Unsettling Claims of Belonging: Deconstructing Canada through Four Generations of Stories on Turtle Island

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Abstract

Starting from the premise that we have to know where we have been to know where we are going, this piece looks heavily to the past and considers the effects of differently experienced belonging in Canada across generations. This autobiographical reflection questions how we might read migrant-settler narratives of belonging alongside Indigenous struggles for sovereignty in such a way that desires for belonging do not displace or erase such struggles but rather support them. Reflecting on my experiences of belonging and shame as a Japanese Canadian of mixed Japanese and British ancestry, the article seeks to deconstruct and disrupt settler-migrant stories by examining citizenship and belonging from these different perspectives.

Keywords: Belonging, Citizenship, Shame, Settler Colonialism, Japanese Canadian internment, Autobiography, Life Writing

Introduction

While reflecting on what I could contribute to this Special Issue on living stories of migrancy, 1988 came to mind as an important year. I was only eleven years old at the time. That year, Canadians were redefining the contours of belonging as citizens such as, but not limited to, signing into law the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. That year, I was also in a process of understanding the contours of that belonging on a very personal level. Two important events took place. First, I applied for and was granted Canadian citizenship which is interesting because I was born in Canada. Second, on September 22, the Canadian government apologized to my family and compensated some family members for what is often referred to as “the internment” during the 1940s.

I was enrolled in Girl Guides when I applied for Canadian citizenship. As a Girl Guide, I remember promising on my honour to do my best, to do my duty to God, the Queen and my country with one hand on my heart and the other raised in the air. I never understood the significance of the Queen as a child. But, I still memorized and recited these words weekly. At the end of one of our weekly meetings, a group leader encouraged me to apply for a Canadian citizenship card and handed me some forms. I did not understand what a citizenship application meant nor its historical or contemporary significance. I am also not sure if other girls in the group were similarly encouraged to go through the process. In any case, I asked my parents if we could apply because the leader made it seem important. At the very least, she said, it would be good to have as a crucial piece of my identification as a Canadian citizen. I ended up going through the process and took an oath while standing in a school gymnasium beside the Canadian

flag. I vaguely remember having to swear an oath, again to the Queen with my hand raised, as I stood beside that flag and her portrait. Today, despite having been born in Canada, I have a Canadian citizenship card. The wallet-sized laminated card features an awkward picture of me as a child wearing my Girl Guide uniform and states that I was 157 cm tall at the time. I have never used it once in my life as a piece of identification.

The privileged experience I had while applying for Canadian citizenship as a child is unlike any other of which I have heard. To receive this piece of identification, there had been no travel from one place to another, no hardship experienced, no worry as to whether or not I would be accepted, no process to test my historical and/or cultural knowledge of a nation some of us call Canada, or how to be a “good” Canadian. In retrospect, I suspect that the application process was treated as a formality because I am already a citizen by birth, as are both of my parents. However, for my friends who were born elsewhere and who have recently become Canadian citizens, this was not the case. Each of them were encouraged to study a document called *Discover Canada, The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship: Study Guide* in preparation for taking the citizenship test (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). This guide provides a small window into various aspects of Canadian life including its history, culture, rights, geography, and government. *Discover Canada* distills life in Canada into a 69-page document and states under the heading “Who We Are” that “to understand what it means to be Canadian, it is important to know about our three founding peoples—Aboriginal, French and British” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012, p. 10). The guide skims across these complex historical and contemporary relations.

