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**UNBELONGING BETWEEN TURTLE ISLAND AND BANGLADESH:
A SECOND-GENERATIONAL RAMBLING**

It is integral to remember Indigenous history and sovereignty before discussing my contribution to commemorating 150 years of a country's sovereignty at the expense of so many people's sovereignty. Thank you to the people and land in whose space I live, experience, and affect. Lest we forget.

Bidushy, my name, resembles the *Bangla* noun *bideshi*, meaning “foreigner.” It was always a little joke between born Bangladeshis:

“Amar nam Bidushy.”

“Ki? Bideshi?”

As I got older, it became less of a funny mispronunciation and more of a revealing title that sits next to my namesake. Being, feeling, and getting addressed as a *bideshi* eventually became as familiar to me as is the name Bidushy, with the term reshaping itself in both meaning and intelligibility. I am a foreigner. I am always a foreigner, whether I am in Dhaka, Bangladesh or in Vancouver, Canada. I can never be fully part of either culture because I’m too Canadian to speak like a Bangladeshi and too racialized and Bengali to be Canadian. Yeah, my passport says I’m Canadian, but you don’t picture me when you hear the word “Canadian,” unless someone mentions the cultural mosaic. It’s a great script for foreign policy, Canada, but maybe y’all should try implementing its value at home first.

Indeed, Canada has no shortage of discrimination against the foreignness of one’s skin, sexuality, ability, age, and so forth, but when you’re right next to the United States, that kind of dialogue gets shoved under the rug. The thing is, if you don’t look like the British or French colonists that came here centuries ago to lie, steal, exploit, and murder Indigenous communities – sorry, I mean bravely venture into unknown, barren land – then you’re never going to lose your foreignness. I was born in the capital city of Canada and have lived here all my life, but I’m never confused about my belonging – not anymore, anyway. It takes time for us to understand where we belong. Are we coconuts? Are we white-washed, dippers, or a cookies and cream mix? I used to judge classmates who identified as Canadians instead of representing the countries their families came from. In retrospect, I was wrong. Don’t feel ashamed of acknowledging the culture you’re really from. You didn’t grow up in Bangladesh or Nigeria; you grew up here, and you’re not white-washed or lacking culture. Canadian culture is just as valid as a racialized culture.

Race being a fluid, discursive construct doesn’t give you belonging; rather, it’s the culture you live in. Maybe you’re like me, and you don’t feel like you could firmly plant your feet anywhere. Maybe you’re mixed, unlike me, and have that kind of additional complexity to deal with alongside these other issues. To save you time, I’ll tell you that you don’t need

to belong to either dichotomy/polychotomy. All of you – all of us – we’re not made up of two incomplete halves, because all the experiences we’ve had make us a whole person. Unbelonging becomes our own belonging.

Sure, it seems contradictory to feel at home as an outsider, and it’s just as conflicting when I name this mesh as my unbelonging. It’s not that complicated when you get that not belonging is what makes you belong. Where you belong becomes the space in-between where two cultures drip and flood in and out – sometimes in and out of each other, and sometimes not; either way, you’re there to receive the waves. You float in and out of where you are and where you could have been. For me, where I am is Vancouver, Canada and where I could have been is Dhaka, Bangladesh. Most of my family is from South Asia, and I’ve seen our struggles as Bengali Canadians in navigating and negotiating our belonging between dual nationalisms such as that of Canada and Bangladesh or India and so forth. For second-generationers, specifically the ones born in the “New World,” it’s tough in a shared, bittersweet kind of way. You’re accomplished with a supposedly bright future just for being a citizen here. Not to say there isn’t wealth to enjoy in our home countries or wealth outside of the value of money, but usually we have seen the daily hardships colonized countries endure. It’s an age-old colonialist discourse that Western countries are more successful and smarter than non-Western countries. However, the effects of centuries’ worth of colonialism exist, and many of our family members and countries witness this. We are no exception as colonialism pushes itself forward in the 21st century.

I don’t have the clearest definition of what home is, but I do reside, experience, and live on unceded Indigenous land. My family and I came to be trespassers in response to the devastating aftermath of colonialism in what is known as Bangladesh. Racialized immigrant relationships with and entitlement to this land are complex and often undermine this land’s history and contribute to the ongoing violence against the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. The first colonialist intrusion of British and French immigrants on this land is what made them the hegemonic or dominant group. Hegemonic groups establish a hierarchy of power and value wherein the groups themselves are valued at the expense of those outside of these groups. This is why I mention racialized immigrants; however, power never acts neatly.

