Conversation between Simon Nguyen, student-artist-in-residency, and Camila Vásquez, ArtLab coordinator October 19, 2023

Camila: [00:00:00] Okay. Great. So, we've been talking a lot since the beginning of the residency of different themes that you were reflecting on regarding the LIA's *Migratory Roots Festival*. But now it's more about what is alive today. And you were already into it. Exploring the sense of alienation and belonging or not belonging.

Simon: [00:00:35] So to pick up a bit from where I left off. I was talking about how right now, instead of focusing on alienation in the present moment, in my lived reality of existing where I am and in the society I've been living in, I was thinking more about this idea of this supposed country of origin where I truly belong and how in, in many ways, there is no version of it that I would really even be able to call home. I'm in a way supposed to feel the Vietnam of my parents is where I kind of belong, or like some idea of how it's home, you know. War torn and poor. Really kind of still Third world and brown in a sort of way, as we would talk about it in, like our parlance, here in the West. But, you know, less and less it's being seen that way now. It's being considered a rich Asian country, basically. By coincidence, most Vietnamese people are still pretty poor. But my family that's still there has risen up to be upper middle class. My aunt has married a celebrity. She's like a paralegal or something like that. Now she's sending her children to study in Australia in a way that I can't do that. Right. And yet we are still sending them remittances, hilariously enough, because there's still this expectation, this understanding that we in Canada must still be wealthier than they are. But we just haven't been able to communicate to them that that is not the case.

Simon: [00:02:09] We are like: "You know, compared to you, we are poorer than you, even if we live in a wealthier country". Um, and so, it's particularly interesting, that is a tension point. That's really funny because in a way, I came over there when I was 16 and I saw people wearing like American shirts, like shirts with the American flag on it. Yeah. This was in South Vietnam. Maybe in North Vietnam they kind of remember the war more or something like that. But in a sense, it became very easy to feel like, they're all watching American movies. And I'm not sure how critically they're doing. So, you know, to a large

extent it seems like they've gotten over it. Right? Like, whereas like us, we're still poor. My parents lived through the refugee stuff. My mother especially was a boat person and everything. So that deeply affects her. And she passed that on to me. Right. So when I come there and I'm just like: “Guys, you know, am I the only one who remembers? Have you guys moved on? Well, I'm still stuck in your past, and that's the really fun part”.

Camila: [00:03:28] That's a very beautiful sentence.

Simon: [00:03:30] As being part of the diaspora, we all escaped relatively around the same time, right? I was watching this video that was teaching Vietnamese, probably to a large extent with the idea of a diaspora audience in mind. Right. And so she talked about, for instance, how a lot of people in the diaspora will use, um, extremely informal terms that they don't know any better about because, that's what you say in your family and you don't really know how to speak in the language of your parents professional spaces and things like that. So, you will say, like, I'm going to piss or something like that when you don't know how to say, I'm going to pee instead. And there's the other element that was way more interesting to me was that the language has shifted. A lot of words that we use in my Vietnamese are no longer used in Vietnam. I can say I have a word for “airport” that they don't use anymore. I the way she described it was literally mid-century Vietnamese. I'm speaking Vietnamese like JFK's time, you know, which is insane to me. I really am 30, 40 years stuck in the past, if not more so.

Camila: [00:04:27] Actually, that would be more like 60 years stuck in the past.

Simon: [00:04:29] Um, yeah. I'm just frozen like that, you know. I really am some fossilized remnant. If I come and speak to my cousins the Vietnam that I inherited from my parents they would laugh at me, right? Because I would be describing an idea of Vietnam and speaking in the tongue of Vietnam that was been gone for 70 years.

Simon: [00:05:04] And I would like I would be able to speak to maybe a 70-year-old or 80-year-old person and they would understand me in a lot of ways better than if I spoke to someone my own age over there. Which is utterly absurd. Being a member of the diaspora is to some extent being like flash frozen and then having that aspect deteriorate, but still, you're not updating yourself and you're not within the living Vietnamese culture. A

diaspora can invent its own things. Absolutely. Like Chinese restaurants are like really an American invention by the diaspora, like fortune cookies and so on. But in my case, there isn't really a diaspora culture even that I'm partaking in. So, I'm really just like blaster frozen from my parents. And then that's it. Like I'm deteriorating. I'm losing words, I'm losing like memories and so on. If I ever have a generation after myself, they're going to know almost nothing, right? They're going to have some basic ideas, maybe a few basic words, but also those basic words and notions about Vietnam will once again be the Vietnam of the 60s and 70s. It will be completely disjointed from Vietnam as it exists nowadays.

