



The Knot Itself: Tangling with Multiculturalism

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Abstract:

Multiculturalism has defined Canadian identity, both within and beyond its borders, for fifty years. Supporters laud the policy's celebration of unity through difference. Critics, meanwhile, argue that this celebration is superficial. Canada's multiculturalism policy, they say, obscures the workings of power in processes entrenching structural inequalities. Taking a reflexive approach, we—a mixed-race settler immigrant who arrived in Canada as a young child in 1975, and a White settler Canadian born in Halifax in the 1990s—interrogate our experiences and understandings of multiculturalism. Using collaborative autoethnography and found poetry, we examine our affective encounters and engagements with settler multiculturalism. In the process, we tangle with questions of (non)arrival, belonging, migration, branding and identities. Ultimately, we suggest that thinking through the knot and knottiness of multiculturalism can offer a path towards more nuanced and complicated futures.

Keywords: multiculturalism; Canada; identity; knot; autoethnography; found poetry

Le nœud lui-même : L'enchevêtrement du multiculturalisme

Résumé :

Le multiculturalisme définit l'identité canadienne, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur de ses frontières, depuis cinquante ans. Les partisans de cette politique louent la célébration de l'unité dans la différence. Les critiques, quant à elles, affirment que cette célébration est superficielle. La politique de multiculturalisme du Canada, disent-ils, masque les rouages du pouvoir dans les processus d'enracinement des inégalités structurelles. En adoptant une approche réflexive, nous—une immigrante métisse arrivée au Canada dans son enfance en 1975 et une Canadienne blanche née à Halifax dans les années 1990—interrogeons nos expériences et notre compréhension du multiculturalisme. En utilisant l'auto-ethnographie collaborative et la poésie retrouvée, nous examinons nos rencontres affectives et nos engagements avec le multiculturalisme des colons. Dans ce processus, nous abordons les questions de (non-)arrivée, d'appartenance, de migration, d'étiquette et d'identité. Ultimement, nous suggérons que la réflexion sur le nœud et le caractère nouveau du multiculturalisme peut offrir une voie vers un avenir plus nuancé et compliqué.

Mots clés : multiculturalisme; Canada; identité; nœud; auto-ethnographie; poésie retrouvée

What might it mean to tangle with multiculturalism? That's the question we set ourselves. One of us, Sonja, is a mixed-race settler immigrant who arrived in Canada as a young child in 1975. She has long found comfort in multiculturalism. For her, it has been a way of making sense of a complex ethnic heritage. Deirdre, meanwhile, a White settler born in Halifax, Nova Scotia in the 1990s, is ambivalent. Multiculturalism, in policy and practice, has held little meaning. Where could our conversations take us?

Breathing together in this intimate and speculative work of questioning, we wrestle with the concept of settler multiculturalism and consider both its possibilities and its limitations. Along the way, we work through a range of themes, among them (non)arrival, belonging, migrations, branding and identity. Through our reflexive inquiries, we suggest the idea of knottiness as a possible way forward. We argue that knottiness performs a necessary complicating function in relation to settler multiculturalism. It encourages unsettling and entanglement not as problems to be fixed, untangled, or even abandoned, but rather, as promises for more nuanced and complex futures.

Multiculturalism is Canada's brand. Indeed, it has long defined Canada's identity, not only to its citizenry, but also to the international community. And yet, since its inception in 1971, both the concept of multiculturalism and its implementation as policy have been continually contested. Supporters of multiculturalism suggest that the policy has changed mindsets (Driedger, 2011; Kymlicka, 2010). Critics, however, suggest that while multiculturalism may have been a "feel good" project of national unity, it hasn't lived up to its hype. They point to unexamined Whiteness, the silencing and erasure of Indigenous identity in the service of settler nation building and structural inequalities that cannot be resolved within the contours of the current policy, among others (Bissoondath, 2002; Kobayashi, 1993; Nakhaie, 2006; O'Connell, 2010; Syed, 2010; Vernon, 2016). Greensmith (2018) suggests that multiculturalism might be more accurately defined as *settler multiculturalism* because multiculturalism does not celebrate unity through difference; rather, it serves to sustain and extend the goals of French/English settler colonialism (Leroux, 2014; C. K. W. Leung, 2006; Thobani, 2007). Now, half a century after its formal implementation, what might a reflexive approach, realized through collaborative autoethnography and found poetry, offer to a re-imagining of multiculturalism?

