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Navigating Everyday Multiculturalism in the Culture Chats Writing Program
Observation from a Community Writing Workshop in Metro Vancouver
Naviguer les expériences quotidiennes du multiculturalisme dans le cadre du programme d'écriture « Culture Chats »
Observations d'un atelier d'écriture communautaire au centre-ville de Vancouver

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Résumé de l'article

En adoptant une approche au multiculturalisme privilégiant le communautaire et les perspectives de pédagogie publique, cette étude présente les résultats d'un projet de recherche axé sur la communauté qui s'est penché sur les perceptions et les expériences quotidiennes du multiculturalisme vécues par un groupe d'écrivaines immigrantes dans le cadre d'un atelier d'écriture communautaire au centre-ville de Vancouver (Colombie-Britannique). En s'appuyant sur les observations, les entretiens et les artefacts écrits, les résultats mettent en relief la manière dont les écrivaines ont pu naviguer les expériences concrètes du multiculturalisme par le biais de pratiques d'écriture partagée. Ces expériences pratiques révèlent les disparités entre l'idéologie multiculturelle de l'état et les réalités vécues au quotidien. Les résultats soulignent aussi la pertinence pédagogique de l'atelier d'écriture comme praxis critique dans le contexte de pratiques littéraires transnationales et d'apprentissage socioculturel.

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NAVIGATING EVERYDAY MULTICULTURALISM IN THE CULTURE CHATS WRITING PROGRAM: OBSERVATION FROM A COMMUNITY WRITING WORKSHOP IN METRO VANCOUVER¹

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Abstract

Adopting a “multiculturalism-from-below” approach and the perspective of public pedagogy, this study presents findings from a community-based research project that looked into a group of immigrant women writers’ perceptions and experiences of everyday multiculturalism in the setting of a community writing workshop in Metro Vancouver, BC. Drawing on observation, interviews, and written artifacts, the findings highlight how the writers navigated on-the-ground multiculturalism through shared writing practices. These on-the-ground experiences reveal the disparities between the state multicultural ideology and the daily lived realities. The findings also demonstrate the pedagogical significance of the writing workshop as a critical praxis for transnational literary practices and socio-cultural learning.

Résumé

En adoptant une approche au multiculturalisme privilégiant le communautaire et les perspectives de pédagogie publique, cette étude présente les résultats d’un projet de recherche axé sur la communauté qui s’est penché sur les perceptions et les expériences quotidiennes du multiculturalisme vécues par un groupe d’écrivaines immigrantes dans le cadre d’un atelier d’écriture communautaire au centre-ville de Vancouver (Colombie-Britannique). En s’appuyant sur les observations, les entretiens et les artefacts écrits, les résultats mettent en relief la manière dont les écrivaines ont pu naviguer les expériences concrètes du multiculturalisme par le biais de pratiques d’écriture partagée. Ces expériences pratiques révèlent les disparités entre l’idéologie

- 1 This work was supported by Mitacs through the Mitacs Accelerate Program and Culture Chat BC Association. The authors also wish to express gratitude to the women writers who participated in this study and generously shared their works and insights.

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multiculturelle de l'état et les réalités vécues au quotidien. Les résultats soulignent aussi la pertinence pédagogique de l'atelier d'écriture comme praxis critique dans le contexte de pratiques littéraires transnationales et d'apprentissage socioculturel.

Keywords

Everyday multiculturalism, public pedagogy, immigrant women, community writing workshop, transnational literary practices, socio-cultural learning

Multiculturalism was first adopted as an official policy in Canada in 1971 (Government of Canada, 1971) to recognize the importance of immigration and cultural difference (Metz et al., 2014; Sloan et al., 2018). Over the past decades, Canada has seen a growing influx of immigrants, who have become an integral part of the country, contributing to heightened intercultural exposure and diversity. According to the 2021 Census of Canada, over 1.3 million new immigrants settled permanently in Canada from 2016 to 2021, and the share of recent immigrants settling in Atlantic Canada almost tripled in 15 years, rising from 1.2% in 2006 to 3.5% in 2021. As the immigrant population continues to grow, it was projected to represent from 29.1% to 34.0% of the population in Canada by 2041 (Statistics Canada, 2022). As Canada solidifies its position as a top destination for immigrants and refugees, the public policy of multiculturalism, together with a diverse array of programs and services, has been developed and implemented with an aim to keep pace with the ever-evolving immigrant demographic and to help newcomers successfully navigate their new lives in the host country.

Despite these top-down efforts, the multicultural policy in Canada has often been criticized for primarily fostering passive coexistence. As highlighted in a report by Simon Fraser University Dialogue Programs (2005), the actual implementation of multiculturalism as a living public policy is intricate and challenging. Moreover, immigrants' day-to-day experiences with multiculturalism often diverge from the official rhetoric on multiculturalism (see further discussion in Hardy et al., 2017; Shan & Walter, 2015). In fact, immigrants' integration into plural societies is a long-standing public policy issue that has generated a substantial body of scholarship debate in Canada and beyond (Chatterjee, 2019). Many scholars argue that the neoliberal rhetoric surrounding multiculturalism results in an uncritical embrace of diversity and cosmopolitanism, leaving hierarchies and power relations unchallenged (e.g., Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Kubota, 2020; May & Sleeter, 2010; Sloan et al., 2018). Among these voices, a growing body of scholarly literature asserts that multiculturalism and equity must be negotiated from the ground up, and the complexities of multiculturalism can be better understood through "the *everyday practice* and lived experience of diversity in specific situations and spaces of encounter" (Wise & Velayutham, 2009, p. 3, italics original).