Camila: [00:06:21] Your diaspora isn't alive for you and there's nothing that is evolving in there? You don't have a sense of community, of being part of a group that is...

Simon: [00:06:32] Inventing anything new.

Camila: [00:06:33] Where you all have the same background. You were born here, your parents came from Vietnam, and now there's something new that is emerging. That doesn't exist.

Simon: [00:06:45] Absolutely not. Yeah. I can say that about multiple other aspects of my life. Right? Last time we were speaking, I talked about how there isn't any working-class culture here in Canada that I can really relate to either. I went to an upper middle-class school and learned all their manners and so on. And now oftentimes I'm trying to reconnect with this idea of having been working-class and this feeling that it was stolen from me, a working-class culture. So, I am cut out from that possibility of feeling naturally fitting within. A culture that I can say is really mine and that I belong in, in a kind of organic way. So, I'm cut out from a class identification. My ethnic origin is all weird and bendy and twisted. Um, I really don't have any. And obviously I can't connect to my current society, right? Canadian society, perhaps, but my daily experience isn't really of Canadian society. It's of a *Québécois* society which innately pictures itself and understands itself as constituting a white population. You know, I will never belong. Even if my French is absolutely perfect, I will never be seen as a proper and real *Québécois* person. So that is something that you know. I cannot identify with my nation state, quote unquote at all. Really, there is nothing I can identify with. I am simply stuck being myself.

You know, stuck being completely disjointed from anything and only being trapped in these ambivalences about all of these identifications I would like to be able to make. But if I'm going to be honest and not deceive myself and just lie and kind of block out everything that doesn't fit the narrative, I have to confront that. This doesn't fit. I can't tell myself that I belong here. Yeah.

Camila: [00:11:51] Yeah... You also told me last week that you were playing with the cliché of how you're perceived in Bishop's University. There are these clichés of what people think you should be. You were playing in a conversation with another student that really had his idea in mind of you being good at math. Can go back to that?

Simon: [00:12:30] Yeah, sure. So, I started, at least I gave some space for what I'm going to do as a character. I'm going to note out essentially all the tips I have to play my character, which I describe as *Sing*. I let people think that's something like a pan Asian name of myself, but it really is just the two first letters of my first and last name. I put them together and let people assume that's my real name or something like that. And I play into this idea of being like a fancier East Asian. There's this distinction between Southeast Asian where they're still brown. But I pass as East Asian and Vietnamese are somewhere in between the two. I just lean hard into the parts that are, better seen in our society. And then I lean into those stereotypes we have about Japanese or Chinese or Korean people that they're good at math, that they're kind of socially inept, but sometimes can be eccentric in a charming way, extremely inoffensive, you know. Kind of in a way incapable of critical thinking, soulless in a sense. They can be smarter than you on a technical level, but they don't do art. So, they can only perform in really technical ways. Even when they do music, for instance, it's they're prodigies, sure, but they don't have soul in it. You know, you would never see an Asian person make jazz, for instance, or something like that. Or be able to really write a song, a gut-wrenching song.

Simon: [00:14:02] There are these kinds of ideas that I love. I adore playing into. I know people make these assumptions about me and I have no intention of correcting them. I will definitely abuse that and just make fun of it by leaning into those stereotypes as much as possible and seeing them fall for it over and over again. I told you already about the story. A person came up to me and I told them I was a political economy and liberal arts major. And they told me they thought it was a computer science major. And then I was like: "I

wonder why?" They said it was because of my glasses. Obviously, that was a very racially charged moment. They tried to break the tension by saying: "Oh, you know, try to guess what major I am". And I said, you're incredibly annoying. So, I must assume you're a business major. And I was correct. Of course, that was quite funny. So, I play into those ideas about myself, and it's not just to gain certain agency and power over my own image. Because if they know exactly who I am, then they can decide that they're better than me. And I lose the power to have much agency at all. Like, okay, I'm just worse than them and that's it. There is no ability to maneuver.

Simon: [00:15:28] Instead of they just seeing me as I am, I'm passing as something that's kind of their equal, you know. In some ways they still see me as sort of inferior or something like that, but in other ways there's an insecurity about Asia, the East that is overtaking the West and things like that. Um, in a way, I can like be somewhat seen as a threat while also, there's this whole idea of East Asian people as completely inoffensive. Um, but I gained the advantage as well of the social capital of it, point blank. If I am seen as an upper middle class East Asian, I am seen as more worthwhile to talk to, more intelligent, just better fitting in a way. If I were black or something like that, people would have a hard time coming to terms with: "Oh, you're so well-spoken. You must be one of the good ones and so on". White people tend to kind of recuperate me in some way that they can accept me as an East Asian person if I'm seen as one. They just innately are like: "Oh, you make me feel safe because you fit exactly into… you conform to the stereotypes I already have in my head". Then, from there, I can maneuver, I can play with them.