Collaborative Autoethnography and Found Poetry

As autoethnographers, we situate ourselves simultaneously as both researchers and participants and engage in a critically reflexive process of writing and analysis (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Holman Jones et al., 2013; Spry, 2001). Following Chang et al. (2013), we take a collaborative approach. As they state, "the combination of multiple voices to interrogate a social phenomenon creates a unique synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation" (p. 24). In other words, our work is richer, deeper and more rigorous for our collaboration (Diversi & Moreira, 2016).

Our autobiographical data emerges from our collaborative journaling and found poetry. Over a four-month period in 2019, we engaged in a process of memory work (Kuhn, 2010; Till, 2008). We

read a range of scholarly literature on multiculturalism in Canada¹ and in response to this, wrote about our own experiences and understandings of multiculturalism in the form of a collaborative journal. Our weekly collaborative journaling resulted in a written conversation of approximately 13,500 words. Analyzing this collaborative journal, we identified several repeating themes. Dominant among them were the following: difference, discomfort, entanglement, hybridity, identity, Other, untangling, arrival/non-arrival, belonging/unbelonging, knot/knotted, settle/unsettle, unknowing/unlearning and visibility/invisibility. Next, we created a second document from our collaborative journal that highlighted these themes and removed repetition. This second document became the basis for our found poems.

In found poetry, in the “act *and* art of extracting words from transcripts and shaping them into poetic form” (Pate 2014, para. 10; emphasis in original),² what matters most is not the final product, but the journey itself. In our case, the journey was the ongoing collaborative massaging and analysis of our autobiographical data through poetry. Prendergast (2009), in referring to found poetry also as “constrained poetry”, observes that “the self-composed constraints . . . can be parallel to the constraints of working with data to create found poems in a research context” (p. 547). In other words, found poetry aligns itself with a process of coding and analysis. It enables researchers to bring larger themes into conversation with one another. In keeping with the methodological principles of found poetry, we extracted statements, phrases and individual words from our second document and experimented with voice, rhythm, structure and silence (Faulkner, 2016). In each of our poems, we sought to capture the essence of our thinking, both individually and collectively.³

Found poetry is particularly relevant to our work here. It not only enabled richer conversation between our two autoethnographic voices, but also, through the processes of fragmentation and reconstruction that lie at the heart of creating poetry (Leggo, 2018), it allowed us to reflexively interrogate some of the visceral and deeply embedded assumptions we held both individually and collectively about multiculturalism. This approach, which we understand as a *poetics of fragmentation*, can shake loose assumptions that are so embedded they have gone completely unchallenged, thus forcing us to consider our autoethnographic reflections in new ways.

Lorri Neilsen Glenn (2016) observes that poetry can serve as a way “to un-know, to disrupt, and to keep moving” (p. 102). This is how we view the poems that we created. The poems are fragments,

¹ The literature we consulted included scholarship on histories of multiculturalism (i.e., Day, 2000; Draper et al., 1998; C. K. W. Leung, 2006), policy (i.e., Brotz, 1980; Esses & Gardner, 1996; Fleras 2011; Guo & Wong, 2015; Kymlicka, 2010; Leroux, 2014; H. H. Leung, 2011; Wright, 2016), nationalism and national identity (i.e., Bissoondath, 1994; Fries & Gingrich, 2010; Guo & Guo, 2011; Haddock & Sutch, 2003), individual and group identities (i.e., Ali, 2008; Driedger, 2011; Lupul, 2005; Ralston, 1998), and the erasures of Indigenous identities and histories (i.e., St. Denis, 2012; Syed, 2010), among others. We also considered literature on mixed-race identities, and how these further complicate official discourses of multiculturalism (i.e., Mahtani, 2005, 2014; Paragg, 2015; Vernon, 2011).

