Canadian Citizenship:
Three Stories of Informal Learning

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Introduction

The notion of sovereignty, particularly in the developed world, is in conflict with the project of modernization and rapid globalization. Whilst sovereignty allows a state freedom to determine its social, political and economic policies, the processes of economic globalization, such as population migration, are making it increasingly difficult for nations to enforce just and equitable policies, particularly with respect to citizenship. Though by no means conclusive, according to Seyla Benhabib, the debates surrounding citizenship generally fall into two distinct camps – the radical universalist and the civic republican. Radical universalists argue that “from a moral point of view, national borders are arbitrary, and that the only morally consistent universalist position would be one of open borders” (2002: 87). This argument is gaining popularity given the upsurge of recent political crises worldwide and the rise of economic globalization which are resulting in increased social mobility. Communitarian and civic republicanists, on the other hand, advocate a rigid standard of citizenship for immigrants and newcomers. Their conception of citizenship is that only immigrants who “come closest to the model of the republican citizen envisaged … will be welcome; others will be spurned” (Benhabib, 2002: 87). Such a constricted vision of citizenship is not only antithetical to fundamental human rights of justice and equality, but in addition, it fosters social apathy and inhibits citizens from realizing their full potential as equal members in the social polity.

Despite the polarized views offered by these two perspectives, neither view adequately captures the often-disregarded dilemma of modern citizenship, especially for new-comers and their children: that of being a citizen but never feeling like one truly
belongs. The myth of the Canadian nation-state plays a key role in this experience. It
goes something like this. Canada was born as a settler colony comprised of enterprising
individuals who, with their Christian goodwill, were tolerant of First Nations Peoples and
Blacks. Everyone has always been welcome in Canada, since we are a much kinder
nation-state than our neighbours to the south. The nation is founded on two homogenous
groups: the Anglophone lingual/cultural group and that of the Francophones. These
communities coexist peacefully with the ethnic diversity that immigrants bring to the
country. It is for this reason that we are a multicultural country comprised of a colourful
and harmonious pastiche of races and ethnicities.

A critical reading of Canadian history unpacks all of the above statements as
dishonest and quite simply wrong. They serve to create a myth which privileges certain
groups of people to the detriment of others. Himani Bannerji’s critical reading of
multiculturalism is that it has “never been effective” and that it exists only as “an
ideological slogan” that “supplies an administrative device for managing social
Policy Review describes the citizens who were involved in the project as conceiving of
immigrants “as threatening national values by their cultural and social diversity” where
diversity is characteristic of immigrants and not “Canadians” (1999: 82). In fact,
immigrants are seen as “overwhelming the nation’s resources through overpopulation”
and “they” threaten to end “our” way of life (1999: 84). Ghassan Hage conceives of this
category of “too many” as “embodying some form of ‘racist’ belief” that functions
primarily as a category of “spatial management” (2000: 38). This means that citizens
who are empowered by national myths to think of themselves as “authentic” Canadians
“perceive themselves as spatial managers and that which is standing between them and their imaginary nation is constructed as an undesirable national object to be removed from national space” (2000: 38). We will see the ideas of these three scholars playing themselves out in the personal narratives.

During the process of sharing our citizenship learning experiences, we came to realize some distinct differences and similarities in our collective understanding of citizenship. We wanted to link the over-arching themes in our experiences into a framework that could clearly depict the themes in all three of our experiences. This was a difficult and lengthy process. We referred to several frameworks of citizenship, but found that all the models focused on citizenship within a legal context or the duties associated with being a citizen. As all three of our experiences are defined based on a large subjective component, we found it necessary to have a framework that acknowledged that missing piece.

Drawing on Heater’s framework of citizenship (1999: 180), we created a framework (Figure 1) that draws on the different components of citizenship in a way that reflects where we are in our individual stages. We feel that the broad themes of Status, Agency, and Identity encompass the different forms of citizenship that we have each experienced or are currently experiencing.

**Status (S)** refers to the legal, civil, political, and economic rights that an individual is entitled to when a citizen of a nation. Status does not reflect any personal sentiments or a sense of duty towards citizenship; it is the most basic form of citizenship.

**Identity (I)** refers to the social, political, cultural, and national understanding and the
multiple identities that each one sees within herself. Identity focuses on the individual at the centre of citizenship and draws on her understanding of and loyalty towards citizenship based on her subjective views on its various components. Lastly, by Agency (A) we refer to the sense of duty that one feels towards her citizenship, and her political efficacy as an agent in society. This can include social, political and environmental duties and responsibilities, as well as the competencies and civic virtue of the individual. One can engage in agency when the different components of identity have been met.

We do not see each of our positions within the framework as static in any way. Through critically examining our citizenship, we have each learned that we are evolving and moving from one theme to the next. We have identified where each of us is currently at in our citizenship development and in which way we are shifting by the arrows, as shown in the diagram in each of our individual sections.

Maryam’s Section

Overview

The concept of citizenship has been a trajectory wrought with inconsistencies throughout most of my life. A more lucid understanding of these challenges has been possible following reflection and engaging in dialogue to produce the ideas I present below. To conceptualize how my informal civic learning has contributed to my Canadian citizenship, I must conceptualize what citizenship means at the current state of my evolution. Aside from the external factors such as those reflected in the passport that I carry, my voting duties, and the rights that I am entitled to, citizenship has played a more dynamic role in my life, as I am largely defined by my two citizenships, the first of which was by default and the other espoused by choice. Two of the three themes of citizenship,
agency and identity, have been integral in challenging the ongoing dialogue I have with my Iranian and Canadian self, by providing an outlet for my understanding of and actions towards my citizenships.