On the other hand, Canada has a rich history of grassroots immigrant and settlement initiatives from within local communities. These on-the-ground efforts, often initiated by community-driven and volunteer-based organizations, such as local community groups, non-profit organizations, and ethnic and cultural associations, play a crucial role in addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by newcomers to help them better integrate into the local community. These grassroots initiatives in the context of immigrant and settlement efforts are venues where day-to-day, localized multicultural encounters

and practices occur. Multiculturalism transcends mere policy; as noted by Hardy et al. (2017), it “defines, shapes and affects everyday life for ordinary people” (p. 3). Therefore, further research becomes imperative for a better understanding of how multiculturalism dynamically manifests within these micro-publics. Inquiries in this regard can provide insight into how multiculturalism is perceived and experienced on the ground, and what barriers are there to impede the promise of multiculturalism. This deeper exploration also has the potential to expand our comprehension of the complexities and nuances in Canada’s multicultural landscape, thereby fostering a more inclusive multicultural society for all.

Drawing on the perspective of public pedagogy and a “multiculturalism-from-below” approach, this article presents findings from a community-based study that was centred on a group of women immigrants and their experiences navigating everyday multiculturalism in a writing workshop situated in Metro Vancouver. Moreover, this study explores the role of this writing workshop as a critical praxis for intercultural communication and socio-cultural learning. Grounded in data collected through observation-participation and interviews, the study aims to address the following questions:

- How did the writers’ written works reflect their perceptions and experiences of everyday multiculturalism?
- How did the writers engage with intercultural communication and socio-cultural learning through shared writing practices?

In what follows, we present a review of the relevant literature and conceptual perspectives that provide a rationale for our interpretations of the data, followed by clarification of the research context and data gathering. The discussion section presents how the shared writing practices during the workshop series opened up opportunities for the writers to engage in intercultural meaning making and learning. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of the writing workshop case for research inquiries concerning everyday multiculturalism and public pedagogy.

Conceptual Perspectives

Multiculturalism

The concept of multiculturalism is broad and ever-evolving; it can be “descriptive and ideological, or it can refer to political policies intended to address diversity” (Sloan et al., 2018, p. 5). Multiculturalism has also been a widely debated concept, particularly in the recent decade, against, on one hand, the backdrop of a growing nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric around the world, and, on the other, the call for a recognition of the importance of immigration and critical consciousness of the power of difference, arising out of the larger concerns of social justice and equity (Goodman, 2015; Kubota, 2020; Sloan et al., 2018). A part of the ongoing debates in the multiculturalism literature centres on how different definitions and forms of multiculturalism challenge or reinforce patriarchy, oppression, and unequal relations of power among groups (see, for example, Colombo, 2015; Sloan et al., 2018). For example, liberal/neoliberal multiculturalism and pluralist multiculturalism have been criticized for their “superficial celebration of cultural difference” and their failure to address “power hierarchies that produce and sustain institutional racism, sexism, linguisticism, and other injustices” (Kubota, 2020, p. 315). Increasingly, critics have argued that the top-down approach to multiculturalism bound up

with institutional and state conceptualizations often leads to the discursive exclusion and othering of immigrants, cultural minorities, and Indigenous peoples. In contrast to the state policy discourse, "a grounded approach to multiculturalism" (Wise & Velayutham, 2009), often referred to as everyday multiculturalism, has emerged. Everyday multiculturalism is focused on intercultural encounters and experiences enacted in our daily life with diverse ethnocultural groups interacting and living together (e.g., Harris, 2009; Semi et al., 2009; Wise & Velayutham, 2009).

Our review of the relevant literature suggests a scarcity of research that examines and understands how everyday multiculturalism is practised and experienced in informal learning environments. In this study, informed by everyday multiculturalism alongside a critical pedagogical lens, we seek a further understanding of lived experiences of multiculturalism in an informal learning site.