² See also Faulkner (2016).

³ Our approach to found poetry was individual; that is, while we worked from the same source material (our collaborative journal), we wrote and constructed our poems based on our individual inclinations and our own experiences as poets. The ways that we chose to draw from the original source material also varied (i.e., Deirde held more closely to the original source text in terms of capitalization and verb tense than did Sonja). As a result, we take our own approaches to capitalization, punctuation, italicization and spacing.

and as scraps of knowing, they require us to un-know; that is, to see, read, feel and understand differently, as we interrogate the dominant frame of what it does and does not mean to be Canadian. Our collaborative process allowed us to breathe into each other's emotional investments in multiculturalism and then to breathe them out again, not just as hopes, dreams and imaginings, but also as frustrations, (dis)comforts and vulnerabilities. Our found poetry allowed us to grapple together with both contradiction and multiplicity. It offered us a language to think critically and reflexively about multiculturalism in the face of resurgent nationalisms, increased racial violence and rising xenophobia, both within Canada and in countries around the globe.

Questioning Our Beginnings

Where does multiculturalism begin? To answer that question, we first turned, unsurprisingly, to our personal origins and origin stories. Perhaps equally unsurprising, we soon found ourselves tangled up. Our origins would not be easily told. They were messy and murky and our attempted tellings were difficult.

Sonja: "where are you from?"

where are you from?
 you don't belong here
 every time it was a surprise
how did I get here?
 how baffled I was.

no one has ever asked me where I am from
where am I from? Nova Scotia, I suppose.
(I am not entirely from away)

where do we begin to trace our roots?
it needs to start with my mother.
 maybe because I don't know where else to start.

the mother land?

where are you from—
 what does it mean to arrive?

I am the mess of mixture.
 I wonder if it's possible to untangle it.

I, Sonja, began with a question that's been put to me since childhood, one common to many racialized people who call Canada home. "Where are you from?" questions both origins and belonging, situating racialized people as perpetual outsiders to a presumptively White Canadian nation state. Following David Chariandy (2018), "What is the real story, the *truest* meaning, of our origins?" (p. 45, emphasis in original). In the poem above, I wanted to consider my desires and longings for my origin stories, but I also wanted to trouble them. After all, as Tobagonian-Canadian

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writer Dionne Brand (2002) has written, in her reflections on the impossibility of origins in the face of the fundamental ruptures of the transatlantic slave trade, “too much has been made of origins. And so if I reject this notion of origins I have also to reject its mirror, which is the sense of origins used by the powerless to contest power in society” (p. 69).

Drawing from my own experiences as a mixed-race immigrant who arrived in Canada as a child, just four years after multiculturalism was officially adopted, I explore in the poem above how mess, mixture and *tangliness* all point to the ways that our lives and histories do not easily conform to simple origin stories. By constructing this poem using two different voices, the first being that of a Canadian who is regularly questioned about her origins and the second (in italics) that of a Canadian who is rarely questioned about this, I also wanted to start a conversation about the limits of belonging. What became clear in the writing of the poem is the impossibility of its central question: “Where are you from?” Who asks this question? What kind of answer does this question presuppose? And, as Hill (2001) has argued, is anyone actually able to give it?

When I re-read my poem, I became interested in the relationship between origins and belonging. In a country that has long identified itself as a land of immigrants, origin stories matter. Inevitably those origin stories include stories of arrivals. Erased in this logic, of course, are the stories of Indigenous peoples who already lived here (St. Denis, 2012). From this perspective, immigrant multiculturalism is, inevitably, settler multiculturalism. Further, as Greensmith (2018) points out, it is *White* settler multiculturalism.

One word I planned to use, but ultimately couldn’t find an appropriate place for, was blood. While that word appeared only once in our original collaborative conversation document, nevertheless, the word blood burbles up in many of my questions. Following trajectories traced by Lawrence Hill (2013), whose blood matters? Whose blood belongs? How does blood allow us to trace lineage or inheritance? How does blood stand in for belonging and perhaps, for the right to belong? Questions like mine have also been voiced by others in recent years. For example, they are behind the formation of the People’s Party of Canada and behind its leader, Maxime Bernier’s assertion of “extreme multiculturalism” (Tasker, 2018). These questions also operate in relation to the 2018 Yellow Vest protests, the 2022 “Freedom Convoy”, and the rise of far right, White supremacist movements and political parties around the globe (Dawson, 2019).

