

i am: circular questions of *i* dentity

INTRODUCTION: CYRUS SUNDAR SINGH

On the pre-pandemic morning of February 20, 2020, two guests were interviewed on CBC Radio's *The Current* (Galloway, 2020) about the ongoing rail impasse resulting from the Wet'suwet'en First Nation's protest against the Coastal Gas-Link pipeline through their unceded territory. Both guests on *The Current* used the term "everyday Canadians" in reference to those citizens who were being affected by the blockades. Who are everyday Canadians? Are there someday Canadians? And perhaps weekend Canadians? However, as I pondered these questions, COVID-19 descended on and disrupted all Canadians.

Fortuitously, in the midst of the 2020 pandemic summer, I designed and co-led the *i am...* digital media project through CERC (Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration) at Ryerson University. Open to graduate students from across Canada, the project elicited expressions of identity and belonging or not-belonging with a Canadian-ism and broke new ground in qualitative research methodology. *i am: circular questions of i dentity* are the lived experiences of six project participants.

CHAPTER 1: SAMITA SARWAN

The process of finding my identity, much like the *i am* project, was a constant cycle of change. I had to learn to lower my expectations for myself, which for me meant re-evaluating the definition of success and understanding the negative attributes of "categorizing." I think society tends to put people in boxes too often without exploring secondary factors. People are the way they are as a result of many different experiences that are unique to them. Too often, third parties/persons commit "assumicide," leaving little room for the individual to come to their own identity.

BY CYRUS SUNDAR SINGH, SAMITA SARWAN, NICOLE LEE, SOO KYUNG MIN, JOEL ZHANG, TEMI PHILLIPS, AND EDDY WANG

Cyrus Sundar Singh is an **AcademiCreActivist: a multiple award-winning filmmaker, composer, and scholar pursuing a PhD in communications and culture in the York-Ryerson Joint Graduate Program. Samita Sarwan is currently working toward her master of social work at the University of Windsor. Nicole Lee is a second-year master of science student in kinesiology at Lakehead University. Soo Kyung Min is a global education specialist who oversees and supervises the founding of schools and program development in various countries, and she is a scholar with an EdD in educational leadership and policy from OISE/ University of Toronto. Joel Zhang is currently working toward his master of science in One Health at the University of Western Ontario. Temi Phillips is a PhD candidate in the Department of Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering at the University of Calgary. Eddy Wang recently graduated with a master of arts in cinema studies at the University of Toronto.**

For the majority of my childhood, I was put into boxes, I was labelled by family, by teachers, and by peers. These labels have stuck with me as I entered adulthood, and many choices about my life were based on these labels. They have interfered with my ability to see success in my own eyes. I view myself as a powerful yet apprehensive person. I wish to be seen as a smart, beautiful, and confident person, which I can grow into only by continuing to push my boundaries. I crave the feeling of acceptance.

CHAPTER 2: NICOLE LEE

When I think of my journey to belongingness, my view of myself along with the opinions of others have shaped what this

looks like for me. To others I look like a Caucasian female, whereas in reality I am a First Nation Indigenous woman. To me this is a constant battle of feeling powerful but also feeling as if I do not belong.

"Being" a different perspective on Indigenous culture allows me to feel powerful. However, I feel like a failure because I am told that there is no way I belong within my culture because of the way I look. It feels as if I am allowing others to decide what is right and wrong within my own culture. As I learn to stand up for myself, this also needs to start with others. A world where no one feels ashamed by the way they look is when this divide through culture and identity will be no more.

CHAPTER 3: SOO KYUNG (SUE) MIN

My journey to discover, define, and connect with the concept of identity began when I was a young teenager, when I was sent away on a study-abroad program to Canada. Relocation to a foreign country without family and encounters with various unfamiliar individuals led to the establishment of a survival instinct: talk, act, and be like *them*. However, I have come to realize that the goal should no longer be about being part of *us* instead of *them*, but rather gathering the courage to wholly accept oneself despite societal expectations, norms, and judgments (this is what I have termed as "identity begins with *I*"). Creating a movement from the mainstream culture as a minority while enduring through unexpected ignorance and microaggressions is not an easy task (Dei & Kempf, 2013). Nevertheless, I believe that the country we live in has the potential to change into a place where all *I*'s can be fully cherished, no matter how Canadian or not Canadian they may be, and this is why I am sharing my story of *Identity*.

i am: circular questions of i dentity, page 12

CHAPTER 4: JOEL ZHANG

Our identity is constantly being pushed toward a leap of faith. Kids growing up now are obsessed with being “different,” unlike when I was growing up. My mom profoundly remembers a younger me claiming that I was “white.” She remembers what I don’t, because she knew what it felt like to have an identity crisis. It must have broken her heart. I fought to belong, so I ate and dressed how the people around me were, and then later on, I rejected that aspect of myself, and began to act the opposite of what I tried so hard to do earlier in life. Every step of the way, I was making my own leaps of faith.

I overcompensate for that now by being outspoken about any Asian-American issue, so those who feel what I felt don’t have to go through what I went through. We all grow up hiding parts of ourselves in order to belong. We leap blindly, and sometimes it doesn’t work out. That hurt is necessary and evolves until we understand who we really are.

CHAPTER 5: TEMI PHILLIPS

I am not. I am often asked how I see myself. I’ve been told to find my identity outside the labels society slaps on me, not to let anyone tell me what I can or cannot be or do. In all of this search for meaning and identity, in all this fight against systemic racism and sexism, and

all the other isms out there, there are times when all I want is one precious moment when I don’t have to live in that label-crazed world. I simply want to step out into my life without remembering, or being reminded, that I’m a Black woman of a certain age pursuing a career in a “male-dominated” field. Sometimes, I just want to forget what my colour is because my race is often a huge burden to carry, and I just want to live without the labels for a few precious moments. Sometimes, I don’t want to *identify* with anything. I simply want to *be*.

CHAPTER 6: EDDY WANG

I am a nomad. I have wandered between “Canadian” and “Asian” identities for all my life. The nomad wanders alone, searching for a home to give their soul rest. I feel lost, aimlessly moving, like a visitor in my own skin, looking ... for what?

What have I lost?

Melancholia is an experience of loss wherein you don’t understand what thing was lost in the first place. Cheng (2001, p. 23) points out that what undercoats the Asian immigrant subject is a deep constitutive melancholia.

I have been disassociated from my loss, unable to associate my “me” with my Asian Canadianness. I forget I am Asian Canadian. I have lost the answer to the

question “who am I?” I suppose I’m learning how to be *okay* with my melancholia. Learning how to be okay with how I’m feeling helps me feel okay. After all, you never lose your melancholia. How could you? How could you lose loss? 🍁

REFERENCES

- Cheng, A. A. (2001). *The melancholy of race: Psychoanalysis, assimilation, and hidden grief*. Oxford University Press.
- Dei, G., & Kempf, A. (2013). *New perspectives on African-centred education in Canada*. Canadian Scholars’ Press.
- Galloway, M. (Host). (2020, February 20). Farmers and the rail blockade [Interview]. In *The current*. CBC Radio. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-feb-20-2020-1.5469685/thursday-february-20-2020-full-transcript-1.5470080>



CANADIAN LANGUAGE MUSEUM

MUSÉE CANADIEN DES LANGUES

The Canadian Language Museum was established in 2011 to promote an appreciation of all of the languages used in Canada and of their role in the development of this nation. The Museum is located on Glendon College campus of York University in Toronto. Our exhibits have been displayed from coast to coast to coast!