Everyday Multiculturalism

Everyday multiculturalism is an analytical perspective that is used to explore what people do and experience in "the mundane interaction in everyday life in intercultural contexts" (Colombo, 2015, p. 816), ranging from schools, grocery stores, playgrounds, worksites, neighbourhoods, and community gardens, to public transport and so on. As Colombo states, multiculturalism from this ground-up perspective "is mainly conceived as a social practice" (p. 816). In other words, an everyday multiculturalism lens seeks to understand "how social actors experience and negotiate cultural difference on the ground and how their social relations and identities are shaped and re-shaped in the process" (Wise & Velayutham, 2009, p. 3). In this regard, Harris's (2009) take on multiculturalism is concerned with how young people deal with cultural differences in everyday neighbourhood contexts, vernacular expressions, and popular culture. Hardy et al.'s (2017) study is based on the everyday lived reality of multiculturalism for young White British people. Knijnik and Spaaij (2017) present findings from their study on how everyday multiculturalism is performed and challenged in the active football (soccer) fan subculture of the multicultural cohort of football fans in Western Sydney. Shan and Walter's (2015) study addresses how community gardens on a university campus in Canada serve as a site to foster everyday multiculturalism among immigrants from a practice-based learning perspective. In these and other studies, the everyday multiculturalism lens problematizes the ideal representation of multiculturalism, so we can look more closely into everyday racism, sexism, colonialism, exclusions, and othering in the everyday dimensions of multiculturalism. In this sense, such a critical multicultural vision "sits in contrast to top-down state multiculturalism" (Meetoo, 2020, p. 264) and allows us to develop a more nuanced understanding of multiculturalism on the ground.

Public Pedagogy

Public pedagogy is a concept that looks at pedagogy's intersections with "spaces, practices, discourses, and maps of meaning and affect produced through a range of cultural and pedagogical technologies" (Giroux, 2011, p. 686). Burdick et al. (2013) provide a definition of public pedagogy as

focusing on various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning occurring beyond or outside of formal schooling. It involves learning in

institutions such as museums, zoos, and libraries; in informal educational sites such as popular culture, media, commercial spaces, and the Internet; and through figures and sites of activism, including public intellectuals and grassroots social movements. (p. 2)

The recent research trend of public pedagogy is focused on the pedagogical potential of media, popular culture, arts, and even everyday life to articulate and (re)construct knowledge, discourses, images, and values (see as examples, Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012; Giroux, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004; Ito et al., 2015; Jocson, 2015; Zorrilla & Tisdell, 2016). The idea exemplified in these studies is that new media and popular culture are important pedagogical sites to “facilitate transformative learning around diversity and equity issues” (Tisdell, 2008, p. 48) and to prepare citizens with critical and civic consciousness.

In this study, we also draw on Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural perspective of learning, which sees learning as “an interrelational process” (Shan & Walter, 2015, p. 21). This approach emphasizes that learning takes place through ongoing social, historical, and cultural interactions with diverse others. It underscores a continuous cross-boundary learning flow involving navigating relational dynamics, challenging existing beliefs, and fostering reconstruction of new understandings.

Study Context

The study was focused on a community writing program that took place in Metro Vancouver in the province of British Columbia, Canada’s most ethnically diverse province and home to the country’s second-largest immigrant population. Metro Vancouver is known for its remarkable ethnic and racial diversity. Census 2016 shows that the Metro Vancouver region had a total population of 2,463,431, with immigrant residents representing 40.8% (989,540) of the total population (NewToBC, 2018). Because of its substantial immigrant demographic, Metro Vancouver houses a diverse array of government-funded services and agencies to offer assistance to newcomers. There are also informal community-based organizations and associations often formed by residents of a particular area or neighbourhood. These grassroots efforts mostly focus on helping new immigrants integrate into the local community through social events, cultural exchanges, and information sharing. The Culture Chats BC Association, which initiated the workshop where this study was conducted, was one such community-driven initiative.

Culture Chats BC Association (hereafter Culture Chats) was established in 2015 by Asmita Lawrence (Author 2) as a non-profit organization. One main goal of Culture Chats is to create a meeting hub of multicultural experiences for local community members. Over the years, Culture Chats has facilitated a range of cultural and arts programs and activities for community residents, such as book clubs, art exhibitions, multicultural art workshops, and writing workshops. This study started with an invitation from Asmita to Jing Li (Author 1), then a PhD candidate in education at Simon Fraser University, to collaborate on research into immigrant women writers’ experiences with multiculturalism and their participation in the Culture Chats writing program. The authors’ shared interest in community education and multiculturalism inspired this research project.

Cultural Chats Writing Workshop

The Cultural Chats writing workshop where we conducted the study took place each week in local community centres or libraries. Workshop members met every Saturday for a 90-minute session, where they engaged in creative writing and explored writing techniques. The session usually began with some kind of contemplative pre-writing exercise led by the facilitator, such as breathing, stretches, or a quick “free write” (an exercise where the writers were encouraged to write without constraints or specific prompts), to allow writers to free their thoughts and prepare for the writing session. Writers then were given a writing prompt (a question, scene, or idea to inspire writing) and spent 15 minutes writing in response to the prompt. The remaining workshop was devoted to reading and sharing everyone’s writing, receiving feedback from the facilitator and peers. The facilitator and participants also discussed writing skills and shared difficulties and challenges they faced in writing. The workshop participants sometimes created content at home and prepared for the next week’s session using the prompts of their choice. Over the course of seven weeks, the writers explored a variety of genres, including imaginative stories, personal narratives, short fiction, fairy tales, and poetry