Deirdre: “it needs to start with my mother”

Like Sonja, I was interested in questions and contradictions. But while Sonja considered the impossibility of origin stories, I turned instead to mothers, land and motherland:

how I came to understand myself.
“three quarters Irish, and one quarter Scottish”.
Fractioned.
There is nothing visibly exotic about me
White
(No one has ever asked me where I am from)

It needs to start with my mother.
Maybe because I don't know where else to start.
my mother is from Newfoundland.

Identified as Irish —

In the beginning, this meant a lot.

Mom

It's why I chose Irish

$\frac{3}{4}$ Irish,

Fractions of ethnicity?

Where are you from?

Newfoundland

entitled to belonging.

My mom was born here.

home

as

the motherland —

mother's land,

her mother's land,

and her mother's land.

None of their land.

just replicate the processes of herstory.

I am ~~not~~ entirely come from away.

~~not~~ Irish,

~~not~~ Scottish,

~~not~~ Canadian

Fractions of ethnicity

Yes

I feel

I am

That knot of (non)arrival.

Like Sonja, I was interested in exploring my fractioned and fractured relationship to my concept of origin and belonging. In using the word "motherland", I consider the knotted nature of my origin stories. Following poet Kaie Kellough (2019), I locate my origins in my body and in bodies not entirely my own. Like Kellough, I regard my body as "a body, a continental jut / a density of times past / an assemblage of others who are you, a being made of beings" (p. 13). My fractioned (and fractured) sense of self mixes well with Kellough's ideas of assemblage, which gesture towards an inherent multiplicity of self. Taken more broadly, if read as mosaics and tapestries, both of which are constructed from fragments, pieces or threads, fractions and assemblages also gesture towards the

originary impulses of Canadian multiculturalism (Trudeau, 1998).

I started with my blood, my mother's blood, and her mother's blood. I needed to look backward and inward to understand the histories of my knotted identity. Looking to my foremothers and to their relationships to place and identity, I found both fractioning and hybridity. My poem above allowed me to examine the roots of what I came to see as my fractioned relationship to identity and belonging. The notion of being mostly Irish, a little Scottish, totally Canadian and also a Newfoundlander⁴ was dizzying.

I imagined my mother and her family breathing in the familiar salted air and weaving stories of belonging as Irish settlers and outsiders to an already settled and stolen (New-found) land (Manning, 2017). However, after reflecting on my mother's relationship to belonging, place and land, I realized that for her, Newfoundland as "homeland" and Ireland as "herstory" were more of a blending than a fractioning. My mother never felt far from her Irish roots and ancestors. She spent her youth immersed in Irish culture as it existed in rural Newfoundland. Her Irish origins told the story of a group of people who had come from away, who settled to fish, who fished to live and who stayed to die (Cadigan, 2009).

I struggle to understand how hybridity is possible within Whiteness. How can I be at once mostly Irish, a little Scottish, totally Canadian and also a Newfoundlander? What does this even mean? If one's origins indicate the roots from which a person began, then perhaps, for those of us taught that our roots begin and end as Canadians, origins feel arbitrary. What can origins mean to Canadians, like me, taught polite compliance with cultural, ethnic and racial erasure as a way of breathing together (Lee, 2018)?

As I wrote, what became increasingly clear to me was that my mother's origin stories were not my own. I didn't feel them in my body, as she did. When I got to the end of my poem, I recognized I had arrived with an understanding of myself as a knot of (non)arrival.

