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Migration and Identity through Creative Writing

StOries: Strangers to Ourselves

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Preface

Although the back-story of the birthing of this edited collection has been told in some detail in the introductory chapter of this book, it is important to highlight a few important aspects in this Preface. The precursor to this book was the book-project, titled *The StORIES Project: Strangers to Ourselves*, envisioned and born during a conversation between the lead editors, Alka Kumar and Anna Triandafyllidou. This happened during the first stages of our strange and unprecedented COVID-19 times; the book-project was subsequently developed and implemented at the CERC program at Toronto Metropolitan University in Toronto during the remaining months of 2021.

In terms of the how-to, a call to invite interdisciplinary graduate students at Canadian universities was announced; and following a competitive process of recruitment, a nine-month timeline was kick-started in July 2021 to March 2022; and the engagement process with the project participants – now authors of the chapters contained in this edited collection – was somewhat on the lines of a graduate seminar, but also different (see Chap. 1 for more details). Our objective was to explore the potential of personal storytelling, narrative inquiry and creative writing to examine the lived experience of Canadians to generate new insights into complex and multigenerational migration histories, and contested notions of diversity, race and identity in Canada today.

The group of twenty plus selected graduate students came together weekly in a shared (virtual) space of engagement and conversation during summer and fall 2021, and we brainstormed using structured discussions, based on academic and literary readings, and audio-visual resources. Co-creation and reflexive practices among peers were strategies that were encouraged greatly, and we shared our experiences and our stories; we collaborated to give form to our thoughts and our writings with the help of reflection prompts and by employing several other thinking and writing strategies. As a group, we aimed and managed to create a non-hierarchical as well as a brave space, and many of the stories in this book were seeded and born here, while other family stories, previously deeply buried, were excavated; and without the nine-month process of engagement that was at its core, there would be no book. Given this seminar space became our safe ‘online’ home

for a few months to be united with each other as a special community – while ironically, we also lived our ‘real’ COVID-lives isolating from family and friends – there were both abundant cathartic tears and experiences of bonding through solidarity as we found that our story-sharing resonated with our colleagues and our peers. This process also led to an in-person creative writing workshop with Canadian internationally acclaimed author MG Vassanji that took place at the CERC offices in November 2021.

In addition to the above, the scholarly and methodological imperative behind this story-telling initiative and book-project was to centre lived experience, narrative inquiry and personal voice to explore the potential of alternative methods of knowledge production in migration. Our intentions were not only to understand more deeply, and to mine, the potential of creative and non-academic writing forms-like creative non-fiction, memoir, reflective essays and autoethnography- to get close to authentic and layered life-experiences of individuals, as impacted by migratory movements in past or recent times; we also wanted to explore theoretical frameworks and methodological parameters that would help us shift Eurocentric paradigms, the objective being to use counter-narrative for the purpose of decolonising the production and mobilization of knowledge. As the stories you read will reveal, this project and the book that has emerged from it, also became about re-visioning and meaning-making in relation to identity construction through ‘workshopping’ our writing in collaborative settings.

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Acknowledgements

The time to write a note of Acknowledgement is a special milestone in the journey that produces a book, and as editors, it is certainly a grateful place to be in. It is a significant landmark for a number of reasons. Not only does it signify completion, it also creates a space for reflection; to think about lessons learned, mistakes made; and a chance to look ahead, plan to do better next time, and to dream about the next steps in an ongoing journey.

Most importantly though, and especially in the case of an edited collection, it is an opportunity to offer thanks to all the contributors whose commitment and hard work made it possible for us all to arrive at our destination together. In fact, in the case of this edited hybrid collection, *Migration and Identity Through Creative Writing: StOries: Strangers to Ourselves*, as the core at its heart is personal storytelling, we are especially grateful to all the contributing authors (let's call them story-owners too) for allowing themselves to be vulnerable and open in the sharing of their hidden and untold 'migration' stories. As editors, we appreciate the sharing of authentic experiences that came from each author, now presented in the stories collected in this volume. These stories are often of buried (or silent) inter-generational trauma, stemming from experiences of individuals leaving old homes with their families during childhood or youth, and being compelled to create new ones elsewhere; or having to continuously respond to oft-asked questions like 'where are you *really* from'; or seeking answers for oneself, to the 'who am I' question. The stories told also celebrate the fact that these writers own the fact that they come equally from many places, and that it's not about being either from 'there' or being 'here' but rather they choose their own happy place as one that's from everywhere and anywhere, simultaneously and at once.

We thank all the wonderful authors who took this leap of faith with us to participate in an innovative and dynamic project and helped co-create its unique journey and its story. All authors come from an academic standpoint, being graduate students – current or recent – and many of them were first-time dabblers in creative writing; given that, the stories are really well written, moving and powerful, but the reader must ascertain that for themselves by engaging with them. It speaks to the power of personal writing and the sense of agency it brought to us all, individually,

and as a group; certainly, it was a liberating experience for us all who live mostly in a research space and undertake writing tasks in academic and scholarly modes, and everyone appreciated the legitimacy and space the StOries Project provided – to write ‘differently.’ All these 20 story-chapters run from Parts II to VII in the Table of Contents.

As indicated earlier, in our imagination, this book-project was experimental, dynamic, and iterative; and there was a core of fluidity integral to our method, based on its exploratory nature. The plan was for the collection to contain both academic and scholarly chapters grounded in migration themes that emerge from the stories, and explicate them through situating them in relevant literature; and there are story-chapters contributed by each author who participated in the project. In line with this objective, Chaps. 1 and 2 are an exploration of relevant migration literature that exemplifies aligned migration tropes and trends, as well as thematic, theoretical, and methodological frameworks that help ground this edited collection.

Special thanks and our appreciation must go to the editors of the two chapters that comprise Part VIII: ‘Reflections, Conclusions, and New Beginnings,’ Ozlem Atar, Esra Ari, and Natasha Damiano – also project participants and authors of their own story-chapters. Having its inception at an unprecedented time in history, with new unknowns unfolding on an everyday basis, COVID-19 became an important protagonist and shaping influence for us all; and we felt that this book needed to tell the story of how it was impacting project participants, i.e., the authors of this collection. As indicated above, this book was always envisioned as a hybrid collection-carrying academic and non-academic writing forms (in creative and literary styles); it made sense then, to include an academic chapter on the pandemic.

With true generosity and courage, in Chap. 23, titled ‘Pandemic Thoughts: Life in the Times of COVID-19,’ Ozlem and Esra collaboratively stepped up to this tall task of collaborating on writing this scholarly chapter on the experiential aspects of the pandemic. In addition to taking on full editorial responsibilities – of conceptualizing, writing, and editing this chapter – they also took on coordinating roles by reaching out to all project participants to gather their pandemic stories. We have no doubt that our readers will appreciate the contextual nature of this chapter, and its experiential flavour, as well as the methodological framework of collaborative auto-ethnography the editors employ to connect the dots between the personal, the social, and the political.

Chapter 24, ‘Becoming Through Story: The Relational Processes of Writing and Creating the StOries Project,’ the second scholarly chapter in Part VIII (and the last of the four academic chapters we have in total), written by Natasha Damiano, is an insightful and complex articulation of the process and the behind-the-scenes journey we went on together as a way to arrive at this edited collection. In line with the exploratory and iterative stance that this book represents, Natasha accepted to take on the writing of this concluding chapter; and her philosophical ruminations take her in several important directions; some of the questions she raises relate to knowledge paradigms in migration being entrenched in colonization; the need to centre story as method; and the role of language in making sense of sensory experience. Being an anthropologist, through her reflections, she makes sense of the

‘field-notes’ maintained by project participants to document the unique ways in which each individual recorded their ‘experiencing’ of different life-stages of the project; while also being analytical about the activities that writers engaged in that were instrumental in processing their lived experiences, and tell their story. We thank Natasha not only for her thoughtful reflections on so many topics that are central to the arguments developed in this book, but also for the extensive tasks needing much coordination that she performed single-handedly.

In their roles as editors of these two academic chapters in Part VIII, Esra Ari, Ozlem Atar, and Natasha Damiano are an integral part of the editorial team, and we thank them for their valuable contributions. We also thank especially Jenny Osorio; and Arunkumar Rajavel for providing support, editorial as well as compilation-related. We appreciate the diligence and hard work Karen Young put in, to document and record on a regular basis, the proceedings of our workshop sessions during the first phase of the STORIES Project.

Most significantly, this book could not have become a reality without the labour of love that each and every author in this book committed to with excitement and with passion when they embraced the challenge and the opportunity of sharing their unique story of migration, and for this, we will always be grateful.