I make little reference to citizenship as status for two reasons. The first is that it has not been palpable, as have the other two concepts, in marking my struggles of understanding my citizenships. My Iranian citizenship, formed in the early and formative years of my life, shaped my understanding of agency, and later, identity. At this age, status was something that I was not yet cognizant of. My Canadian citizenship was also formed at a young age and the struggles that came with it took place through a sense of representation and inclusion. My path of finding solace with both citizenships, in recent years, has marked identity and agency as central in my understanding. Second, as the process of identifying my citizenships was primarily through the concept of social inclusion, I felt a need to belong in both citizenships and recognized that by identifying citizenship as ‘status’, I would not reap the full benefits and thus actively shifted my focus from citizenship as merely legal, civil, political, and economic rights.

My sentiments towards citizenship in the ‘Canadian mosaic’ are often mixed and marked by question marks. Since immigrants of colour are constructed as the ‘other’ and can confront systemic limitations for rightful citizenship engagement, one’s identity as an immigrant is often a site of struggle which becomes the pillar on which citizenship is formulated. I will draw on the themes of citizenship, based on my reflections as well as theoretical concepts pertaining to both ethnic identity and citizenship to elucidate how my citizenship as both a Canadian and an Iranian have prevailed.
Agency

A sense of loyalty to the values and ideals associated with being an Iranian as well as a sense of responsibility to those values and ideals, instilled from a young age, have shaped my Iranian citizenship. There are three instrumental events that I can identify as having defined my sense of loyalty which, in turn, strengthened my Iranian identity.

The first was the circumstance under which my family left Iran when I was six years old. My parents made the decision to leave for the “West” for a better life for my brothers and I, one where we would have education and life opportunities not possible in Iran. The reason for our emigration was made clear from the beginning and emphasized throughout my childhood. I often recall my mother saying something to the effect of “We gave up everything for the three of you…,” implying that we were not to let her or my father down in any way. I would later learn that many Iranians were forced to leave the country because of war, politics, economics, or religion. Since none of these reasons were ever mentioned as the reason for our leaving, I did not have any negative sentiments towards Iran. Rather, my sense of loyalty was strengthened as I felt that I had a duty not to disappoint my parents who represented everything that was Iranian to me and who had left for me! This duty would later translate into over-achieving to compensate for the loss they had endured in leaving their native land. It has, subsequently, been instrumental in shaping my Iranian citizenship and later affected sentiments towards my Canadian citizenship, as I will discuss below.

The second phenomenon which strengthened my Iranian citizenship was the strong sense of pride I felt for being Iranian, a sentiment that was often reinforced at
home. My parents encouraged my brothers and I to embrace everything that they felt was valuable of Canadian culture, though making clear that our Iranian culture was equally valuable and that we were first and foremost Iranian. Speaking only Farsi at home, partaking in Persian rituals and holidays, lessons in Persian history as dinner-table conversation, and my father’s ability to draw parallels between any trite event to something extraordinary that was Iranian, all positively contributed to my identity. My parents felt great pride for their native land and through its reinforcement, I felt a sense of responsibility was bestowed on me to represent my culture and ensure that it was not forgotten. The relationship between parents’ ethnic identity and their child’s sense of ethnic values, customs and preferences are strongly linked and children often place the onus on themselves to ensure that their parents’ identity is not lost (Gonzales and Cauce, 1995). I recall as a child feeling that if I did not have a sense of the values associated with being an Iranian, I would be disappointing my parents, which would be unfathomable, in light of the sacrifices they had made.

The last and most poignant memory that reinforced my sense of loyalty, which in turn shaped my Iranian citizenship, was a difficult and drawn-out process of nine years. Having left their family, friends, native language, culture, and all the other comforts that many adult immigrants leave behind, my parents suffered hardship and after a few years in Canada, my father returned to Iran to sell his remaining assets. Unbeknownst even to him, his return to Iran resulted in a nine year absence from the family. This affected my life at many layers, and a dual affect with respect to citizenship, the first of which I discovered shortly after he left. As an impressionable teenager, I greatly feared losing my Iranian identity, as he represented and reinforced that for me from a very young age. His
absence left me with the hefty responsibility maintaining that part of myself. The second was more complicated and would eventually be the source of great confusion, which I will expand on in the next section.

Identity

Contrary to my Iranian citizenship, primarily formed at home, my Canadian citizenship was developed at a much deeper, visceral level which often resulted in painful reflection about the two contradictory worlds that I was exposed to and where I stood in relation to each. The experiences that have shaped and that continue to shape my Canadian citizenship are challenging and transformative; each new experience provides me with a more critical lens than the last. My Canadian identity was largely formed as a response to the themes of representation and inclusion. When considering these themes in the context of citizenship, it is assumed that through representation and inclusion, one can more comfortably align herself with citizenship. However, as was my case that I felt neither represented nor included, I made forced efforts to feel both while consciously defining my Canadian citizenship.

Growing up in Canada, I did not see myself represented at any capacity. I felt that other immigrant youth were not sensitive to their dual identity (at least that I could see), but rather portrayed an exclusive Canadian identity or their respective ethnic identity, which I could not identify with. I felt a great need to place myself in a context where I did not feel excluded. This was especially difficult because my Iranian self was such an integral part of who I was, and came through in my interaction with others. As I did not feel that others could identify with this struggle, my frustrations culminated into a state of alienation and confusion. It is a popular and problematic notion of Canada that
“…through the introjection of the idea of belonging, we are left with the paradox of both belonging and non-belonging simultaneously” (Bannerjii, 2000: 65). I did not want to fully assimilate, which would mean losing my Iranian identity, and I felt that by maintaining both identities I would be marginalized. These feelings were further intensified with having strong Iranian ideals that were reinforced at home. This stage of ones development, labeled “Social Identity Theory,” analyzes “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his or her knowledge of membership in a social group (or groups), together with the value of emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981: 225 in Gonzales and Cauce, 1995: 138-139).