Sonja: Pysanka, The Ukrainian Easter Egg

As a mixed-race child in semi-rural Alberta, I was easily seduced by multiculturalism. I was drawn into its celebration of cultural practices involving food, dance, costume and community. In east-central Alberta, site of "the largest Ukrainian bloc settlement in Canada" (Swyripa, 2010, p. 3), multiculturalism was represented most vividly by Ukrainian-Canadian culture and more specifically, by the *pysanka* or Ukrainian Easter egg. The egg captured all the romance of multiculturalism for me. As a result, pysanky also popped up regularly throughout our collaborative reflections:

rainbow handprints and
pysanky and spanakopita
and Scottish sword dances and finger-painted murals
diversity, peace, and unity

⁴ To identify as a Newfoundlander is to claim a provincial identity with strong nationalist underpinnings.

Gung Haggis Fat Choy
bhangra and Highland dance

compassion, love, understanding
holding hands around a world

pysanky everywhere

"three quarters Irish, and one quarter Scottish?"

"half Irish, half Scottish?"

"Dutch-Canadian."

Multiculturalism was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I wrapped myself in it.

It brought joy to my heart.

It was a refuge.

Multiculturalism promised to make everything

make sense,

and I was its poster child.

And pysanky.

Me and pysanky.

I assumed we all felt the same way.

...

I didn't feel multiculturalism. I still don't feel it.

I wonder what multiculturalism would feel like

(can I even call it a celebration?)

Whose voices get drowned out by fireworks and parades—

because multiculturalism, as a concept, gives me all the feels?

My own affective commitment to multiculturalism is not surprising. As Vernon (2016) observes, "multiculturalism policy extends to the immigrant, ethnic, and racialized person—those of us who, like my ancestors, were once constituted under the category of 'non-preferred races'—not just entry into the nation but full citizenship in it" (p. 93). There is, of course, something deeply seductive about this promise of belonging, even if, as Bannerji (2000) argues, such promises are illusory. Accordingly, my poem considers the affect and seductive appeal of multiculturalism. In it, I relive the feel of multiculturalism as I experienced and understood it as a child. This is represented by a "dreamlike" approach where ideas and words bounce against one another without any punctuation. At the same time, I interrogate the facile nature of those feelings. I ask, what are the limitations of multiculturalism as paint, parties, dancing and food? As I take that question inside myself, I wonder how this superficial articulation of multiculturalism became a stand-in, not just for "my" self, but for "our" selves. As I move through the poem, things become more concrete, and accordingly, my

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punctuation, too, changes and becomes more fixed. In the end, I ask: How are so many of us so easily seduced into multicultural belonging, to the extent that we come so easily to assimilate multiculturalism as a core aspect of identity?

In my poem, I position multiculturalism as a promise we make to each other. It's about diversity and living well in community. It's also about what children learn. In this way, the vision of multiculturalism I interrogate in the poem above is necessarily about futures; it is about aspirations and nation building. This is the happy face of multiculturalism. It says that although my family might be questioned about our right to belong, none of the fractions of identity matter. What matters is the one, big, happy, colourful, well-fed, Canadian family moving together towards a shared future.

While that story makes me feel good, and while it has been central to my understanding and experience of myself as a racialized immigrant Canadian, it has also been exclusionary. Thus, my poem represents the beginnings of my realization that some people living in Canada have never been part of that happy multicultural rainbow. Multiculturalism makes no room for Indigenous people. Nor does the concept necessarily resonate for White Anglophone or Francophone settlers. Rather, these are conversations for other, mostly racialized, people whose stories are lost in colourful parades. How can I reconcile these realities with my own emotional investments in multiculturalism? These questions formed the basis of a second poem:

my multiculturalism is a complete cliché
diversity, peace, and unity
multi, many, lots
in a white world

people told me to go home
every day

I wrapped myself in
assertions of belonging
yes, I did

defend my belonging

multicultural all inside myself
I've invested a lot in this—
we all belonged

even suckers like me

I worked with this poem for a while, trying to figure out the relationships between the celebratory stories I told myself about multiculturalism and how those stories butted up against my lived experiences, which were often very different.

In the stories I told myself, I was multiculturalism's poster child; I was a rainbow of peoples and histories gathered inside a single body. This self image reflected official government talking points, and from that perspective, it's easy to see why I was invested in the narrative of diversity. In the

indented sections of the poem, I look at the stories I told myself, considering my investments in and commitments to multicultural belonging and multicultural identity.