Finally, this edited collection, *Migration and Identity Through Creative Writing: StORIES: Strangers to Ourselves* and the ‘workshopping’ the StORIES Project that preceded it, came to life as a result of generous financial support received from CERC in Migration and Integration at Toronto Metropolitan University which in turn is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Envisioned and initiated by the Chair of CERC, Anna Triandafyllidou, it received administrative support from the CERC team, and for all these blessings we are truly appreciative. The project also created for us all a unique and stellar opportunity for an all-day Writing Workshop with internationally acclaimed Canadian writer, MG Vassanji, and we thank CERC for this too.

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Part I
Setting the Stage

Chapter 1

Between Critical Inquiry and Creative Writing



Anna Triandafyllidou and Alka Kumar

1.1 An Introduction

Migration is rich with stories-of ongoing journeys, destinations and returns, of wanderlust and the co-existence of multiple identity narratives. It often is about individuals and families seeking fresh opportunities, second chances for building new lives away from their original home, in an elsewhere far away. These migratory movements, often transnational, are also about paradoxical realities of living continuously in in-between spaces, experiencing at once loss, belonging, and the birth of new possibilities. Memories and exclusions are other popular migration tropes; the point then, the experience of migration, as unique or universal as it might be, is always rooted in everyday stories of lived experience, of real people striving to create new beginnings and tell stories that are both precarious and exciting, real and imagined.

The book *Migration and Identity through Creative Writing: StORIES: Strangers to Ourselves*, is a hybrid edited collection that emerges from an interdisciplinary migration-themed project that began in July 2021, at the Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) Program in Migration and Integration, at Toronto Metropolitan University, in Canada. Initiated with the objective of giving voice to the multiplicities and layers, nuances and contrarities that co-exist at the heart of migration narratives, it was created as a virtual project against the backdrop of COVID-19. Further, this book-project is also inspired by the fractious environment initiated by pandemic inequities, as well as the racism and the social isolation it gave rise to. The first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic became a time when paradoxical narratives began to emerge-of communities being impacted differently based on the privilege they had or lacked; and diverse population groups being

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inexorably connected through participating in a unique human experience. ‘We’re all in this together’ became an oft-cited war cry while the need to build solidarities and support networks with each other rather than being separated by differences was emphasised.

This project lives at the intersection of the ‘experiential’ and the ‘narrative’ in Migration Studies; and contributors are Canadian researchers and emerging academics and practitioners in migration and other disciplines (with intersecting interests in migration). Although the stories are produced in Canada-several situated here too-they span geographical locations, personal memory mindscapes, and complex political and social issues rooted in countries as varied as Brazil, Colombia, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad, India, Iran, Italy, Taiwan, China, Turkey. This duality makes the collection relevant for Canadian researchers, academics, and general readers; and also beyond-to an international readership interested in migration, both from a scholarly perspective and from a popular culture standpoint.

1.2 The Canadian Context

Given the collection’s grounding in dominant articulations of ‘Canadian’ multiculturalism and immigration policy, and in specific notions around diversity and integration that shape the lived experience stories told by story owners, a few specific contextual considerations are highlighted below.’ Some of the explication that follows in this section may be particularly helpful for readers-international and others-who have a cursory understanding of the Canadian context, and would like to learn more. This may be helpful as the following conceptualizations of migration and integration trajectories; and of intergenerational dilemmas they often lead to, serve as the backdrop to several stories included in this collection.

1.2.1 *Multiculturalism as Official Policy in Canada*

For instance, it may be helpful to note that multiculturalism-oftentimes the contextual backdrop in the stories and personal essays collected in this volume, and at other times situated centre-stage- has long been enshrined as official policy in Canada; it came into effect through the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in the 1970s, and became law in 1988. Several studies have teased out dilemmas and complexities inherent in this framework as well as ways in which lives of immigrants and non-immigrants in Canada are impacted as a result of this policy (Berry, 2011; Ghosh, 1994; Halder, 2012; Imbert, 2017; Joppke, 2017; Kymlicka, 1995, 2010; Moodley & Adam, 2012; Naidu, 1995). Contrary to its conceptualization and implications in other societies globally, multiculturalism in Canada is intentioned towards equality for all; and the provision of rights and freedoms to minority communities to protect and preserve their differences, their heritage and cultures, religion and languages,

while celebrating their diversities and facilitating their meaningful integration into Canadian society, including in the labour market- through Canada's employment equity policies. Further, not in the manner of the American "melting pot," Canada's integration framework (and model) encourages ethnic and cultural communities to preserve and promote their cultural practices, their heritage, and their differentiated identities, just as individualized pieces stand out in a "mosaic." It is a big topic- and has immense potential to impact the everyday lives of individuals and groups- and is made sense of by people, based on their specific situated-ness.

Clarifying this notion further, a scholar's disciplinary orientation shapes their views about multiculturalism, and as a policy framework, a newcomer to Canada may see it as full of promise with potential to reassure them of their human rights. Scholars and academics have defined it variously, discussing if it is a single doctrine, or if it has been slowly dying (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). Over the last few decades, and based on the climate of the times, scholars from multiple disciplinary standpoints have argued about its role in shaping (and being shaped by) discourses around cultural differences and Canadian identity, immigration, diversity and democracy, citizenship and human rights, and other big narratives that shape the world we inhabit. Critics have discussed its relevance, and the backlash to it, including observing that despite its liberal connotations it has little power to enforce equity or to assure migrants of anything substantive, like, economic rights, which is what they most need (Bannerji, 1996). On the other hand, any rights framework is perhaps a good thing, as within it, an institutional or legal structure exists that individuals can access when the redressal of wrongdoing, or legal recourse, is needed. To understand discourses, and everyday realities, concerning integration and belonging, racism and discrimination, or even the key considerations in Canada's immigration policy and governance, multiculturalism is not only a useful theoretical tool for analysis but also has practical applicability in the every-day, as well as implications for policy and practice on the ground.

1.2.2 Visible Minority: Names and Labels and Their Impact on Identity-Making

Views and perceptions about immigrants that fit them into neat one-dimensional economic (and social) paradigms often construct individuals and communities in a monolithic, either/or representation. For example, it became quite clear during the StOries Project discussions, that legal citizenship on paper does not always grant the right to be recognised as "Canadian," particularly if an individual belongs to a visible minority group. There are other 'signs' of belonging including phenotype, name (foreign sounding or not), accent, only to name a few. Generally, in conversation when a reference is made to "Canadians," the (default) implication is not to citizenship but rather to an Anglo-saxon or French ancestry. Naturally 'Canadians' is a malleable category as it may simultaneous include those of European ancestry in

general but exclude some Europeans (e.g. from southern or eastern Europe) compared to others (from northern or western Europe or from Australia and New Zealand.) There are multiple layers of identity and recognition as is common in most major immigrant receiving countries, which include not just the legal form of citizenship but also the phenotypical appearance, name and accent of people. As Ager and Strang (2008) have argued in their work on integration, there are different layers and aspects of belonging and of becoming integrated and these are recognised in interaction with other members of the community. In countries like Canada however, where the path to citizenship is relatively straightforward (three years of residence with permanent resident status are required to apply for citizenship and the state makes it a priority for new immigrants to become citizens when the time comes (see for instance Hou & Picot, 2021), the dominant narrative of welcome and inclusion often stands out in sharp contrast with experiences of discrimination that individuals face in the every-day. Our work in this volume seeks to elaborate on the complex intertwining of these different layers of identity and belonging and of feeling ‘integrated.’

Dismantling and interrogating the subtle forms of exclusion or discrimination can help us navigate and critique hidden assumptions and biases widely prevalent in popular culture. This can also be potentially useful in deconstructing the impact such labeling and terms of representation have upon newcomers’ constructions of self, as well as their self-esteem. For example, terms like “visible minority,” “immigrant,” “migrant,” or “newcomer” – used to describe or address this cohort- shapes not only their self-perceptions, but also others’ assumptions, and negative stereotyping of them; and this often creates homogenizing and totalizing mainstream narratives in relation to immigrants and immigration. These play a role in further enhancing migrant individuals’ sense of a marginalised outsider-status (Maxim, 1992; Ogbuagu, 2012).

Although such forms of identity-making are most powerfully experienced by individuals who are new entrants in the host culture, oftentimes, as years roll on and they become legal citizens, and are meaningfully employed, such labels stick, confirming their minority status; such labels-carrying negative biases- become further normalised due to the color of people’s skin, their accents, or their need to sustain their bi-cultural identity (Haiying, 2005; Tafarodi et al., 2002) through continuing to maintain their cultural practices, and their religious traditions, like celebrating their festivals or going regularly to their places of worship.

Canadian multiculturalism may be seen to lie at the heart of these tensions and gaps because it promises inclusion with space for diversity at the individual and collective level (for example, through aspiring for an integration model, like a ‘mosaic,’ not a ‘melting pot’) but then it does not fully deliver on the promise, particularly for those who belong to a ‘visible minority’. As Will Kymlicka notes, multiculturalism has offered in Canada an incomplete process of ‘citizenization’ as minorities have often suffered a stigma of not belonging, whether because not contributing hard enough to society or because they are ‘citizens of convenience’ (Kymlicka, 2022: 25.)

