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Stories From the Field www.onenationindivisible.org April 2013

Lessons from the Former Great White North

Living, Loving and Immigrating in the New Toronto

Story and Photographs by Lygia Navarro

Moving to Canada in 2011 was my first time as an immigrant, but not my husband's. The year after our wedding in Cuba, we landed in Miami with a package from the American diplomats in Havana: a chest X-ray proving my husband wasn't bringing tuberculosis into the country; a medical form declaring him free of "apparent defect, disease, or disability;" a Cuban government guarantee that he had no criminal background; quadruplicate copies of Immigration and Naturalization Service forms with minute details of our families and where we'd lived and worked; a bizarre State Department printout with names and birthdates of other immigrants issued visas in the same batch; and a collection of birth certificates, our marriage certificate and awkward passport photos.

At the immigration booth, after indolently thumbing through the pile of papers, the agent began interrogating my husband: *"¿Dónde la conociste?* Where did you meet her?" As if we hadn't just spent months on visa interviews and filing reams of immigration paperwork. This dragged on, until the agent eventually shunted us to a holding room to wait for him to finish the paperwork. It wasn't until sitting in that drab anteroom to the American dream, that someone—the Latino airline baggage worker tasked with tracking my husband's luggage—finally said, "Welcome to the United States."

In reality, my husband was lucky. Certain American immigration hurdles are simplified and fast-tracked for Cubans. Meanwhile, people from the rest of the world wait, often for years, for visas to the United

States—even if their wives or children or parents are already there. In contrast, our emigration to Canada nearly a decade later felt exceptionally painless. And fast. Over just three months, my husband was offered a job in Toronto, his employer dealt with the paperwork, and we crossed the bridge from Detroit into Ontario. There, friendly Canadian officials admitted us as immigrants and issued our work permits in a fraction of the time it took to wait for his American visa in that Miami airport holding room years ago.

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I am continually surprised and impressed by Canada's understanding that immigration is necessary to the country's survival, and by how this translates into day-to-day interactions between native- and foreign-born Canadians. In Toronto, where more than half of the city's residents are foreign-born, billboards for government programs and bank ads tout services for "newcomers"—the common term for immigrants here, rather than "aliens." Traveling back and forth between Canada and the United States, each time I observe anew the stark difference between how the two countries treat, and think about, outsiders. At U.S. border crossings, even as an American citizen I am always grilled more about why I am coming home than when I cross into Canada, where I'm not yet even a permanent resident. All of which begs the question: what else can Americans learn from our neighbors about accepting immigrants?

Spend time in Toronto, and it is obvious that Canada is a nation built by immigration. Take a subway or streetcar and, above the thick parkas and closely-wrapped scarves, the faces around you include a wide range of skin tones—any likely to be topped by a Toronto Maple Leafs cap. For lunch, stop for Nicaraguan nacatamales, chouriço in Little Portugal, Vietnamese pho, or bison as cooked on native First Nation reserves. Wherever you go, you will hear any of the city's more than 140 languages and dialects—as well as the lilting accented English of immigrants who have dedicated themselves to becoming part of their new country. Turn on the television, and you'll see the CBC evening news hosted by two first-generation immigrants born in Jamaica and Sri Lanka.

At ice hockey games, on soccer fields, in malls and restaurants and bars, Toronto exudes internationalism—its residents working and living and playing together. Now, rather than being the only immigrant (and person of color) in his workplace, my husband has colleagues born in Korea, Germany, China, and India. My hairdresser is the son of Jamaican immigrants, my favorite antiques dealer is from Malaysia, and my doctor is of Indian descent. More of my friends are first- and second-generation immigrants—from Italy, Mexico, Taiwan, the Philippines, England, France and Turkey—than Canadians tracing their ancestry in the country back generations.