Table 1: Discussion Topics and Writing Prompts

	Discussion topic	Summarized writing prompt
1	Culture & linguistic self-portrait	Creative writing
2	Why write?	Creative writing
3	Multiculturalism	Free writing on personal experiences
4	Childhood stories	Exploring personal memories
5	Childhood story sharing	Expressive and fictional writing
6	Fairy tales across cultures	Frog prince
7	Readings and discussion regarding particular cultural values	Share the mythologies from your culture

Research Methodology

Data Gathering

Participation in this study was voluntary. Author 1 attended the Culture Chats writing workshop between January and March 2020. During the first two sessions, Author 1 introduced the research project to workshop participants and clarified the purposes and procedures of the research. Eight writers provided their consent and participated in the study every week during the three-month period. Most of these eight women had been regular attendees of the Culture Chats writing workshop since the spring of 2019. Data were gathered through observing, on-site note taking, and interviews. With the consent of the writers, we also had access to their writing samples. These written artifacts, alongside the fieldwork journals, provided additional insights, allowing for a deeper insight into the participants’ daily multicultural experiences.

All the study participants were immigrants with great diversity in ethnicity, language, education, profession, and religion, as shown in the cultural and linguistic self-portraits the participants created during the workshop (see Figure 1²). The writers came from Bangladesh, China, India, Mexico, Thailand, Philippines, and Uzbekistan, with the time they had been in Canada ranging from less than one year to more than ten years at the time the study was conducted.

Between February and March 2020, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all but one of the eight women writers (one participant lost contact at the later stage of the workshop). Six interviews were conducted in person, with one via telephone due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and full lockdown in British Columbia. The interview questions were mostly about these writers' perception of multiculturalism, their identification of their own and new host cultures, migration and integration experiences, as well as their visions of living together in intercultural communities. Interviews were carried out one-on-one, so their responses were free of peer influence. Each interview lasted around 40 to 60 minutes and was recorded. The interviews were also accompanied by research journals and field notes taken by Author 1, who attended the writing sessions from January to March 2020.

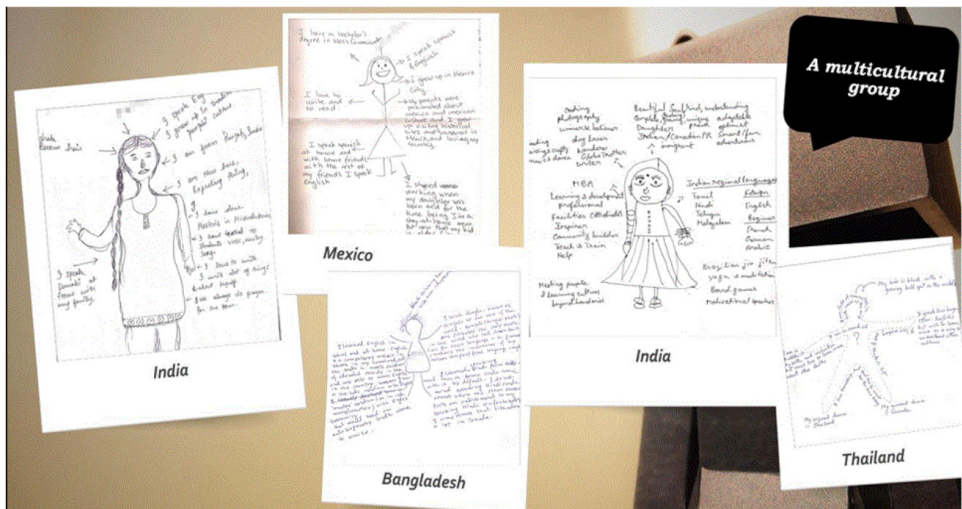


Figure 1 : Linguistic and cultural self-portraits of the Culture Chats writers

Data analysis

After the initial stage of fieldwork, we retreated to the literature in search of analytic lenses so we could phenomenologically view the collected artifacts and fieldwork experiences. When analyzing the data, we took an inductive, data-driven approach, coding diversely and letting new themes evolve while refining analytic tools accordingly. This process allowed us to develop the major themes around everyday multiculturalism, public pedagogies, and

- 2 Informed by the visual method used by Prasad (2014) to access learners' representations of their linguistically diverse identities, we encouraged workshop participants, to create a cultural and linguistic self-portrait to introduce themselves during the first workshop session.

socio-cultural learning. These themes then sent us back for further review of the literature. All themes were checked for emerging, coherent patterns so that they logically alluded to the overall research focus and questions.

Throughout the data analysis process, we engaged in continuous reflection regarding our individual perspectives on various moments and aspects of the conversations and activities being examined. This divergence of focus stemmed from our distinct world views, personal experiences, social and cultural backgrounds, and other factors that shape how we perceive the world. In effectively navigating these differences, we complemented one another's observations and comprehension, which enabled us to present a more comprehensive portrayal of the everyday multicultural experiences of the Cultural Chats writers.

