

On Beginnings: reflections on topics that can be (vaguely) described as beginnings, including personal introductions, my first explorations in research, and being young and ambitious.

For the past two years, I've had an irrational fear of making introductions.

Truly, they terrify me. In classes, at events, or hangouts, I would wait in nervous anticipation to answer admittedly simple questions: *Where are you from? What do you study?* Each time, I would try to confidently state answers that I had absolutely zero confidence in.

I was scared of these questions for a bunch of reasons. I was scared that potential friends would determine I wasn't Filipino enough, American enough, or Vietnamese enough to claim these cultures as part of my identity. I was scared to admit that I was falling out of love with architecture, or that I no longer saw a future in economics. But on a deeper level, I was scared of these simple questions because of how they echoed the bigger ones that I've long wrestled with: *Who are you? What do you want to do in the "real world"?*

Of which, the only honest answer I could give is: *I don't know.*

The only thing that I did know was that I wanted to figure it out soon.

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Having studied visual arts for all of high school, I've often found it useful to frame challenging university assignments as "experimental self-portraits" to motivate me. Maybe, for example, instead of strictly following an essay prompt, I could frame the task in terms of questions I was already asking, or somehow link it to the issues that already mattered most to me.

This metaphor proved particularly useful this time last year when I struggled to pick a topic for my Laidlaw Research Grant application. I knew that I wanted to pick a topic that would allow me to learn more about Filipino, Vietnamese, and American culture. I knew that I wanted to pick a topic that could help me finally finalize my majors and minors. And, ultimately, I knew that I wanted that topic to help me narrow down a career trajectory. I just didn't know which intersection of those themes to pick.

As my shortlist of potential topics grew longer and longer, my mind wandered to a very literal experimental self-portrait I had just created for a first-year course. For a collage assignment, I interrogated my relationship with my Filipino identity and supplemented it with visual representations of reflections from members of the Filipino diaspora living in Toronto's Little Manila.

To this day, the 6 hours I spent in Little Manila are among my favourite university moments. Immersing myself in the ethnic enclave, I heard stories of pure Pinoy pride, stories of hard work, struggle, resilience, and joy; stories which I drew inspiration from for my project. I went to a modernized *sari-sari store* filled with my childhood snacks; I had my favourite Filipino dish, *tosilog*, for lunch; and, I treated myself to a cup of *Halo-Halo*, which literally translates to "mix-mix" for dessert, all of which briefly teleported me back to the Philippines.

For most of those 6 hours, I was enveloped in a strange, nameless feeling that I couldn't explain—a blend of joy and warmth, tinged with a soft sadness.

Almost 10 months later, and two weeks after I started writing my shortlist, I was on Christmas break with my family in Seattle, exploring the city's Little Saigon. After a quick Google search, I learned that Little Saigon was just one of the ethnic enclaves in what is now known as Seattle's Chinatown-International District. I also learned that the C-ID is the only known neighbourhood in the U.S. where Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, African Americans, and Vietnamese settled together and built one neighbourhood.

Walking through the streets of Little Saigon, I felt that same strange feeling again. Only this time, I could figure it out: it was nostalgia.

In Little Manila, I was nostalgic for being away from my family. In Little Saigon, I was nostalgic for being away from the city I grew up in.

In Little Manila, I found my topic: ethnic enclaves.

In Little Saigon, I found my scope: the Chinatown-International District.



Experimental Self-Portrait Collage



Sari-sari store



Tosilog



Halo-Halo

My uneasiness toward my academic identity only deepened as I waited for the selection committee's decision. Feeling lost and directionless seemed even more isolating as an architecture student. While all my friends were passionately focused on securing one of the three competitive specialist programs, I was questioning why I was still studying architecture in the first place.

Yet, as I even began to doubt my place in economics, I started questioning every decision I had made and every choice I still had to make. Did I really know what I was doing? Should I have stuck with architecture? Why didn't I feel the same passion as everyone else? Had I wasted my time on economics? And what about my growing interest in political science?

So, when my surprise acceptance into the Laidlaw Program came, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. Here was my chance to apply theories from architecture, economics, and political science into practice. It was an opportunity to see which subjects truly resonated with me. I placed the weight of my future on this research project, believing that this "dream paper" could finally resolve the uncertainty that I've struggled through for so long.

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My fear of introductions became very relevant when I returned to the C-ID this summer to conduct my research documenting the neighbourhood's evolution over the past 25 years. I had scheduled a couple of interviews with professionals working around the District. These professionals had expertise in the neighbourhood's history, community development projects, and the city's public policies. I couldn't believe my luck when these Titans agreed to offer their perspective.