In addition to this, the media played an instrumental role in misguiding my identity and sense of citizenship. Middle-Eastern women were not represented often and when they were, it was accompanied with negative stereotypes that did not make it easy for an already struggling youth to find a place of comfort. Suarez-Orozco (2001) draws attention to this, referring to the “societal mirror” as how one sees him/herself represented in society:

When immigrant and minority children look into the societal mirror they see predominantly negative and hostile images… such reflections as these can be further intensified by the media. Even when parents provide positive mirroring, it is often insufficient to compensate for the distorted images that children encounter in their daily lives (135).

My only comprehension of how to begin feeling represented or included was to adopt what I perceived as values associated with being ‘Canadian’ as opposed to being an ‘immigrant’. I did not feel like there was a fine balance in achieving a dual identity and that I had to become either one or the other. These feelings were the combination of cultural dissonance and negative social mirroring, which resulted in difficulty in
developing “…a flexible and adaptive sense of self” (Suarez-Orozco, 2000: 138), where I could comfortably share different aspects of my identity.

I had run for school council in junior high and distinctly remember that I wasn’t particularly interested in the tasks that were associated with the position. I ran not only to be a leader and do what other Canadian students would do, but more importantly, to do what immigrant youth would not do. Such efforts as well as many others that were not as noble resulted in marked efforts to assimilate the best I could with the existing barriers from my home life. I was successful in achieving this though it meant putting my Iranian identity on the back burner for a period of time.

As my father’s involvement in my life was instrumental in shaping my Iranian identity, his absence, coupled with the newly developed confusions, contributed to my neglecting a major part of who I was. Because I did not want to put blame on him (initially) for being absent in those formative years, I put the blame on Iran and, subsequently, anything that represented Iran. This transference translated into anger and a strong dislike for anything that represented my Iranian citizenship. The tensions left a great void in my life, as I was conscious of the fact that by strengthening my Canadian citizenship, so as to feel included and represented, I had pigeon-holed myself in a manner where I had lost focus of the importance of my Iranian citizenship. This awareness resonated with me for sometime as I began another stage to find balance between two citizenships that had shaped who I was. Labeled, as “ethnic awakening”, this process generally takes place during later adolescence and will “…lead to a more integrated understanding and acceptance of (one’s) own ethnicity, as well as greater appreciation and respect for other groups” (Gonzales and Cauce, 1995: 136).
Agency and Identity

With a solid identity base from my childhood and having witnessed, firsthand, my parents’ ability to adapt to their new and often challenging milieu with determination and resolve such that they could succeed in a foreign society, I felt that I was capable of finding a balance between my two citizenships. Although periods of void and confusion surfaced, I felt a strong sense of agency with respect to how I could be successful, particularly with my strong belief in equality. This was reflected through my activism work and travels abroad which gave me perspective on the different notions of citizenship that were often contingent on the ‘status’ associated with citizenship. This was central to my ability to effectively manage my two citizenships.

From about the age of 17 to 20, I felt very disenchanted with where I stood with respect to my citizenship. I was aware that I was at a loss in some aspect of my life, but could not identify what that was. It was only when I witnessed my brothers who had managed to find equilibrium between their two identities that I began to understand the missing link in my own life. My ‘ethnic awakening’ was also reinforced through compassionate people that I had met volunteering, who were keenly interested and wanted to learn more about my ‘other’, non-Canadian citizenship. This was a new and foreign concept to me.

Efforts to bridge the gap between my Canadian and Iranian citizenships were largely influenced by aspirations to build community. I strongly felt that through a sense of community, I could acknowledge myself as an Iranian youth. At the age of 17, I endeavored to organize a gathering of over one hundred Iranians from around the city in celebration of the week leading up the Persian New Year. I remember feeling silently
proud of what I had managed to achieve. I felt like a true citizen in having succeeded in
my efforts of building community. This sense of agency was strengthened through other
initiatives in following years.

Gonzales and Cauce (1995) identify four types of adaptation: assimilation, biculturalism, rejection and marginalization. Through the many experiences that have forced me to question and reevaluate those aspects of my identity that have in turn formed my citizenship, assimilation and biculturalism are the two most salient adaptation techniques in my journey. Assimilation is when “…individuals take on dominant cultural characteristics and cultural identity and move into the dominant society, thereby relinquishing their own ethnic identification” (143). This was clearly the stage during my teenage years and my attempts to fit into Canadian society. With the amalgamation of events, and in part, the naiveté of youth, I felt that assimilation was the only route to rid myself of confusion. Through this process, I drew on rejection as a short-term coping mechanism. Today I am closest to biculturalism, where a positive relationship exists with the dominant culture and where I “…take on its characteristics and identity while at the same time retaining (my) own culture and identity” (143). This stage would not have been possible without the struggles of earlier stages.

Summary

For most, particularly those who identify with more than one citizenship, the process of questioning and evaluating where they stand with respect to their citizenships is a necessary, though not necessarily easy, task. The process is formative in allowing one to determine where she wants to be placed in context to the different components of citizenship. In the below diagram, used as a framework for our collective understanding
of citizenship, I have placed my current state of citizenship between agency and identity, as I see a bi-polar relationship between the two.