Moreover, despite the complexity of our relationship with Indigenous peoples and their land, we must acknowledge our capacity to harm while we are being oppressed. If we’re fighting for anti-oppressive spaces, we have to uphold our end by resisting settler colonialism. Otherwise, we should really question our values because they are clearly colonial, selfish, and limiting. Upholding Indigenous voices before we proceed allows us the knowledge to disrupt a system that profits off of our subjugation. No one is truly free until the peoples of Turtle Island feel freedom. Being mindful of the violent history that brought us here always brings us closer to where we want to be, and in this paper I’m hoping I make that clear.

UNBELONGING

Although I am Canadian born, my Bengali or Bangladeshi heritage has always preceded me before my rather conditional Canadian nationality. On paper I’m Canadian, but due to my racialization I’m automatically cast aside by a nationalist gaze. My parents, too, always

reminded me that I'm Bangladeshi before anything else. So yeah, the racialization of my physical features determines the experiences I navigate through in the Canadian public sphere while my upbringing within my family determines my private Bengali sphere. These two worlds collide and stretch, configuring with one another, and a lot of us become the manifestation of that configuration.

There seems to be a cultural pedestal that diasporic migrants consistently fall short of as if by structural intention. There exists a circular state of foreignness – one is, for instance, too Bengali to be Canadian but too Canadian to be Bengali. Our loyalty to our multiple nationalities and/or ethnicities is often the site of contestation wherein we test our cultural integrity as best we can. Who we are becomes a question of where our loyalty lies. Are we over here or over there, and how well can we prove it? For me, the big problem isn't usually the lack of representation as a Canadian, because this is my culture that I grew up in. There's more tension with my Bengali essence being compromised according to my family, especially my mother. My footprints and bra straps are measured and calculated in relation to how admissible my behaviour is according to my parents' Bengali ways. Things have changed in Bangladesh – my parents admit it themselves – but you teach what you've been taught, and it intensifies under attack.

There's a lot to say on this subject, but my main point is that these two cultures I am part of are where I am situated. I am both Canadian and Bengali, and those experiences are not mutually exclusive even when our parents pit them against each other. I'm always both, even if I'm not wanted by both all the time, and even if I don't want both all the time. That doesn't mean I can't move to Barbados and have that become part of my culture as well, because I experience life through my positionality. Culture is not a rigid concept; rather, it is fluid. You live what you become, and you become what you've lived. South Asians ourselves have one of the richest collisions of historically diverse cultural transaction within our genealogies. Indeed, cultures are formed over thousands of years of two or more cultures coexisting in the same space.

What we are is a newly formed culture.

What we're not is the lesser of two cultures.

Basically, unbelonging is a pretty frustrating state to be in, but if we see ourselves as a culmination instead of a division, maybe this frustration can dissipate.

Bangla has always been an insecurity of mine ever since I was young. For some reason, it felt like it was my fault I didn't speak like a native Bangladeshi even though I grew up in another country learning other languages my entire life. There are still many mundane words I don't know. I learned what I heard, and what I heard were day-to-day conversations between family members. When I was growing up, my parents really struggled to make ends meet, and the language we'd use was short, simple, and efficient like most of our encounters. My *Bangla* actually improved when our financial lives improved. Understanding Bangladeshi dramas and the like became clearer with more exposure, too.

There's no right or wrong way to speak a language. Many Bengalis have an idea of what "*shudho*" *Bangla* is and we shame different dialects and structure. If you recognize two or more languages, that isn't not knowing a language. Maybe you're not as fluent as you're told (or feel) you should be, maybe you can't speak the language but can understand it or vice versa, or maybe you talk with a funny accent – yet you do know and recognize that language. Say you hear a neighbour play piano from their balcony all through your

adolescence; you can't play the piano, but it's more familiar to you than a guitar, isn't it? Don't let people shame you, and if they do, ensure that eventually it will roll off your shoulders.

Language for me as a Bengali is definitely unique, since our country fought and died for the freedom and right to speak *Bangla*. I've realized maybe that's why I'm so scrutinized for speaking broken *Bangla*. Baba is a pretty liberal-minded guy, and I don't entirely mean that as a compliment. He's not religious in the slightest, but he does maintain tradition when it comes to my clothing and sexuality as a girl. Moreover, he never thought I needed to learn *Bangla*; in fact, he'd be okay with me forgetting it altogether. It's strange, because, although my father isn't very cultural, he is very politically engaged. Yet although our country fought and died for our language – a war that my father remembers year 'round – he's never seemed to mind my lack of fluency. Ma and the women of the family, on the other hand, used to shout at my sister and me day in and day out, telling us to speak *Bangla* to each other. My uncles and grandfather never said much but I'm pretty sure that's just because my aunts and grandma were already on my ass about it. It's funny how guys profit off of that – being the chill, laidback ones – at least until the women take a break.

