

I'm(migrant) Canadian: Renegotiating a "Canadian" National Imaginary in English as a Second Language (ESL) Classrooms

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Abstract

What does being "Canadian" mean to racialized students learning an additional language? What happens when such students do not fit in with dominant, idealized notions of being a Canadian? Drawing on Norton's and Anderson's concept of imagined communities, this article posits that Canada is an imagined nation. In responding to the two questions, I summarize the relevant literature and share some key personal and lived experiences in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) students. To conclude, I suggest that in light of the significant demographic changes that negotiating and reconstructing the "Canadian" identity, is a learning process in which all societal members must participate in equitable ways.

Keywords: Citizenship, racialized immigrant students, imagined Canadian communities, narratives, lived experiences

Introduction

I am a "Canadian." Legally, since 2001, I have the documents to prove my status as a "Canadian" citizen. Culturally, I subsume and accept this designation since I have grown up in this country since the tender age of two years. And yet, there are pregnant pauses whenever I state my nationality. These hesitations can be found in the gap between Burmese Canadian. My parents migrated originally from Myanmar. I have only been to their mother country once. By then, I had been an adult for a long time. I can visually note and viscerally emote, the discrepancies between Burmese nationals and myself, the "Canadian." Another form of hesitation is noticed when people ask me where I am *really* from. I reply with weary silence and the intrusive conversation ends. But this conversation continues in other forms in my everyday life. It screams at me when I walk down a street and a loiterer throws racial slurs at me. It nags in the way employers in Southeast Asia reject my job applications because I look like the locals. And it whispers quietly when I am mistaken by volunteers at my workplace as a refugee client and not recognized as one of the professional, fully trained members of the teaching staff. I imagine, that when I state that I'm "Canadian," what is heard instead is the label migrant in-between the gap. In other words, what is heard is 'I'm(migrant) Canadian.'

My identity as an immigrant "Canadian" is a matter of perception. Who I imagine myself to be, and what, how and who others perceive me to be, may align or clash; meld or dissolve. I did not stop being an immigrant once I obtained my citizenship certificate, nor is my "Canadian" status stripped of me when I reveal that I am originally from a foreign place of origin. What is

detrimental, especially for racialized Canadians, like myself, is whose perception (either explicitly or implicitly) is exalted and celebrated, over others, and the Othered.”

What does it mean to be “Canadian?” Or, to inquire further, what does being “Canadian” mean to residents who do not, cannot, or may not ever reflect the traditional, idealized notions of being a “Canadian” citizen? To answer my question, I begin by thinking of the distinguished scholar, James Banks (2009) who reminds us that “becoming a legal citizen of a nation does not necessarily mean that an individual will attain structural inclusion into the mainstream society and its institutions or will be perceived as a citizen by most members of the mainstream group within the nation” (p. 12). While Banks (2009) refers to societies that draw explicitly on citizenship concepts of homogeneity and monolingualism, his notions also apply to nations that promote and implement official policies of multiculturalism and celebrate diversity. Despite Canada’s enshrinement of multiculturalism and human rights in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, racialized minorities experience structural and systemic acts of racism and discrimination.

In this essay, I share short stories of becoming and unbecoming a “Canadian.” While becoming a “Canadian” has political and civic dimensions, I allude to the “Canadian” identity as a sociocultural process of inheriting national values, histories, and ideologies (Banks, 2008; Pashby, 2008). The following anecdotes are neither fantastical nor unordinary. They are simply narratives of my lived experiences: some are teaching moments in the language classroom, and a snapshot of living as a racialized citizen. Borrowing Aoki’s (2003) words, I share my lived experiences as a “curriculum-as-live(d)” (p. 2). Such a curriculum will “accommodate[s] lived meanings, thereby legitimating thoughtful everyday narratives” (Aoki, 1993, p. 263). In contrast, Aoki’s (1993) curriculum-as-planned means the formal, official curriculum. Within the context of this essay, I refer to normative narratives of the “Canadian” national identity as representing the latter type of curriculum.

I begin the next section by discussing Norton’s (2001) concept of the imagined community to describe what the process of becoming and unbecoming means, and furthermore, how it is experienced and lived. Then, I summarize how the normative imaginings of the “Canadian” have influenced my lived experiences with students in the classroom. I also include a critical incident on the national level—Don Cherry’s, Remembrance Day, ‘poppy’ scandal to illustrate how racialized immigrants are ‘othered.’ The aim of sharing these stories is to expand the boundaries of the discourse regarding our national identity, and to reconsider, what it means to be a “Canadian,” for racialized immigrants and non-immigrants.