By strengthening my identity through experiences and questioning different components of my citizenship such as my social understanding, my dual identity, my loyalty, and my national and cultural understanding, I have a stronger sense of agency with which to act. This is very much in-line with my earlier reference to how both my Iranian and Canadian citizenships were formed and the sense of agency that allowed me to find balance between my two identities.

My social and political agency, the responsibilities associated with my citizenship, and the skills and competencies that I feel are all strengthened as well as reinforced through a sense of identity. The various components of identity, as outlined, have been a strong focal point in the making of my Canadian citizenship, in which representation and inclusion were the major themes. The link between agency and identity is instrumental in allowing me to place my citizenship into context.

These concepts have been pervasive in the making of my citizenship. They have strengthened and brought different layers to the conception and re-conception of my citizenship as both Iranian and Canadian. I believe that because I come from two distinct identities and have had opportunities to reflect and critically look at both, I am privy not only to the status associated with citizenship, but also the responsibilities which I have learned, in my adult life, not to take for granted.
Leila’s Section

Overview

Living at junctions has shaped my identity as a citizen. I have never existed within a stable category of being. Instead, I move along fault-lines of nationality, ethnicity, language, and race. This borderline status has become my ontology; I embrace ambivalence and ambiguity personally and academically as that which is real to me. Boundaries, however, have instantiated themselves in the most insidious ways to trip me up.

This section will use four vignettes from different stages of my personal development as a base from which to interrogate my citizenship formation in informal contexts. One of the premises of this piece is that each of our personal narratives acts as a “fertile source of data for insight into and analyses of…societal and individual histories” (Ferdman, 2000: 20). The vignettes that I offer are discrete experiences delineated from everyday life by way of their emotional impact. My methodology throughout this project has been to look for experiences which have evoked powerful emotions as possible instances of informal learning. I have found a strong correlation between emotional response and informal learning. While I draw on experience, memory, and emotion to form the vignettes, I also incorporate scholarly articles so as to come to a critical understanding of the citizenship learning, and ultimately, the personal transformation that occurred. To conclude, I will situate my citizenship development in terms of our tri-partite diagram, and explain how I conceive of the relationship between identity and agency.
My piece focuses on identity and agency. I do not speak to the third part of our conception of citizenship, status, because, rightly or wrongly, it is not something that I ever gave much thought to throughout this process. Rather, it would seem that I took my status for granted, enjoying it without being fully cognizant of what it meant. I imagine that as I develop my political efficacy, I will have to cultivate a better understanding of what is entailed by my legal status as a Canadian.

A few prefatory remarks to contextualize myself will prove useful here. I grew up feeling like an invisible minority. That which made me Other, my Indo-Guyanese-Hindu and Italian-Catholic heritage, endorsed me with a cultural capital distinctly different from that of my classmates. It is only in hindsight, however, that I recognize that it was culture that shaped our conflicting worldviews. I went through grade school feeling ostracized, and attributing it to my individual lack of “the right” things. My clothes were too feminine, never cool; I wasn’t allowed the liberties that other girls were accorded, such as sleepovers, until a later age; I wasn’t outspoken or good at sports; I was intimidated by boys, and so on.

**Identity**

Having always felt different, I didn’t realize that others saw me as different until I was fifteen and embroiled in a confrontation with an Anglo-Canadian boy who was older than me. He became hostile after my girlfriend and I refused his proposition. As my Anglo-Canadian girlfriend and I walked away down the street, he yelled after me “You f*cking pakis!”

Shock and embarrassment followed. He and I had talked about our backgrounds on friendly terms earlier, and his distillation of what I had told him into me being a
“f*cking paki” was something I had never anticipated. With three words a divide was violently inserted between the others and I. Clearly embarrassed, my girlfriend offered the consolation that he was “an idiot” since I was “only half brown, right?” This incident was a difficult informal lesson in difference and belonging that brought to the surface my social ambivalence. My shadowy feelings of otherness did not only exist in my head. In that moment, my outsider status was instantiated in a single, violent speech act.

My own feelings of being different in combination with others’ conception of me as ethnic or coloured meant that I never experienced membership with the dominant Canadian group while growing up. Access to my Italian or Indo-Guyanese identities was also precluded by my hybridity. I was never an authentic Italian, Indian, Guyanese, Indo-Caribbean person, or Canadian. I inhabited borders without ever being submerged in any one group. The only person I knew who looked like me and had a similar worldview was my sister. This made for a very small, closed community.

This sense of not belonging within the Canadian community was sparked early in my development. When I was five, my family lived for a year in Quebec. I had had little previous exposure to the French language and remember feeling like an outsider within the group of children that lived in the neighborhood, since many of them spoke only French. My clearest memory of this time is watching the blockbuster children’s movie of that year, “Pippi Longstockings,” in French, with some of the neighborhood Francophone kids. I distinctly remember the frustration of being completely unable to understand what was happening in the movie and wanting desperately to know. While the other kids laughed in delight at the movie, I sat there and felt stupid. This early lesson in how language can serve to bond some people and bar others became increasingly important as
I grew older. Through my Guyanese family’s interactions with the dominant culture of Anglo-Canadians in general, I came to understand how the Guyanese dialect served to exclude Guyanese-Canadians from the dominant culture.

My relationship with two of my Indo-Guyanese cousins was instrumental in shaping my ideas of identity, hybridity, and citizenship. We shared a closeness that resulted in my Indo-Guyanese identity dominating over any sense of Italianess or Canadianess, even though I knew that I was still some sort of outsider to that group. Looking at my cousins’ brown faces I began to believe that I too was brown. My brownness, however, was always an open signifier, constantly vulnerable to any challenges (Rattansi, 1994: 30). Such was the case when I began to explore music and put up a poster in my room of a rock group popular with my classmates. My cousins scorned and ridiculed me for identifying with Anglo-American, longhaired rockers. My authenticity as an Indo-Guyanese person was immediately suspect since I had demonstrated an affinity with the dominant culture and their music. I took down the poster that same day and hid it in my closet.

