

The past, present, and future of Canadian identity

THE PAST: TO BE A CANADIAN

My first encounter with the concept of identity occurred at the early age of 11. “Uh-hak-yun-soo,” which in literal translation means going abroad to learn another language and culture, became a trending phenomenon in Korea in the late 1990s. My parents were not an exception in joining the crowd. While being introduced to numerous school brochures with photos of young Caucasian students smiling, I imagined myself being one of them. The excitement of getting my own forest-green-coloured passport overpowered the exhaustion of waiting in an endless line at the Canadian embassy to get a student visa, as well as the fear of rejection my father instilled in me during the passport photoshoot by yelling, “Pull your hair back more! They won’t let you in at the Customs if you don’t show both of your ears.”

After eight months of preparation, I began my journey at a small private school in Newmarket, Ontario. First period was French. Madame recognized that I was a new student and asked, “Comment tu t’appelles?” I froze in silence, not knowing what to do. Others replied, “Oh, she doesn’t know French.” Madame asked Dennis, who was sitting on the right side of me, to share his *On y va!* textbook and insisted I try. Even after skimming through the pages, I could not speak because none of the words looked recognizable. Dennis quietly whispered the answer into my ear, “Je m’appelle Sue.” I mumbled with a stutter, “Joo ma pell Soo.” “Très bien,” said Madame. Yet I knew she did not mean it. I was not très bien at all but rather helpless, vulnerable, and alienated. A sudden moment of realization came: I did not fit the criteria of a perfect Canadian as I imagined myself to be. Efforts must be made to be stripped of “I” to be part of them.

Throughout the next five years, I spent significant time being immersed

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in the new society. I dyed my hair bright blonde, listened to the Billboard Hot 100 chart, went to every school dance party, and became the only non-Caucasian cheerleader on the squad. I was also the residence ambassador, a member of the student council, and an MVP-winning athlete: the Asian girl who did not fit the stereotype. Simultaneously, I could not stop questioning myself every night when left alone in my room, “Who am I, really?”

THE PRESENT: WHERE IS CHANGE?

Twenty years later, I now hold a dark navy passport and no longer need to pull my hair back tightly to show both ears for fear of being rejected at Customs. Not only am I able to speak fluent English and French, but I can even effortlessly add “eh” at the end of every other sentence. Nevertheless, I can still vividly see an 11-year-old girl who so eagerly wanted to be “them” that she endured the pain of bleaching her hair for hours to turn it blonde from black, lip-synched to pop songs without knowing any of the words, and introduced herself as being from Richmond Hill, although it was only my guardian who lived there. This is because while working with diverse bodies of students as an educator, I have come across numerous individuals standing at the same crossroads where I once stood, challenged by a choice to be more or less of a Canadian. My story was indeed our story.

Over time, school facilities have been renovated and modern technology has been implemented to provide supposedly better educational experiences for future leaders. More news articles are being released to inform citizens on issues of immigration policy, and movements founded on equity and acceptance such as Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate are vocal. Yet why is it that young people in our society are still pondering the same question I did two decades ago?

THE FUTURE: IDENTITY BEGINS WITH “I”

The most unfortunate surprise I have encountered throughout the interactions with various cultural minorities is that most have never spoken out loud about their identity crisis, as if having gone through such a struggle is a disqualification for being a true Canadian. These experiences were being hidden for societal norms, values, and beliefs to be clothed on. However, ignoring the existence of personal stories only acts as an obstacle to the creation of a unified country where differences are respected, while intensifying the structures of inequity.

My intention here is neither to demonize certain groups nor to play the blame game pointing out societal flaws, but to bring attention to what has been undervalued: lived stories told through individuals’ own voices. Armstrong and McMahon (2004) explain how voice encompasses one’s thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Therefore, voice can be the key to answering important questions of identity, namely, “Who am I?” and “Who defines me?” (McMahon, 2012). Thus, I argue that various “I” voices must be acknowledged as honourable actors with the agency to create, modify, and reaffirm their own identities. The silencing of voices should be regarded as the

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equivalent to oppressing the power to self-identify because it ultimately leads to assimilation and conformation (Blanco-Vega et al., 2008; Castro-Olivo & Merrell, 2012). Furthermore, the historical justifications that have been used for segregation and labelling, including racism, sexism, class-based discernment, and any other perceived disabilities which result in discrimination, must be resisted (Bolin, 2017).

I have radical hope that an honest and open dialogue can be exchanged on the basis of collective efforts. We engage not as part of us or them but as “we,” as equal partners in the change-making initiative. We will be able to establish a new discourse of identity where being a Canadian is about cherishing different voices. 🍁

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