THE GEOGRAPHIES of Identity

BY Minelle Mahtani

I'M STANDING IN LINE AT THE GROCERY STORE, DIMLY WONDERING IF I HAVE ENOUGH MILK TO MAKE IT THROUGH THE WEEKEND, WHEN SOMEONE TAPS ME ON THE SHOULDER. I TURN TO FACE A STRANGER WHO LOOKS APOLOGETIC. I LOOK AT HER QUIZZICALLY, AND BRACE MYSELF FOR THE INEVITABLE. "I'M SORRY," SHE STAMMERS. "I HOPE YOU WON'T MIND, BUT I HAVE TO ASK YOU: WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"

I sigh, and smile wanly. I'm used to this. I've been alternatively tired and thrilled throughout my life when I've been asked this utterly ambiguous question, "Where are you from?" I never know how to respond without a whole series of explanations. Am I from Toronto, where I was born and raised? Am I from Vancouver, where I currently live? Or is there another question being asked here?

I know that people want to figure out why I look the way I do. It comes with the territory of being a person of "mixed race" descent. My mother's Iranian and my father is Indian. And this identity throws people when they first see me. Because it's not easy to "place" my ethnicity.

This notion of place intrigues me. What is the relationship between place and identity? Why do people always ask me where I'm from? For me, it's all about the spaces I can be located. These spaces are always multiple and multifaceted. I believe that a politics of identity is truly a politics of location. It's no wonder that I was drawn to study issues of identity within the discipline of geography. I am convinced that who you are has a lot to do with where you are. For example, when I am in Italy, it is assumed I am Italian, because of my dark hair and olive complexion. I don't see myself as the troubled, anxious and confused biracial as the stereotypes would have us believe: rather, my multiracial status has allowed me a freedom from stifling racial categorization in many ways, providing me with an access point into many different multiracial communities.

It seems I'm not alone here. Many of the women I interviewed for a study on "mixed race" identity in Canada felt similarly. They explained that their identities as multiracial women always change, depending on where they are. In some spaces, they might be seen as black, in others they might be seen as white. But the only stable reading of their identity is that these readings are always changing, and very hard to predict. The ways we are raced, gendered and classed alter daily, as Marical, a twenty-six year old graduate student explained to me. Marical's mother was Japanese and her father European. She explains how others rely on particular physical markers in order to classify her racially:

> How I'm perceived really depends on everything. It's funny because I think that race is very obvious, sometimes. For me, it depends on the time of year, where I am, how long my hair is, whether I'm wearing makeup, whether I'm not, what kind of clothes I'm wearing – people identify me as all sorts of different things.

It is a wide array of circumstances, among which skin tone is only one, which creates the potential for racial identity for some "mixed race" women. Marical explains how the intricacies of cosmetics, hair, clothes, time and space play a role in the ways in which she is racialized, thereby problematizing the polarities normally associated with racialized identities by accentuating the multiplicity and mobility of social positionings.

Davy, a health worker in her forties, and of black, white and First Nations ancestry, made clear her concern with the ways the term can create unwarranted generalizations about the individuals who adopt it. Davy suggested to me the importance of not homogenizing a 'mixed race' experience:

> There's a common misunderstanding that anyone who calls themselves mixed race has had very similar life experiences. And it's not like that. We have some common threads, but you know, it changes, dependent on place. We can all look exactly the same, but our experiences are different depending on where we were located, geographically.

Davy is emphasizing that geography and material realities shape what 'mixed race' means. Social conditions in the daily landscape are more complex than the term can encapsulate. The very experience of living in different places plays a role in how an individual experiences her ethnicities. Depending upon place, she insists that the experience of 'mixed race' identity alters fundamentally.

It's important to remember that identity is always changing, and dependent upon a myriad of factors, including sexual orientation, age, class, amongst other countless dynamics. I often think about my identity as a series of transparencies, overlapping layers, one on top of the other. No-one part makes up the whole, but together the transparencies make up who I am. Our research needs to interrogate how questions of identity are always made up of various layers – that shift and change in relation to place. These aren't easy processes to map, but it's my hope that our legends will become more complex and multidimensional as we attempt to create new geographies of identity in Canada.

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