worker, and he kept up with the rapid changes in the industry. When I was a teenager he bought a house in the suburbs and left the noise and commotion of downtown. Over the years he was promoted in his job, and his salary provided us with a modest middle-class lifestyle.

Although my dad managed to make a comfortable life in Toronto and got to taste some of the pie, I have wondered what cost he paid for doing so. Part of my disappointment in his identification with Toronto was that he was cutting away from his past. He was selecting the last thirty years of his life as the point of reference for his identification and as a result seemed to turn his back on all that had gone before it. When I was growing up most of the references my father

made to Ecuador were laced with a comparison between it and Canada. Of course, he always showed that Canada was more prosperous. It had the brighter future, and it was safer and more beautiful. He reminded me that Ecuador was poor and that its governments were riddled with conflict and corruption. I wondered if he had lost a part of himself in his drive to be Canadian and to fit in — if he had closed the door on my chances to identify with his history. It seemed as though he thought he could not be Canadian and still identify as being from Ecuador. Instead he seemed to think that he had to be one or the other, and he chose to be Canadian.

Even so, as I thought about it more, it became less than clear. Did he really have to make such a bold choice? Or were things actually more subtle? Did he forsake one identity for another? Or was it a matter of time? I wondered why I expected him to identify as anything other than Torontonion. After all, he had been living there for thirty years. He had been away from Ecuador for so long that I imagined he had little in common with the place he used to live. Things don't stay the same. Language and culture, not to mention people and identity, are always changing.

Time has an amazing effect on memory and identity. It allows us to forget, to re-create, and to sow our seeds over and over again. Along such lines, Ernest Renan (1945) and Benedict Anderson (1983) argue that identity and nation-building represent a cyclical process of forgetting, misinterpreting, and re-creating symbols and markers of identity. In thinking about time and the process of maintaining or perhaps more appropriately re-creating culture, I wondered why I had expected my father to hold onto his identity as a foreigner for so long. How long do people have to stay in Canada before they are Canadian?

The answer to the last question has long evaded many scholars. Part of the irony of our experience on the side of the road was that my dad identified as Canadian, but the man asking him the question did not see him as such. Frederik Barth (1969) argues that identity is enclosed by cultural and symbolic boundaries. He argues that ethnic and national groups use features such as accents, mannerisms, physical characteristics, or other differentiations to distinguish people who belong to a group from others who do not belong. In my father's case, he speaks with an accent, has a name that is not considered common to Canadians, and looks different from what most Canadians would think of as a *Canadian* look. Identity is a two-way street, and, unfortunately, to choose to be Canadian does not necessarily make you one. Instead, identity is a contested issue that is reflexive and negotiated.

The man asking the question did not accept my father's answer and then asked the question again — offering my dad the chance to give a different answer. My dad elaborated, maintaining his identity, and the man on the side of the road was in turn forced to adjust his perception. The way he adjusted was by walking back to his truck and accepting my dad's answer. In thinking about this I realized, like the man who asked the question, that I did not really accept my dad's choice. I did not see him as Canadian . . .

### He isn't but I am? Or am I?

It was strange that I was offended by the interchange on the side of the road, both at the man for asking his question and at my father for answering in the way he did. The paradox is that I saw myself as Canadian, but did not see my father as such. Somehow over the years I had bought into the belief that being Canadian meant that you speak with a Canadian accent, that you speak English, and that you are born in Canada . . . and so my father was not Canadian. Even so, I was, I am, Canadian — when friends ask me what I am, I always answer Canadian; it always seems unimaginable to be anything else. For example, when I moved to Montreal a couple of years ago, people would ask me: "Where are you from?" I would answer, "Toronto." Somehow I thought that answer was appropriate for me, but not for my father. In justifying my belief I thought of the little things that make the two of us different. I thought of his passion for soccer, my passion for hockey, my dad wearing long johns in winter, the embarrassment I had in wearing them as a kid, his assertion of manliness, my dislike of machismo . . . and the list goes on. We were different, we are different; somehow I always accounted for those differences by thinking of him as being not from Canada. I thought it was novel that he insisted on being Canadian, that he wanted to be from Canada, but I was not convinced that he was.

I was not sure what he had to do to *be* Canadian, but I had created a subconscious list of things that excluded him from being so. In thinking about the question the man asked on the side of the road, I thought about times that I had been asked what I was or where I was from. Despite my ready answers — "Canadian" or "from Toronto" — there were times the response did not work.