The vocabulary used in Canada is telling of contradictions that reflect both a proactive migration policy and the history of an immigrant nation and a settler colonial state. Thus immigrants are understood as different from migrants – where immigrants are those who come with a perspective to stay and usually have entered the country as permanent residents, while migrants are those who entered with a temporary status and are expected to leave. It is though now clear that this distinction largely no longer holds as even in Canada many people arrive with a temporary status and then transition to permanent (Akbar, 2022). Citizens and permanent residents of a non-European or non-white background are labelled as visible or racialized minorities. The term is preferred to ethnic minorities (used in Britain) or immigrants, guest workers (Germany), people of immigrant origin (France) people from outside the EU (extracomunitari) (Italy) or allochtones (the Netherlands) as used in different European countries for instance. Visible or racialized minorities signal non-whiteness as a common feature and the experience of being perceived as non-fully Canadian, this regardless of their legal status. The term is truly more flexible and accommodates how different communities may define their identity at the intersection of ethnicity, race, religion or other attributes.

The notion of visible or racialized minority and the overall approach of multiculturalism, while in principle positive and laudable, may turn into a double edged sword. Through its official mandate to encourage (even promote) cultural diversity, multicultural policy often ends up congealing migrant identities in specifically ethnic moulds, precluding possibilities of fully embracing a Canadian identity, especially for migrants who might choose to do so. In other words, ethnic minority status is often thrust upon migrant individuals and groups even when they themselves do not own up to occupying such a space on the periphery, and have moved beyond such a personal subjectivity. For the 1.5 generation (those who migrated to Canada with their parents as children or youth), as well as for second and later generations, the impacts of assumptive and racist behaviours they experience can be more intense and deeply negative when compared with their parents' generation. Being born or raised in Canada, (or both), their situated-ness and status in Canada defines their sense of self; and their claims to a Canadian identity, as well as their attachment and belonging to this country and their home, is very different from that of their parents as Canada is the only home they have had. Experiencing racism, discrimination, even an outsider status in such a context has enhanced potential for personal and social conflict.

1.2.3 The (Problematic) Politics of Representation

Deconstructing this politics of representation further, one established view perceives migrants as a monolithic group that takes jobs away from more deserving and entitled Canadians while the other perception sees in them a necessary resource that can make a useful contribution to the Canadian economy. Such dualities in perceptions relating to newcomers create a binary wherein individuals are often situated on

two opposite ends of a spectrum (van de Ven & Voitchovsky, 2015). Besides, such a binary is problematic also because these two views become separated and compartmentalized spaces into which individuals and groups are often forced to fit in, with no real options of being situated in the more nuanced spaces that lie in between.

As a result of these broad strokes, the specificity of a life and singularity of the story replete with everyday lived experience of success and failure, is lost (Ogbuagu, 2012; Hébert et al., 2010; Wilkinson, 2013). Further, such grand narratives lead to simplifications, generalizations, and patterns that create rigid and homogenous categories that get locked in popular imagination and culture. As well, they lead to stereotypical representations and assumptions that are often fixed and one-dimensional (Krishnamurti, 2013; Mogadime et al., 2012). These two mindsets co-exist, both indicative of racial biases, namely, immigrants viewed as resource that will perform jobs “Canadians” don’t want to work at, and when they get good jobs being seen as outsiders who steal good opportunities from more deserving Canadians (Berry, 2011; Palmer, 1996).

Many migrants, new to the Canadian context, are offended by this turn of events because they know well their own expertise. They are well aware too that such blue-collar minimum wage jobs in call centres or flipping burgers, or working as security guards and health care aides, are not the jobs they came to Canada to work at (Danso, 2007). Even when viewed as respectable here when compared with perceptions of people back home, these forms of employment often make them feel humiliated, underutilised and unable to contribute in ways they believe themselves capable of or qualified for (Chatterjee, 2015). Immigrant professionals encounter other significant challenges apart from unemployment, for example, underemployment, and over-qualification (Bluestein et al., 2013; Ng & Shan, 2010; Reitz, 2001; Thompson et al., 2013), deskilling, and devaluation (Guo & Shan, 2013). Their lack of job search experience in this new cultural context is a major barrier in and of itself, and certain prescriptive methods and behaviors are recommended by settlement organizations in order to help them achieve success (Akkaymak, 2017; Guerrero & Rothstein, 2012).

1.3 Narrative Braiding of the Experiential and the Scholarly Through Creative Writing

This edited collection brings together storytelling and self-narrative, creative writing and narrative enquiry to explore a variety of topics in migration from an experiential lens. The volume is both hybrid and multi-genre as it contains both scholarly chapters grounded in academic migration literature, as well as personal essays and creative non-fiction. The objective was for contributors- trained as researchers and academics, being current or recently graduated students- to employ creative writing formats and techniques to tell their personal migration stories. These 20 narratives,

written primarily in a creative non-fiction and personal essay mode, were initiated and seeded through using a collective process of ‘workshopping.’

Being both personal and sociological, political and intergenerational, many of these stories are also loosely informed by autoethnographic perspectives and principles. However, given they are not academic essays, or research studies, they cannot be characterised as autoethnographic texts per se; nor did the authors set out to produce them using precepts that underpin analytic or evocative autoethnographic approaches. That being said, several stories straddle the liminal and blurry boundaries existent between autobiography and autoethnography. In addition to the 20, what we may call story-chapters, there are four academic chapters too- this introductory one, a chapter on methodology, a chapter on the COVID-19 Pandemic, and a last chapter on ‘notes from the field’ that wraps up our thinking on (alternative) ontological and epistemological pathways for studying migration ‘differently.’ These academic chapters examine and discuss the related concepts of migration, like, identity and diversity, integration and agency, transnationalism and return, providing critical reflections on these concepts. Further, together these chapters propose a particular methodology for ‘workshopping’ migration narratives, and writing about (personal) lived experiences through iterations of scientific reflection, narrative enquiry, and creative imagination.

This book project uses creative writing to explore some of the main concepts and themes that pertain to migration, specifically those that emerged through the scholarly inquiry and creative writing the participants of the CERC StOries Project engaged with. These contexts and themes, as well as significant related migration concepts, are organised by the editors in thematic categories. In this introductory chapter, we discuss these conceptual, theoretical and methodological frameworks, and we investigate their connotations and ambiguities. We discuss recent developments in the respective fields and identify gaps in migration theory and methodology that we feel creative writing can contribute towards addressing. We also share a few examples from the 20 stories collected in this volume to highlight important migration themes the authors have helped to concretize through their personal essays and creative non-fiction contributions.

As an aside, it is important to note that a diverse and rich plethora of diasporic literature and immigrant writing-in all genres, from fiction to creative non-fiction, memoirs and personal essays, as well as in other innovative formats- is abundant internationally and in Canada (this country having the distinction of being a country formed through immigration, where apart from indigenous peoples, all other populations carry some past history or current story of migration). Postcolonial scholars and theorists too have explored and grappled with important migration themes, providing rich critiques on them. As Burge (2020), Gallien (2018), Woolley (2014), and White (1995) observe though, literary texts have not been a significant part of the study of migration, with social scientists continuing to see literature as ‘tangential sources’ (White, 1995, p.9). The gap is wide between the contribution of sociological approaches to migration and what interdisciplinary fields, especially the

humanities- and within that, specifically, literary studies and creative writing-can bring, to our deep understanding of the complexities of the migration experience; and much can be explored in the world of literary accounts that can expand our understanding of the migration experiences, and its multiple trajectories and tropes.

Following on the heels of the introductory chapter is the methodological discussion that begins by telling the story of the vision, objectives, and implementation of the StOries Project, grounded as it was in a workshopping process that was central to developing this edited collection. Using experimental and innovative methods to understand the lived experience of migration, the methodology chapter tells the story of experimental methodological approaches that were employed- that focused on personal storytelling, self-narrative and autoethnographic enquiry- to explore the potential of creative writing to delve deep into the lived migration experience. Additionally, the objective was also to examine the methodological and pedagogical aspects that underpin the processes of generating these stories (another form of data); for instance, strategies we used throughout the implementation of this project, like collaboration and co-creation, reflexive practice and peer-learning. These strategies led to the shifting of power dynamics within the teaching-learning environment that were instrumental in producing these creative non-fiction stories and personal essays. The implications these alternative methodologies have for knowledge production in migration research and practice, and for decolonising the field, are relevant to this discussion.