Authorial reflexivity

As female immigrants and community-based researchers (Author 1 and Author 2) and service providers (Author 2), we approached this research in a collaborative and reflexive manner. Our own transnational experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds, as well as continuous participations in the workshop activities and discussions, allowed us to become connected with the workshop participants and resonate with their struggles to integrate into the new surroundings, which in turn contributed to meaningful connections with the participants and "experience-based empathic understandings" (Pink, 2008, p. 65). In this way, our interpretations were shaped not only by our own researcher perspectives but also by our active participation in and co-creation of shared experiences and practices alongside the writers.

Findings and Discussion

The findings consist of two parts: first, we illustrate, through the work of three writers, their perceptions and experiences of multiculturalism both as an ideology and as a lived reality. We then explore how the writers navigated everyday multiculturalism while engaging in socio-cultural learning in the writing workshop context. To provide a better contextual understanding, interview excerpts featuring the participants' perceptions of multiculturalism and their experiences with cultural differences in Canada are interspersed throughout the first part. With the findings shown below, we aim to showcase two key aspects: (1) the writers' navigation of everyday multiculturalism through shared writing practice, and (2) the writing workshop as a critical praxis for transnational literary practices and socio-cultural learning.

Navigating everyday multiculturalism through shared writing practices

Three cases

Jessamy's Story: Seeking Employment. Jessamy³ arrived in Canada in 2019 as an immigrant from Punjab, India. She said she was deeply rooted in her traditional Punjabi culture and was a multilingual speaker of Punjabi, Hindi, and English. Jessamy earned her bachelor's degree in microelectronics and engineering and a master's degree in engineering from Punjab University. Before coming to Canada, she had worked as a teacher in India.

3 Pseudonyms are used for the interviewees in this article.

When asked about her perspective on multiculturalism in Canada, Jessamy said, “I have positive experience of interacting with people from different cultures. They have different values, different thoughts. I respect that. They respect mine.” Eager to integrate into the community, she expressed her desire to learn English and not be seen as an outsider: “I love to speak English and to get involved in the community, as no one can think I’m an outsider.”

Jessamy participated in the first few workshops, but then had to discontinue because she had been on a job search. When we had a phone interview with her in March 2020, Jessamy said with excitement that she had recently been offered a customer service job in the copy centre in Staples. However, she acknowledged that this job was a significant departure from her engineering background: “It [the job] is totally different from my field. In India, I have a master’s in engineering.” She highlighted the challenges in finding employment in her own field in Canada. She attributed this difficulty to the fact that employers perceived her thoughts and perspectives as different from those of native Canadians. She said on the phone: “Employers do not trust me, [because] I have different thoughts than native Canadians.”

During one workshop session, Jessamy composed a narrative reflecting on her struggles to adjust to the new country and her ongoing pursuit of employment opportunities in Canada.

In my native country, I was so independent. I had a job. I know all the systems that how to complete the paper works,...but when I came here, I feel I am too much dependent on my family. I have no car, no driving licence...I want to be independent...When I tried to look for jobs, it was so hard for me. It was difficult to think how to approach employers. Employers prefer candidates with Canadian experiences. When I go to Work BC [a provincial agency that helps British Columbians navigate the labour market], the facilitator told me to do volunteer. For me it was so difficult to accept the volunteering because I thought, “I have done my master’s in engineering”...Sometimes I got phone calls for interview. But even [when] my interview went well, no one calls me. I started doing follow-ups. Even then there is no response. Then I thought maybe I didn’t know the proper professional dress. I ask to my facilitator at Options [a non-profit social services agency]. She told me about the professional dress. Even then I was unable to get the job. Then I tried to make my resumé more updated...I got to know about the cover letter, which no one asks in my country. I tried to write cover letters too. I put so much effort. I feel like depressed sometimes I start crying. I cry too much in those months. My lovely family, my dear husband always support me. Then I started doing volunteering. I joined a program at YWCA...This helps me and give me the directions.

Tamara’s story: Adapting to “Canadian Ways Of Thinking.” Tamara came from Bangladesh and moved to Canada with her husband six years ago. They first lived in St. John’s, Newfoundland, and then Winnipeg, Manitoba, before moving to British Columbia a few years ago, where her husband was doing his PhD. During that period, Tamara also received her master’s degree in Canada. Describing her understanding of cultural differences in Canada, Tamara, a Muslim, said she appreciated multiculturalism but was not sure about

adopting another culture in addition to her own. She said there were many cultural values in Canada that were in conflict with hers, such as gender cross-dressing and transgender issues. Describing how she went through a process from culture shock to more tolerance and even acceptance now, she said, "Like, now I have accepted many things that I couldn't [before]. And I also realized that Canada, despite being liberal, still has to learn to accept things, although they claim that they are liberal."

During our interview with her, Tamara told us she was temporarily working at two jobs, with one requiring only a high-school degree. She used to work as a cashier when in St. John's. Like Jessamy, she also expressed frustration at the struggle to get a full-time permanent job in Canada even though she already had a master's degree. "I didn't need a master's degree if I just worked here," she said. Tamara attributed her unsuccessful attempts to find a good job to her lack of Canadian work experiences and skills. She said, "I did not find a better job, but do not take that as someone not accepting me, just my lack of skills." She told us that she had been offered admission letters to PhD programs from two universities in Canada not long ago, and was hoping to move to that city for her doctoral degree in the fall.