The experience of having my identity threatened was frightening. Being ostracized by the only peers that I identified with was a horrible betrayal and a salient lesson of the risks of inhabiting borders. My commitment to being perceived as Indo-Guyanese by my cousins is a testament to my inability to negotiate my tri-cultural status. This seemed easier and infinitely more clear-cut. However, as Williams discusses in her essay “Claiming a biracial identity,” the sense of being an impostor and the fear of being called on it is very real when one takes this route (Williams, 1999: 32-33). Existing as an
impostor also results in feelings of dishonesty and guilt that diminish the pleasure of being embraced as a full member of a group.

These are a few of the various experiences that have contributed to my self-conception as other. Being a boundary-walker, I sought out and identified with those who inhabited a similar space. My literary heroines were marginal characters that I could relate to, such as Jane Eyre and the early Anne of Green Gables. I was also fascinated by Indigenous cultures since they were in my mind an alternative to the dominant Canadian culture. I was reading Native folk tales from the age of eight or so. They played a large role in my literary development. It was not, however, until I arrived at Daniel Schugurensky’s “Citizenship Learning and Participatory Democracy” class at OISE/UT (the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto) that I began to understand these lifelong and lifewide experiences of not belonging in terms of my citizenship formation. I was unprepared for what transformations such an interrogation would bring.

Agency

I was surprised to learn that I had never critically thought of myself as a citizen. This is in all likelihood due to my sense of existing somewhere outside of the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture. By going through Daniel’s exercise of looking, for instance, at specific age brackets where I learned something about myself as a citizen, I came to realize that my citizenship formation had been passively acquired. It occurred by way of experiences such as those mentioned above where I felt excluded both from mainstream Canadian culture and “ethnic” Italian and Indo-Guyanese cultures. In essence, my conception of citizenship was negatively formed. I was neither a mainstream culture
Canadian nor a Canadian of a specific ethnicity. In having been affected most by experiences of exclusion, I had failed to cultivate any sense of inclusion as a Canadian and only begrudgingly accepted myself as such.

As a member of Daniel’s class, I was impressed by the diverse student body comprised of active citizens engaged in important community work. I suddenly became aware of my lack of initiative as a citizen and realized that this in all likelihood is the logical result of my inability to conceive of myself as a Canadian citizen in positive terms. This was a revelatory moment wherein I realized the connection between the two parts of the course: citizenship learning and participatory democracy. It was suddenly clear that the way in which one conceives of herself as a citizen determines her agency as a citizen. While this is a simple idea, it had a great impact on me.

The first problem was how to understand myself as a citizen in such a way so as to allow for the maximum amount of political efficacy in my environment. At the time, I had been studying Sherene Razack’s notion of complicity in ‘Looking White People in the Eye’ (2001). It occurred to me that my embracing of Canadian citizenship might be at the expense of First Nations Peoples since the state of Canada has historically treated them like third-class citizens, and continues to discriminate against them today. How could I proudly claim to be a member of a state that continues to destroy the lives of the original inhabitants of this land? I believe that citizens are complicitous with the actions of their state unless they take oppositional action. How good of a citizen was I if I contributed to the subjugation of First Nations Peoples by an occupying state guilty of theft and human rights violations?
While I am still struggling with this, I have resolved to move ahead looking for the answers, instead of waiting to find the answers before going forward. I have proceeded to cautiously and critically craft a new concept of citizenship for myself while remaining conscious of my implication in the struggles of First Nations Peoples. I am embracing my tri-cultural status as characteristic of the future of Canada. Racial and ethnic diversity is a fact of Canada’s road ahead. The number of inter-cultural youth such as myself will increase, and the challenges I face in coming to terms with my Canadian citizenship and learning how to be an active citizen will become increasingly widespread. This newfound optimism about myself as a Canadian citizen has already improved my political efficacy. For instance, the past elections were the first time I had researched candidates’ platforms and voted. Also, I have an interview for a summer job with Youth Unlimited, a group that works to help Toronto street kids. With this cautious and critical embracing of myself as a Canadian citizen, I am working towards strengthening not only my agency as a citizen, but my contribution to my social environment.

**Summary**

My conception of citizenship is shifting from being centered on identity towards becoming rooted in agency, as the diagram below illustrates. By reconciling with myself to adopt a meaningful conception as a tri-cultural Canadian citizen, I am able to move beyond questions of identity. This newfound peace allows for political efficacy. As Daniel has suggested in lecture, when I see how my actions as a citizen are successful, my sense of agency deepens. Additionally, there is a feedback loop between political efficacy and conceptions of citizenship. When one
performs herself as a citizen according to how she imagines herself as a political agent, the results of her actions will reaffirm or revise the original conception of citizenship. I now see how agency and one’s self-conception as a citizen have a cyclical relationship, and how important it is to nurture this process.

**Farrah’s Section**

**Overview**

Although my informal civic learning has been an ongoing process from birth, the specific ideals, values and goals inculcated have varied from one context to another. Up to the age of fourteen, civic learning was nurtured by my Somali citizenship even though I grew up in international settings. The national identity, social institutions, values, and character that defined my citizenship were in turn sustained by the social and cultural bonds that connected me to my kin and community. In many respects, this citizenship-based identity was “fixed” in that the code of ethics were heavily influenced by a patriarchal, patrilineal culture and orthodox religious ideals. It was also adequately “fluid” in permitting space to immerse in cross-cultural experiences. I often saw my actions/goals reflected in others because of our similar experiences as “products” of the international schooling system.