Camila: [00:16:47] So it's a lot about identity, races, and narratives.

Simon: [00:17:01] That's the thing, right? It kind of comes together in a way. I can't really identify meaningfully. Or at least I can't deceive myself into completely believing in nation state narratives or diaspora immigrant narratives that I'm supposed to. None of them really work for me. In doing this project, I was thinking, do I write about war in a way? What would I have to say? I didn't live through it. I didn't see through. My parents lived in the aftermath of it. But even, they didn't have a firsthand account of it either. And what would it be worth if I said, if I told the story of my parents? Perhaps I could be like: "You know, they can't really speak that well within this culture". And then I could be a voice for them. But that's full of complications on its own. I'm not really like actively speaking to my

parents, you know? So, I can play with identity in this way, probably because I've given up on like a good faith truth, where I can just be authentic. Because it doesn't work. I can't fully believe any single narrative. I have to exist in this bizarre hodgepodge of ambivalences and complications. So, when I present myself in class and so on, I, I can't really open up every class by explaining to everyone that I'm working-class, but there's no working-class culture.

Simon: [00:18:26] I'm Vietnamese, but I'm a refugee. But now most immigrants here are I immigrants who are seen as economically worthwhile. And I went to a school that was upper middle-class that was full of those richer, better-quote, immigrants. Even if I did explain it to everyone, most people probably wouldn't understand it. It's pointless. Even if I were to try to be authentic, they would just basically not be able to understand me and they probably still put me in East Asian anyways in practice.
I've spoken to a person from Vancouver, a white person, and he was very nice. We still get along very good. I told them fairly early on that I was working-class and from this background and so on. But I asked him and he admitted to me that to a large extent he still saw me basically as another one of those like upper middle-class Chinese kids in his class.

Camila: [00:19:36] He couldn't make the difference between what you were telling him and his perception of you?

Simon: [00:19:43] He didn't know anyone from my background, probably. Who else?

Camila: [00:19:47] Right. He doesn't have somebody to compare you. Yeah.

Simon: [00:19:50] Yeah. It's just not a thing that he can really understand. In a way, his only way of understanding me is still the fact that I am Asian, right? Whatever that means. There are still some elements of me that I broadly share with other Asian immigrants to some extent. It's still the closest thing he can do to just get at understanding me. Um, and of course, he also accepts me as an individual, which helps a lot. Right. Um, so he takes me on that basis, but he can't really understand me as a working-class, like child of refugees and so on. Because what is the parlance? What does that mean? How do you get that? Read a bunch of books on the subject? Or you grew up around a bunch of

people like me, right? Which he just did not. He grew up around a bunch of upper middle-class people, Asian people whose parents were doctors and engineers and things like that. So that's the only way he can understand me. If I wasn't me, I wouldn't be able to understand me either. You know, like if I didn't come from this background and I came from the same background as all the other kids in my high school came from, and then I met myself, I wouldn't be able to understand my background or anything like that. I would only be able understand me as an individual, but I wouldn't be able to approach myself from the angle of working class and that means this and that and so on.

Simon: [00:20:36] Like I can't be authentic to one narrative, but to be authentic to myself, to my real lived experiences. The only thing I can do is live in these ambivalences and at most maybe section off the parts that kind of work and just present them as is expected of me. The job or in the classmate role and so on. The reason I'm bifurcating like this once again is because they can't accept me. They won't understand me. So, the only thing I can do is play into what they want and then keep myself like what I know to be like myself. Stuck in my individuality, you know? Because the more I present myself as *Sing*, for instance, the more I alienate that part of me from myself, the more I know that it's false, the more I find it funny that people are falling for it. And the more I validate and reinforce my sense of individuality in these ambivalences don't quite fit squarely in any of these narratives that we create.

Simon: [00:21:59] There's something very appealing to me about that. As a person who to some extent, I know I'm going to have to work for a living. And I know that I'll never really make sense of myself. In a way that's entirely satisfying, you know? So, I will probably have to continue this for the rest of my life. Just sectioning myself off insofar as I have to present to a society that will never understand my individuality and my ambivalences. And then be stuck alone with myself, with the only hope being maybe I will have a few friends who will understand me as an individual. But I'll never be able to truly believe in any grander cause in any grander culture that I can organically attach myself to and be like: “This is my community. This is really my people”. That will never be accessible to me. And in line with that, that's a big reason why I think I want to just become an exile. Right? I want to leave Quebec at some point because I’m already forever seen as an outsider, as a stranger here. And I'll never be able to form a real community in a sense. So why not just leave and, actually be a foreigner andget to experience that in a way that

doesn't feel so alienating? It would be a lot less bad if, you know, I was really a tourist, you know, assuming.

