

Diversity as Understanding (In)equality and Social Justice: Celebrate Our Strength Not Only Our Culture

It is said *to be Salvadoran is to be half dead*. When poet and revolutionary Roque Dalton wrote these words he was referring to the 1932 Massacre in which 30 000 Indigenous peoples, in a short few days, were killed by the government. Since Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of the "New World" we have never been free. He called us "Indios", thinking we were Indians. The name El Salvador is a tribute to Jesus Christ and the Catholic church; until 2001 our currency was the "Colón" – Columbus' last name in Spanish.

Being half-dead resonates now more than ever. We were massacred by the Spanish, then by our own people, the Salvadoran elite. The Communists promised us justice through revolution, the Americans prosperity through open markets. When I hear the words inclusion and diversity, I don't think of globalization or multicultural policies. I turn to my Dad and Mum for inspiration. How they have bled and cried so that I can feel *included* in a country where most people don't look like us. I know that many people reading this will have experienced similar hardships –the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, refugees, immigrants, visible minorities etc. This is as much their story as it is mine.

He wakes up at 6 am every-day, hops in the shower, gets dressed and proceeds downstairs. His steps have a rhythmic pattern to them as he slowly and carefully descends the staircase, almost like the beating of a heart –*dum-dum, dum-dum*. Much

like the heart keeps one alive, my Dad is the life force that has helped my family survive. He has the loudest footsteps I've ever heard, despite only being 5'3". I like to pretend that the titanium in his legs makes him an X-Men like the invincible Wolverine. Actually, my Dad has much in common with one of my favourite comic book super-humans. Both are small yet mighty like Hercules, were captured, detained and tortured by the military. Wolverine's body, like my father's, is also reinforced by metal. My Dad is the Salvadoran Wolverine. I smile as I write that because it's funny to imagine Wolverine with my dad's voice, Wolverine's infamous "Hey Bub" would sound something more like "Eh Boob".

You see, my father survived the Salvadoran Civil War but he was neither US-backed military nor a Communist guerilla fighter. He was told he needed to choose a side to survive, he chose not to fight. At the age of twenty he already had a family. Yet, fate would soon unfold itself like it always does. My mother says "everything happens for a reason", I'm slowly figuring out what that means. My Dad found himself lying in his own blood just meters away from his house. A Salvadoran soldier's AK-47 had mistakenly shot my father's car penetrating through the door and both his legs. The bullets shattered his bones. Long ambulance rides and two hospitals later, a doctor finally operated on him and saved his life. The doctor couldn't understand how my Dad hadn't died on the way to the first hospital, one of the bullets had hit an artery. My Dad says the part where you see the light at the end of the tunnel and your life flashes before your eyes is true. I don't understand how my Dad survived the next part.

After months of rehabilitation and learning to walk again, Salvadoran *death-squads* raided his home and forcibly took him away from my mother and sister. My father is the most honest man I know, he knew nothing of the war; rather than make up a lie—the death-squad promised to let him go if he could provide any sort of information—he took the beatings, the kicks to his already damaged legs, and the threats of acid being poured over him. He was blind-folded for the most part; on one occasion, the interrogators finally threw the bucket on his back.

My Dad said once the liquid touched his back he rolled around screaming only to realize it was just freezing cold water. Six months later and no information obtained, they realized again, they had the wrong man. Today, he laughs at the acid scenario, it's that kind of laugh that when you hear it, you just want to laugh along, it's a genuine laugh —*ahee-hee-hee*. But when he laughs I can't help but get choked up inside because despite his country breaking his body, the dangers of war forcing him to seek refuge in the United States where he would be judged simply for the colour of his skin, no one could ever take away his laughter.

I've been academically trained to critically analyze Western methodologies, but to a certain extent, Western medicine and science has brought me closer to my Dad. My dad doesn't have a BA, he's a handsome sweet-talker that convinced the National Bank of El Salvador to give him a job. He could only afford his first surgery because he was covered by the bank's health insurance. After all the false Communist accusations, he was let go. Too poor in El Salvador, too foreign in the United States, it wasn't until we

came to Canada that my Dad could finally get the treatment he needed. Once in University I also learned that torture, abuse and seeing death can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet, these diagnoses are unheard of in El Salvador, seeing death is simply everyday life and continues to be. El Salvador is currently one of the most dangerous countries to live in, street gangs torment the people to the extent that the government has had to sign peace accords with them. Using public transportation is one of the most dangerous spaces you can be in even during the day. This is unheard of in Canada. I fear not if I will be killed when I hop on the bus, but whether I'll be on time to my 8:30 am class –which I never make anyway.