On the left-hand side of the poem, I present the more cynical or perhaps, more jaded, me. This is the me that was frequently questioned about my background, and also the me that directly challenges the feel-good multicultural narrative in which I had invested so much. This left-sided me is the one that sees how I bought into multiculturalism's marketing ploy and into a narrative designed to make a government look good to immigrants, native-born settler Canadians and the international community alike. This side of the poem is also about the cracks in the multicultural façade made by the people—adults, parents, classmates—who told me in many and various ways that I didn't belong. In other words, it is the side of the poem that tells the stories that others told (of) me.

There is an equation, of sorts, that I'm trying to work out in this second poem, where both sides seem to simultaneously contradict and sustain one another. The story I created for myself and the stories others told (of) me are intertwined and, so, the poem is too. The last line of each section belongs both to what comes before and to what follows; they are two halves of a messy whole. This uncomfortable linking also reflects something I still struggle with, and that is an intense desire to own, claim and live multiculturalism, even in the face of lived realities, policy limitations and political jockeying that, as numerous scholars have observed, taint the possibility of its ultimate success (Bissoondath, 2002; Kobayashi, 1993; Nakhaie, 2006; O'Connell, 2010; Syed, 2010; Vernon, 2016). In the end, am I the sucker who bought into the story that was written for me? Is my multiculturalism a complete cliché? Or do other possibilities and potentials reside within it?

Deirdre: Belonging?

Belonging belongs to those who long to belong
for those for whom it must be said, "You belong."

When do you feel you belong?

We give you belonging
In a world that was always ours
We get to just
Be

In a world that was always ours,
there is no
Longing . . .

I have never longed for belonging.
A way forward . . .

Take the space away from me, tell me I don't belong
Let me feel
Unbelonging.

The tensions that Sonja describes above lay at the heart of my thinking. As I struggled to figure out what belonging meant to me, I kept massaging ideas, until I realized that as a White Anglophone settler woman growing up in Canada, multiculturalism only mattered to me to the extent that it mattered for others—a point Sonja also observed. In other words, multiculturalism was “our” collective Canadian celebration of the belonging of racialized Others. There was never a question of, or concern for, our *own* belonging. “We” were busy gifting others the right to belong, with fireworks, parades and murals. In this way, my view of multiculturalism appears to reflect observations made by Banting and Kymlicka (2010), who write,

The fact that Canada has officially defined itself as a multicultural nation means that immigrants are a constituent part of the nation that citizens feel pride in; multiculturalism serves as a link for native-born citizens from national identity to solidarity with immigrants. (p. 60)

In other words, if I read this statement in relation to my poem, I needed immigrants to realize my own Canadian identity. This sense of unquestioned belonging, a rooted belonging that positions multiculturalism as a sort of elsewhere, is perhaps the result of my unambiguous and equally unquestioned ethnic heritage, which gives me access to the privileges of Whiteness.

Throughout our musings, I was in constant conversation with myself concerning this notion of belonging. Why was there a lack of embodied engagement in my writing, especially in contrast to Sonja’s deeply felt relationship to multiculturalism? Why did I find it so hard to breathe with and through multiculturalism? With this poem, I wanted to respond to the visceral belonging that Sonja spoke to, that sense that multiculturalism had given her belonging (in a White world). Multiculturalism told her she mattered. It said there was space for her. In writing this poem, I realized that my experience of *unthinking*, or perhaps, *unreflecting* belonging is what created my desire for others to belong. Through my unthinking, I realized why I also felt so little about multiculturalism. The answer to this absence in both thought and feeling was to unsettle this belonging and from there, to tap into my own *un*belonging, I examine this in two poems that follow in the next section.

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Kymlicka (2010) has observed that “multiculturalism is first and foremost about developing new modes of democratic citizenship, grounded in human rights ideals, to replace earlier uncivil and undemocratic relations of hierarchy and exclusion” (p. 101). This is a noble goal. But have we succeeded in achieving it? The broad range of critiques, taken together with our own reflexive inquiries, suggests that we have not. If this is the case, then what possible futures might exist for multiculturalism?