The citizenship study guide also refers to the apology and compensation that were given to my family and members of the Japanese Canadian community on September 22, 1988. This moment in Canadian history, the first time that the Canadian government apologized to and compensated a “minority group” for past wrongs, marks the second moment that I became aware of citizenship in Canada. The guide notes that

...the state of war and public opinion in B.C. led to the forcible relocation of *Canadians of Japanese origin* by the federal government and the sale of their property without compensation. This occurred even though the military and the RCMP told Ottawa that they posed little danger to Canada. (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012, p. 23, emphasis my own)

I emphasize the words “Canadians of Japanese origin” in this quotation because it refers to a nuance I learned that year about citizenship: despite being born in Canada and despite having that citizenship card, I am “different,” and one is not simply a citizen, full stop. For some, conceptions of citizenship are qualified by certain markers of difference, in this case “Canadians of Japanese origin.” I was too young at the time to fully understand what this all meant of course. And yet, one thing I wondered for many years after was why I was not also a Canadian of “British origin” in reference to my mother’s side of the family. I stopped asking this question over time. More often than not, it was met with the swift and uncritical reply ‘oh, that’s *just Canadian*.’ It seemed there was no need to question this. The understood “Anglo-Saxon Britishness” of the answer was obvious for part of my family and other Canadians. So, I stopped questioning... Until I began taking an interest in my family history and the past more generally.

Cree/Assiniboine/Saulteaux scholar and member of Gordon First Nation, Dr. Raven Sinclair, writes that “in order to know where we are going, we have to know where we have been. ... we need to understand our personal histories and cultures and how the colonization of our lands has affected us as individuals, families and communities” (Hart et al., 2009, p. 19). In this quotation, Sinclair uses the pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our” to address other Indigenous peoples. In turn, I stress that this is also important for non-Indigenous peoples who settle, reside, live, arrive, and become citizens on this – Indigenous – land. Historian Victoria Freeman (2000) observes that the vast majority of British descended Canadians she encounters who have been here for several generations, have neither any knowledge about their ancestors beyond their grandparents, nor the historical, political, and economic factors that brought them in the first place to this part of Turtle Island that we now call Canada. This was certainly the case for me until I actively chose to begin learning, not just about my genealogy, but about what this genealogy and my own family’s stories of migration can tell me about the formation and maintenance of the Canadian nation-state on Indigenous land.

The call for this Special Issue encourages authors to question whether or not our nation-states, public institutions, and/or research are doing enough for newcomers and/or refugees. This autobiographical piece leans on such questions to examine and unsettle the sense and use of the possessive pronoun “our” around which this call is oriented. A sense of unease, sometimes anxiety, and several questions come to mind when I encounter the word “ours” and its opposite, “theirs.” Who is included and who is excluded with the invocation of the pronoun “our”? What assumptions about people and belonging are present, but remain unengaged and unacknowledged, by naming something “ours”? Around what peoples are lines and boundaries drawn and hierarchies formed? Who *belongs* in this “our” and who determines that sense of belonging? Does belongingness change over time? While these questions might appear to move somewhat away from the immediate subject of the issue at hand, I emphasize that these are foundational questions and concerns. Migration and citizenship are intimately intertwined with notions and experiences of belonging and that sense of belonging requires constant unpacking and a critical eye. The Canadian nation-state, its public institutions, and research all actively shape, contest, and challenge understandings of who belongs and who does not, while often looking to the experiences of those who are marked by difference in contrast to those who are *just Canadians*. My contribution seeks to unsettle and historicize claims of belonging in relation to a Canadian settler colonial context toward encouraging an examination of the foundations from which we question, analyse and address issues of migration.

The life writing presented in the pages that follow weaves together personal and collective memories and experiences of “arriving, residing, and/or becoming” as well as displacement and racial violence within Canada. Life writing is relational work that narrates moments of one’s life as experienced in a range of contexts and personal and public worlds (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). This autobiographical piece particularly reflects my effort to “see life within the fullness of a double or even a multiple vision” as described by curriculum scholar Ted Aoki (1983, p. 334). Inspired by Inazō Nitobe’s text entitled *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, Aoki uses the sakura and the rose as metaphors to describe this multiple vision (*ibid.*). The goal is not to compare or reduce the metaphors, characteristics, and histories of one flower over the other or attempt to reduce them to common traits, but instead see the richness in their differences. This emphasis on multiple vision is also in-line with the principles of *métissage* as life writing research or the braiding together of personal and family stories with larger ones about the nation (Blood et al., 2012). The intended

