

Three Cities: Routes and Roots of Migration

The futures we imagine are shaped by our understandings of the past (Cho, 2008, p. 189). Creative practices may be the important spaces where the transformation and reclamation of diasporic identity can occur, where alternative futures are actively imagined and created (Cho, 2010, p. 120). There is a sense of power that comes with using forms of cultural production to make meaning of our deep histories, sit with our present diasporic identities, and reimagine our futures, as members of diasporic communities. To discover the degree of agency that we have, we must be willing to collectively test the limits of anti-colonial resistance in various ways, such as through creative practices (Dei, 2010, p. 25). Our cultural knowledges can allow us to radically re-imagine and re-define identity, belonging, history, politics, and culture, amidst colonial desires of control, as evident through my painting *Three Cities* (Dei, 2010, p. 25). In this paper, I use my painting *Three Cities* (2017) as a form of transformative pedagogy that disrupts the certainty and linearity of hegemonic ways of producing knowledge (Freire, 1970; Sameshima et al., 2019, p. 69). With my painting, as a form of arts-based inquiry and pedagogical possibility, I bring to light the critical question: to what extent do the creative arts provide members of diasporic communities with the agency to transform and reimagine their futures within colonial structures of the nation-state?

My painting called *Three Cities* is a merging of my past histories, present identity, and future imaginings; it problematizes what it means to have a “homeland” and critically reflects upon my diasporic roots that have shaped my multidimensional identity. Migration routes bring significant nuance to how we understand the rootedness of our diasporic identities. More importantly, these roots of migration in the soil are simultaneously routes of my family’s migration, when they were refugees travelling on horseback through the mountainous regions of

Afghanistan. I am alluding to the long journeys my family began to Toronto, Canada, from Kabul, Afghanistan, when they fled the Soviet war. I also reflect upon the formation of my identity while growing up within the urban geography of downtown Toronto.

I also imagine future trajectories for myself in Thunder Bay, Canada, where the Sleeping Giant peninsula is located, on the Indigenous traditional territory of Fort William First Nation. As an individual who is leaving one diasporic Afghan Canadian community to another diasporic Afghan Canadian community, I am travelling back and forth, across Lake Superior, while I am making meaning of where home is. I am also emotionally flying to Afghanistan, where my roots are. The ambiguity of the birds being constantly in motion, without flying towards a particular site, represent the longings for futures of possibility; this includes how the Afghan Canadian diaspora will evolve and transform, as it is informed by its histories.

First of all, the migration journeys of my family are alluded in my painting through the soil that nourishes the flower. These past histories are also represented through the golden roots in my painting. The shape of the soil also represents the mountainous terrain of the Afghan-Pakistani nation-state border. This is because of the important notion that the flower's golden roots are also simultaneously migration routes, where my family members became diasporic peoples; they were displaced from their land, due to the political violence and war that was devastating Afghanistan during the 1980s. I allude to my mother's stories of being a refugee and fleeing travelling through the routes and passages on horseback, passing villages along the way. She sought refuge in Pakistan, before flying like a bird to the other side of the world, landing in Canada.

The processes and journeys of displacement profoundly shape diasporic identity (Cho, 2008, p. 189). The flower is rooted strongly in the soil, but it is also rootless at the same time.

Memories of displacement are constantly being made and re-made when remembered; identities are constantly transforming based on how we make meaning of past histories and experiences (Cho, 2008, p. 184; Miki, 2004, p. 9). Furthermore, displaced people have the agency to draw from alternative geographies and histories to develop coalitions and anti-colonial realities (Mawani, 2018, p. 25). The routes and passages are dynamic and are as valuable as its golden colour. In this way, I do not see my roots as only Afghan, but as a product of the multidimensional relationships and interactions with other diasporic communities, in overlapping of migration routes (Cho, 2010, p. 130).

Moreover, my painting *Three Cities* alludes to my imaginings of the future of my Afghan diasporic communities in Toronto and in Thunder Bay. I recognize the heterogeneity of these two communities, shaped by the distinct contexts and histories of the people who lived there before it. The Afghan diasporic community in Thunder Bay may have settled at a different time than the Afghan diasporic community in Toronto. My painting depicts my migration journey within Canada, from Toronto to Thunder Bay. I reflect upon my positionality as an Afghan Canadian who is a settler on traditional Indigenous territory. The Sleeping Giant peninsula in Thunder Bay, at the top of the painting, is part of the Fort William First Nation Indigenous territory; it is a geographic landscape I often saw while living in Thunder Bay and a landscape that reminds me of my responsibilities as a settler to actively work towards decolonization. The golden roots growing from the Sleeping Giant are distinct from the roots growing flower, due to how different my migration journey is from my family's migration journey. The roots are extending to the fluid waters of the lake, alluding to the flexibility of diasporic communities. The birds constantly flying back and forth between Toronto and Thunder Bay remind me of how migration is continuous; diasporic cultural survival depends on the relationships that

communities build in sites of arrival (Cho, 2010, p. 130). Therefore, each diasporic community is dynamically interacting with other communities in the spaces and sites of arrival.