While I was prepared to ask my questions, the one thing I refused to prepare for was my personal introduction. Gone were the all-too-rehearsed lines of my name, cultural identity, and supposed academic background. I wanted to answer them as naturally and as honestly as I could.

I wanted to face my fears.

If I'm being honest, it went terribly! My horror stories include mixing up which countries I was born in, raised in, and which my parents are from; claiming I was studying programs I had long abandoned; and even getting my own name wrong! Twice!

However, after I settled my nerves and apologized for my mistakes, I found these interviews to be truly illuminating discussions. It was so rewarding to gain such nuanced perspectives on the neighbourhood and its evolution in the past quarter-century.

Moreover, it was rewarding to see how these experts, working in careers that I had never even considered, all offered different approaches that contributed to the neighbourhood's revitalization. I was starting to see that there was more than one "right" answer to my search for a career trajectory.

As for my research, these conversations helped to bolster my confidence that I could create the “dream paper” I had envisioned in my application. Between my interviews and the weeks I spent combing through physical and digital archives, I gained a diverse collection of perspectives to glean from. I just needed to figure out how to weave them together.

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Along with the interviews and the archival research, the final component of my mixed-methods approach was mapping the differences in the neighbourhood between 1998 and the present day. Admittedly, this was the component I was least excited about. Having already taken four map-making-intensive classes, I didn’t think I had many new things to appreciate or even learn about map-making.

I was wrong.

While combing through the archives, I started to notice how some maps were the only surviving pieces of evidence that storied places ever existed. In a small but powerful way, I came to better respect the history that these maps document; and how these maps can be tools to combat the historical erasure of communities. I came to respect how maps can tell the world: *we exist, and our stories matter*.

Not only that but staring intently at the streets, searching for insights into how conditions in the built environment can tell bigger stories about the neighbourhood. I started to appreciate how studying architecture has made the world less invisible to me. I was falling back in love with it.

And, as I started mapping the present conditions of the neighbourhood, I found that I needed to utilize skills from across the various courses that I struggled through. From critically practicing concept formation in political science, applying Excel techniques in economics, utilizing software skills from my GIS elective, implementing representation techniques from my architectural studies, and even applying math skills from IB.

I was starting to worry that by having switched my majors and minors five times in the past two years, I had wasted my time in courses that would no longer give me any value. Yet, just as my years in visual arts helped to reframe challenging assignments, I came to appreciate that things I’ve long abandoned still shapes my understanding of the world today.

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I’ll be the first to admit that the draft of the research I ended this summer was not the “dream paper” I thought it would be. In many ways, the paper I ended up writing felt like another experimental self-portrait: a paper collage made up of resources that my interviewees passed on, the maps I made, and the archives I read, pasted hastily together.

By no means do I think it's "bad," I can just list all the little ways it could be better. Little ways a more qualified and experienced researcher could more critically, and successfully, weave the evidence I had gathered together.

Admittedly, had I spent more time trying to weave things together, rather than being overwhelmed by it, I would have probably done a better job at it. Ultimately, I just lost confidence in my writing, and I was too scared to admit it to anyone at the time, including myself.

But I'm trying my best not to be too harsh on myself. I am incredibly proud of the work I did in Seattle. I know how much I learned in those interviews, in mapping the district, and in delving through the archives. I know that there's more to the C-ID than I wrote, and I know that I have more to say.

To be fair to myself, I think it was unfair of me to assume I could learn and expertly document a 25-year history of a neighbourhood, filled with all the necessary nuance, in just two months.

I'm learning to accept that being ambitious, in itself, isn't enough, and I don't yet have the competence to back it up. Because I am not *yet* a "qualified and experienced researcher." There are skills that I have yet to learn, or I simply need more time to practise.

And I'm also learning to accept that that's okay. Because I know I'm too young to say "I'm still young," and I am now more comfortable knowing that I'm still figuring myself out. This was my first attempt at research. This is just the beginning.

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As I sit here and reflect upon what I've learned this year; yes, I think about the research and time management skills I still need to develop, but more importantly, I'm realizing the empathy, patience, and kindness I owe myself in shaping my own life. I'm granting myself permission to go at my own pace and to be comfortable with not having all the answers yet.

So, as I introduce myself now (hopefully without having to memorize it) I can confidently say:

Hello! My name is Tyler Carriaga. I am a Halo-Halo, a mix-mix, of cultural and academic identities: An American-born Filipino, who grew up in Vietnam, and I study architecture, public policy, and GIS.

And, as for those deeper questions—*Who are you? What do you want to do in the "real world"?*— I now know that I can sit in a little less discomfort, and a little less fear, knowing that the true answer is:

My name is Tyler, and I'm still figuring myself out.