Regrettably, this flexible understanding of my Somaliness has undergone a dramatic shift as a result of my migration to Canada where deep-seated bipolar conceptions of citizenship – that of “Canadian” v. “Other” – has produced an urgent and indispensable need to belong, to reconnect with “my” people. As Yvonne Hebert (2001) acknowledges, whenever one is not sure of belonging, of how to place oneself among a variety of cultural styles and patterns, the notion of identity becomes increasingly
significant. And in modern, multi-ethnic societies like Canada, identity is oftentimes a complex and multi-layered issue regulated by the state apparatus (Bannerji, 2002). With the progress of time, my identity in the Canadian context has metamorphosed from one label to another to form a series of identities which were not only alien to me, but further ostracized me from acquiring “authentic” Canadian citizenship. These labels included, but were not limited to, “refugee”, “immigrant”, “person/woman of color”, “(visible) minority”, “ethnic”, etc. depending on the various phases of my citizenship incorporation. What is critical, however, is that even with the acquisition of citizenship (naturalization), such labels persist. Thus, state-sponsored schemes of “othering” have prevented successful integration, and the effort to reconstruct an alternative conception of Canadian identity.

Prior to this project, I had never successfully interrogated the essence and significance of my Canadian citizenship. In a vague, offhand way, I accepted citizenship as an identity derived from a particular set of cultures, traditions, and history which, rooted in liberal democratic principles, engendered political, economic, social and cultural rights and privileges to all members. Ideally, citizens of the nation-state would thus promote social inclusion (sense of belonging), social cohesion (fair balance between rights and responsibilities) and encourage civic engagement in the socio-political process. The reality, however, was starkly different. According to Bannerji (2002), the civic-republican interpretation of citizenship as narrow and constricted is a predominantly European phenomenon. This conception of citizenship seemed to me to be at odds with the overarching notion of social inclusion in a multi-ethnic, multicultural society. Despite growing multiculturalist rhetoric of diversity, state policies continue to legitimate
erroneous constructions of Canada as a “white” state thereby partially denying the realities of the Aboriginal peoples and the growing non-white populations inhabitants (Bannerji, 2002; Mukherjee, 2001).

The roots of this disparaging conception of being Canadian is pervasive in both formal and informal learning and continues to be reinforced and reproduced in many institutions and settings. A multitude of timeless voices, texts, events, practices, and gestures tell minority students that they are intellectually, emotionally, physically, and morally inferior (Hebert, 2001). The formal and hidden curricula marginalize minority students and exclude their experiences, history, and contributions. The persistent need to other, to distinguish between “real” and “new” Canadians based on cultural differences has produced isolation and exclusion of non-mainstream society. This, in turn, has prevented citizens from participating in civic action and processes for social change. While the nation boasts of its openness to difference, the informal structures in place inculcate a covert agenda of ethnocentrism that defeats its vocal commitment to social diversity.

The following vignettes illustrate the conflicting, and oftentimes distressing socialization generally associated with individuals with multiple and competing identities. The various scenarios depict crucial lessons which developed, strengthened and enhanced acceptance of my multiple citizenships – Somali, Canadian, and global – during my childhood as well as throughout my resettlement years in Canada. The overarching themes of status, identity and agency are used to illustrate the specific phases in a lifelong citizenship learning process that has often been marred by uncertainty and/or socio-political detachment. Detachment has characterized my
citizenship for a long time because my status as citizen has been synonymous only with my immigration status (refugee, permanent resident, citizen). Being Canadian literally translated into the possession of a globally respected passport and the occasional voting privilege. Through this informal learning process, however, I have broadened my understanding of citizenship beyond mere symbolism to an overt struggle to validate my unique identity, as one of many, within an alternative framework of Canadian citizenship. This interrogation has facilitated transition from citizenship as merely identity-based to that of social agency and active membership.

It highlights an internal struggle to validate my unique identity, as one of many, within an alternative framework of Canadian citizenship. The learning gained from this interrogation has enabled the transition from citizenship as merely identity-based to that of social agency and active membership.

**Status**

**Legal Exclusion**

My pre-Canada citizenship learning was grounded in two distinct elements: a strong Somali culture and a quasi-global awareness. My early socialization rested on language, traditions, religion, and patriotism. Born into an actively political family, knowledge of history, politics and family genealogy was critical. Given that Somalis are a clan-based society, one’s knowledge of clan structures and politics are crucial in that they provide the very foundation of identity. I was proud to be a Somali citizen, to share this heritage, maintain this lineage, even though the socialization occurred in the diaspora and was therefore more abstract than actual. I was also very conscious of my particularly privileged position in society and understood very early that it was not a universal
phenomena. On the other hand, my global citizenship was a result of extensive traveling and being educated in western formal schooling in the diaspora. Growing up in the international schooling system, we tended to celebrate difference rather than homogeneity. My classmates were all equally “foreigners” with different histories and unique cultural experiences. From early on, I learned to value and appreciate diversity, and accept the inherent equity in our interaction. Skin color and ethnicity held little significance. We equally sported dual identities – our national (real) and global (symbolic) citizenship.

As such, while my journey to Canada was a conscious decision to secure a safe haven for settlement, I am not certain I internalized the greater implications entailed in the journey. I was not prepared to adopt another identity, another citizenship, nor did I realize that the experience would be fraught with tensions and ambiguities. From my initial meeting with the immigration officer, I sensed the impending cultural and power dynamics in persistent references to “your people” and “in this country”. This was the starting point of an exclusionary process that many immigrants/”Canadians” grapple with throughout their resettlement.