For instance, when I was a teenager my mother and I moved to Winnipeg, where I spent my high-school years. The high school I went to was in the city's North End and had a large cohort of Filipino students, many of whom were first-generation immigrants. At my

high-school graduation ceremony we had to line up in alphabetical order. In seeking out my place I found two other "Ramos," both children of Filipino parents, and according to the procedure I was supposed to be between them. One of the Ramos told me that I was in the wrong place, that they were both Ramos and I should be either in front or behind them, not in between. I told them that I was also a Ramos. They looked a bit surprised. One asked, "So how did you get a Filipino name?" When I said that my dad was from South America, they said, "Oh?" Another time I was at a friend's house and his father jokingly asked me, "So are you related to Fidel Ramos [the former Filipino president]?" When I said no, I wasn't, he said, "If you are ever in the Philippines, make sure you say you are not related, Filipino politics aren't very friendly." In dealing with both instances, I deflected the question of identity by saying that my father was Ecuadorian, that because of him I had an Hispanic or Filipino name; but I would think to myself, I am not Ecuadorian, I am Canadian:

In thinking about my Ecuadorian identity I have always thought of the markers and symbols that exclude me from it. I don't speak Spanish, or at least the little I do know of the language does not serve me well. I have never been to Ecuador, and what I have read about it in the newspaper or heard through my dad is not appealing. For example, I remember a couple of years ago reading (in *The Globe and Mail*) that in an election campaign for the presidency, one of the candidates said that people should vote for him because the other candidate had watery sperm. Such rhetoric is unheard of in the conservative realm of Canadian politics. I cannot relate to such experiences. By and large I have lived a modestly comfortable Canadian life; the things I hear about my dad's country are foreign and strange; it feels fraudulent to think of myself as anything but Canadian.

But to say that I know nothing about my dad's country would be a lie. I have a certain affinity to read about it when I see a story in the newspaper. I go out of my way to ask people from Ecuador about it, and I ask my dad to tell me stories and give information about his country. I also exchange letters with a cousin, Patricio. He writes in Spanish, I write in English, and we manage awkwardly with the translation. He tells me odds and ends about Ecuador and I try to tell him about Canada. Both of us share the exoticness of each of our experiences. I have managed to learn about some of the foods and dishes that are traditional in my father's country, like *fritada*, *plantains*, or *uca*, and try to include them in my regular diet. I even know a number of folk stories and a bit of the country's history. Nevertheless, I always seem to be aware of the boundary that divides us, that distin-

guishes me from my father and my cousin. I am not Ecuadorian, South American, or Hispanic. It feels strange to think of myself as such. Just because my father was born in another country seems an odd reason to consider that country a part of my identity and experience, but it is equally strange not to think of it as a part of me.

### Fitting in? Dancing the tango

In thinking about why I was not Ecuadorian, I came to realize that I have identified with Canada and Canadianness for many of the same reasons my father has. I have spent my whole life in Canada. It is where I was born, and it is what I have experienced. I have done it unconsciously. For the most part, no one has questioned me when I said I was from Toronto or Montreal. Unlike my father my skin is pale, I speak with a Canadian accent, I speak French, and I know the little oddities and cultural quirks that come as badges of Canadian experience. Unlike my father, I do have the luxury of choosing my Canadian or Ecuadorian identity. Unconsciously and later manifestly, I identified with mainstream Canadian goals and identity. I want what I was shown through school, the media, and the state: I want a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. I have identified as Canadian, because in Canada it is the way to fit in.

But in Canada what does fitting in mean? Supposedly we have a multicultural society, but how multicultural is a society that is constantly asking people with dark skin, accents, different mannerisms, and ways of dressing where they are from? As I think back on what fitting in *is* in my experience of Canada, most of the people involved in this experience are like my dad: they speak with accents, they look different, they were born in other countries, they are immigrants, they are Canadians. I think of my aunt who immigrated from Russia, or the kids I look after whose mother immigrated from the Philippines and whose father is Québécois. I think of my friend and his boyfriend who come from Saskatchewan and Cuba, or the people I go to school with who come from all parts of the country, different parts of the world, who have varied lifestyles and share a Canadian experience. Some people have argued that the *other* now lives in the dominant society and that in fact the dominant society is filled with *others*. Stuart Hall (1991), for example, notes that because of globalization, immigration, and increased travel, borders have become fluid, in turn forcing the deconstruction of the hegemonic identity of industrial societies. Likewise I have come to realize that fitting in, in Canada, is not clear-cut; we don't all look the same, we don't have the same

dreams and aspirations, and we don't have the same experiences. If we did, life would be boring and we wouldn't spend so much time trying to figure out who is what and where people come from.

I have realized that fitting in is not so much a matter of looking and being Canadian; it is not a matter of being the same. Instead it is a matter of identification, a matter of acceptance, and a matter of learning the steps to the tango of questions like "Where are you from?" I have been luckier than most, in not having to dance that tango so often. It is clear that some of us have to dance more than others. My father, for instance, knows the steps all too well. Fitting in is learning to deal with the Canadian obsession with identity, which manifests itself through the conflict between Canadian and Quebec identity, our inferiority complex with the United States, and our attempts to define a multicultural Canadian identity. In each instance we create categories of identification and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The problem with our obsession is that it tangibly and materially impinges on and excludes people(s). Evidence of this effect can easily be seen in the cases of Aboriginal peoples, Quebec, and discrimination in immigration laws, as well as in the vertical mosaic that excludes some ethnic/racial groups from getting ahead. Fitting in is working with and against our cultural or social categories of inclusion and exclusion.