To early residents of the 219-year-old city, whose name comes from the Mohawk term tkaranto for "where there are trees standing in the water," Toronto of 2013 would be unrecognizable. The frigid city on the edge of Lake Ontario was first home to a succession of First Nation bands, then British Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution, with a steady influx along the way of Brits, Irish and other Europeans. For nearly 200 years, Anglo-Canadians were the Toronto majority, with smaller populations of aboriginal and French Canadians. Although immigration from Europe has been a constant, in the 1880s official discrimination against Chinese (and then all non-white) immigrants began. By 1903 Chinese head taxes — these were fixed fees charged to each Chinese person entering the country — reached the equivalent of $13,000 today, and between 1923 and 1947, Chinese were barred by an Exclusion Act. The Canadian Immigration Act of

1910 prohibited "immigrants belonging to any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada"—or, in other words, people from warm countries. Nine years later, the act was amended to also prohibit immigrants "deemed undesirable owing to their peculiar customs, habits, modes of life."

It is only over the past four decades that Canada has truly become a nation of diverse newcomers. From the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, a succession of prime ministers—John Diefenbaker, Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau—overhauled the country's immigration framework, while considering the role of immigration in Canada's future. In contrast to inflamed U.S. partisanship around immigration, Canada's revamp began under the conservative Diefenbaker (himself the son of an immigrant, which took Americans 51 years to match). Among others in his Tory Party, Diefenbaker valued immigration as an economic stimulus and an integral factor in nation-building, appointing a Minister of Citizenship and Immigration who abolished racial discrimination policies.

In 1967, amidst high unemployment among unskilled Canadian workers, the centrist Liberal Pearson inaugurated the points system. Potential immigrants were no longer evaluated by country of origin or race, but awarded points based on education level, age, French or English fluency, family connections in Canada and job opportunities. In addition, the 1976 Immigration Act established the nation's commitment to family reunification, admitting refugees and ensuring humanitarian shelter. The change was dramatic: in 1966, 87 percent of immigrants came from Europe, but by 2006, only 16 percent of recent immigrants came from Europe. Immigration rates exploded, with almost three times as many newcomers entering Canada in 2010 as in 1966—the majority now coming from Asia and the Middle East. Today, 20 percent of Canadians were born abroad, and the country has admitted an average of a quarter-million new permanent residents annually for the last decade, giving Canada the highest rate of immigrants per capita in the world.

Framing public debate principally around economic immigration, says Canadian Conference Board analyst Michelle Parkouda, "has been one thing that has helped to increase public opinion. They are bringing in that growth, bringing in that innovation that makes Canada more vital and does increase productivity. People see it more as a plus." Statistics bear that out: in 2010, 67 percent of Canadians supported either the immigration status quo or increasing immigration—a rate higher than before the recession. The same year, 82 percent of Canadians said they believed immigration was a positive for the country. Amazingly, from an American standpoint, the unemployed and residents of poorer regions are most likely to support immigration, according to a report by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, "in the hope

that [immigrants] will stimulate the economy and create employment."

Canada's focus on openness to newcomers still shows in its 2001 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, with objectives such as "to permit Canada to pursue the maximum social, cultural and economic benefits of immigration;" "to enrich and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of Canadian society, while respecting the federal, bilingual and multicultural character of Canada;" "to support the development of a strong and prosperous Canadian economy, in which the benefits of immigration are shared across all regions of Canada;" and—my favorite—"to promote the successful integration of permanent residents into Canada, while recognizing that integration involves mutual obligations for new immigrants and Canadian society."

The second largest nation in the world by area, Canada is a country of wilderness more than cities, with vast prairies, pristine lakes, rugged mountains, and enormous stretches of the Arctic. So, in addition to the economic reality and open attitude spurring Canadians' support of immigration is the understanding that, without newcomers to help populate the country, Canada would simply shrivel in size. Already, immigrants account for two-thirds of the nation's population growth. Recently, the government agency Statistics Canada warned, "Without a sustained level of immigration or a substantial increase in fertility, Canada's population growth could, within 20 years, be close to zero." In other words, without steady influxes of new immigrants, and with the upcoming mortality flood of aging baby boomers, the country and its prized social programs—including the nationalized health system—would go bankrupt.