In the end, we arrived at a conceptual point that we termed, perhaps paradoxically, *(non)arrival*; that is, we found ourselves tangled in knots. And as we struggled to unknot ourselves, we found that we tangled ourselves further, learning, in the process, that this tangling and the knots that resulted were precisely where potential futures for multiculturalism might reside. This tangling formed the basis for two of Deirdre’s poems, both of which take the knot itself as a point of departure.

Deirdre: “We *are* the knot.”

multiculturalism

an empty word, phrase.

a sort of liberal catch-all that ultimately means nothing,
diversity as the liberal bragging right
and the illusion of tolerance
that *is* Canada’s brand

Current Canadians

We *are* the knot.

Entangled in the afterlives of histories that we continue to live.

How do we deal with the reality of living on stolen land?

There is no longer an arrival; “we” were “always here”

arrival has been subsumed into cultural memory

it is the “other people” who have to be taught what “Canada” is,
assimilated, through the metaphor of the mosaic,
multiculturalism promises belonging that it can’t deliver
it was never meant to deliver

In this poem, I, Deirdre, sought to capture the notion of multiculturalism as “the knot itself”. One version of the knot captures multiculturalism as something that disappoints, disorients and suffocates all those caught in its tangled web. I used words that communicated numbness, defeat and desperation, then put them into conversation with one another. From there, I explored the potentials and limitations of our individual and collective (non)arrival with this notion of multiculturalism as a knot. I question if we could or *should* try to untangle it. Could this knottiness be the basis for something generative?

This snapshot of the knot also reveals how both of us seemed to be pulling at loose ends and how doing this created more chaos as we pulled and pushed and wrangled with multiculturalism from different angles. Interestingly, this was the first poem I, Deirdre, wrote. When I read it again, I realized that I had started at the end of our musings and worked backwards. Although I started from the end, this poem captures the beginning of my own entanglement with multiculturalism. This first encounter with the knot was unmoving and empty, but also endless. Indeed, this vision of knottiness was uncomfortable. It represented fear and threatened eventual abandonment of my task as the knot grew ever tighter.

Later, I returned to the idea of knots and knottiness:

multiculturalism

I took that vague term and I massaged it—
created my own definition of multiculturalism.

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Multi. Many. Lots.
mess of mixture
I am that mess . . .
multicultural all inside myself.
I've read hybridity *into* multiculturalism.
The knot, in other words, as what matters most.
We *are* the knot.
Current Canadians.

How do we live together in this complicated, haunted space of belonging and
unbelonging?
Is knottiness a way of moving forward?
This knottiness is vibrant matter⁵
What has knottiness given me—
love, compassion, and understanding
longing, desire, yearning.
that knot of (un)arrival is productive, generative.

It is a source of beauty.
A network.
A web.
Togetherness.
entanglement is the goal.
knotting.

That *is* Canada's brand.

For me, this second poem offers a snapshot of how I am beginning to conceive of multiculturalism as having a pulse. I see it now as bursting with potential. This vision of multiculturalism, which repositions knottiness as a *goal* rather than as a problem to be resolved, untangled, or even abandoned, is generative. It frames the knot as unifying multiculturalism. It is a sticky, tangly web that we create together.

When I read this poem as a response to the poem that immediately precedes it, I am able to follow the ever-evolving journey through which I came to see multiculturalism, or knottiness, as a way forward. Primarily through Sonja's celebratory message of belonging in this mess of mixture and hybridity, I began to imagine the knot of multiculturalism as a form of embroidery.

As I noted earlier, my initial relationship to, perception of and conversation with multiculturalism felt stunted and resistant. I was intimidated and unsettled by its knottiness and I struggled with how it tangled my thoughts. My experiences felt so very different from Sonja's. It was

⁵ I draw on the work of Jane Bennett (2010), who argues for "the material agency . . . of non-human or not-quite-human things" (p. ix).

by imagining knottiness as embroidery and embroidery as a form of craft work that not only features a variety of knotted stitches, but also celebrates a chaotic and yet also fortuitous tangling of threads into rich and vibrant display, that offered me a new way to think about multiculturalism going forward.