I wish I were fluent in Bangla like I am in English – but hey, helping me is better than complaining about it any day. Language represents that pedestal of belonging, where how you speak will impact how Bengali you appear to your community. Just like your clothing and manners, your language is how you communicate with others, and it's time we widened what we're really saying to each other. Making us feel like we belong in our culture is something I believe our communities are responsible for. No one wants to have fun somewhere they feel judged or underestimated, and a lot of us do feel that way. I have a page limit, so I'll leave it at this: we should remember that there's more to us than what other people criticize.

COLONIALISM

How often do we contemplate how a nation of people that lived from the west coast of Vancouver Island to the east coast of Nova Scotia isn't with us in the supermarkets or on television? Our modern day system of government is founded on the genocide and desecration of both nobility and humanity enacted against those who had initially welcomed migrants of Europe onto their land. Selfish greed exhibited by colonialists must be terminated because in order to profit as an imperialist you must take and maim. This begins with Indigenous peoples (using the word *peoples* to prevent generalizing distinct communities as one static Indigenous identity), as they are the primary receivers of colonial violence.

Being on Canadian soil entails settler colonialism, and all of us participate in it whether we have a hyphenated title or not. My family is South Asian-Canadian, and growing up I never learned about Indigenous history or the decolonized Canadian history we all should have learned. In 1971, Bangladeshis fought for our language, identity, and freedom, and yet here we are on someone else's land, neglecting the rightful inhabitants of Turtle Island.

Immigrant/Indigenous relations are underdeveloped in my experience. My knowledge of Indigenous peoples' ownership and positionalities before, during, and after

Confederation was very limited during my highly sanitized education. Colonialism was seldom mentioned, let alone the past and present violence foundational to Canadian history. I saw cartoons and television shows where derogatory stereotypes (I do not wish to re-implement these by specifying them) of Indigenous characters created two-dimensional caricatures. When we happened to see totem poles or other Indigenous art, my family appreciated the work and informed us how the First Nations people lived here before we did, but that's about it. There wasn't anything particularly malicious in this, but there was erasure, taking space for granted, and negligence. At cultural events, we never perform land acknowledgements, nor do most places outside of school campuses. Although we did have one high school teacher who taught First Nations 12, there was another who talked about Indigenous communities solely as powerless victims. Even in Grade 4, we learned about kayaks and the cedar tree but never that much about the people themselves, whose lifestyles and presence were portrayed as historic and ancient as opposed to modern and present.

Racialized immigrants also being settler-colonialists isn't always a comfortable realization, but being uncomfortable is never a just excuse for failing to unlearn harmful discourses/habits. We cannot decolonize without Indigenous sovereignty, and we cannot be anti-colonialist while we are anti-Indigenous. To sum up, if we really want sustainable change, it's either all of us or none of us.



Due to the furthering of the European construct of race, the term "Bangladeshi" is thought to pertain to common (see: stereotypical) Indo-features such as dark skin. As a light-skinned Bengali, I have been asked by both non-Bengali and Bengali people if I have mixed heritage; people usually assume I have a European parent. Since people move beyond our planned perceptions of them, my skin and features perhaps stretch beyond the cultural imagination of what an entire population of 165 million people should look like. In addition, it's pretty annoying when I can sense the underlying question: *how can you be this attractive given your ancestry?*

Despite this mild discomfort, I have never had to think twice about my complexion, unlike many darker Bengalis who bleach their skin or eagerly avoid the sun. It seems like it's always tougher for younger girls with dark skin who grow up with internalized self-hatred and shame. I'm not sure why this applies particularly to girls, since both boys and girls are planned to be married, but I've noticed that when a girl is "*shemla*" or "*kahlo*," people tend to make a bigger note of it. I've seen my cousins and friends pay greater attention to their pigment in a day than I ever did in a year if at all. I always received compliments on my beauty and pureness without ever critically considering that perhaps this wouldn't be the case if I were several shades darker. My light skin is definitely valued above rationalization in both cultures, and this is due to (surprise!) colonialism.

It's just a preference! yeeEEAAAH: A racist one.