1.4 Methodologies for Exploring New Directions in Migration Research and Practice

This anthology is a hybrid multi-genre collection that represents the diversity and the variety, as well as the nuances, contained in the lived experience of migration. Bringing the world into one place, chapters Three to chapter Twenty-One are story-chapters written in a creative writing style- primarily personal essays and creative non-fiction. Given the shared commonality of profile between the contributors referred to above-all have an academic background- the authors are trained to write following the rules of the scientific genre, being aware of sociological and conceptual contexts in relation to migration specific theories and terms. However, the objective and focus of this collection was that writers embrace the challenge of writing creatively about these themes and issues, additionally turning the narrative lens on their personal experience of migration. We should add here that their participation in this initiative to workshop and submit their migration focused story for this collection came from their own deep interest and strong motivation to participate to produce stories inspired in a collective setting. In other words, through this anthology, we explore the potential of creative writing as methodology, undertaken by individuals who are not creative writers per se, but they are familiar with dilemmas and trajectories of migration and exclusion, both from a lived experience standpoint

and a scholarly perspective. It is important to also note, that unlike many anthologies of 'immigrant writing,' many of the contributors to this collection do not have first-hand experience of migration. More than half of the writers are either born/raised in Canada or they moved here at an early age of development as part of family migration—either as children or in their teenage years. Some writers came to this country as international students, some others as economic migrants, and they decided to pursue higher education in their later years once more pressing settlement and employment needs had been met. In terms of their racial and ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds too, there is a hybrid mix of identity-sites among them.

Another factor that makes this collection different, and innovative, is that although immigrant and diasporic writing is well-established as a canon in the literary field, and in cultural and postcolonial studies, to name a few disciplines, broadly, the focus of the scholars in those disciplines is to study the '{representation} of others' migrant experience (in diaspora writing, for instance), using textual analysis and critical and literary theory. The focus, through a collection such as ours, is to argue for the inclusion of creative and expressive writing in migration studies as an approach to explore, write and present the self through turning the lens inward. This is in line with the post-colonial stance of returning the gaze, and writing back from the perspectives of those whose stories these are, with the intent of taking back control, power, and agency. It is also with the objective of building new knowledge in relation to multi-layered experiences of migration, arrival, and integration in the host country, through producing non-hegemonic counter-narratives; and exploring arts-based approaches that have good potential to help migrants and refugees share their self-narratives with others. Employing Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches and autoethnographic narratives to design and implement projects that centre the voices and stories of migrants and refugees are important as they have the potential to get closer to lived experience than traditional research methods (See O'Neill et al., 2019; and work done by Dutch International Storytelling Centre). While these ground-up approaches and elicitive methods are being used in creative writing workshops—and these have been proliferating even more widely during our pandemic years—these approaches are still relatively young and somewhat experimental in the established academic field of migration studies, and should be expanded further.

Our aim, through this collection, is to reach out to both cohorts of readers: one is the general non-academic (mainstream) reader for whom migration stories and issues are a key context that shapes our world today. Importantly though, the second cohort this collection aims to specifically also address is the academic reader, including researchers and students of migration, interested in exploring interdisciplinary and innovative perspectives to enhance their understanding of lived experiences of migration.

The collection includes a chapter where COVID-19-titled *Pandemic Thoughts: Life in the Times of COVID-19* is the protagonist, and through opening 'a slice of life' kind of window upon these pandemic years, it centres these experiences as situated in the lives of Project participants-contributing authors of this collection- who

in some shape or form have been, or are still being impacted by migration in their own personal lives. Given that the last two years have generated ample data and stories- with findings resulting from both qualitative and quantitative research studies in the migration field- this chapter would contribute another layer of observations, insights, and critical analysis to the current literature on migration in times of COVID-19. Finally, the last chapter, *Becoming through Story: The Relational Processes of Writing and Creating the StOries Project*, is an interweaving of reflections and analysis relating to ‘fieldnotes;’ and while this chapter serves as a conclusion to the collection, it also lights the way forward, suggesting new theoretical and methodological ways of understanding ourselves and each other as well as contexts related to identity and belonging.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

This anthology explores the potential of personal storytelling, creative writing, and narrative approaches (like autoethnography) to delve into migration settings and mindscapes that emerge from experiences of mobility- be they recent, multi-generational or transnational. Connelly and Clandinin (1990), and Clandinin (2006), describe narrative inquiry as the study of the ways humans experience the world. Also, as it became clear through the ‘process’ of this book project, stories of life events are not simply definitive accounts of ‘what happened’ but rather, mediated by memory and imagination, these *storied* lives are reconstructions of *lived* lives (Christou, 2009). Several stories in this collection express the dilemmas individuals experience when they feel like they are forever both (partial) insiders and outsiders in both home and host cultures; and even when living and embracing such hybrid positionings, in the stories and essays they write, the struggles to fully understand and re-visit this dynamic and shifting self are ongoing and resonant. Moreover, it is in relationship with the societal that stories come into being; and it is precisely in these locations that they need to be negotiated with.

Boylorn and Orbe (2014) describe critical autoethnography- one of the qualitative research approaches that underpin some of the chapters- “to understand the lived {and contextual} experiences of real people, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination.” While the theoretical and methodological imperatives to consider this lens, and explore this approach more fully seem obvious, it has so far been little utilised to make sense of the interlinkages and resonances between the personal, social and political, and the psychological, in migration. As the disclaimer above articulates, the creative writing chapters were based more in personal storytelling and grounded in lived experience, and they were not written in academic and analytic styles that deliberately utilised autoethnographic approaches and modes. Even so, if examined critically, the stories in the collection demonstrate the potential within autoethnography- for centring experiential knowledge, bridging the personal self with the social text, and prioritizing interdisciplinary perspectives.

Further, speaking of interdisciplinary boundary-crossings in the context of migration, and considering creative practice more generally, creative writing facilitates processes and spaces where self-explorations can lead to therapeutic healing, including in a community setting with others; and this perspective has been central to feminist theory too. One of the themes we workshopped during the life of this book project was the question ‘why I want to write, and for whom am I writing.’ Describing the benefits of writing, bell hooks (1999, 4–5) explicates the value of the “counter hegemonic experience of creativity within patriarchal culture.” Chibici-Revneanu (2016), argues for the implementation of expressive writing workshops as an effective and financially viable policy measure to promote psychological well-being and integration for some migrant populations.

Finally, as an ideological position and a technique, posing a challenge to dominant ideologies through critically reflecting on one’s own personal experiences and social realities also reiterates commitments to social justice and to amplifying personal voice; counter-storytelling that focuses on uniqueness and specificities, as well as multiplicities and abundance, then have the potential to challenge hegemonic colonial grand narratives.

In a similar vein, through the StOries Project and the workshopping method we employed (leading to this edited collection), we collaborated and co-created safe spaces where it was possible to *break our silences* and tell our *own stories*. Our stories centralize our “*lived experiences*,” surface our lost *stories* and give *voice* to us. These are *counter-stories* which challenge the categorizations and stereotypical images of us which are produced and reproduced by the *white supremacy*. This act and process of writing and sharing our lives on our terms is an empowering process through which we reclaim our identities. Furthermore, echoing critical race theory, our stories *undermine the discourse that ours is a just* and a multicultural society. As noted by Delgado and Stefancic (2001, 144), “Critical race counter storytelling is a method of telling a story that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority”; it is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes (Decuir et al., 2004, cited in Ballesteros, 2022). Given the gap between our lived experiences and the promises of multiculturalism, the stories hold up a mirror to Canadian society but also more broadly to most countries in the world as they all experience migration as origin, destination and transit places and as most are ethnically and culturally diverse.

1.6 A Workshop Methodology for Writing

StOries: Strangers to Ourselves is a special book project that uses storytelling and creative writing to explore significant concepts and themes that pertain to migration. These themes have emerged through a project of scholarly inquiry and creative writing (using a graduate seminar format in its first stage), developed at the CERC program at Toronto Metropolitan University in Toronto during 2021. The themes

and the related concepts-presented through artifacts of literary and creative writing-are organised by the editors in thematic categories. All stories have emerged directly from the life cycle of this migration project, and none have so far been published.

The process of ‘workshopping’ themes and topics central to migration experiences was at the heart of the design and methodology utilized by the StOries Project. A call was announced, and based on a competitive selection process, a cohort of 23 current and recently graduated students, all with affiliations with Canadian universities, were selected to participate in this book-project. Using a discussion and workshop format, similar to a graduate seminar setting, a course outline containing academic and non-academic readings, podcasts, relevant youtube videos, and other online popular culture resources- like panels with writers, book discussions, and the how-to of writing memoirs and personal essays, as well as reading samples – were shared with participants. These resources as well as writing and reflection prompts, employed in a collaborative environment, initiated weekly discussions, leading to thoughtful collective reflections and writing exercises in a group setting. Additionally, other methods, including mentorship, were used that helped create opportunities for project members to develop and finesse their writing styles, both individually and collectively. It was in this workshop conversation setting, where we used collective reflection, peer-feedback, and writing prompts, to create an environment that was thoughtful, emotionally fertile, and that felt safe, where many of these personal stories were seeded and born.