I was struck by the immigrant officials’ total ignorance of world affairs, given their absolute authority in determining the fates of thousands of refugees/immigrants. More unsettling was their lack of cultural sensitivity which promoted a sense of social exclusion. These interactions are significant in that they contributed to the transformation of a flexible sense of self into concrete “othered” statuses, thus making it an inescapable, permanent fixture of one’s identity. During my interview session with immigration, I was unconsciously ensnared within this bipolar conception of “me” v.
“them.” The over-emphasis of my difference encouraged the emergence of a dormant sense of self (Somali-ness), which has continued to gain strength vis-à-vis my Canadian-ness in subsequent years. My sense of being an outsider has remained throughout my formative years in Canada. It has been instrumental in distancing myself from “them”.

My interview for high school enrollment is another case in point. My foreign name and immigration documents were sufficient in rousing an undesirable image of the “typical” immigrant. These were crucial moments that reinforced my heartfelt aversion to my adopted “citizens” and their condescension, superiority complex, and lack of respect for difference. I never understood the idiosyncratic behavior that immigrants evoke. Why, for example, do white Canadians raise their voices when speaking to foreigners or upon hearing an accent? What led my former guidance counsellor, Ms. Osbourne, to assume that volume would make up for a supposed lack in communication? And what is it about difference that prompts disapproval? Certainly, there is something here that warrants close re-examination.

Social Exclusion

My college years in Ottawa also reinforced the separation between the “ideal” citizen and the intrusive immigrant. I emphasize ideal because, ironically, it was during this period that I obtained Canadian citizenship. While I could officially call myself Canadian (status), I lacked the attributes that accompanied this entitlement. I did not feel sufficiently secure in my new identity to critically engage in civic duties. The barrier between a real and a new Canadian still existed – both physically and socially. My visibility as a foreigner was still palpable and it did not lessen the ordeals of securing basic rights like decent housing without undergoing rigorous examinations. Were these
obstacles a result of blatant racism or simply routine procedure? I was often grateful for my early education in English which enabled me to audibly “pass” as a Canadian. But overall, these formative years evoked feelings of being distinctly unwanted, unaccepted, and marginalized. The need to explain, to justify, and to apologize for my difference prevented me from interrogating my citizenship and attaining social inclusion.

Depending on the context, questions like “where do you come from?” generally reinforce the notion of social exclusion, particularly between invisible and visible Canadians. While some may argue that these exchanges can contribute to diversity and knowledge creation amongst Canadians, it is, for most immigrants, a tacit, exclusionary act. Oftentimes, the interrogation of personal history becomes persistent with anyone who speaks “good” English but doesn’t “look” Canadian. Can we then ask if citizenship is synonymous with race? The lack of acceptance of multi-generation African-Canadians as “real” Canadians appears to be a case in point (Shadd, 2001; Hill, 2001). Given that I was functioning in a Canadian setting, used an official language with little difficulty, and could easily immerse myself in the multicultural milieu, I found it unsettling that my non-Canadian identity was more appealing to my audience. Didi Khayatt (2002) notes that this type of interaction is really a performance of citizenship, a re-enactment of one’s past and present to the speculation of the inquirer. As a refugee and landed immigrant, performing to such questions was simple: I was not a Canadian and was not expected to answer as such. Upon attaining the new status, however, I pondered whether my response ought to change. Clearly, these persistent references to origin were not rhetorical but rather designed to strengthen the belief that I was not a real citizen. As
such, I learned to be appreciative of the rights and privileges I enjoyed as a citizen in status.

Why was difference so important in this context? And what factors prevent change? As Juliet Merrifield (2001) notes, citizenship is both an act (virtue) and a process of being (status), and these components must be examined carefully in order to maintain a healthy civil society. Given the increasingly diverse composition of today’s “Canadians,” there is a dearth of critical information and engagement amongst citizens in socio-political affairs. Enabling structures, such as inclusive curriculum in schools and active civic participation in community affairs, broaden the education of the society in understanding the drawbacks of citizenship and committing to an agenda for equality and social cohesion for all Canadians. Defending one’s legitimacy as a Canadian is not a viable option if the broader social system is not receptive to such social changes. The symbiosis of virtues and status entrenches one’s identity in his/her environment and makes him/her a better citizen. And it is only with deep structural changes that “othered” Canadians can find solace and satisfaction in their new identity.

Identity

Fusion of Competing Identities

Though the depiction of Canada as an open society is widespread, what I am questioning is the society’s receptiveness to the transformation of national identity. The transition from biculturalism to multiculturalism is a top-down, legalist approach which does not appear to have genuinely permeated the political, economic and social constitution of society. Multiculturalism enables new citizens to exercise their ethnic identities without fear or prejudice (Jones, 2000). It does not, however, guarantee their
total acceptance in the mainstream, Euro-dominant culture as equal citizens. Such exclusionary tactics generally entrench civic participation as the domain of a minority group (Heater, 1999), thus ostracizing new Canadians’ participation in particular arenas where they can make an impact. Not surprisingly, the end result is apathy, discontent, and an inability to accept their citizenship in practice.

Given that one’s perception of citizenship is informed by legal and social exclusion (experiences which accentuate citizenship as rights-based), most fail to realize that citizenship encompasses not only rights, but also responsibilities. For example, it is critical to keep in mind that citizens share the responsibility of making the legal system fair and accessible to all, and ensuring that Canada is in all respects multicultural. These responsibilities, in turn, would enable the reconfiguration of a Canadian citizenship so that a multicultural society is truly embraced. Currently, legal and political rights and freedoms (as well as economic freedoms, to an extent) are deemed sufficient goals for “new” citizens. However, with time, there must emerge a deeper questioning of citizenship, not just as status, but in social practice as well.

