

## Public Narrative

Rachel MacNeill

When asked to speak on ideas of migration and identity, I felt stuck. I'm from Yellowknife. In Canada, this arouses mild to moderate interest. Everywhere else, it gets blank stares. It's a novelty, somewhere isolated and notoriously cold, but not somewhere people think about on a regular basis. Except for me. I think about it every day. I grew up there, my family is there. It's home.

Perhaps, I felt stuck because I realized that while my roots are in the north, I haven't lived there for five years. I'm not totally sure yet how the newer parts of my self-concept fit with that foundation, and how that fits with the work that I believe in.

My parents moved north when they were young, seeking adventure and good jobs. First in Iqaluit, then in Yellowknife, they, and later we, took to the northern lifestyle. We spent time on the land. We whistled at the northern lights. We participated in traditional northern activities. We perfected the art of making Halloween costumes that fit over snowsuits.

As I developed my wings, and left the nest to travel and live around the world, I've built on my lifelong identity project with bits and pieces of the different lives I've lived. Here in Montreal, I've fallen in love with the interculturalism, the joie de vivre, the food, the poutine— but my northern roots still remain.

It's because of these roots that I care about the things I care about. My desire to advocate for gender equity and a fairer, better world stems from the experiences I lived and witnessed growing up in Yellowknife. Things like volunteering to raise money for desperately needed and under-resourced Northern women's shelters. Things like witnessing the impact of colonialism on indigenous women, and men. And, the internal conflict of being a living part of that legacy.

But as my identity has grown, so has the scope of my interest. When backpacking in international hostels, I've encountered vastly different cultural views towards gender rights. Living in Zanzibar, I realized that international development often leads to deepening rifts on issues around equal rights for

women and girls. And now, as I navigate my way through Quebec's infamous health care system, I grow more and more convinced of the need for wide-scale systems change in women's health care in Canada. These experiences build on each other. They create a broader perspective that remains rooted in the desire for a more equal world.

Today, our cities are full of people from all over. Who in this room doesn't have roots, formative experiences, or loved ones elsewhere? So many of us have been uprooted from singular place-based identities. We build and rebuild new ones from bits and pieces of other countries, cultures and experiences.

What does it mean, to no longer be one of an 'us' in opposition to 'them'? To be part of many 'us'es? What does this mean for the advocacy issues around which we build our lives?

The new world requires that we reframe identity. We must acknowledge that identities are never monolithic. They are always fluid and intersectional. Creating and embracing a modern concept of identity is the prerequisite for real contemporary social change.

As for me, my sense of self has grown to include a 'family' of urban, transnational and international compatriots. I've become who I am through the experiences I've had with them, inside the Sauve House and out. For me, it's been only natural that the scope of my interest has grown the same way. I've had to reconcile my commitment to local-level change with my desire to work on a broader scale that takes into account the person I am today.

As I make Montreal my home, my advocacy, like my identity, draws from different places, experiences, and cultures. Transitioning into a new field working on gender-focused health improvements in Canada, I reframe my own identity once again, pulling from all of these past experiences, Northern, Canadian, and international. I try to allow myself to grow in new and unexpected ways, embracing both roots and wings, and creating something new in between.