After our interview with her, Tamara sent us by email a vignette she wrote called "A Canadian Interview." She explained that this story spoke about her frustration of wrestling with "Canadian ways of thinking" in the workplace. Tamara said that despite the vignette being in third-person point of view, the writing was "the narration of [her] personal experience."

She failed the same interview twice! "I give up. Now it's no longer a career—it's just a job...will I never be a Canadian?" She indeed was trying so hard to learn, but seems to be taking in the wrong clues. She was so sure she fit into the description of the circular.

"They want only high school graduates. I am a university graduate!"—educational qualifications—tick!

"I can type with a moderate speed in MS Word"—tick!

"Excel...okay...just data input. I can fill out forms in a given software"—so, tick!

But her bosses—people she had worked with over the last few years—asked those awkward hypothetical questions: "Tell me about a time when so and so happened and how you dealt with it" Oh, Gosh! She never gave a Canadian answer to those questions...

Why don't her employers just train her? Canada is a country where people could be trained for creative works, too—works that in her culture was perceived of as Nature-gifted talents. Then why couldn't her employers just train her to be a proper Canadian employee? They know what a hard-working and sincere staff she is, don't they? Okay...she may have given the wrong answer there! A very "insensitive" answer. But what was the right answer—in Canada?

Natalia's Story: "Multiculturalism Is Being Tested." Natalia was born and raised in a Korean family in Uzbekistan and had lived in Canada for a few years when she participated in this study. When asked how she perceived multiculturalism, Natalia expressed her endorsement of multiculturalism in Canada:

I grew up in a multinational society. So, multiculturalism is not new for me. I am used to it...We absorb all these differences. At the same time, we preserve our own identities. I think it is important. But when I came to Canada, I found Canada is even more progressive, even more people from more countries. It really enriched myself in terms of my knowledge, view and perception.

Natalia had a good job in finance in her home country. She said she had anticipated the difficulty in seeking employment here in Canada, "but the situation was much worse [than she imagined]. People ask for Canadian experience or education...[but] from where people are supposed to get Canadian experiences if you do not hire them?" Natalia was lucky to find a job eventually because of her international MBA degree. But she decided to quit her job later and became self-employed, setting up an import/export business.

Natalie was an active and persistent workshop participant. In March 2020, as the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic continued, Culture Chats made the decision to cancel the remaining workshops scheduled in March and April. Around that time, as the panic caused by COVID-19 kept rising among the public, incidents of hate speech and violent attacks against Asians in Canada and elsewhere across the world were on the rise and had been reported in the media. This became a topic during the writing workshop discussion. Natalia said she felt sorry that Asians were being blamed and attacked for COVID-19. During one discussion session, Natalie said, "Multiculturalism is being tested." Observing what had happened in Vancouver, she expressed an urge to write out her thoughts on these everyday practices of incivility. In her mind, discriminatory behaviours and practices were undermining, rather than contributing to, the core of multiculturalism. Reflecting on racism and hate speech at the time of the pandemic crisis, she shared her thoughts in the following words:

Multiculturalism is being tested now. I don't talk about fundamental pillars like respect of sovereignty and people's values. We are all blessed to have it in Canada. I talk about intercultural relations or communication fundamentals.

Amid coronavirus panic and hysteria it is more difficult for some people to remain tolerant, patient, wise and in common sense if you like. I hear that coronavirus is often attributed to particular country or nation, which at this moment is not the case anymore. It has a global scope.

Looking at reaction to Asians in some countries I pray to God to give people tolerance, patience and common sense. It is testing time. Only societies of higher order (to which I definitely include Canada) can stand it.

It is testing for all of us. We shouldn't give in to fear and panic. We should always remember that this testing time will pass anyway but the bitterness and consequences of our actions will remain much longer or even forever.

Disparities between idealized and everyday multiculturalism

The three cases of Culture Chats writers described above highlight a common theme in the contrast between inclusions and exclusions, as well as the juxtaposition of idealized multiculturalism against day-to-day multiculturalism. The lived reality of multiculturalism shared in the writings mirrors the reality in Canada, which presents a counterpoint to the top-down discourse of multiculturalism. On the one hand, the three writers demonstrate an overall positive attitude toward the constructive role of Canada's multicultural policy in fostering the diverse cultural and ethnic landscape. This is particularly evident in Natalia's writing (e.g., "fundamental pillars," "we are all blessed to have it in Canada," "societies of higher order"). On the other hand, the women's on-the-ground multicultural experiences, especially in the labour market, allow us to see the obstacles many immigrants encounter during their everyday navigation of multiculturalism. Although they have already obtained university degrees and occupational skills in their home countries, because they are perceived as lacking "Canadian experience," "Canadian credentials," and/or "Canadian ways of thinking," they face obstacles on their paths to professional success in Canada. This tough situation is exacerbated by other constraints associated with English-language proficiency and differences between the socio-cultural norms of the host society and of their former homes.