I'm not exempt from prejudice; in fact, I realized some time in Grade 10 that I wouldn't date someone darker skinned because I don't find that attractive. Hoping to relieve myself of this racist internalized prejudice, I followed blogs that had mostly black models; whenever a black model would pop up on screen, I would just stare at the model for a bit before moving on. Eventually, believe it or not, I too was surprised how you really can alter a seemingly stubborn perception sometimes. I remember being about to scroll

past one picture after a regular stop-and-scroll when I had a passing thought: “he’s cute.” And there it was.

Maybe it’s childish, and I really hope it’s not wrong, but I just wanted to share that decolonizing your values is possible. I didn’t just normalize non-European features, I started to admire them. In the process, I noticed that I started to love my own features more, too. Changing our own perception is what enables long-term change. I’m not saying people can easily change or that all people can unlearn in their lifetime, but I am saying that you should try and do whatever you can to move in that direction. Colonialism truly hurts us all, but we can’t always identify it.



You already know I’m going to talk about it. I have to find a Bengali Muslim man, several years older and taller than I am, able-bodied, and with a stable income. Ma’s always been insistent, probably because the responsibility of raising a proper young woman falls on the mother. Baba’s considerably more laid back, but does prefer I marry a Bengali so he can speak to them. If Ma had to choose, she’d probably choose Muslim. So yeah, that’s my sexuality:

Birth – School – Marriage – Kids

I try to keep it PG.

Bengali sexuality, even sexuality in general, is one where it’s somehow no one’s business but everyone’s business at the same time – particularly if you’re a girl. Your family’s respect apparently lies between your thighs, meaning you can’t have sex before marriage or wear a miniskirt. I remember in seventh grade I was out with a group of friends at the mall food court when a Bengali aunty greeted me. A few days later, my parents told me that my aunt’s friend told my aunt she’d seen me at the mall with a boy. Was one of the four friends I was with a boy? Heteronormatively yes, you could consider them a boy. Were the other friends girls? Yes. They were. Yet here I was, having to explain myself because a member of our community felt it was her duty to inform my family of my relationship with a boy – the main sentiment being that if anything compromises your ability to get married into a heteronormative lifestyle there are going to be problems.

Abstinence is obligatory, and showing any interest in sexual desire often receives harsh backlash. This desire is special but secret for a monogamous married couple; however, it is also disgusting and immoral outside of marriage. Especially as a girl, your family’s reputation teeters on your presence as a proper and modest Bengali, but more often than not, it’s what you can afford to keep secret on your private Instagram. Many of us make compromises and lead double lives in order to feel as comfortable as possible in both our Canadian and Bengali lives.

Although there are Quranic interpretations that influence abstinence, the purity-policing of women’s bodies has been heavily influenced by colonial discourse introduced during British imperialism in India. The sexism apparent within British imperialist men became effective through policy reforms and legislation. Colonialism, being a moral venture, assumed British morality was superior and needed to be implemented in order to erase alternative ways of life.

Queer desire is treated no differently, as the stigma against queer people is just as influenced by our internalization of British values. Non-heteronormative desire is even more abominable and perverted, whereas heteronormative desire is pure and morally superior. Many queer Bengalis jump in and out of the closet because being gay isn’t

something just anyone in the community should know. Feelings of shame, guilt, and self-hatred, and toxic, internalized misconceptions of what queerness means accompany many Bengalis due to their upbringing. Our family's reputation precedes our public actions, and the added stigmatization prevents Canadian Bengalis from exploring their queerness fully. Canadian culture does tend to be more lenient; however, queerphobia still exists systemically. All in all, both cultures provide limited avenues for queer kids to understand non-heteronormative desire in a healthy, responsible manner. The same goes for policing women's bodies: Canadian culture has way more leniency than Bangladesh; however, that does not mean women can move freely without consequence.

We could all use a systemic cleansing, but I believe subversive power can lie outside of the system. Going to queer-prioritized events and consuming queer art, film, books, etc. can really give you a sense of belonging and relief even if not consistently. Decolonizing your space, body, and health has ripples; nonetheless, the priority remains alleviating pain from the subject oppressed: you.



As a non-essentialist, I believe we are a product of our environment. This means that our brain – being our largest and arguably only sensor, since our senses require our brain to recognize them in order for anything to be sensed – absorbs everything we experience. *Every. Single. Thing.* Our brain likes patterns, and supposedly if a regular stimulus gives you the same neuron activity over an extended period of time, your brain begins to repeat this activity without the stimulus. When your brain keeps excreting certain hormones, it excretes fewer of the hormones you're not using, and depression and anxiety can be produced from this process. (N.B. I am not qualified to speak about this confidently, so feel free to confirm my statements).