Sonja: Pulling at the Wrong Ends of our Entanglement

Like Deirdre, I also found myself tangled: in my longings and desires, on the one hand, and in my experiences and critical reflections, on the other. As I tangled and I knotted and I not-ted, I realized that the process of knotting was itself the point. What, then, might happen if Deirdre and I pulled at the “wrong” ends of our entanglement? What would happen if we refused to accept facile solutions? Perhaps, as Deirdre observed earlier, I needed to live with discomfort. Perhaps, the knot itself is the answer.

In our original collaborative conversation, I wrote: “What happens when we are in a rush to untangle our knotted selves? The knots get tighter. In order to untangle our knotted selves, we must step back and sit with the entanglement. Look at the knots, experiment.” I realized that I was tangled in my longing for the dream of multiculturalism and my ethical responsibility to interrogate its realities. How could I not belong in the context of a policy ostensibly designed to make sure that I did belong? How could I make sense of the hyphen (Wah, 1996/2006) that enfolded the complicated realities of migrations that have brought people to this place over time? And from there, how could I make sense of living on stolen land? Could settler multiculturalism be unsettled (Snooks & Boon, 2017)? What was the relationship between unsettling, arrival, (en)tangling and knots? Could the concept of multicultural knot(ted)/not arrival offer a possibility for personal and possible collective transformation? These questions tumbled through themselves as I tried to work through the complexities of multiculturalism, as both ideal and lived experience. I tumbled. I tangled. I knotted. I wrote:

I am
 both beautiful and fragile
 indefinable

I am
 the infinite nature of the immigration story
 something that could break

What are the silences saying?
 multiculturalism as erasure
 multiculturalism on stolen land

I massaged it, that knot
 blood leaked through the blanket
 of belonging

confusing

Tangling with Multiculturalism

uncomfortable

unknowing

unlearning

tangled in the silence of non-arrival

there is beauty

knotted

knotty

knot

not.

arrival.

I am

love love love

gnarled

tangled

(k)not/ted.

what happens when we pull at the (wrong) ends of our entanglement?

"There is beauty in the corners of multiculturalism," Deirdre wrote in our collaborative journal. I agreed with her, but I also wasn't clear about what exactly we meant by beauty. As I dug deeper, I realized that our understanding of beauty wasn't just about wonder, it was also about awe, "a feeling of reverential respect, mixed with wonder or fear" (Oxford English Dictionary). It is this sense of beauty that I wanted to capture at the end of this poem. I wanted a tangling that was both beautiful and messy, a sublime tangle, if you will.

Conclusion: (K)not/ted

Prior to our collaboration, Deirdre had never really questioned origins or belonging, and as a result, the idea of knottiness and non-arrival felt uncomfortable and unsettling for her. However, it was this process of unsettling that ultimately served to ground her, both in the questions she had never asked and the belonging she hadn't previously felt the need to examine. In other words, embracing knottiness revealed the threads of her own entanglement with multiculturalism. Sonja, meanwhile, had long grounded herself in the romance of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism was not just Canada's brand, it was her brand. Multiculturalism was a part of who she understood herself to be. Interrogating the knot of multiculturalism thus meant examining not only the stories she had been told, but also those she had told herself. Thinking through knottiness allowed her to confront silences and erasures within the grand romance of Canadian multiculturalism, and from there, to imagine a more complex, layered and, indeed, tangled relationship with it.

In our collaborative breathing with and through words, memories, politics and ideologies, we sought to explore the knotty puzzle of multiculturalism and to interrogate the assumptions deeply

embedded in our psyches. The poems that emerged when we allowed letters and punctuation to jostle against one another in a splitting of sounds and selves showed us the importance of tangling both with the “not” and the knot itself.

While scholarship on multiculturalism has moved beyond policy considerations to examine the lived experience of multiculturalism (e.g., Ali, 2008; Mahtani, 2015, 2014; Vernon 2016), we suggest that an even more intimate and reflexive approach, premised on intimate conversation, collaboration, reflection, and a poetics of fragmentation, might offer further ways towards imagining possible futures for a contested concept.

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