The writings from the Cultural Chats writers question the hidden assumptions, oppressions, and privileges in different and similar ways. The shared concerns, issues, and fears voiced by the writers accurately pinpoint the boiling points and the lasting bitterness and consequences caused by the deficit-oriented discourses. Such discourses reinforce an entrenched ideology of inferiority of racialized immigrants and may in turn result in denying immigrants' equal access to socio-economic resources and perpetuating their marginalization in the labour market and in society at large.

Through the lens of everyday multiculturalism, we see how the writers' encounters with daily multiculturalism are discursively aligned with, while at once opposite to, ideal multiculturalism in the context of Canadian multicultural nation building. Stratton (1998) argued that official multiculturalism is not an entirely innocent ideal. Such ideal multiculturalism, according to Stratton, is based on a taken-for-granted dominant culture paradigm that includes acceptable aspects of difference but only through a racialized hierarchy. The stories of the three Cultural Chats writers may vary in context and content, but they poignantly reflect repercussions imposed by the ideological construction of immigrants as deficient subjects. What is worth mentioning is the subjectivity and agency these women demonstrate while using different coping strategies as they seek to blend in and accumulate cultural-social-economic capital: practising English and volunteering in the community centre (Jessamy), pursuing a doctoral degree (Tamara), and starting an import/export business (Natalia).

Meanwhile, through the shared practice of creating content about their everyday experiences navigating constraints in the idealized discourse of multiculturalism, the

writers not only exchange their ruminations on multiculturalism, but also make visible “the ways in which [immigrants] construct, resist, translate and mediate social categories in daily relationships” (Colombo, 2015, p. 816), whether this is while navigating barriers in the labour market, or grappling with social and cultural norms in the workplace, or advocating non-discrimination and mutual respect at a time of public fear and panic. As the women writers share the ordinariness of navigating everyday multicultural experiences in the community writing workshop, they collectively engage in problematizing the hegemony that legitimizes institutionalized integration logics and practices that perpetuate inequalities and marginalization. Furthermore, through these shared practices, they may provoke co-feelings in others and open up spaces for critical socio-cultural learning and community engagement. It is the socio-cultural pedagogical aspect of the workshop that we will now turn to.

Writing Workshop as a Critical Praxis for Transnational Literary and Socio-Cultural Learning

Children’s Stories Collection: Transnational literary practices

The Culture Chats writing workshop was meant to provide a shared venue for community residents to develop writing skills and intercultural communication. One observation during our research was that transnational literary practices were embedded in this local community writing workshop, which in turn promoted socio-cultural learning. An example was the collective creation of children’s stories. Over the course of the seven weeks of the workshop, participants engaged with a variety of writing genres (see Table 1). During the sessions, some participating writers shared their experiences of reading children’s books from their home culture to their kids. This led to further exploring of children’s literature and literary works from diverse cultures. As a result of these discussions, the writers decided to create a collection of children’s stories.

The writers first selected popular children’s literature from their home culture or the children’s stories that held special meaning for them growing up, and shared them during the workshop sessions. The selected stories covered a good mix of topics and forms, ranging from Thai fables, Russian fairy tales, folk tales from the Philippines, India, and Bangladesh, to one of the most popular comic series, *The Adventures of Tintin*. The selection of the stories/folk tales reflected the writers’ culture-/religion-oriented views of humans, living beings, the world, as well as their interrelationships. For example, Natalia, an ethnic Korean growing up in Uzbekistan, told us popular Russian fairy tales. In her writing, she explained how her multicultural upbringing in a country where more than 100 nationalities co-existed provided a fertile ground for her to explore writing for children and youth:

I remember I had a book of fairy tales of the nations of Soviet Union. This book contained fairy tales of different nations that lived in the Soviet Union at that time. There you could find Russian fairy tales, Uzbek, Kazakh, Azerbaijan, Moldovan, Georgian, American, etc. I am thinking of this book now, and nostalgia is overcoming me.

Leona, a devout Buddhist from Thailand, shared with the writing group an age-old Thai folk tale called “The Tale of Grandma and Grandpa.” The story described how a sequence of actions by a tiny gnat, a mouse, a cat, a dog, a hammer, the stream, and an elephant helped

two children get back the precious seeds of sesame and nuts to avoid punishment from their grandparents. Describing the moral of the story, Leona wrote:

The Thai fable's underlying message concerns the inter-connectedness of all beings, big and small, that there is nothing too insignificant in shaping (or re-shaping) the chain of events. There is also the spiritual aspect of the tale tied to a Buddhist teaching on "Dependent Origination."

While sharing multicultural stories from around the world, the writers often noticed recognizable common themes and connections in these stories. For example, a Russian tale ("The Scarlet Flower") reflected a similar story from Western culture—"Beauty and the Beast"; the Thai fable shared similarities with "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" and "The Twelve Days of Christmas"; and symbolic representations of the dragon occurred in different manners in the East and West. As the workshop facilitator commented, "It's the same story told in different cultures and in different forms, and we find the common humanity among these stories." Finding out about similarities and differences invoked a sense of cultural connection, and the writers engaged in lively discussions on commonalities and common wisdom and human nature expressed in these multicultural stories. As conversations unfolded, discussion sometimes went beyond literary works to include other topics, such as styles of dress, religious traditions, and habits or manners of socializing, leading to cross-cultural contact and social interactions.

