

Intersecting Identities, Marginalization Processes and Multiculturalism: A Commentary on the 6th Annual Ethnic and Pluralism Studies Graduate Research Conference

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Introduction

Academic conferences serve as moments and spaces for young scholars to engage in productive conversations, develop networks and gain public speaking experience. Between January 31st and February 1st 2013, the *Ethnic and Pluralism Studies (EPS)* program at the *University of Toronto*, successfully hosted its 6th annual Graduate Research Conference at the *Munk School of Global Affairs*. Focused on issues of migration and ethnicity, the two-full day event brought together Canadian and international graduate students from a variety of disciplines. The yearly *EPS* events have established a tradition of interactive scholarly dialogues. Presenters submit their papers in advance to the session chair(s). Post-presentation, expert discussants provide young scholars with extensive feedback, intended to rework their manuscripts into potential publishable submissions. Featuring a keynote presentation, usually taught by a renowned scholar within the ethnic studies field, the conference creates a platform for students, junior scholars and other academics to engage in productive conceptual conversations and share innovative research methods.

This short report style paper documents the multifaceted works concluded at the 6th *EPS* conference. Thematically linking papers and scholarly dialogues, it highlights the significance of a graduate student conference in promoting critical skills and addressing social (in)justices regarding the wellbeing of marginalized immigrant groups.

Racialization and Multicultural Nationalism

The vast majority of conference presentations paid special attention to issues of multiculturalism, nationalism and racialized experiences of ethnic minorities. Drawing from anti-colonial, anti-racist and feminist lenses, the presented works articulated various forms of oppression and marginalization. Moreover, they shed light upon neocolonial practices perpetuated by liberal multiculturalism and nationalist ideologies (Thobani 1998), which reproduce racial oppression from political discourses to everyday life experiences.

Rainos Mutamba, from the *University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)*, critically analyzed the web-blogging process in Africa as rooted in racist colonial stereotypes and western post-modernity. Mutamba illustratively used 'digitelling' as a technological example re-

constructing Western identity and naturalizing colonial typecasts. Continuing a similar thought, Robin Liu Hopson, from the same department at the *University of Toronto*, examined current dominant discourses on equity, diversity and anti-racism within the educational field, exploring how racialized minority teachers from the Greater Toronto Area understand the professional expectations casted upon them.

Moving the debate into the realm of institutionally grounded racism, Nadia Prendergast, a Ph.D. Candidate at *OISE*, de-constructed the archetypal image of women professionals in multicultural societies (i.e. white and middle class) to show the re-colonization of leadership positions within the policy making field. Drawing from post-colonial, anti-racist and feminist perspectives, Prendergast reported on qualitative findings from internationally educated nurses to reveal the exclusionary character of state supported multiculturalism in relation to foreign trained female professionals.

Bukola Salami's work continued Prendergast's discussion on global inequalities. Demonstrating how racialization works through gendered and classed bodies (Fellows and Razack 1998), Salami, a PhD Candidate from the *University of Toronto's Nursing* department, explored the experiences of Philippine educated nurses who migrated to Canada through the Live-In-Caregiver Program. Enriching and broadening the transnational feminist concept of global care chains, her work exposed a laddered down immigration process that excludes newcomers from the Canadian labour market. Her work was thoroughly congruent with former scholarly research on the topic: the state non-recognition of foreign credentials (George 2002), institutionalized economic, cultural and educational discrimination (Dowding and Razi 2006; Richmond and Shields 2005), the prevalence of 'Canadian work experience' discourse, migrants' unfamiliarity with workplace practices (Tufts, Lemoine, Phan, Kelly, Lo, Preston and Shields 2010), un-transferability of their skills (Schellenberg and Hou 2008) and state's insufficiently supported inclusionary mechanisms (Bejan 2011).