audience that I have in mind for this piece are settlers of British ancestry – those who might consider themselves *just Canadian* – and Japanese Canadians as it is from these locations that I write. However, my reflections might be of interest to other people who identify as Canadians from Asian Diasporas and more particularly Chinese Canadians who also received and/or research the history and redress for the Chinese Head Tax. This is a call for us each to engage with our individual genealogies in order to remember and reconnect with ancestors and their migration stories, so that we might gain a deeper understanding of citizenship and belonging and their implications on Indigenous land and for Indigenous nations. In the broadest sense, my hope is to connect with Indigenous and other People of Colour with whom the writing on shame and nation in the pages that follow might resonate.

Origin Stories: Looking Back at Belonging as the In/Ability to *Become Canadian*

The foundational narrative of Canadian nationhood is a romance of pioneering adventure, of wild lands and savage peoples, of discovery and enterprise, of the overcoming of adversity through sheer perseverance and ingenuity. (Thobani, 2007, p. 33)

We were taught that French voyageurs and British pioneers sought to establish peaceful settlements that mimicked their respective ‘civilized’ metropolitan institutions. Other inter-national settlers such as, but not limited to, the Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Ukrainian, and the different local Indigenous communities remained absent from the common countenance of what now constitutes Canada. They were not accounted for in our life narratives. (Ng-A-Fook, 2016, p. 125)

But where does a Japanese Canadian like me belong? (Aoki, 1983, p. 324)

Hello. 今日は¹. My name is Jennifer 蜜 Ann 松永. My middle names honour two of my great-grandmothers. 蜜 was from 松崎町, 日本 and Ann was from Aberdeen, Scotland. I was fortunate to have met them both as a child. When they spoke, I had a difficult time understanding their perfectly good English through their accents. My young ears had not yet been attuned to hearing and understanding English other than as spoken in the accents of my immediate family, the people in my neighbourhood, and those at school; however, their life-worn hands, their warm hearts, and the kindness that I saw in their eyes when they smiled at me communicated enough. I cherish these felt, and heard, memories. I was in Vancouver, British Columbia when I met 蜜 and Birtle, Manitoba when I met Ann. I would learn many years later as an adult in university that I met my great-grandmothers on Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories (Vancouver), and Treaty 2 and Métis territories (Birtle).

¹ The few *kanji*, or the Japanese writing, that I have allowed to stand on their own without translation or pronunciation in this piece are there for a couple of reasons. As the paper will discuss in the pages that follow, during the 1940s, the Canadian government targeted and shamed tens of thousands of people of “Japanese racial origin” for their physical appearance and culture and as a direct result, most descendants of those who were targeted, like myself, are not fluent Japanese speakers today. There is a collective sense of loss in the Japanese Canadian community because of this. I have worked hard to come to know my own surname in *kanji* and to learn what Japanese I do know. I respectfully leave this writing to stand in its contrast to English in this piece.

In 1942, 蜜 had already been in British Columbia for twenty-six years. That year, she and my great-grandfather were subject to the Canadian government's Order-in-Council P.C. 1486 that addressed "All Japanese Persons and Persons of Japanese Racial Origin." The government gave my family 24-48 hours to gather whatever clothes and belongings they could that would not exceed 150 pounds of luggage for adults and roughly 75 pounds for children (Collins, 2018). They were forced to leave behind their home – everything that would not fit in that luggage – and life as they knew it before having to report to Hastings Park where they were temporarily housed. Three generations of my family, including 蜜, her husband, my grandmother, grandfather, and my father would later be moved to Tashme, a remotely situated "internment camp" that was 14-miles southeast of Hope, British Columbia. They were divided between shack numbers 62 and 64 for roughly four years until they petitioned the Canadian government to be able to follow my grandfather to a work camp run by the Canadian Pacific Railway, in Ontario, in order to keep the family together. They were uprooted a second time. Keeping the family together was crucial to my great-grandmother and I have inherited the landscape of feelings and values that are associated with that imperative. In my family, the importance of "sticking together" – a phrase meant to protect from threat of racism, discrimination or danger – is a phrase that I have heard many times since I was a child.