Furthermore, the birds that are seemingly flying towards and back from the sunset are alluding to the concept of unfinishedness, a state of becoming and transformation (Freire, 1970). Diasporic communities and nations-states are constantly in a state of “becoming” (Cho, 2008, p. 188; Freire, 1970). The painting embraces the journeys of migration and the complex dynamism of diaspora. Therefore, the birds are simultaneously flying away and towards the sunset horizon; they are flying towards the mountains of Afghanistan and the CN Tower in Toronto, while also flying away from these geographic places, and in various directions. The birds do not know where they are going, just as I do not know where the future of my Afghan diasporic community is heading; I am in the process of reimagining what my future looks like based on the multidimensional histories and migration journeys of my family. I have hope in the agency that I have to resist anti-colonial structures. Collective anti-colonial resistance involves the need to creatively convey more of our diverse histories, experiences, and narratives, which enrich the social landscape of Asian Canada and shape our futures (Cho, 2008, p. 191). By collectively re-imagining and re-making, humans become active agents in transforming the world around them, constructing decolonial realities (Freire, 1970; Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 201).

In the allusion to my present, the CN Tower in my painting *Three Cities* stands amongst the set of white buildings surrounding it. This pays homage to my upbringing in Toronto, in my neighbourhood of St. James Town, which is a densely populated and diverse neighbourhood in the city’s downtown core. While I have called Toronto my home for most of my life, I demonstrate that home is an imaginary space; the three cities of Kabul, Toronto, and Thunder Bay are home to me, to some degree, but not completely. The flower is flourishing in its

environment. The flower and the birds around it represent the creative agency that I have right now, as the artist of my painting. Using imagination as a method of opening spaces for endless possibilities requires love and hope for a more humanized world, while using collective memories to re-create my histories (Freire, 1970). Home is an imaginary space that is constantly being negotiated within the Canadian nation-state that often excludes racialized people from its national identity (Mishra, 1996, p. 222).

By reflecting upon the migration routes, there is a resistance towards the incorrect assumption that migration journeys are continuous, unidirectional, and are not as influential as the geographical spaces of departure and arrival (Cho, 2008, p. 190). A large portion of the painting's background is the merging of Lake Superior and Lake Ontario, which can also be interpreted as the oceans that separate Afghanistan and Canada. I depict the palpable blue waves that carry stories of joy, sadness, and mystery. We also do not fully know what is waiting for us to explore about ourselves. This is why it is important to critically examine our histories and memories (Cho, 2008, p. 190). The oceanic waves look different at any given period of time. The ocean is a space of ongoing, ceaseless change that carries its important histories with it, in order to define the present and future (Mawani, 2018, p. 8; Cho, 2008, p. 190). With my artwork, I sit productively with the dissonance that the sites of endless possibilities can also be limited by the nation-state; this is evident in the ways the Canadian nation-state views racialized people and the ways it maintains cultural difference through neoliberal multiculturalism (Mackey, 1999). This brings me back to ponder about the critical question I opened this paper with: to what extent do the creative arts provide members of diasporic communities with the agency to transform and reimagine their futures within colonial structures of the nation-state?

Perhaps, it is also appropriate for me to describe the learning journey and the literal journey I have made with my painting *Three Cities*. I created this artwork in the summer 2017, when my curiosity about diasporic identity formations and migration was blossoming. My artwork allowed me to better make meaning and reflect deeply upon my multidimensional diasporic identity, in addition to thinking critically about the places I called home. Perhaps, it is also a way of relieving the homesickness when I first moved away to Thunder Bay, while reminding me of the three cities that have become important to me; I reflected upon what was next for me. The painting travelled from Toronto to Thunder Bay with me and is now back in Toronto with me. Three years later, I began to see *Three Cities* in a more nuanced and deeply significant way, after taking a graduate course in Asian Canada. This has allowed me to re-theorize my artwork and to make new pedagogical connections that I had not done before. My artwork further depicts the notion that the arts provide pedagogical possibilities to disrupt colonial ways of knowing and being (Dei, 2010); it sparks productive dialogue about migration roots and routes using arts-based inquiry.

While I arrive at the end of this paper, I am strongly reminded of how my journey of learning and the theorizing my diasporic identity is not yet complete. I am creatively energized while I sit in the liminal space of transformative possibility, knowing that there is an important space for me to continue theorizing, imagining, and making my future. In my painting *Three Cities*, I make visible the significance of the diasporic communities' multiple trajectories and the heterogeneity of migration routes (Cho, 2008, p. 190). Identity extends beyond the roots in geographic places. My work depicts the need to consider both migration routes, as much as we consider migration roots, when theorizing diasporic identity. It merges the past, present, and

future, through the migratory birds flying in different directions; the birds are “neither here, nor there” (Miki, 2004, p. 9).

As a form of arts-based inquiry, I theorize with my artwork that there is some degree of possibility for me to have a physical space to feel at home within the Canadian nation-state, despite not fully feeling “at home.” This hopeful possibility is enabled by the collective agency exercised by Asian Canadians to re-make and re-imagine their narratives of belonging, in their own terms. My artwork instills the fundamental notion of hope that transformation is possible; it echoes the need for collective liberation, sparked by trans-cultural community building that is enabled by collective agency (Freire, 1970).

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