Drawing on the multicultural literary resources, the writers brainstormed themes and topics they wanted to further explore in their own writing. One example prompt was:

Your character travels to Kathmandu and explores the Himalayan Mountains, braves harsh weather conditions, confronts a band of violent smugglers, follows mysterious footprints in the snow, and hopes to find Yeti!

The group then discussed how to create appealing characters and stories using language in a way that would engage young readers. They read their story drafts during the workshop sessions, received comments from peers and the facilitator, and continued to polish their works. The discussion and writing processes further ignited the writers' interest in knowing more about the connections of literary works between their home culture and Canadian culture. In one instance, a writer expressed her interest in knowing more about Indigenous folk tales and to "study the way First Nations peoples perceive the world and write about them and tell them to my people in Thailand."

The children's stories project proceeded through several stages from January to March 2020. The final compilation of the story collection was completed in May. The completed project was shared on the Culture Chats website and during an online reading event in the fall of 2020.

Pedagogical site for socio-cultural learning

As described above, the Culture Chats writers actively engaged in discussions on literary and cultural topics, immersing themselves in the everyday experience of intercultural sharing and learning. They used writing as a means to navigate the complex landscape of multiculturalism, challenging their emotions and experiences in creative work. This process fostered an inclusive learning environment and a sense of community engagement, where

“cultural diversity is experienced and negotiated on the ground in everyday situations” (Wise & Velayutham, 2009, p. 3).

Furthermore, the act of creating literary works allowed the writers to partake in intercultural communication, gaining a deeper appreciation of their own and others’ cultural assets and perspectives. The writing workshop, in this sense, can be seen as a generative space for critical praxis. Each writer shared their unique cultural perspective through their storytelling, while simultaneously acting as attentive listeners to the stories of their peers. In this way, the writers participated on equal footing, establishing personal and intercultural connections that facilitated reciprocal sharing and understanding. This process led to the development of “a set of stories and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 3). One writer described her experience in the Culture Chats writing workshop, explaining how it created a sense of connections among participants: “When I joined this writing class, I felt the connection. There are different cultures and people. Like the topics, we have to choose one. When we write, we can see the culture of people. Each person says something...I feel connected to them.” While these cross-cultural relationships and connections may not be close enough to be described as friendship, as another participant noted, they helped create a bond and a heightened awareness of cultural diversity and sensitivity.

Taking a socio-cultural perspective of learning, which views learning as a social process rooted in human interaction and culturally mediated activity (Vygotsky, 1978), it becomes evident that the community writing workshop served as a pedagogical site where writers not only enhanced their writing skills but also formed meaningful social connections. As pointed out by Shan and Walter (2015), “every cultural-crossing or boundary-crossing practice may involve learning and change as hybrid knowledge and practice is produced” (p. 21). In this context, the writers engaged in a process of socio-cultural learning, where they continuously adapted and evolved their knowledge and practices through the dynamic interplay of cultures, contributing to their personal growth and a richer understanding of multiculturalism in their everyday lives.

Conclusion

Adopting a grounded approach to look into the everyday practice and lived experience of multiculturalism, this study explores the representation and implementation of everyday multiculturalism in a community writing workshop context. Our findings highlight how the writers within this workshop setting (1) shared/processed their experiences of navigating the multiple layers and forms of everyday multiculturalism through shared literary practices, and (2) engaged in transnational literary and socio-cultural learning in collaboration with others in the localized space of the community writing workshop. Through the stories of Culture Chats writers and our interviews with them, we observed a discrepancy between the popular essentialist view of idealized multiculturalism and the real-world constraints immigrants face in their daily life. In this sense, as with other research on everyday multiculturalism, our findings dispute the top-down ideological synergy that treats multiculturalism in a romanticized and idealized way and thus sustains institutional injustices and inequalities. By highlighting the educational potential in everyday multiculturalism settings, as illustrated by the example of the Culture Chats Workshop, this research has contributed to the establishment of meaningful connections

between localized contexts, everyday multiculturalism, and public pedagogy. We believe the findings from this study contribute to addressing the identified gap in the existing literature on multiculturalism, particularly on the grassroots aspect of multiculturalism, through the lens of public pedagogy.

Further, by exploring an ordinary, on-the-ground "intercultural contact zone" (Shan & Walter, 2015)—a community-based writing workshop in this case—and how the participating writers exert agency to engage with one another in transnational literary practices, intercultural communication, and "hybrid knowing and knowledge" (Shan & Walter, 2015, p. 21), we hope this study advances our understanding of the community-based writing workshop as an informative venue of inquiry for grassroots multilingualism, socio-cultural learning, and meaning making. For educators and practitioners in adult education, and those who work with immigrants in Canada's multicultural contexts, findings from this study provide evidence for considering the educative potential of grassroots venues, such as the local community-based writing program, where adult immigrants can engage in community-based literary practices and cultivate multicultural identities.

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