Camila: [00:23:17] That you will be the other and there's no other expectations.

Simon: [00:23:27] Belonging. Yeah. Because every moment I spend here is kind of a betrayal, right? There is this sense that I don't belong in Vietnam. We went through how that is a whole, a cluster field of ambivalences and I'd have to do a bunch of self-deceptions and force myself through. But I definitely don't belong in Quebec either. The way we have constructed the idea of the history of Quebec and what it means to be *Québécois* and things like that squarely does not include me. Even you. Right? We don't really belong here. We can't ever say that we are *Québécois* people in a way that you can't even say about a country like America, for instance. Where someone who goes to America integrates relatively well into its culture and adopts American slang and starts speaking a little bit with American accent, can be considered very quickly a real American. Or even maybe you'd have to have a child in America to have no controversy, whatsoever. A black American, for instance, or even a second generation racialized American of any kind is still considered uncontroversially an American. Even a white supremacist would have to admit that they might want it to be different, but they can't really say "You're not an American" without basically everyone laughing at you and not really making sense of that. But here, as I understand, there are some *Québécois* people who are very gently spirited and very idealist perhaps, who will tell me: "You have to stand up for yourself and you have to say, no, I'm *Québécois* I was born here. I was raised here. All I've known is Quebec, right? So how can I not be?" But there is this assumption, like at the base of things and the way we constructed it, that, you know, a person like me, even if I was third generation, fourth generation, what does that mean?... There are people here who are of Chinese ethnic origin and who built the railroad and so on. And we're still not going to call them like really real *Quebecois.* We might call them *Québécois s* in a kind of colloquial sense to say that, you know, they are like people who live in Quebec and all their lives and so on. But they're never going to be seen as properly *Québécois*. If you write out Quebec, in the first image you think of, it's never going to be them. Right?

Continuation of the conversation

Simon: [00:00:00] Yes. Okay, so start again.

Camila: [00:00:06] No, don't start again. We were talking about. Yeah. Like, uh, maybe a third or fourth generation of immigrants. That person, for you, would still not be really seen as a *Québécois* person.

Simon: [00:00:28] So there is like, you know, constantly this sense of alienation and a kind of, once again, a betrayal in that. Right? Um, a sense that, of course, we're not living in America here. There isn't like this idea of the American dream that anyone can come in and integrate and become part of the society. But there is still a certain sense that, you know, I was born here. All I know is this place. And as I was growing up, actually, there was a different narrative that was forming. It was like the 20 tens and so on. And there was still this kind of idea, especially in my circles, that we could that, you know, Quebec could be a multi like we didn't use the term multicultural at the time. It was more intercultural, I believe, but it could be a space where multiple different cultures could coexist with each other, and that we had our place and that we were bringing riches and we were like an important part of the country and that, you know, we like, had our place and we really existed and were, you know, our own community in a sense that that, um, was really respected.

Simon: [00:01:35] And now, what I hear about the politics and so on, of course, we're living in like a bubble, like a big part of my realization is linked to different narratives at the time but is also linked to the fact that now I can see outside of my immediate circumstances. Um, and I have to acknowledge that the main *Québécois* medias and so on, relatively speaking, really have pushed back from that idea into more nativist talk, into more this idea of Quebec as an identity on some level, a nationality-based sort of enterprise that doesn't really have that much space for me. And I can exist insofar as I'm economically useful, but, you know, just integrate as much as possible. And relatively speaking, forget about this idea of, you know, having my own culture and enriching the province or anything like that with further interaction and, you know, kind of co-mingling or anything like that. It's very much more defend what we have now and keep away foreign influence.

Camila: [00:02:45] Yeah, I remember that. At one moment you mentioned this. You used the word “exist”. This feeling of not really existing because you don't see yourself anywhere. Like you don't see yourself in the media. You don't see yourself anywhere outside of your being. Yeah.