My father is my superhero, yet when I think *diversity* I don't only think of my family's Latin-American heritage, our different language, food, phenotypic differences or our unique story of how we eventually made it to Canada. As an academic, I have spent more than seven years investigating this confusing term in the classroom: what do we mean by “diversity” and what do we actually accomplish when we make it our goal? But as a person, I embodied diversity the second I was born.

Most people will think of diversity in ways in which the “Other” is accepted into the dominant culture. Being in Canada, I grew up in a very white city, so to me, diversity meant looking and sounding different from most. In fact, to me, to understand diversity, you need to understand the ways in which one is often excluded. So when I think diversity, I think about the many families in Canada that have similar stories like my family's –sacrifice, sadness and exclusion. Although all our stories would be unique and

“different” we share that commonality, that sameness, that the “Other” often feels. This feeling is twofold, it is one of sorrow *and* strength. But these feelings are not only unique to immigrants living in Canada, anyone that doesn’t fit the status quo of cis-gendered, able-bodied, male, white and middle-class will feel some sort of “not belonging” at one point in their life in North America.

When I hear the word *equity*, well, this isn’t always a word of happiness. True, equity is different from equality in that *justice* recognizes that differences exist between people; justice must therefore be unique for every individual. But life isn’t composed of ideal definitions. These differences mean that, statistically speaking I will be racially profiled by society as a potential delinquent. I can’t hide my foreignness even if I no longer speak with an accent or am on track to hold more degrees than the teachers and principals that told me I’d never go to University. It’s not just my long Latin name that gives it away, it’s my dark skin, which means I’m more *Indio* (Indian) than I am Spanish. In fact, I don’t even know any European family members.

Growing up in Oshawa, Ontario, I’m pretty sure my brothers and I were the only visibly minorities in our classes. This remains the case even in University. I’m currently in the first year of my PhD, I took a class called “Diversity and Pluralism” yet I was the only *visible* minority. This is not to take away from the brilliant conversations within the academy, but we should be conscious that even the University, the hub of which should harness “diversity”, often privileges certain identities.

As a University educated visible minority I will take home 20% less than my non-visible minority colleagues. These statistics don't even begin to scrape at the obvious gender pay gap in Canada. But what of women that never went to school and are also visible minorities? My mother is one of those. Even if she was not dark-skinned, I think her accent that's reminiscent of Sofia Vergara's is an obvious giveaway that she isn't from this side of the tracks.

When I think *inclusion*, I am reminded of all that my family has endured so that I can write this story on my laptop and be the first in my family to participate in what we call "higher learning" or "University". My parents always wanted me to feel *included*, even if that meant taking on three jobs at a time. Both my mother and father have worked at Burger King, as house-cleaners, as laborers just so their children could escape the poverty we would have faced had we stayed in El Salvador. Growing up I used to hear of how my friends' parents would take them on vacations, attend all their sports games, take them to their music recitals. My dad has missed more graduations than he's attended because of work.

The heart-beat like footsteps I hear in the morning are caused by my Dad's legs being a little uneven in length. Where some may say he walks funny, I simply see strength. If we neglect to hear, listen and understand these painful stories when we talk about diversity, we simply celebrate "cultural differences" like the fact that Canadians eat "poutine" and I eat "tortillas".

If our system is built on diversity, inclusivity, and equity, why is 40% of our LGBTQ+ youth population homeless? Why are women paid less than men for the same job? Why are visible minorities targeted by white officers or in some situations neglected like the lack of investigation into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women cases? Our new government says it'll do something about it, that it'll finally work with the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, but like El Salvador, governments often don't keep their promises.

A simple *Webster's* definition of "diversity" won't tell you about these stories. Rather than a righteous fight for social justice, "diversity" has come to embody the celebration of "differences" despite us acknowledging ableism, racism, sexism, and yes, colonialism. So what are we really celebrating? Are we simply recognizing the differences that can be accommodated to fit the status-quo? To understand diversity and its complexities we must listen and decontextualize first and recognize that diversity isn't always ideal, polite or pretty. We must eliminate the *diverse* systemic conditions that replicate marginalization.

Nevertheless, appealing to diversity isn't always bad, it can unite people across differences if we recognize how similar we actually are than different. I start from sorrow to appreciate inclusion. It also affirms a basis of commonality and a shared, self-reinforcing commitment that we should have for each other. Today my parents smile as they see their grand-children playing outside free from war or crime. Mum was right,

everything happens for a reason. We are no longer half-dead, we found life. So celebrate not *only* our cultures, but the strength within our hearts to continue fighting for a better tomorrow.