Contemporary racism and exclusionary practices were also explored within the European context. Focusing on a public statement given by Dublin's mayor to his Black minority constituents, Christiana Fizet, a MA graduate from the *University of Dublin's Sociology* department, critically analyzed how the Irish political elite discursively institutionalizes racism. She further offered insights into applying an anti-racism framework to confront and challenge Ireland, which she described as following Mac Einri's (2006: 260) thought: "part colonizing, part colonized, but arguably a subaltern, perpetrator, and a victim nation."

Beesan Sarrouh, a PhD Candidate in *Political Science* at *Queens' University*, explored the religious tolerance within the national English and Scottish contexts. Branding religion as a marker of difference, Sarrouh insisted on the liberal factors and conditions accommodating Muslim minorities. In the German context, Emily Pittman, a MA Candidate from the *University of Toronto's Centre for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (CERES)*, examined dominant group representations of Doner Kebab as sustaining German nationalism, fetishizing a 'different' culture and maintaining mainstream perceptions of Turkish otherness. Lastly, Tom Abel, a *Political Science* MA candidate from the *University of Toronto*, drew from Charles Taylor's work on recognition and Marion Young's scholarship on democratic inclusion to examine Slovakian integration policies for the Roma minority. Despite the Romas' role in shaping the country's minority policy, Abel showed this influence as immaterialized within the state-supported integration schemes.

Immigration and the changing meaning of race were themes thoroughly explored within the keynote lecture. Featuring Dr. Jennifer Lee, a prominent scholar within the field of migration from

the *University of California-Irvine*, the central lecture entitled *Asian Americans and the Stereotype Promise: Immigration and the Changing Meaning of Race* smoothly extended the conference dialogues onto issues of race, ethnicity, migration and education.

Drawing from the historical representation of immigration in the United States, particularly juxtaposing former constructions of Asian-Americans as undesirable and inadmissible to the public figure of Jeremy Lin, the popular and successful Asian-American basketball player, Professor Lee revealed how the immigration system has changed the meanings of race within the 21st century. According to Lee, current positively enforced representations of Asian-Americans as a hardworking, high-achieving and a highly educated immigrant group are closely related to the chronological changes within the American immigration policy, such as the high selectivity criteria introduced after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act. Pioneering the novel term of *Stereotype Promise*, Lee talked about how the promise of being perceived from positive lenses produces a stereotype-conforming pressure, leading in turn to an apparent boost of performance. Her research showed that high academic outcomes for students of Asian backgrounds were intrinsically linked to the *stereotype promise ideals*, and positive assumptions made by teachers. Contesting suppositions around immigrants' intrinsic and unique ethnicity traits, Lee revealed that particular behaviors, performances and responses to Asian-Americanism are socially constructed from historical and structural processes of racialization.

Women, Wellbeing and Social Service Provision

The intersecting issue of women and migration has been highly discussed throughout the conference. Dialogues about social service provision were added into the conversations, thereby examining the impact of migration on women's wellbeing.

Using an auto-ethnographical narrative approach, Natalia Segal, a MA graduate from the *University of Toronto's School of Public Policy*, demonstrated how the newly implemented 'conditional spouse' regulation unfairly disadvantages women. Drawing on expressive writing pedagogy and performance theory, Segal revealed inherent tensions between immigration policy and human rights perspectives. Segal argued against the recently introduced two-year co-habitation requirement for sponsored spouses (Alboim and Cohl 2012), contesting its twofold individual harm: 1) spouses' helplessness in fleeing domestic abuse 2) exposed risk to deportation. Segal states, contrary to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, this policy revision infringes on permanent residents' rights of taking residency in their preferred province of choice and of equally benefiting from the law without ethnic discrimination. Bringing forward arguments from international human rights codes, along with national and provincial regulatory bodies, her study advances the knowledge of how immigration policies affect the lives of foreign nationals and their families.

Experiences of immigrant women in later life were also explored. Grace Yoo, a MA Candidate in *Women and Gender Studies* at the *University of Toronto*, examined the lived experiences of elderly Korean-Canadian women. Often living below the low income cut-off and at a heightened risk of domestic violence, Yoo recommended going beyond gender solely as a site of oppression, but rather considering its intersection with race/ethnicity and class in affecting the health and wellbeing of elderly women.