1.7 Key Themes

In the introduction to this collection of stories, we discuss migration related theories, trajectories, and tropes that align with themes raised in all 20 stories. We investigate their connotations, ambiguities, and complexities, linking these to specific topics explored in the creative pieces while grounding them in a broader review of migration literature, identifying gaps that we believe creative writing can contribute towards addressing. Using an interdisciplinary approach, this edited collection of migration narratives explores the following main stages of migration and the related concepts. We start with what precedes migration, notably the context of nation-states and notions of identity and diversity today. We then discuss the very experience of migration as a social navigation and the agency of the migrant. The notion of integration follows with a critical appraisal of how measures of integration may be misconceiving the nuanced experiences of migrants. We then look at what comes after integration, notably the negative experiences of racism and discrimination. Last but not least, we turn to what could be the last chapter of a migration project but which is often just a new beginning.

Below we offer a brief discussion of these key concepts and themes, and explain how contributions to this book address some of the issues that the research literature has emphasised, including new ones that were highlighted during the life-cycle of this project.

1.8 Negotiating Nation, Identity and Diversity

Migration today takes place in a world of nations. The migrant, as Abdelmalek Sayad put it more than 30 years ago, is an anomaly, a contradiction to the national order as s/he is present where s/he should not be (at a country other than her/his own) and s/he is absent from where s/he should be – at her/his homeland. While nations remain a powerful source of identity and legitimacy and the predominant form of political organisation today, they are also faced with complex challenges. Economic globalisation has intensified, bringing with it a more intense phase of cultural interconnectedness and political interdependence. The flows of capitals, goods and services have been intertwined with human migration flows even if in usually different directions. The global pandemic crisis of Covid19 is but the latest and most dramatic expression of how interconnected and mobile the world is. Kazmi's 'Suitcases: A Story of Migration During the Pandemic,' situated at the intersection of the experience of 'migrancy' and border closures in COVID times, is a moving testimony that takes us to that intimate place of what an individual 'feels' when their lifelong dreams are about to be shattered, their life put on hold.

In addition to a few other stories where the pandemic is mentioned in passing, or creates the context for telling the story, this anthology devotes a whole chapter-called Pandemic Thoughts: Life in the Times of COVID-19-to this global crisis of our times. It is a collaborative kaleidoscope of a few select pieces on COVID-19- a kind of time capsule packed with empirical evidence of multiple impacts the pandemic has had on migrant individuals, as well as on their families and communities. Important themes emerge, like gendered experiences of the pandemic and what mothering looks like at this time; social inequities and exacerbated negative impacts especially triggered by race and class identities; as well as how this unique time in our history has highlighted the demarcations between categories that further divide 'us' from 'them.' In these creative writing pieces, some presented as life defining vignettes, others in the form of philosophical reflections, this story-ing of 'life in pandemic times,' as articulated in direct and penetrating personal writing from contributing authors, can make the reader think more critically about migration in a time of transnational mobilities, as situated in the backdrop of global capitalism.

While some authors have seen in globalisation (Mann, 1997) and regional integration (Milward, 1992) the rescue of the nation state, others (Papastergiadis, 2000) have announced the death of nations and their fall into irrelevance as globalisation and international migration intensify, leading to the de-territorialisation of identities and the de-nationalisation of governance (Zorn, 1999). These latter arguments were indirectly supported by the critical sociologists of late modernity such as Anthony Giddens (1991), or Ulrich Beck (1992) who argued for the disjuncture between the individual and the collectivity in late modernity and the emergence of information or network society (Castells, 2010a, b). More recently though, several scholars (for instance Calhoun, 2007), have argued that nations are still important and relevant as communities that underpin political and social rights and democracy even if a certain dose of cosmopolitanism is necessary too.

Reality has proven right those who advocated for the continuing relevance, and perhaps adaptation of nations and nationalism, to the new challenges of post-industrial societies. Nationalism is re-emerging in different guises: as ethno-religious nationalism with racist overtones like in Orban's Hungary or Kaczynski's Poland (Buchowski, 2016), as chauvinist and populist patriotism like Italy's Lega party or France's Front National (Betz, 2018), in the guises of subversive populist left wing movements like Syriza which advance a sense of national independence in their anti-establishment discourse, and of course in the discourses of fear of the Other and a return to an authentic civic but homogenous nation rising in Austria (Wodak, 2016), Norway (Bangstad, 2018) or Denmark (Jorgensen & Lund Tomsen, 2018). Thus, while the nation state appears to surrender to supranational institutions or private actors and its borders are transcended by multiple flows and networks, nations and nationalism are alive and kicking, and a good part of the citizens appear to ask for the re-nationalisation of the social space.

However, during the last 15 years, we witnessed also important trends in favour of transnational solidarity, transcending national borders. A case in point are the various Indignados and Occupy movements across Europe and North America in the early 2010 as well as youth mobilisations in support of the Arab spring movement. Later in that decade we witnessed both transnational commemorations of the victims of terrorist attacks in Paris, France or in Christchurch, New Zealand, and transnational protests like the Extinction Rebellion or the Fridays for Future in London, UK and other cities around the world. The same can be said about the most recent Black Lives Matter and anti-vax protests again across different countries and world regions that brought people together across borders along common themes of protest and solidarity (Triandafyllidou, 2022).

These contrasted trends suggest that the way we conceive of identity and diversity is probably changing and we need new concepts to make sense of such changes. The question therefore arises on how we can talk about identity and diversity today? Can we still use the categories of homeland, belonging, the nation or should we argue for a post-national existence (as the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also famously stated in 2015: Canada is the first post-national state). Recently, Triandafyllidou (2013, 2020) proposes the notion of plural nationalism as a concept that can accommodate these dynamics. Personal essays in the anthology, like Baksh's 'Random thoughts on immigration, religion and home,' and Ari's 'How I became an Alevi Muslim woman' are representations of gendered religious identities that reflect these fluid 'liquid' configurations of self that are both rooted in geographical spaces but they also come across as freewheeling, not tied to notions of any nationhood despite personal allegiances the protagonists have to a religion, sect, or ethnicity. While tropes that emerge from visceral notions, like nostalgia, belonging, and home, will at some level always be integral to the migrant mind-scape, these stories self-reflexively tease out these identity dilemmas while being comfortable with multiplicities, paradoxes, and also irreconcilable differences.

Plural nationalism acknowledges that the nation is based in some commonality. Such commonality may invariably be based on cultural, ethnic, religious or territorial and civic elements. What is important is that the ingroup perceives such

commonality and identifies with it, organises around it. Within this plural nationalism there is certainly a majority group that to a large extent has given its imprint on the national identity, through the historical process of nation formation which may have been smooth and gradual or traumatic and conflictual. However, this majority national cultural, ethnic or civic imprint does not monopolise the national identity definition and the relevant dominant discourse. By contrast plural nationalism acknowledges openly a degree of diversity in the nation that may stem from the period of nation formation and the existence of minorities within the nation, or may have evolved later through the experience of immigration. Plural nationalism acknowledges the changing demographic or political circumstances of the nation and the nation-state and through a process of tension, even conflict, and change, it creates a new synthesis. This nationalism is plural not because it acknowledges diversity as a fact but because it makes a commitment to engage with diversity. It is in these in-between spaces-existent between communities that see themselves (and that are seen) as definitively majority and others that are clearly marked as minority in the context of any nation- that a voice like Ari's claiming her space as an Alevi Muslim (a minoritized Muslim group) in Turkey have potential to challenge the dominant narrative.

A concept similar to plural nationalism has recently been advanced by Tariq Modood (2019) who has argued for a multicultural understanding of nationalism. Modood's notion builds on his earlier writings arguing that British national identity should accommodate post-migration ethnic minorities who ask for recognition and inclusion within the national self-concept (Modood, 2003). Modood argues (Modood, 2019: 236–237) that the majority and the minorities should stand in a dialogical relationship which should recognise that both identities are ever evolving, that neither side has the right to impose itself on the others, in ways that do not allow these others to coexist.