Simon: [00:03:09] And for a while I at least had… it was this very strange existence. I grew up in where, on the national level of Canada, there was all this talk about multiculturalism and things like that, which were kind of idealistic. And I was always kind of skeptical about that in a certain sense and never really felt real to me on the provincial level. There was still this understanding that white Quebeckers, especially as my parents told me about them, were would never accept me. That I would have a hard time finding jobs to a large extent. And I really had to make sure I became something technical, like an accountant or a dentist or a doctor, or like positions in the economy where other Asian people have made it and could kind of create networks and blocks where we would fit in economically. Um, otherwise the other economic bloc we fit in was what my dad was doing, which was manual labor. Right? And the big fear was I would be stuck doing manual labor if I didn't succeed well enough in school. Um, but yeah, to continue what I was saying about, uh, yeah. Belonging. So there there's this idea on a provincial level that I really didn't belong in, that I had to make sure I had to prove that I was worth it, and I could live in a white *Québécois* society while being brown.

Simon: [00:04:34] I couldn't really erase it. But I had to do that by integrating as much as possible, by finding a position that didn't offend anyone. Right? Doing a job that made no one feel uncomfortable about the fact that I existed. If I was a dentist, people can just accept me. My parents did not want me to go into political science, for instance, because they said: “What are you going to do, become a news reporter or something like that? You're like, you know, your hair is black, and you have the face of that. You know, you're never going to make it.” Um, and then simultaneously, very strangely, at the very local level, the municipal level, but especially the level of just day to day experiences, I went to school and everyone around me was like Arab or Chinese or from the Indian subcontinent or something like that. So, we were still white supremacist, funnily enough, actually. Like, the very few white kids we had in our school were like heavily praised and there was really this awkward narrative where we kind of, like, threw laurels at them just by being relatively

nice and polite. We immediately kind of assumed these great intentions to them. And I was part of that, I probably had it worse than most because my parents raised me in such a race obsessed way. The white kid I knew and had as a friend in elementary school and went to high school with, when I stopped being his friend, for instance, I genuinely saw it as a negative moral decision on my end. Like I was actually turning myself away from the good, you know.

Simon: [00:06:27] Maybe there were four white boys in our class of 30 students, you know? And so in a way, I didn't quite see immediately that it was like: “Oh, it's because they're white people, they're good. But I did internalize it on that level. I did kind of recognize that, but without being critical about it. I just accepted it and went on with my life genuinely believing that white people were kind of like angelic beings in a way that they were innately morally good, and that, in contrast, I was innately morally bad and like, tainted in a way. So even the fact that I live in such a multiracial environment, actually, weirdly enough, only elevated the few white people as like especially rare beacons of like, you know, extreme positive good.

Camila: [00:07:11] You were not being able to maintain this in your life because you broke this friendship with this white person. So, it was this pressure of not only not belonging, but…

Simon: [00:07:32] But not integrating either in a way. Yeah. Not being able I wasn't able to really stay with him and stay good. Yeah. No absolutely. I wasn't able to align myself in a way that allowed me to become one of the good minorities. Yeah, absolutely. And when I broke with it, when I really broke with it, like mentally I stopped, I really consciously decided to stop seeing white people as innately good and myself as innately tainted with sin. Like, this is the sort of narratives people said back in biblical times. People said during slavery, you know, that black people or colored people, racialized people had the mark of Cain so that we could exploit them. They're kind of soulless or things like that. I genuinely into the 21st century believe the version of that. And but when I broke with it, it actually was painful to me because if I had the narrative that there was this good and evil world, monolithically where white people were good and I was tainted with sin, and maybe if I align myself with white people, I could save myself. Then the world was at least simple, right? There was a kind of easy narrative which I lack, right? I don't have any easy

narratives that I can fit myself into. Where I could turn back towards the good and become a good white person or something like that. But to break with this, hilariously, to stop being so incredibly racist to myself, it was this sad moment of disillusion for me, where I lost hope in the narrative that I, in a way, kind of treasured.

Camila: [00:09:06] Almost more alone than you were before.

Simon: [00:09:09] Yes, exactly. Because before at least there was this weird, really twisted hope that I would find like a sense of community and belonging and my life would all come together and make sense if I just, saw the light...

Camila: [00:09:24] But, I mean, it's amazing that you were able to see that and you had this awareness and this inner force to decide to choose something else.

Simon: [00:09:39] I mean, it's more that I can't stop the critical voice that you know, keeps finding flaws in every possible thing I could try to attach myself to. And then I end up with nothing, right? Like I would have to actively choose to deceive myself, or that would be an effort to try to fit myself into anything. So, I just keep having this issue where there are some narratives that keep breaking apart in my head as I try to reach out for them, right. And I try to grab on. So, it's not even an inner force. It really is just an inability, to lie to myself, which constantly creates situations where I just feel ambivalent and, stuck within myself and incapable of reaching out and attaching to anything more solid, perhaps.