As violence particularly occurs along gendered and ethnic lines, support services should be suitable and accessible. Reporting on qualitative findings with service providers and domestic violence survivors, Mariam Rashidi, a MSW Candidate from the *University of Toronto Social Work* program,

highlighted the gaps in service provision for women and families of South Asian descent. She then offered informed recommendations for the betterment of such services.

The health care sector was additionally explored. Rewa El Oubari, a MA student from the *CERES* program at the *University of Toronto*, drew attention on the inaccessibility of Kosovo health care system. Providing a historical and political account of the situation, El Oubari showed the detrimental effects of colliding local and international systems, impacting marginalized citizens.

Meanwhile, Sofia Garcia Bayaert, a PhD Candidate at the *University of Barcelona, Instituto de Gobierno y Políticas Públicas*, explored cross-linguistic communication and immigrant access to language and interpretative services within multicultural societies. Using examples from her fieldwork in the province of Ontario, Bayaert argued that competing discourses surrounding interpreting are oppositionally framed: a citizenship supported mechanism of rights and entitlements rooted as a 'special need' condition of immigrants versus the politicized, nationally supported politics of difference.

Immigrant Identity and Diasporic Community Formations

Identity matters. How dominant groups construct and imagine the identity of the 'different' other (Ahmed 2000) has implications for social policies, group formations, community identifications and belonging. The conference papers constructed identity not as a fixed concept, but rather as a contextually specific embodiment involving continuous negotiation and development.

Language was explored as a tool for immigrant identity preservation. Abril Liberatori, from *York University's History* department, branded language as a valuable asset in understanding newcomers' lives, either as an intimacy tool or as a strategy for socio-economic growth. Exploring the organizational use and abuse of historical memory, Amber Nickell, from the *University of Northern Colorado MA History* program, revealed inherent limitations of *American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR)* documents, in relation to diasporic identification. Meanwhile, from a sociological perspective, Roland Mascarenhas, a MA Candidate from *Harvard University's Education* department, explored the Goan (southwestern Indian state) diasporic formation as a case study of global immigrant integration. Revealing how Goan bridges the East and the West through an adaptable and economically productive citizenry, Mascarenhas pointed at how community formations are enabled by various socio-historical and political conditions.

Non-Citizenship

Recent research efforts documented the multiple systemic exclusions experienced by non-status individuals, particularly in relation to protective legislations, healthcare and citizenship claims (Shakya 2013). Within the context of a record-breaking number of deportations - 16,511 people in 2011-2012 (Hussan 2012) - state apprehension of undocumented children (Bejan and Sidhu 2010) and charges of asylum seekers advocates under diverted human trafficking laws (Russo 2008), the issue of undocumentedness has become a hot Canadian topic. Francisco Villegas, a PhD Candidate at the *University of Toronto's OISE* department, explored how school boards' bureaucratic procedures invisibilize and dehumanize students without legal immigration status. Villegas especially focused on the historical gate-keeping of school registration forms, as maintaining exclusionary practices and ruling out undocumented students. His ground-breaking work revealed the disconnect between

Canada's alleged inclusionary multiculturalism and practices of exclusion, further linking the broader issues of migration to international human rights mobilization.

Discussion

Succeeding its 6th year, *EPS* has clearly secured its place as an outlet for young scholarly thought within the field of migration studies. Attracting more and more graduate students each year, from both Master and PhD levels, the conference has grown to have quite an interdisciplinary and international character. In conclusion, the authors' offer their personal comments and insights to potentially further the conference's goals of hoping to better serve the young and emerging community of ethnic and migration scholarship.

To start, we consider the preponderance of scholarly works on issues of racialization, exclusion and nationhood as indicative of junior scholars' growing concern about social (in)justice issues besetting non-dominant populations. It is a call for policy makers, knowledge producers and activists to continually invest in critical inquiries that disrupt the uncontested doxa of current multicultural policies (Bejan 2013) and better ground social processes within social justice principles.