The notion of plural nationalism (Triandafyllidou, 2020) is not in reality particularly distant from the multicultural nationalism of Modood, albeit with a caveat: it is concerned not only with minorities within the state but also with real or imagined Others outside the boundaries of the nation-state. We argue for a more comprehensive view of nationalism in an interactive and multi-scalar context. Modood focuses on the normative and political dilemma of cultural and religious diversity accommodation and recognition in a national state, seeking to balance the relative predominance of the national (numerically superior and historically dominant) majority and the right of minorities to leave their own imprint on an inclusive national culture and to be allowed for public spaces of coexistence. Modood also emphasises that multiculturalism needs to focus on identity not just on rights and values if it is to create an inclusive multicultural society (Modood, 2020) and respond to majority anxieties. While we share this concern, both generally and in the context of representation of identity issues and dilemmas in this anthology, we are more preoccupied with understanding how identity works today and the dynamics that shape it; these are not to be found necessarily within the confines of the state but are related also to international pressures and constraints (see also Antonsich & Petrillo, 2019, on Italy) and situated in a triangular relational framework of the here, there and the

elsewhere (country of origin, new homeland, and other significant ‘places’) as Tahseen Shams very insightfully argues (Shams, 2020). In ‘Kingston Blues,’ Atar expresses her struggles with identity-constructions and erasures, and with notions of borders of all kinds—real, imagined, and assumed. As an international graduate student during her first lonely winter in Kingston, Ontario, and dealing with the immediacy of emotions like homesickness and un-belonging, she also has to navigate ‘polite racism.’ It is unnerving for her to observe herself being seen by others as a typical Middle Eastern woman just because she came to Canada from Turkey. What is that, she can’t help but wonder; is this me, she seems to ask in her story (knowing full well, that it’s not. If she is that, she is also much more, she asserts). Meanwhile, in her own strong voice, and through her favourite playlist too (a kind of home for her) she engages in self-portraiture, ensuring her reader can see her more clearly, and on her own terms.

1.9 Navigation and Agency: The Journey of Migration

Recent scholarly work has paid increasing attention to the role of individual migrants, their families and networks and on the interaction between structural factors, relational forces and individual desires and aspirations in shaping international migration. The former two are conceptualised as drivers of migration to emphasise their dynamic and interactive nature beyond the more traditional approach of push and pull factors (Van Hear et al., 2017). The latter have been discussed using various terms like aspirations, desires, abilities and capabilities (see Carling & Schewel, 2017 for a review). Efforts to conceptualise and operationalise the notion of migrant agency in irregular migration processes include the recent insightful work of Mainwaring (2016) and Squire (Squire, 2017, also Strange et al., 2017). These studies seek to cast light on how migrants in highly constrained and vulnerable situations still seek to regain control and negotiate their situation, exercising agency. The above discussion aligns with Osorio’s story, ‘WIP.’ Conceptualising these navigations to achieve integration and self-actualization using the metaphor of a ‘work in progress,’ this author centres her lifelong hobby of doing cross-stich, started at age 13, to voice dilemmas and contradictions embedded in questions like, ‘when does one start being Canadian?’ Storying a life through the medium of brief vignettes and photos from their family album, Osorio’s personal essay shares the process of becoming Colombo-Canadian, starting from the invisibility of arrival in Canada to slowly weaving into her embroidery piece, one stitch at a time, new experiences and skills, as well as brand new dreams ‘until we were seen for who we are, not for the linguistic gaps, or the cultural differences.’

Research on international migration needs to focus less on how migration policies shape migration but rather investigate how migrants seek to ‘use’ policies in creative ways to circumvent or bypass restrictions, find alternative pathways and eventually proceed with their migration project. Recent research has highlighted such strategies, for instance, applying for asylum to obtain a temporary legal status

(Bloch et al., 2011), go underground when other options are not available (Bloch *ibid.*), respond creatively to tighter border controls by passing as tourists (Chavez, 2011), or indeed use their knowledge of other migrants' past experience or international law to insist on coastguard to rescue them (Mainwaring, 2016). The creative story-form Rajavel employs in 'You lie in wait, you observe' to express the arbitrary nature of border control is surrealistic, mythic, and it carries a kind of legend-like quality. Located in circa six million years ago, the story takes us on a journey through time that feels almost timeless; it is a commentary on territorialism and human expansionism, large nations engaging in wars with smaller entities, and humans with power engaging in rigid boundary making to suit their own objectives, creating uncertainties and exclusions for individuals and groups they decide are not worthy to be admitted.

Following from these insights, we have (Triandafyllidou, 2019) elaborated on the notion of social navigation (see Vigh, 2009) as a heuristic concept that helps us analyse different forms of agency that migrants develop in their process of navigating the various barriers, build on their resources and achieve their aims. Migration is a multi-dimensional (social, spatial, temporal) process which develops in non-linear ways, with several transit phases and places that can also involve moments of being 'suspended' both physically (because 'stuck' in a place) and legally (because in irregular status) (Oelgemoeller, 2011). In other words, it is a 'fragmented' journey with different 'stops' and intermediate milestones where the journey can change nature and direction and where there can also be returns and new departures towards new migration destinations. During these phases, there is an interplay between the migrant's initial decision to migrate and her/his action of actually migrating, the conditions encountered while in transit and the related policies of both transit and destination countries, and the subsequent, or secondary decisions that the migrant makes.

As demonstrated by some of the stories gathered in this anthology- told by the 1.5 generation, and second-generation Canadians- both social navigation and integration can be ongoing and lifelong journeys. Ostapchuck, of Trinidadian heritage, and describing herself in 'Trinidadian Trinkets,' as a Canadian-born woman who married a Belarussian-Ukrainian Canadian man, shares in her story, some of her own identity-dilemmas: "There was a very good reason why I always asked what was for dinner, because it could have been any one of the following: pilau, dhal and rice, geera chicken, stew chicken, curry goat, curry dear, dumpling soup, and her own homemade roti; dhalpuri and buss up shut, which I only recently learned is also called paratha. One afternoon, Grandma let me help make the roti. I came in for the last step, but she let me roll a very small, six-year-old-Sarah-sized roti and cook it on the pan. I still remember how it tasted and felt. It was greasy and warm, with little brown marks, and it tasted like her roti, but a little chewier (I hadn't properly rolled it). I was wearing one of her aprons. It extended to my feet, like a special dress."

Social navigation and integration may even be intertwined in the way one spills into or shapes the other; and personal stories told using non-academic and literary styles of storytelling can be another way to get to the heart of those hidden and untold stories and the silent embedded layers of experience. This can have

implications for policy making too. For instance, terms in which we understand or expect 'integration' to happen, or be attained by newcomers and immigrants, is what currently shapes settlement and integration programs, services and practices, as well as social and public policy objectives. If other layers and nuances, arising from inter and multi-generational story-sharing, including historical or trauma-infused narratives, were to be added to ways of meaning-making and knowledge production, then that would expand the repertoire of useful research methods that can help excavate (and triangulate) lived experience data to achieve further analytical granularity.

Jennings' 'Family histories and stories that made me' is a good example of the social navigation process described above. The protagonist in this story is a second generation Canadian, and being white, has no idea that her family could have been from another country. In a school project in her social studies class on 'The Founding of Canada,' she first learns that Canada was founded by brave European explorers; and as she has seen her entire extended family always living in Canada, she begins her social navigation journey sitting in class and in 'shocked silence,' suddenly needing to ask, 'how could my family be something other than Canadian?' Well integrated so far, she now needs to ask the big identity questions: "what are we," and "where we are from." All the responses she receives from her family members seem fragmentary and inadequate. They dissatisfy her as she believes important truths about the past-pertaining to the family and to the nation- are being concealed from her. She wants to elicit these untold and missing family stories that are hard to tell, from her grandmother, before it is too late as she senses that these might contain the key to who she really is. The migration process is thus seen as a transnational socio-temporal field, an 'archipelago'. The metaphor of the sea and of the archipelago is appropriate in conveying the fluidity and dynamism of the migrant's social navigation. Indeed, it borrows from the story of Ulysses, and from the effective character of migration as a journey of both spatial and temporal nature where many actors and many places are involved. Social navigation is a useful heuristic tool that allows us to position the different actors and factors within a single framework.

The navigation heuristics offers the framework within which to place the migrant and her/his individual agency, the other actors that interact with her/him, notably her/his family or household that may support or indeed obstruct her/his decision (see also Belloni, 2016); the wider migration industry that provide their services to the irregular migrant to help her/him move (including smugglers, employment agencies, or employers); the enforcement and other control actors that seek to prevent her/him from moving; or indeed the third sector actors that may offer assistance during the journey or at destination. Thus, one can conceptualise the migrant's agency as a specific capacity to navigate the migration field – the 'archipelago' between her/his origin and her/his intended destination.