The “Canadian” (Imagi)Nation

In his seminal work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson (2006) coined the phrase imagined nations to illustrate that “members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). By drawing on Anderson’s work, Norton reconceptualizes the imagined community in terms of the immigrant language learner (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001, 2013, 2013a). He theorizes that the language learners’ bonds to and with their new country develop through direct and indirect interactions. Interestingly, while lasting connections can be made through interactions

within workplaces, schools, and religious groups, abstract affiliations of unity are just as strong (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Importantly, such affiliations have the abilities to connect and also disconnect the learner with “fellow compatriots across space and time” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). Let us recall Banks’ (2009) statements once again that the status of one’s citizenship relies not only on one’s structural inclusion into the system but also on the perceptions of the established members of the community.

This is a cyclical relationship that brings into play interactions between the nation-state and its citizens, as well as the yet-to-be citizens. All of whom come into a space with real and imagined identifications and attachments. If accessibility to this space is heavily guarded by historical, social, cultural, and political gatekeepers, immigrants may be barred intentionally or unintentionally, and not allowed to enter the space. To be more explicit, within the context of this essay, they are denied entry into the imagined “Canadian” community. At the same time, there are intervals in the “Canadian” historical timeline when and where certain sectors of the population are considered to be more or less “Canadian.” With this view, we teachers as citizens can understand that the immigrant student’s admission into the nation as full participants, relies heavily on positive relations with other members of the real and imagined “Canadian” community. Not surprisingly, the imagined community is also a gated community. Norton’s investigation of language learners in imagined communities is conducive to understanding how the phenomenon of becoming and unbecoming “Canadian” can be witnessed in interactions within the language classrooms.

Making a Nation out of a Classroom

A critical incident: “What does this word say?” I asked, one day in class, lightly tapping the text with the point of a pen. The student, Ali, shuffled in his chair, brow furrowed, hand gripping his borrowed pencil in agitation. Unfortunately, Ali had never received a formal education in 20 years of his life. I remember that I was leading a review of familial relationships with the class as the preparation for the students to draw their personal family trees. Ali was struggling with the word ‘brother.’ Knowing that Ali needed help sounding out the syllables, I gestured to the other side of the room where his elder sibling, Omar, sat practicing his printing.

“Who is he to you?” I asked Ali. He looked pointedly at me, and with a voice devoid of any emotion, Ali muttered, “nothing.” I chuckled in response. Silence followed in the room. I internally recoiled when I realized it was not a joke. I remembered that the two brothers were estranged from their biological family. They had immigrated to Canada together. For over two years, Ali and Omar were waiting anxiously to be reunited with the rest of their family.

Ali and Omar were students in a pilot settlement program. It was designed to provide an education in a secondary school environment to refugee and immigrant students (between the ages of 18-21). The pilot program sought to address the specific issues that regular Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes could not meet in terms of: creating the appropriate educational environment, establishing peer-group relationships and networks, and identifying the students’ learning goals. The following year, this pilot high school program was assigned to another instructor when I transferred to the main office to teach adult LINC classes. A year later, the program was terminated. The students in the program were shuffled into mainstream LINC classes where I now taught. It seemed that the initial recognition and

justification for the program had dissolved in the face of budget cuts and the government's reprioritization of its policies.

Throughout the following months, however, I saw and heard from several of the students in the pilot high school program. Chanel, for instance, came to a class potluck one night. Abdul was finally able to take mainstream math classes at the high school. Zahir dropped by one day to announce he had enrolled in a trade school. Imran's new class was across the corridor from mine. So, he poked his head through the door, every now and again, to say hi. Another teacher updated me on Omar's progress, he was struggling, but going to class, nonetheless. Unfortunately, Ali disappeared and no one has been able to contact him since the program ended.

I've often come to revisit this story as I am reminded, time and time again, that language teaching is never limited solely to language learning (Ricento & Cervatiuc, 2012). As Norton suggests, the imagined community recognizes the agency of language learners in their ability to negotiate alternatives, if the target group is neither beneficial nor agrees with the students pre-existing identities. Notions of participation and non-participation are crucial in Norton's (2013, 2013a) theory of identity. She borrows from Wenger who argues that: "relation to communities of practice involves both participation and non-participation, and that our identities are shaped by combinations of the two" (Norton, 2001, p. 161). Furthermore, there is a distinction between the two concepts, peripherality and marginality as modes of non-participation. The former concept suggests that the learner has agency in their voluntary actions of withdrawal. Such actions include an act of resistance, or the weaponization of silence. Marginality, the latter concept, is the deliberate or unintentional prevention of full participation and engagement by the learner. Wenger also reminds us that within the development of identity, what is present has as much influence as the absences, "what we are not can even become a large part of how we define ourselves" (Wenger, as cited by Norton, 2001, p. 159).

The "individual, the self and the nation", are all equals within this paradigm (Norton, 2013, p. 195). The learner has a multitude of identities and attachments, sometimes in harmony or other times in conflict. Nonetheless, the agency for the adoption of the specific type of identification is given to the 'immigrant.' The "Canadian" can be reimagined by the immigrant to fit an identification they are invested in, and if not, the "Canadian" label can be rejected.