Ann had been in Canada for twenty-eight years by the time the Canadian government issued the Order-in-Council that would impact my father's side of the family so profoundly. Ann had been in Canada only two years longer than 蜜. Ann immigrated to Canada in 1914 as part of the population of farmers and farm labourers who came from the Scottish Lowlands. This group comprised the majority of immigrants that would contribute to the growth of a population of over 1 million Scottish settlers in western Canada (Library and Archives Canada, 2013). Once here, her life was very rooted—rooted in her farm, in her family, and in her community. She and my great-grandfather farmed the land identified as "7-17-25" in Birtle for forty-six years after they were married. My grandfather helped farm that land until World War II began and he enlisted in the Canadian army. A memoir written about the city of Birtle features an entry written by my great-grandmother, Ann, where she reflected on difficult times, of having lost a child, of living with crippling arthritis, and of getting through harsh winters where there were often blizzards and sometimes six to eight feet of snow (Abra, 1974). Hydroelectricity being introduced to the community was an important moment that she remembered well, having been badly burned by oil lamps in the home at one point. She recognized that she was fortunate and had a very good life, despite hardships, and loved the farm. She reflected fondly in that memoir that "Canada is a grand place" (Abra, 1974). Although I never spoke to her about it, Ann conveys a deep sense of belonging in this memoir that is intimately tied to the farm.

Belongingness in the making of a settler Canadian nation dwells quite a bit in essentialist notions of one's "origin" and emphasizes that the ability to own land on which to farm and to build is integral to that belonging. This is the literal and figurative foundation of settlement in Canada. Under the heading "Becoming Canadian," the citizenship guide to which I referred in earlier pages seeks to teach newcomers that,

[t]he basic way of life in English-speaking areas was established by hundreds of thousands Of English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish settlers, soldiers and migrants from the 1600s to the 20th century. Generations of pioneers and builders of British origins, *as well as other*

groups, invested and endured hardships in laying the foundations of our country.
(Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012, p. 12, emphasis my own)

The guide emphasizes that pioneers and builders of “British origins” form the bedrock of English-speaking Canada. Curiously, the guide also references “other groups,” which I have emphasized in italics in the quotation above, but simultaneously erases their contribution in this context. The guide exalts the hard work and experiences of my great-grandparents of British origin who established farms, but not the work of my Japanese grandfather on the TransCanada Highway or the Canadian Pacific Railway (Thobani, 2007). And yet, it makes no mention of how these farms, roads, and railways impacted the Indigenous communities they disrupted, cut into and ripped through. As in the quotation included at the outset of this section, over the course of these early moments in Canadian history, peoples of “different origins” including Chinese, Japanese, Ukrainian, Portuguese and local Indigenous communities contributed and laboured in this foundation-building. These are perhaps the “other groups” which the guide names and simultaneously erases. I grew up in this settler state of erasure, an erasure so deeply ingrained and enforced that I had very little understanding of the “other groups” in this citizenship guide curriculum, let alone my own (hyphenated) otherness.