Migration entails a special navigation capacity, as unlike normal archipelagos, this one is a moving target: the 'islands' notably the policies, their implementation, the stakeholders, the degrees of enforcement can change – it is as if an experienced captain prepares carefully a journey but the intermediate stops may even change position in the journey. Perhaps a little like Ulysses who, deprived of technological

equipment, was unsure of whether he was going forward or moving cyclically and returning to places transited earlier. The sense that migration and the processes of social navigation manifest in a cyclical format, and that they may be understood as a moving target, can perhaps become most visible when individuals present vivid descriptions of their experiences. Khajeh, who moved to Canada as a young adult, writes a letter to her grandfather, and the narrative is about her trip back to Tehran; it starts with “I have left home again, only to arrive at my second home...once again I feel a whirl of emotions that pull my insides, emotions that I physically feel in my stomach, my throat, and the back of my eyes. I can cry any second but I don’t because I know these feelings too well, I know they won’t last but they’re never really gone either.” This story moves back and forth in time and space, sensory memory being the method and the bridge that connects the many nodal points between the past and present. Another layer can get added to this experience when the author reflects upon them; and in her reflections, presented in the Field Notes chapter, the narrator of this story describes the long process of emotional recovery from this trip back happening through the process of forgetting those sensory experiences, when replacing them with others in the new home happens. These reflections though are a key part of this internal journey as they help the narrator cope with the guilt of leaving home in the first place, and also understanding better the history of her home and also her own personal history as an immigrant.

The notion of ‘navigation’ includes both the initial stage where the migrant develops an aspiration to move, the capability to move, the resources mobilised, the journey and its different intermediary stops, the nodal points where the migrant may seek and mobilise resources to move further or the nodal points where the migrant may encounter Sirens, and Cyclops that will prevent her/him from moving further or will oblige her/him to take a different route or change the time of the journey. Such nodal points relate also to migration control and migration management policies. The notion of social navigation and the connection with the story of Ulysses and his journey fits contemporary migration understandings as these are not simply about where one wants to go and what one wants to achieve but also about who one wants to become (Collins, 2017; Bal, 2014), like Ulysses. We argue and show in this anthology that one of the ways to zoom into these liminal spaces that shape ‘who we become’ as migrants, as well as life changing decisions that need to be made by migrants when the path ahead is non-linear and unclear, may be achieved through using research methodology grounded in autoethnographic approaches, and literary and arts-based approaches. These are methods and strategies but they also go beyond that, being conceptual frameworks used to design and conduct research, and analyse data; and they are so far under-utilized in migration studies.

A crucial step in setting out from one’s port to *navigate* the migration archipelago is gathering information about the destination and the opportunities it offers to satisfy the migrant’s needs and wishes as well as to organise the journey. This is what Kahneman and Thaler (2006) call the *anchoring* of the decision to turn into action: migrants first evaluate the prospects that await them at destination and then they evaluate the hurdles to overcome in emigrating. Considering these different stages from decision to action, it is important to note that migrants operate within

contexts of bounded rationality. Migrants do not simply make mathematical calculations about costs and expected earnings. They are influenced by their own desires to stay or leave, and in function of those constraints the information they receive and the choices they consider as possible courses of action (Galotti, 2007, cit. in Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016). They thus tend to be selective in remembering past experiences (of their own or of others) and are also selective in the ways they consider their possible options (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016). Examples of this positive asymmetry in socio-cognitive processing can be found in Townsend and Oomen (2015) who point out that many migrants disregard information about high levels of risk in their journey believing this will not happen to them and rather focus on the positive stories that they have heard of. As Hernández-Carretero (2017) argues in her study of Senegalese emigration to Spain and return migration to Senegal, hope-filled uncertainty is preferred to hopeless certainty.

In ‘Guericco,’ Zuzarte pays tribute to her father, starting a letter to him with a eulogy. It is a long love letter that celebrates his life and the gifts he generously gave to her and to her siblings—wisdom, piety, fortitude, spirituality—and by role modelling life-skills and values that the narrator can live by in her own life. It is family history too, and while it could be a typical immigrant story, it is specifically the story of this family where we see the children (now adults) raised by hard working parents who came to Canada from Pakistan to follow their dreams of creating for the family a life with new opportunities. What transforms this ‘immigrant narrative’ into a unique story of a particular family is that this narrative helps us actually visualize how these individuals have become who they are due to the specific circumstances they experienced growing up. The reader can participate in the slice-of-life kind of resonance where the presence of a rich tapestry of still-to-be-told stories can be experienced.

1.10 Integration

Immigrant integration has long been at the heart of sociological research and policy-making. Approaches to integration have been impregnated by normative and highly political considerations alongside pragmatic ones. We define ‘integration’ as a process, rather than an end-state, that involves phases of personal and social change among individuals, communities, and institutions (Spencer & Charsley, 2016, 2021). It affects all of society (not just immigrants), is multi-faceted (has structural, socio-economic, cultural, civic and identity dimensions), is spatially defined (happens locally but involves (trans)national linkages), and evolves with time (at different paces in different spheres).

Despite the complex and dynamic character of integration at both individual, community and whole of society levels, much of the policy debate focuses on individual migrant competences such as language learning, employment, educational attainment and relevant “migrant integration” data, without necessarily due attention to the actual process of integration (Mahendran, 2013). Migrant integration

policy discourses often involve an imagination of society and the majority culture as a bounded unit to which migrants as individuals have to integrate, (often this actually implies that they should assimilate). Thus, integration requires the migrant to achieve a set of attainments in education, language and economic self-sustenance. In addition, while the policy discourse requires individuals to conform with the majority culture, their failure is attributed collectively to their minority culture that is not sufficiently “modern” (Schinkel, 2013).

Conditions for integration encompass economic, social and cultural dimensions, and it is generally agreed that integration is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. Integration processes involve both migrants and the receiving society, while the role of the sending country is increasingly taken into consideration. In effect, as Nebiler (2013) has pointed out, sending countries may impact their expatriates’ integration in the countries of destination through formal or informal channels, and through formal and informal actors. Government actors, non-governmental organisations, churches, families and even the media may thus play a role in the integration process of the migrant in the society of settlement as well as in their transnational engagement.

Ager and Strang have formulated a framework for the processes that may facilitate integration, identifying domains in which achievement and access matter. These domains include the sectors of employment, housing, education and health, assumptions and practices regarding citizenship and rights, processes of social connection within and between groups in the community, and barriers to such connections stemming from lack of linguistic and cultural competences and from fear and instability (Ager & Strang, 2008, 184–185). In effect, integration involves the real economy and the cultural spaces, it involves the political realm, the social sphere and everyday public life. Integration measures are frequently broken down into structural and socio-cultural components. Structural indicators of integration refer to the individual situation in terms of employment and economic condition, as well as in terms of political and legal spaces opened by the legislative and institutional context at destination (political participation, regular residence and access to citizenship, etc.). The measures of the social sphere instead refer to emotional, cultural, religious and social markers of integration. Guo’s ‘How I became a wordsmith’ is a good example of how validation of self and finding one’s voice can lead to an enhancement in social capital and feeling a sense of empowerment and agency. In his story, Guo reflects on his transition from writing in a journalistic role to becoming a narrator ‘in my own story...I started my writing career in China, but it was in Canada where my writer identity was finally born.’ This drive emerges, in part, from within, but it is also heavily rooted in external circumstances of support networks, personal, community-based and state-funded, that are available to individuals. Personality traits that shape attitudes, for instance, having a growth mindset and the ability to be flexible and adapting too can help individuals access and create innovative opportunities for themselves.

The ‘markers’ and the ‘means’ through which integration happens tend to include the following dimensions: Education, employment, income, access to citizenship, housing, civic participation, language acquisition. These concepts and definitions of

integration have been radically critiqued by Michel Wieviorka (2013) who has argued that so-called ‘models of integration’ are all failing, while authors such as Thomas Faist (2013) have proposed that integration, multiculturalism and transnationalism should be seen as interrelated rather than as mutually exclusive models. As migrants’ transnational engagement has intensified and transnational lifestyles have emerged, destination countries have begun to consider alternative integration models (Pitkänen et al., 2012). In such a scenario of shifting sands where mobility and transnationalism have become compelling contemporary paradigms within migrancy, how can such perspectives shape the big picture of policy and practices around integration, both from emigrant and immigrant perspectives?

The narrator in da Costa’s ‘Going home (twice)’ voices several dilemmas when thinking from an either-or perspective. Recounting all that she misses that’s part of her first home—the warmth of the tropics and the sea breeze, close friends back in Rio she can no longer relate to in the same easy way, and most important, as she notes, “I miss home because home is who I am.” She acknowledges though that the act of migration and living internationally has changed her in significant ways, and that she struggles now with belonging in both home and host countries, speaking both English and Portuguese in a broken fashion, “unable to fully claim any language as my own.” The emotions inherent in “neither here nor there” conundrum though do not necessarily come from a dark place for her; they are part of the roller coaster ride she’s taking where she can say with some ease, “how lucky are we, to have two places to run away to, and to run away from.” The note the story ends on is forward looking rather than nostalgic, as she takes active ownership of her decisions and her ongoing journey: “The sound of the wind is pointing to a new direction, new possibilities to follow and new ways of life to pursue. I’m divided in two, each half separated by 111225.83 km. I never want to become whole again.”