For us second-generationers, being racialized, queer, or a woman are a few examples of the culturally complex terrain that can really personally affect our lives. Stimuli exist everywhere, and having an unhealthy approach and/or no support makes all the difference in developing a mental illness. You're always trying to find that space between what your family finds comfortable, what your friends find comfortable, and what you find comfortable. Different cultures enact different consequences, and neither properly addresses mental health at the right time.

I've struggled with depression off and on since I was nine years old and failed to receive any real support. Of course, I didn't have the language to understand what I was going through and assumed it was normal to regularly fantasize about being dead. Anxiety and depression became a part of my personality and comfort, and moving away from that was something I wasn't used to. However, when it peaked the first time, I figured I would end my life sometime before age 18 even if I didn't at 15. I managed to overcome it on my own using faith in Allah and/or the universe's love; I was sick of feeling terrible, but mainly I realized that if I died there would be one less person to advocate for those who can't advocate for themselves. It sounds fair, until I started living for other people's desires and sweeping my pain under the rug, and all my problems remained. I was a doormat, and although I had desire I had nothing to show for it until I was 21 years old. Perhaps this was because I felt I was only worthy of taking up space if it was in the service of others, and if I was being useful in the slightest ways.

I'm sure everyone's heard the sentiment "there are people with worse conditions than you, so be grateful" at some point, and that's probably the most toxic idea I lived

through. I didn't have negative stimuli in my life comparable to the kind people affected by human trafficking, poverty, corruption, etc. have experienced. During their adolescence, my parents witnessed numerous awful events, and both they and Canada believe this land to be a haven for equality and prosperity apart from Bangladesh (which is not true). Due to this discourse, it can be hard not only to get family, friends, and others to take you seriously, but also to take yourself seriously. It's true that I am blessed and fortunate enough not to experience the awful situations my parents and so many around the world experience; however, despite this inexperience, my trauma remained and failed to disperse. In retrospect, all I did was shame myself for feeling bad on top of feeling bad, convince myself my problems and feelings weren't real, fall into denial about reality, and begin to see myself as a "weak-minded" person. Sure, I wasn't depressed, but I still self-harmed during moments of heightened stress and felt harrowing lows sporadically. These lows don't mean you're paying the price for being happy; feeling suicidal is never a product of a balanced life or mind. I had the idea that I was always exaggerating my emotions for attention and that somehow wanting attention or help was something to be ashamed of. It's not, but both of my communities made me feel so guilty at this vulnerable age.

You can pray, masturbate, exercise, sing, deny, build, paint, jump, escape – in short, do everything you can to alleviate your pain because activities that make you happy help maintain your wellbeing. Yet these only worked for so long, and although I never thought I would be depressed again, I reached a boiling point at age 21. Although I had arguably the best year I had ever had since childhood, I was running low at the same time. I was supposed to be dead at 18, so what was I still doing here at 21? All my reasons to stay alive vanished; I couldn't live for others anymore. If I gave it my every fibre of energy, I figured I could live until February to tie up loose ends and figure out where to die so as to reduce inconvenience for my loved ones. Dying was my heavily contemplated, logically thought out solution.

I received consistent counselling and medication for clinical depression, and now when my friends feel old on their birthdays, I just feel like I earned one more year. I believe if I had had more resources from school, home, and friends while I was growing up, I would have avoided so much pain and suffering.

Your health matters. You can live again and you can feel beyond your numbness. Just because you can ignore an issue doesn't mean it doesn't grow tenfold unattended. Happiness and peace are possible for someone like you, and you deserve to be selfish with your energy and rehabilitation. You will learn to love again because you deserve love. People you love will hurt you and might do disgusting things, but that always says more about them than it does about you. You only realize how strong you are when you need to be, and all the resources available to you are made for you. Be open, soft, and kind. If you turn to stone, it's hard to turn back, but it is possible. Your dreams are possible – so start somewhere.

CONCLUSION

You can be ableist while having a disability, and you can be racist while racialized. Decolonization is necessary to relieve significant, life-shaping stigmatic knowledges, and we need to fight for Indigenous sovereignty while fighting for our own sovereignty. You are

not white-washed; you are Canadian. If you're a fob, stay fresh. You don't need a label to belong. Just look at yourself like, "Wowowow. I am the product of generations of my ancestors who've lived since the beginning of time to get to me. Wow. I do deserve to be here, and I do deserve love and respect. I deserve to take up space and hold space for others, and every step I take generates *eudaimonia*."