One of the most surprising experiences I've had in Toronto occurred at the airport named after Prime Minister Pearson, who'd shepherded the changes to immigration law that changed the face of the country. After arriving early for a flight to the States, I sat down for breakfast in a food court just past the security gates. Among the other passengers sipping coffee were a middle-aged white Canadian couple and, at the next table, a Chilean undergrad sitting beside her sleeping brother. In the United States, the question "Where are you from?" is often more of an attempt to categorize outsiders than it is a warm conversation opener, no matter the questioner's political leaning, and, as such, can put immigrants on guard. Growing up in the liberal bastion of Berkeley, California, was my lesson in politically correct segregation and the subtle racism of middle-class lefties proud of their interactions with immigrants: their gardeners, waitresses, cleaning ladies, and dry cleaners. Canadians, in contrast, are by and large truly curious about the world, and just plain friendly.

That morning at the airport, I eavesdropped as the middle-aged couple asked the girl where she was from. Their interaction didn't end there, though, but sparked a long conversation, with both sides showing genuine curiosity. Over more than an hour, they talked and talked—about South American economics, about the girl's university studies, about international travel. They sounded like old friends, or new friends bonding at a youth hostel.

Canada's openness to multiculturalism is far from an accident. With a national history of brutal treatment of Canadian native peoples and other non-white groups, in 1971 Prime Minister Trudeau signed into law the Multiculturalism Policy, making Canada the first country to codify a national multicultural framework. The Policy enacted protections for aboriginal peoples, encouraged diversity, and supported the nation's official French-English bilingualism.

"When you ask average Canadians, 'What do you think Canada is all about?' you hear about multiculturalism," says Harald Bauder, chair of the Ryerson University Centre for Immigration and Settlement. "It's very much integrated in the public consciousness. Because Canadian national identity relies a lot on defining itself relative, and in opposite terms, to an American identity. Being a multicultural society is one of the important hooks of Canadian identity, which enables Canadians to say, 'Look we're different from the Americans.'"

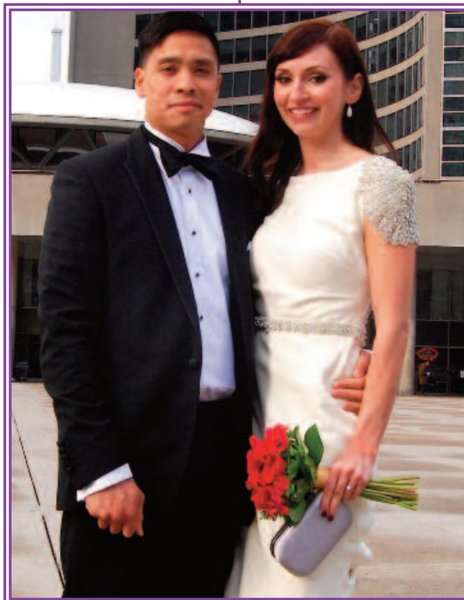
"We know now people who came from India, what kind of people they are. Or people from China. And they're nothing to be afraid of. That doesn't mean that all stereotypes have been removed, but there's a certain kind of education that's going on. People are becoming closer with each other."
— Harald Bauder

Multiculturalism means official support for immigrants integrating into Canadian society without having to assimilate and shed their culture. With two of the main tenets of the Multiculturalism Policy being "to assist immigrants in acquiring at least one of the official languages" and "to assist cultural groups to overcome barriers to their full participation in Canadian society," government-funded programs offer free language courses, as well as help newcomers open bank accounts, learn to navigate Canadian institutions, figure out where to go grocery shopping, get accustomed to their children's schools, and start the process to have foreign professional credentials recognized. This support ends up benefitting immigrants and Canadian society alike: immigrants become naturalized citizens at a higher rate than immigrants to the United States, learn English quickly and to high levels of fluency, and are also largely able to maintain their native languages.

Yet despite such programs, according to Carl James, director of the York University Centre for Education and Community, the government-invented policy of multiculturalism is still a myth. "Some of the studies that we've done among blacks in Canada, they say they prefer the overt racists in the States as opposed to the polite Canadian racism." In fact, prejudice still very much exists in multicultural Canada, James says, although discrimination has adapted to become more subtle, such as employers weeding out applicants who have names appearing to be ethnic, or who are recent immigrants. "The idea of multiculturalism, for me, is a false premise. I always find it paradoxical: we will say 'There's little Italy, there's Chinatown, there's the Greek area, there's little India, there's the Korean area.' What does that say? That we're a nicely integrated community? Or are we pockets of different groups living in multicultural Canada? And if we're pockets, does that mean that everybody's eating and living and laughing with each other, or do people go to their respective areas?"