I revisit Ali's words (mentioned in the earlier incident), and wonder if being an immigrant "Canadian" to Ali, simply means being nothing. Nothing is as complicated, to the presumed and accepted "Othered," as having to navigate existing systems (such as education) which in effect, are exclusionary and work against them. The Omars and Zahirs, for example, can negotiate their personhoods and their identities amidst the many obstacles presented or hidden within the "Canadian" educational systems. However, many students like Ali, are not able to successfully navigate the system. It is far easier for a teacher to focus on the successes and achievements of the students who learn to navigate our systems. It is not an excuse, however, for a teacher to turn a blind eye and ignore the other students who fail to succeed and fall between the cracks. What many Canadian teachers do not see are the students like Ali, who are written off as 'absent' and whose files remain blank. The students who continue with their programs may eventually be handed certificates, graduate their programs, and theoretically, become fully integrated Canadians. However, for students not unlike Ali, nothing, if anything, can be guaranteed of them becoming "Canadians."

Un/Defining being “Canadian”, Or Defying Defining Being a “Canadian” Citizen

A Critical incident: In late 2019, a controversy hit the national airwaves that exemplifies tensions concerning the particularities and specificities of the “Canadian” character. Well-known, hockey commentator, Don Cherry, questioned the Canadian-ness of new Canadians and immigrant Canadians by referring to them as “you people.” He stated immigrants “come here... [and]...love our way of life” while disrespecting the most basic of Canadian traditions: wearing a poppy in November for Remembrance Day (Global News, 2019). While many, if not most, Canadians oppose Cherry’s view, his sentiments typify the citizen-foreigner dynamic that has permeated our country’s national narratives (Harder & Zhyznormirska, 2012). Some citizens of our country will be read consistently, as foreigners, irrespective of their history and contributions to this settler society and their attainment of legal citizenship. Such narratives enact a national and historical amnesia of Canada’s own status as a country of immigrants. We must remember: “we are a country of recent immigrants of colour dominated by former immigrants who forget that white is a colour too” (Chambers, 1999, p. 143). Cherry’s use of “you people” instead of “our” illustrates markers of legitimate and illegitimate Canadians. Overnight, a nation-wide backlash exploded on the internet. Many claimed what the sports commentator had stated was discriminatory, anti-immigrant, and un-Canadian, among other things; it clashed with what they imagined to be “Canadian” (Global News, 2019). Cherry was fired after the incident.

In this critical incident, the presence of the gated community that is a vital part of the “Canadian” national imaginary was revealed in the simultaneous acts of defining and un/defining being “Canadian.” Not dissimilar to Cherry, the online protestors disseminated their own definitions and exemplars demonstrating their own requirements and exemplars of the acts, traits, and countenance of a “Canadian.” The Cherry incident demonstrated explicitly that there is more than one gate into the imagined “Canadian” community which is protected by gatekeepers. It was “a Cherrygate incident” if you will.

The “Canadian” identity, like all identities conceived within western societies and cultures, is constructed of fixed notions of binary opposites (Luhmann, 1998; Kymlicka, 2003). It is “only through a drawing of identity borders do both the self and other come into being thus, difference is a necessary condition for identity” (Fuss, as cited by Luhmann, 1998, p. 122). Accordingly, “Canadian” as a national identity category, implicates those who are not “Canadian.” Thus, non-Canadian students, like Ali, are mandated and regulated by societal expectations, government initiatives, and classroom curricula regarding who they should be, how they should think, and how they should act, in order to meet a Canadian standard that has been developed, implemented, monitored and evaluated by gatekeepers like teachers. Furthermore, acts of defining and undefining the “Canadian” identity are bolstered during times of crisis. Such periods can be found, within contemporary events, such as the Cherrygate incident, as well as during significant increases in numbers of immigrants from non-traditional countries. The sources of the tensions, crises and responses to the presence of racialized immigrants are buried deep within the country’s colonial history.

A “Canadian” identity was, is, and will always be, based on a colonial concept. As some scholars have demonstrated, the strong connections of the “Canadian” national identity with that of the settler-colonist has resulted from an inheritance of British and French imperialism (Fleming, 2015; Kymlicka, 2003; Stanley, 2016; Tupper, 2012). Embedded within a “Canadian”

identity, is the settler-colonist, whose whiteness is normalized and reduced to invisibility (Haque & Morgan, 2009; Janks, 2010). It is the dominant and yet ‘neutral standard’ in which whiteness “stand[s] as unmarked...the standard [by] which all others are judged” (Wray & Newitz, as cited in Janks, 2010, p. 103). In response to such “standards” of whiteness, Canadians need to reimagine themselves as citizens in tandem with non-white immigrants and new Canadians who are often marked as the “foreigner.” Commenting on the 2014 shooting at Parliament Hill, El-Shereif and Sinke (2018) remind us that “we are all Canadian, but some of us are more Canadian than others” (p. 44). There is no single definition of Canadian identity. Popular perceptions rest on the adoption of diversity and multiculturalism as national traits, yet these are continually challenged when new Canadians or immigrant Canadians step out of a fixed mold constructed by a settler colonial national imaginary. Perhaps, no thing and nothing is as undecided as the “Canadian” identity.