After nearly a decade and a half, I am still struggling with my conception of being Canadian. I am also re-evaluating my conflicting citizenships and attempting to merge these multiple identities into a realistic whole. My myriad experiences attest to the emotional pitfall of being Canadian, of never truly belonging. My travels abroad, particularly to Somalia, have forced me to accept that my membership in that culture has also been transformed due to my migration. As a result, I am in a peculiar state of identity limbo (immigrant-alien) in my quest to find the ideal “citizenship.” While I have, in principle, come to accept and endorse the ideal values of an open democracy and
the quest for social justice, I also recognize that justice is not being meted out to those who do not meet the required “standards.” Arun Mukherjee sums it up candidly when she states, “…being Canadian is a privilege only white people enjoy… I doubt I’ll ever become ‘just Canadian,’ whatever that means” (2001:213).

**Agency**

The phrase “whatever that means” has been instrumental in determining the ongoing transformation to define my citizenship. Canadian citizenship as it stands is an outcome of “whatever” the initial settlers perceived as identity, be it British, French or a combination, without due respect for indigenous culture and customs. My rationale, on the other hand, is that while I cannot alter my character or history to better fit into these acceptable cliques, I can choose to enjoy the rights and privileges bestowed by my membership in multiple entities, including that of Canada. I have learned to value my difference, my experiences, *my* unique sense of being Canadian. I have attempted to construct a broader conception of citizenship, which, based on difference, is a sum of *all* its parts. By validating the right to be different, of heterogeneity over homogeneity, I believe we as equal citizens can create a national identity based on equity and justice and aesthetic difference.

This ideological transformation has enabled me to further develop my political efficacy and view myself as a potential agent of social change. I have since attempted to exercise my civic duty by participating in the consciousness-raising of both new and “authentic” Canadians on the illusion of being a “real” Canadian. As a volunteer and community development worker, I have spent...
considerable time and effort working with educators in cross-cultural (sensitivity) and power relations training in order to realize their own culturally-based biases against difference. In educating educators, I have attempted to broaden an understanding of the structures which ease/inhibit the integration of newcomers into the larger Canadian milieu.

Summary

Although the image of what constitutes “Canadian” will for a long time rely on the politics of power, color and history, vital efforts are underway to debunk the myth of Canada founded on two distinct cultures in order to construct a more meaningful and accurate narrative of the nation's historical development. This “unfinished project” of citizenship and identity is one which needs to be critically examined if the objective of citizenship is inclusivity, cohesion and accessible membership in a civil and vibrant society (Bannerji, 2002). And this struggle will continue to inform my citizenship learning and that of future generations. Given that my initial process of integration occurred in phases, it follows that my acceptance of my Canadian-ness is equally fragmentary and protracted. The reconstruction of citizenship as status (passive membership) to one of active membership is the starting point in re-visioning the future of citizenship in a multi-ethnic society. And while a great deal remains in interrogating the values and virtues of citizenship in multicultural societies, I am currently at peace with my interpretation of a hyphenated Canadian.
Conclusion

The impetus for this collective project arose from a conversation on the problem of being a visible/invisible Canadian citizen. While we embrace the norms and ideals of “being” Canadian, we nevertheless feel collectively marginalized from the mainstream classification of Canadian. Our “authenticity” varies from being native born, to child immigrant, to migrating as an adolescent. Our geographic roots are equally expansive: Africa, Middle East, and a fusion of Caribbean and Europe. As a result, our emotional attachments to citizenship range from uncertainty, to ambivalence, to a cautious embracing.

While we have social and cultural differences, each of us reflected on our inability to be fully accepted as mainstream Canadian citizens. Is citizenship a result of birth, based on a particular racial identity, or informed by a collective history? Is it determined by virtues, ideals, democratic values, or civil society? The burning question of ‘what is citizenship, anyway?’ guided the process to define what citizenship meant to each of us and how our experiences as Canadians differ. While we did not have an all-purpose definition for citizenship, our conception of it rests on three distinct concepts - status, identity and agency - and how the intersection of these ideas is where the ideal citizen would be situated.

Can ‘new’ Canadians overcome these challenges of in/visibility in order to access the benefits of their citizenship? The various stories have demonstrated the myriad ways in which race, ethnicity and culture have been instrumental in impeding the acceptance of culturally distinct peoples in Canadian society. However, the narratives are a testament to the ongoing transformations that are broadening our understanding of citizenship.
Maryam’s story is an exploration of the dialectic of dual citizenship and the need to create a fair balance between competing senses of self in order to establish a holistic conception of citizenship. Leila’s citizenship is equally in transition from a lack of consciousness as a Canadian to a cautious embracing of a tri-cultural Canadian citizenship. Farrah’s story tells of a journey towards a conscious transformation from an exclusively legal, status-based notion citizenship towards one rooted in agency.

A common issue amongst the authors has been the notion of citizenship as restrictive. The persistent need of mainstream Canadian society to formulate citizenship in terms that glorify the European national history and denigrate the indigenous one is a testament to the exclusionary nature of Canadian citizenship. By socializing new Canadians into this narrow vision of “Canadian” and by their being complicitous with it, immigrants are removed from the historical development of this society. This means that they fail to see how their marginalization is but one of many in a series of racist policies. Canadian citizenship is therefore an inadequately formulated concept that needs to be broadened so as to foster inclusion. The process of reformulating citizenship begins with an individual interrogation of one’s self as a citizen. It is our hope that this paper contributes to this effort.
References


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