On the other hand, Bauder believes that the myth of multiculturalism is slowly but surely becoming a reality. "We know now people who came from India, what kind of people they are. Or people from China. And they're nothing to be afraid of. That doesn't mean that all stereotypes have been removed, but there's a certain kind of education that's going on. People are becoming closer with each other." Immigrants, Bauder says, "actually have a sense of home, identify with Canada. They feel at home, and then also they become Canadians. The U.S. model is more or less, 'you immigrate and you're on your own.'"

For my husband, the adaptation process has been infinitely easier in Canada than in the United States. For two years before decamping to Toronto, we lived in Cincinnati, Ohio—where intolerance seemed to us to be pervasive. Once, a local pizzeria refused to deliver us dinner because they claimed they could not understand my husband's accent. Even though he was a university professor. And even after they'd made him repeat our address half a dozen times. Experiences like this multiplied. When he went to get an Ohio driver license, despite bringing his American passport, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles staff forced him to go home to get his certificate of naturalization to prove he was an American citizen. One of his colleagues, a Latina professor, was pulled over in an area of the city known for questionable police stops of people of color, and asked for her social security number.



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But the most bizarre detail of living in an insular small Midwestern city was the reactions we got for being an interracial couple. (My husband—whose racially-ambiguous appearance often causes him to be mistaken for Indian, Middle Eastern, or Italian—is the son of one parent descended from Spanish stock and another whose great-grandmother was a slave in Cuba. I am white.) Our first week after moving sight unseen to what we discovered was an all-white, upper-middle-class Cincinnati neighborhood, we stopped at a garage sale on our block. Although perturbed by the collection of pickaninny and black Sambo knick-knacks on display, we bought a cheap set of dining chairs to replace our sole folding pair. Despite our protests, the family holding the sale sent their housekeeper, a tiny middle-aged African-American woman, to help us carry the chairs home. Midway down the block, after we'd thanked her numerous times in embarrassment, she looked up at us. "You know," she said simply, "y'all make a really nice couple."

This happened again and again: older African-American women stopping us at the drugstore and on the street to smile and tell us what a good pair we made. In a city with a vast social and economic divide between black and white, and with few immigrants, interracial families like ours seemed to stand out. And even while living in diverse metropolises like the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City, we'd seen plenty of curious glances and less-than-friendly glares. In contrast, Toronto interracial families are seen as so common as to be unremarkable, which is continually refreshing.

As Canada has quite quickly become more diverse, and Canadians of all backgrounds have more opportunities to work, study and socialize together, the rate of "mixed unions" (the government's term for interracial relationships) has exploded. In particular, according to Statistics Canada analyst Anne Milan, a second- or third-generation Canadian is more likely to be in an interracial relationship than in a relationship with someone from their own ethnic background. This is also true of younger, highly-educated citizens. "It could be that younger people are more receptive to behaviors and attitudes that extend the boundaries of social norms," Milan says. In other words, they're more likely to let themselves fall in love with the right person—irrespective of ethnicity—and their families are becoming more supportive as well.

In Toronto, it can sometimes seem like most couples are interracial. But the statistics suggest that Ohio's

share of interracial couples (23.9 percent in 2010) is far higher than the estimates for Toronto (7.1 percent in 2006).. Clearly it isn't just numbers that count, but attitudes. This dichotomy between the two countries hit home when, shortly after arriving in Canada, I read a *New York Times* story about a multiracial New Jersey family grappling daily with the disruptive, sometimes malicious curiosity of strangers about their family. New Jersey's rate of interracial couples is nearly five times that of Toronto, yet, the reporter wrote, "People seem to notice nothing but race. Strangers gawk. Make rude and racist comments. Tell offensive jokes. Ask impolite questions."

In Toronto later that month, I stood in line to check out a library book while a young couple (a Brazilian woman and South Asian man) chatted with the librarian about a book on Brazil, their baby peeking out of a stroller. Around the library, people from numerous ethnicities read newspapers, picked out DVDs, browsed the Internet, and flipped through picture books with their children. As I waited, thinking about how liberating it was to finally live in a place with such openness to diversity, I realized how easy it was to slip into that lull of normalcy—something that family in New Jersey surely yearns for.