Shame and Belonging

1988 was also the year when I learned that I was half Japanese. I was aware of some differences between friends and myself. I just had no words to understand or to express what I knew and felt about these differences. I did not understand why anytime a new non-white student joined my class, the teacher would sit them beside me and tell me that I should be friends with them and play with them at recess. I did not understand why I had a cutlery drawer like that of my friends except mine also contained chopsticks. I would sometimes poke at my upper eyelids and wonder why mine were “puffy” and theirs had a deep crease. I felt my black hair stood out like a beacon in contrast to their fair hair. I came home crying from school one day because kids were calling me a “chink.” I did not know what the word meant but I could tell it meant something negative by the tone in their voices. I said to my father while crying, “Why are they calling me that? I don’t even know what that means!” To which he replied, “*because* our family is Japanese” rather than *because* theirs were racist. Wanting to protect me, I got my first direct lesson about racism and how to deal with it that day: “Don’t say anything, just ignore them and walk away.” This was a survival strategy that I used for many years; in fact, I still go silent sometimes. But, to be able to “ignore” racism as a kid, required me to stuff down the big feelings it left behind – I lowered my head and kept it down, closed my mouth and stopped talking, and invested a lot of time, energy, and focus into trying to fit in like anyone else... Which meant asserting that my family is Canadian, not Japanese... which meant allowing the richness of that half of my history, my ancestry, my culture, *myself* to be swallowed up and enveloped by that ever-expanding farmland of my British ancestors. I knew very little to nothing about them, either. Despite being Canadian, being born in Canada, and having that laminated Canadian citizenship card, I spent much of my early life in-between worlds and shades of unbelonging, wanting to be invisible, and to be left alone.

Shame is a manipulative and painful beast of a thing that plays tricks on you and attacks your sense of self-worth. Psychological understandings of shame regard this “self-conscious emotion” as one that tends to cause a person to shrink, to hide, to evade, and to attempt to “get

rid of their self” due to the painful experience of some wrong, harm or violation (Stearns, 2017, p. 4). That was certainly part of my experience. By hiding, shrinking, evading and denying the self, and by wrapping it all up in anger, rigidity or defense, that beast believes it is protecting you from harm. Shame is a common symptom among those who have suffered some form of traumatic experience (Platt & Freyd, 2012). I could try, within this framework, to understand, heal and explain away the shame of unbelonging that I have felt in my life by recalling individual experiences. I have experienced racism, name calling, being singled out, and treated differently because of such exclusions. However, treating shame simply as the result of an individual experience or trauma continues to isolate me and to locate that shame as something to be fixed *with me*. I no longer accept this individualistic view as the origin and only answer. I am invested in understanding and contributing to the awareness and healing of relational, collective and productive aspects of shame.

Shame is not simply a self-conscious emotion that is experienced by individuals following the experience of singular events or traumas. Shame produces and reinforces social hierarchies; it can be experienced by groups and collectivities; and it has its own history (Stearns, 2017). Historical trauma and race-based traumas, or historical race-based trauma, are interrelated concepts which have built on one another and are sometimes used interchangeably (See Nagata et al., 2015). Together, they signify complex, collective and intergenerational group trauma and its associated compounding experiences of discrimination and racism (Brave Heart et al., 2011, p. 282). Historical trauma is defined in part by the experiences of Indigenous and racialized communities who have been targeted by governmental assimilation policies (Fast and Collin-Vézina, 2019). Shame is a symptom and result of historical and race-based trauma that cuts across these communities.

I now regard shame as a kind of human holding cell, which requires no bars, buildings or muzzles. I argue that shame is a tool, a strategy, in processes that seek to produce unbelonging; it is not only an individual’s emotional and behavioural response to a situation. Shame has been and is mobilized by the Canadian nation-state, public institutions, and/or research that have targeted and racially-defined entire populations as “problems.” Duncan Campbell Scott, who was deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs and the main proponent of the residential schools during their peak, asserted in 1920 that the system should “get rid of the Indian problem... until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department” (Scott, 1920). Similarly, in 1944, John M. Ewing who was a psychology instructor in a post-secondary institute for the training of school teachers in British Columbia (BC Archives, n.d.), set out to discuss “the problem of the Japanese in Canada” on a CBC program (Ewing, 1944). Ewing makes the case for exiling people of “Japanese origin” to Japan because they, unlike immigrants from European countries, will never be able to be “absorbed into our Canadian stock.” Their inability to assimilate is due to three things, he argues: They are “very unlike us in physical structure”; “they speak another language”; and they “cherish a tradition wholly dissimilar to ours.” Japanese language schools, which were considered “cinders of traditional teaching,” were to be completely eliminated, English was to be strictly enforced. He also argued that “Japanese communities must be so broken up as to compel these people to associate fully with Canadians.” The statements by Scott and Ewing reflect similar and pervasive settler colonial mentalities that define problem populations based on their phenotypic and cultural differences to European descended Canadians; the assimilatory reasoning behind Indian residential schools and the