At that point in my thoughts, in thinking about the question the man asked at the side of the road, I felt like a dog chasing its tail. I began to see that my dad was Canadian, that, like Descartes, he thought he was Canadian, therefore he was . . . Yet at the same time I became aware of his identification with his home country and the subtle transmission of his culture to me. I realized that identifying with Toronto did not have to be an all or nothing process and that identity or identification is far from a clear-cut matter. I realized that all the little things that made my father different from me, that made me think of him as an Ecuadorian, were the things that made him both Canadian and Ecuadorian. At the same time I was convinced that a metaphysical, cultural, ethnic, and geographic boundary did not make me Ecuadorian. And these subtle distinctions had prevented me from allowing myself to see my dad as Canadian. It was the invisible boundary that people cross and dance with as they identify with the world around them and project themselves into it. It was the invisible line that the man who asked the question tried to establish with my father, and it was the line, which my father crossed, showing that he and the man who asked the question were within the same place. As I thought about it, the distinctions and boundaries

that included and excluded became less and less clear. I was not able to figure out what they were, or which ones allowed me to see myself as a Canadian and my father as an Ecuadorian who wanted to be Canadian. I could not see the boundaries that prevented me from being Ecuadorian. I could not explain the distinctions that prevented me from seeing what was always there.

### Was it always there?

My final realization made me think of a story my dad once told me. There was a man who asked his son to take three mules into the market to sell. The man told his son, "Whatever you do, don't ride the mules, and make sure they get there in good health." The son headed off to the market, walking with the mules. After a half day of walking the son realized that it was a long journey and decided to ride one of the mules despite his father's orders. He mounted one and was spared the discomfort of walking barefoot the rest of the way to the market. He got so comfortable that he fell asleep on the mule, which walked along the path with the others following. As it approached the market town the mule slowed, which woke the boy. Realizing that he had fallen asleep, he quickly counted the mules. He counted two. He counted again, and still there were only two. He got worried and realized that his father would have his hide. But instead of panicking, he figured that he would go into the market and sell the two he had and then look for the one that had disappeared. When he got to the market, the livestock salesman asked the boy, "Do you want to sell any of your mules?" The boy said "Yes," and the livestock salesman asked how many. The boy answered, "Two." The salesman asked, "How about the one you're riding?" The boy realized that the third mule had been there all along. It had not disappeared. He did not have to look for what was already underneath him.

Like the boy on the mule, I realized two things that had always been there: my father's answer was justified; and a part of me is Ecuadorian. My father's desire to get what everyone else has, the time he has spent in Canada, and his feelings of attachment all make him Torontonion or Canadian. Although Canada claims to embrace multiculturalism and diversity, the exclusion and lack of recognition of people like my father make that embrace more a matter of ideology than a reality. Instead, people on the side of the road, in the bank, in our everyday lives, still question the legitimacy of other people's Canadianness. Only when people are able, every day, to accept diversity, to accept everyone who chooses to be Canadian, can we say that

we have become a multicultural society. The process of accepting such symbols and markers involves our own acceptance of what has always been there. It comes through the acceptance of the stories, people, and histories that have filled our Canadian experiences.

In the end I discovered that to embrace my Canadianness is to embrace the stories I know, the relations I have. It is to embrace being asked about my last name, to embrace my Ecuadorian identity. What I discovered is that identity is a mucky thing. It is like walking around in knee-deep mud wearing rain boots; you pull, you slide, sometimes your boot gets stuck in the mud, and at times you end up pulling so hard that your foot comes out of your boot. The question the man asked on the side of the road was an experience that led to me pulling my foot out of my boot. It forced me to think about my relationship with my father, about how he sees himself, how I see myself, and how we both project ourselves to others around us.

## THE ELUSIVE AND ILLUSIONARY: IDENTIFYING OF ME, NOT BY ME

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CAMILLE HERNÁNDEZ-RAMDWAR

I live in Toronto now. I live here, but I am not from here, I did not grow up here. I grew up in Winnipeg, during a time and in a place where I was an anomaly. I don't know if that is still the case today. I don't visit Winnipeg much anymore. It is not "home" to me. My whole concept of home is problematic, which I expect is because I was born into a climate, a space, in which I felt unwelcome and unbelonging.

I have written a lot about my experiences of growing up in Winnipeg, but I believe that this time I am writing from a different perspective, perhaps, than I did earlier on, in my twenties. I am in my thirties now, and I have lived in Toronto for over a decade. I am raising my two children here and feel a certain distance from the life I led as a child and teenager on the prairies. I am, I find, even allowing myself some nostalgia for certain things — the rivers, the clean air, the safer streets, the lack of big-city dirt and crush. But other than that, I do not miss Winnipeg. I would not choose to raise my kids there. It is more than the overbearing winters, the floods, the predatory mosquitos. It is a perception I have of a suffocating and engulfing