When I have my own multiracial children, I'll be glad to raise them in Toronto rather than in the United States. My fellow American expat friend Lindsay Brown grew up biracial (Japanese and white) in California, and spent her first three decades being asked questions like "What are you?" and having people "always trying to put you in a box." Coming to Canada was like a revelation, she says. "Walking around Toronto, there are so many different types of people anywhere you go, versus in many U.S. cities, it's nothing but white people. It's just so separate."

In Canada, Lindsay still gets questions about her background, but, she says, "people are more interested in the culture, or how your mom and dad got together. I don't feel that type of hyper-conspicuous here. Canada is just far more inclusive; people are more interested in cultures and mixes. It's something that people can celebrate." When her two-year-old was born, Lindsay secretly feared her daughter would look like her: "In the States, I think that would be a liability." Yet when her daughter resembled her Japanese great-grandmother more than any other relative, Lindsay realized her daughter wouldn't have to suffer the same prejudices Lindsay had in the United States. "She wouldn't have to go through some of the things that I had to go through: being not quite white enough and not quite Asian enough." Being raised by her Japanese grandparents, Lindsay says, "Culturally I was still full Japanese. I want her to be able to celebrate that if she wants to. She's Japanese, American, Canadian, German, Irish and Scottish. I want her to not feel like she has to put that aside."

What makes Canadians Canadians? While I find the people around me to be quite pleasant and easy-going, they are also united by their sense of not being American (including a latent inferiority complex over thinking they're less successful and sexy). In fact, Canadians' discourse on immigration seems to have been shaped, in part, in conscious opposition to the United States' often virulent, polarized debates, says Michelle Parkouda of the Canadian Conference Board. "It's so politicized and so volatile. And you forget that you're talking about people. A lot of us just shake our heads that it's become something so dramatic (in the United States)," she says. "It's just

not that dramatic here." For most Canadians, immigration has become an accepted, even positive, part of national life.

Yet, despite the clear support and need for immigration, Canada is not perfect. The country still struggles with how best to ensure immigrants will be able to work and live comfortably once they arrive. Some provinces actually want more immigration than they already have, but the transition from a federally-determined system to one that answers to the needs of provinces has been slow. While temporary foreign worker programs are drawing Mexican farm workers away from the United States, some migrants complain of harsh, sometimes slave-like conditions. Even for highly-trained workers, the procedures for getting foreign professional credentials recognized is so difficult that many immigrants who are admitted because of their medical or engineering training elsewhere come to Canada only to end up unemployed, working low-wage service jobs, or on public assistance. Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has outlined plans to make immigration an even more clear-cut economic issue, increasing economic migration, especially for entrepreneurial and high-tech migrants, and bringing in more temporary workers for low-skill jobs.

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Even so, the lessons the United States can take from Canada on immigration are many, and straightforward: Recognize that immigration adds to national growth and culture. Foster a society in which all residents are valued (from both economic and social standpoints), in word and in deed. Appreciating and exploiting globalism at home leads to increased trade with immigrants' home countries, and ways for high-achieving immigrants to bring unique skill sets to their new country. Develop communities in which newcomers have access to language skills and social acceptance to communicate with all of their neighbors, and both newcomers and native-born citizens will learn about the multiple worlds they come from, and the new world they are helping create. Make newcomers feel welcome, and they will want to become part of their new country more quickly and more fully. Encourage people to fall in love with whomever they wish. After all, you never know what you might gain from your new neighbors, coworkers, or family members.

Lygia Navarro is a contributing editor at the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and a freelance magazine and radio journalist focused on foreign coverage, particularly of Latin America and Latino issues in the United States. She has reported from Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Germany and Mexico for a variety of outlets including *FRONTLINE/World*, *Marketplace*, NPR's *Latino USA*, PRI's *The World*, the *Utne Reader*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the Associated Press, and the *American Prospect*, among others.

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Thanks to Kelly Garvin at the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice for her editorial assistance on this story.