Japanese Canadian internment are similar in this respect. Similar are the views that racial difference, different languages, traditional teachings, cultures, and practices are shameful when held up against those of Anglo-Saxon Canadians and are threats to the “stock” of such Canadians if they cannot be “absorbed.”

I now think of citizenship and belonging in relation to shame. How has the institutionalized deployment of shame around notions of difference that stand in contrast to an imagined Canadian norm, such as through the policies that persecuted my family and the Japanese Canadian community, held me to an end point of wanting to belong in a settler colonial project at the expense of Indigenous rights and sovereignty? How does the pervasive and common disconnection from and forgetting of my British ancestors, beyond grandparents, hold me to an end point of unquestioningly asserting this as my homeland at the expense of Indigenous rights and sovereignty?

Conclusion

Ted Aoki (1983) reminds us,

We live by metaphors. But most of the time we take our root metaphors for granted without realizing the assumptions we unconsciously hold. If we want to come to know the assumptions we make about humanity and world, we need to learn to stop our ongoing world, and to reflect upon how we make sense of our world by uncovering and thus dis-covering the root metaphor(s) to which unconsciously subscribe. (p. 333)

This piece is a challenge to “stop the ongoing world” for a moment on questions of migration in order to examine some root assumptions and histories about colonization, belonging and its attachment to shame, citizenship and citizen self-awareness in the Canadian settler colonial context. Learning about myself, my ancestors, and my own living stories of Japanese and British migrancy have intimately tied me to a more deeply questioned and felt understanding of myself as a settler, as citizen, and as Other. It has certainly required me to understand myself and my history in their complicit relations to the dispossession of Indigenous lands and continued attacks against Indigenous sovereignty.

My article took a step back from the immediacy of the questions posed by this Special Issue on migrancy to consider the histories and foundations that underlie such questions. Aoki (1983) emphasized the importance of allowing difference to be maintained and respected without trying to subsume, fold or integrate one into the other. Allowing for the multiple realities lived by two sides of my family offers a rich opportunity to understand where we have been, in terms of migration, in order to more fully understand where we are and where we might be headed. The sakura and the rose, my great-grandmothers’ stories, unfold contemporarily to one another and in vastly different realities despite both taking place on this land that many call Canada. Both women would become Canadian citizens. Neither flower was native to this land and one was meant to flourish while the other was not. Their stories demonstrate the uneven terrain that must be kept in view on which citizenship and belonging are built and maintained.

I questioned, at the outset of this piece, how we might read migrant-settler narratives of belonging alongside Indigenous struggles for sovereignty in such a way that desires for belonging, do not displace or erase such struggles but rather support them. In this piece of life-

writing, I focused on notions of belonging within my own history. Missing in this piece are intergenerational Indigenous stories and voices to communicate with the memories and realities that I have shared about myself and my family. As I wrote in the beginning of the piece, Sinclair teaches that to know where we are going we need to know where we have been and colonization is a cornerstone of this knowing. To this effect, I shared some of the starting points to and touchstones of my journey to understand where I have been, where I come from, and who I am in terms of colonization. The curiosity that I have maintained about my history and my experience throughout my life have fed my commitments to connection, justice, truth, compassion, and change. From the time of being a little girl who pledged her duty to Canada's Queen every week in Girl Guides, to now being someone who is motivated personally and professionally by much of what I have shared here, my goal is to walk as purposefully and as gently as possible on my path as researcher, as educator, as friend, as mother, and as great-granddaughter to 蜜 and to Ann.

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