However, future attention should be additionally paid to the weakening of the Canadian welfare state in perpetuating the exclusion and marginalization of non-dominant groups. For instance, discrepancies between Canadian born individuals and immigrants in terms of employment and economic outcomes have noticeably grown in the 80s, when the social investment rhetoric started to circulate within the policy making field (Jenson and Saint- Martin 2003). As Canada's state protectionism (Jenson 2009) shifted towards neoliberal inspired social policies (Jenson and Saint-Martin 2003), immigration regressively moved from building citizenship to importing economic capital (Russo 2008), recruiting the highest numbers of skilled migrants than ever before (Grant and Sweetman 2004) in spite of mounting economic challenges faced by these professionals (Omidvar and Richmond 2003; Wayland and Goldberg 2009).

Moreover, we suggest a critical inquiry to be applied to the scholarly theorization of exclusion on the majority-minority conceptual dyad. Rooted in liberal thought, the rhetoric of multiculturalism and minority rights has been typically imported to analyze ethnic relations within diverse societies (Kymlicka 2007), without ever questioning the conditions legitimizing and perpetuating the primacy of Western imperialism. Ethnic minorities, as objects of exoticization and fetishization, befall into legitimate actors only on their road to integration, in the purgatory of resembling the majority. It is within such theoretical contexts that we need to critically question the multilayered meanings of integration and their inherent mobilization by various nation-states. For example, Abel's presentation on the non-integration of Slovakian Roma minority left unspoken that, within societies where liberal democracy has not been historically legitimized (such as the former Eastern Bloc nations), integration is dissimilarly perceived within the public policy realm. Rooted in Western-type policies of multiculturalism, integration might not be as easily imported to post-soviet nations. Thus, integration must be critically analyzed in lieu of various dominant ideologies shaping its definition: How does it connect with the terminology of recognition? Who benefits from these concepts? How do marginalized groups mobilize such definitions in their social justice efforts?

Oftentimes, it is the very same integration rhetoric which is left un-translated at the ground policy level of Canadian multiculturalism. For instance, in 2009 the government introduced visitor visas for Czech Republic nationals, in efforts to reduce Roma driven refugee claims (Alboim and Cohl 2012),

reflecting perceptions of Roma populations as included within their host nation states. Recently, the newly implemented Bill C-31 amended the Canadian Refugee Reform Act and further restricted permanent residency access for refugee claimants from designated 'safe' countries. A country like Hungary is deemed safe, although it is not actually safe for Romas or Jews, the same way as Sri Lanka is not safe for Tamils (Alboim and Cohl 2012). Within such permeable contexts, the lack of contextual groundings of 'integration' and 'inclusion' leaves room for discriminatory policies at local, national and global levels and gives dominant ideologies the power to derange solidarity movements.

Panels on intersecting gender and immigrant experiences constituted a large segment of the conference. We welcome this as an emerging sub-field within the migration research. Whereas gender has previously been operationalized strictly as a variable, merely as a tally of migrants, some papers provided a helpful account on the complex situations of immigrant women.

A transnational lens (Good-Gingrich 2010) was only lightly emphasized within the conference panels. However, migration is a transnational process and perhaps the up-and-coming scholarly work should make stronger efforts to re-conceptualize resettlement through a transnational perspective. This will work to further reveal the impact of ongoing geographical and identity transformations on the everyday life of marginalized populations. In particular, engaging undocumentedness from a transnational perspective will comprehensively showcase the hierarchical and institutionalized ways of making and re-making of non-citizenship for those migrating from so called 'Third World' countries. Thus, we suggest the *EPS* will provide more space for the engagement of such conversations. Finally, the conference failed to showcase works of indigenous and Aboriginal scholars. We strongly believe there is an additional need to foreground scholarly works on indigeneity in a quest for a continual criticality of how belonging and inclusion impact Aboriginal rights and social justice struggles.

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