Can the I’m(migrant) “Canadian” Speak?

Usually, the students of a LINC program in high school have lost their focus on the matter at hand, long before we teachers, should even consider packing up our things. I do not blame the students. Lunch-time, for instance, is scheduled right after our class. When the shrill noise rings for the end of class, binders are whipped closed and pencils are thrown haphazardly into baskets. The monotony of grammar practices and note-taking dissolve. The disengaged students are transformed as they chat about lunch plans and smartphone notifications fill the air. As I ended the class, and exchanged ‘let’s try again tomorrow’ and ‘see you’ with the students, Zahir stopped right in front of me and cheekily grinned.

“I want to be a teacher too,” he chirps. I was pleasantly surprised and absolutely charmed. I contrasted this declaration with the beginning of the school term, when students mentioned they had career aspirations of becoming shelf-stockers and cashiers. As the semester progressed, I think that my presence disrupted the notions of ‘teacher’ and/or “Canadian” in my students’ imagination. I seemed to have created a dissonance between what a teacher looks like—and by extension what a “Canadian” looks like—when I stood in front of classroom and used “we” when broaching topics of racism and discrimination, rather than Don Cherry’s “you” (discussed earlier). In their lived realities, they had low expectations and saw themselves as cashiers and shelf-stockers, but with their foreign-born, non-white teacher, standing in front of them, they could afford themselves pedagogical opportunities to reimagine their understandings of what the term “Canadian” meant and looked like. As a teacher who works within an educational system with defined levels of power and authority, I required that my students, who speak from the periphery, realize that my presence deliberately disrupts notions of ‘teacher’ or “Canadian.” And yet, my wearied silence returns once I step out of the classroom, and the label migrant is read in relation to my personhood by mainstream Canadians with whom I interact. The gated community has, yet again, made its appearance. Is it too much to ask Canadians, the ones without the prefixes or suffixes, to not read me between the lines? The brackets?

As limiting as the traditional notions of a “Canadian” identity may be, there are still spaces for negotiation and for widening of the imaginary. In our classrooms, there is the potential to imagine gaps, and to construct third spaces for meaningful, reciprocal and respected interactions and communications between the teachers and the students. The teacher, for

example, has the ability to nurture, expand and grow these spaces, or to impose barricades and close them off. Admittedly, we teachers have significant challenges: such as, to equip our students with the tools to navigate processes of becoming and unbecoming a “Canadian,” to teach and learn how to negotiate and renegotiate the national imaginary; to assume the migrant in the I’m(migrant) or to see a unique, stand alone, “Canadian” who is an important part of our future.

Conclusion

We are nearing the end of this essay, and I ask myself once again, what does it mean to be “Canadian?” Surely it does not mean ‘nothing.’ I write from my own positionality of an I’m(migrant) whose ability to become and unbecome “Canadian” allows me to live in a country in which the socio-economic and political systems demand taking sides and/or framing definitions of inclusion and exclusion.

Challenges have arisen, and will continue to do so, regarding the effects and affects of national identities. These should be not considered obstacles that impede, but opportunities to challenge and critically assess our current modes of being which prevent acceptance of simplistic notions of identities. It is through collaboration that we will ensure that immigrant and non-immigrant Canadians are a part of the “Canadian” identity. Not only do we need a new definition of the “Canadian,” but we also need to understand and acknowledge many acts of defining(s) and un/defining(s) the national imaginaries. These definitions should be allowed room to contradict and to harmonize. There is room for growth and change in how we might define what constitutes being “Canadian.” Its multiple definitions should be afforded pedagogical opportunities to flourish in our ESL classrooms. I hope that conversations of what the “Canadian” means, and which of these meanings are included within our curriculums-as-lived and -as-planned, do not fizzle out and end in silence.

Finally, what does it mean to be “Canadian,” for me, the I’m(migrant) Canadian? I imagine it means something more than simply, wearing a red poppy in November. For me, it is many things. It is the certificate that I was given in 2001 that states my Canadian citizenship. It is the members of the culture and community with whom I have grown up and am happy to be involved. Now, I deliberately pass on the sense of undefined pride in who I am to my students in their class lectures and assignments. For Ali, I sincerely hope that he found himself in this landscape and in one of the many, “Canadian” national imaginaries.

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