The power of personal storytelling and creative writing though, lies in the ability of these genres to present not only a unique experience and point of view, but it can also take a deep dive into emotional terrain, with focus on how individuals ‘actually’ experience the nuances of their self-perceptions (and understandings) related to who they are and where they are. This kind of ‘truth-telling,’ when presented through story, can be likened to the shake of the kaleidoscope that reveals a never-before-seen view of experiential reality; leading in turn to helping migration narratives break free of any conceptual notions of ‘generalised’ ways of representing migration journeys as being part of one trajectory or another, or being in any way, ‘typical,’ or ‘atypical.’ One of the stories in this collection that highlights the second-generation experience of integration for the protagonist in their own ethnic communities as well as in the broader Canadian society is: *Eyes and ‘I.’* The challenges of making sense of it all through reflections and analysis while still being very much in the midst of so many paradoxes, discomforts, and dissonances is communicated powerfully, when for instance, Young shares her story: “Remember when I felt confused when Mom pronounced fillings as feelings? There was nothing incorrect about this belief in itself. I genuinely believed for the longest time that she meant feelings as the key missing step needed to make dumplings. And when seeing family (friends) from Brazil, Mom got us to practice giving two to three air kisses to

anyone we visited, it was also a way of opening ourselves with affection to people we just met.” She goes on to reflect on her experience: “Growing up without living grandparents added to the anxiety of navigating life, of navigating between differing cultural worlds. Wading into this uncertainty has allowed me to see values in welcoming and befriending the strengths of opportunities that reality offers. The only way for 筷子 (kuaizi) (chopsticks) to work at once is when one is static, and the other is moving.”

Both in terms of content and in form, when authors in this volume share their personal lived experiences of carrying multiple identities, situated in family history and reflected in their growing up experiences with their families and in their communities, the vivid presence of embodied memory communicates the sense of who they are, as well as the swings between the joys and the struggles of belonging (and unbelonging) during their growing up years.

1.11 Exclusion, Xenophobia and Racism

These themes-racism and xenophobia, exclusion and marginalization -and discriminatory behaviours that emanate from them-are often pervasive in the scenarios that shape everyday lives of individuals who have an immigrant background. These negative perceptions and hurtful gestures do not only adversely impact newcomers or recent immigrants and refugees, but they also persist in the lives of those who carry immigrant histories or ancestry. Lightman and Gingrich (2013) summarise social exclusion as systemic processes that “(re) produce and justify economic, spatial, socio-political, and subjective divides (ensuring) denial of effective exchange of one’s abilities, thus cutting off avenues for upward mobility, leading to an uneven playing field” (124). Some obvious reasons for exclusionary biases that individuals experience stem primarily from skin colour, race and ethnicity, as well as foreign-sounding accents; and these in fact target the very heart of the matter, i.e., an individual’s sense of identity (who they are), often leading to emotions of displacement and permanent un-belonging. In Richards’ ‘Journey through the self,’- a story that grapples with being Black and feeling excluded due to the colour of her skin- the narrator struggles with her thick 4c hair, and with inadequacy, lack of self-esteem, even loss of a sense of self as she sees herself through the eyes of others. While born in Canada, but being labelled as ‘Jamaican-Canadian’ or Canadian of Jamaican descent, or straight-up Caribbean, she feels displaced and lost, confused about who she ‘really’ is. This impacts her personality and her relationships, even with Black men who expect her to be Black in certain stereotypical ways, “I find myself becoming more sceptical and non-trusting, and I may even have become a bit delusional, creating narratives from a stunted glance, a change in body language, or the slightest adjustment in intonation,” she reflects.

Other stories explore intersectional identity frames that create complex everyday contexts for exclusionary outcomes, as in Hui’s personal essay “written with love, and as an act to memorialise my dear friend, mentor, peer, colleague, Derek Yee, so

that his legacy as a poz POC activist will not be forgotten.” This essay highlights the vulnerabilities experienced by BIPOC people living with Acquired Immuno-deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), a global pandemic that affects 38 million globally. Wearing his poz (positive) and *Undetectable* identity proudly, and in his activist-identity, Hui always finds opportunities for telling difficult personal stories as a way to inform and educate the broader community about challenges faced by his community: “My conviction to engage in this writing is to make space for stories of others like myself, racialized queer poz settlers, whose passion and contributions to the HIV/AIDS response on this stolen land would otherwise be erased. This is particularly important as the COVID-19 pandemic has further deprioritized HIV/AIDS as a global pandemic which one would rarely hear about in the news unless during the Pride season or around World AIDS Day.” Further, as the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly highlighted, it is the lives of racialised immigrants, refugees, and newcomers worldwide that have been most disrupted by border closures and by social exclusion and inequities (Boris, 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2020). Due to the precarities of their temporary migrant status, or other factors like financial instabilities due to working in low wage jobs, they have needed to bear the burden of unsafe essential health care and retail work while the more privileged population groups have had the freedom and resources to work from home.

Moreover, although immigration policies in Canada and internationally have gone through major upheavals since the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have tried to accommodate the needs of vulnerable groups, like, international students, temporary foreign workers and refugees, the objective has been to primarily keep the economy going through utilising the labour contributions of these cohorts. Many of these groups, including racialized and indigenous women, asylum seekers and the undocumented, have become more precarious, or have been simply left out due to the temporariness in measures being applied in addressing issues that are systemic. For example, these problems and processes-like time lags, temporary fixes, and failure to use these emergency COVID-19 times to solve long standing issues in Canada that foreign trained health care professionals or temporary foreign workers face- also reveal embedded racist and discriminatory biases. Some of these prejudices have manifested in the lack of political will to really solve these longstanding complex issues even though the pandemic has made clear how indispensable these precarious and temporary workers are to deliver essential services at this time.

More covert forms of discrimination come in the form of attitudes and behaviours that stereotype and broad-brush individuals on the basis of certain identity traits that members of dominant racial groups see in them. These ways of ‘seeing’ people, based on assumptions made about them-because of factors like their race and religion, culture and appearance- in turn lead to othering and exclusion. One of the dangers these ‘single’ stories pose is that due to continued reiteration, individuals internalise them, and this too negatively impacts their sense of self. The writings explore real and imagined stories of encountering stereotypical behaviours, of being ‘seen’ through the prisms of others’ assumptions rather than in the multiple and simultaneous identities that their self- construction sees as more authoritative. Triandafyllidou’s experience with her son’s teacher, or the comment of the real

estate agent provide some rather common examples of how one can be made to feel ‘foreigner’. Damiano’s story, ‘Making a Place for Our Selves: A Story about Longing, Relationships, and the Search for Home,’ that centres to a large extent on her (Italian) immigrant father and the playhouse he built for his children in Canada when they were growing up, also amplifies many more complex and interconnected realities experienced by immigrant families in the everyday. For instance, it highlights the impacts that pre-migration lives, expectations, and relationships can have on individuals and their families, and how these can shape their entire lives in a new country post-migration; or the dichotomies that exist between the two worlds based on the differences between cultures, languages, and faith systems, and the disruptive effects of mismatched emotions individuals may experience around such issues. The second-generation immigrant (narrator) in the story struggles to make sense of the contradictions she feels at an emotional level, “People saw my dad as a manual labourer, but he’s more like an artist (or writer), making new worlds out of old ones, creating a place for himself in the process. Watching him lay bricks, he seemed truly at home, despite the fact he slept in the trailer. The last home he owned was with my mother when I was eleven, the second of two houses that my maternal grandparents helped to finance after my two sisters were born.”

Perhaps the stories in this collection will show the reader how subtle and urgent the personal experiences of racism, xenophobia, social exclusion and sexism can be, and that they have many faces. These can range from overt biases to microaggressions that may be understood or expressed only through silences; but they can still lead to anger and lack of self, mental health troubles and disruptions in families and communities; to a sense of forever feeling inauthentic, or an outsider. Damiano’s portrayal of her father, and by extension, her self-portrayal too, may be somewhat communicated through the following, “Maybe what my father wanted was not a house at all, not a place that *belonged to him*, but rather a place that felt like the home he longed for, a place where he felt *he belonged*. Maybe the dream of the family home never materialized because it was connected to a time and place in his imagination and forever beyond his grasp.”

1.12 Return and Re-migration

Return migration has been a key concept in migration studies and was initially seen as the endpoint of the migration project (Gmelch, 1980). However more recent studies have pointed to the complex character of return, reintegration, and the dynamics of remigration and circulation (Kuschminder, 2017a, b; Gemi & Triandafyllidou, 2021) suggesting that return should be seen as an episode in the wider migration cycle. Thilo et al. (2016) in particular have investigated the return and reintegration patterns of European migrants within Europe, exploring specifically the motivations for return and the concept of ‘return readiness’, notably whether people were prepared for that return, whether materially or emotionally.

Despite the wealth of research pointing to the complex realities of return – prepared, voluntary, or abrupt and forced return, by choice, by opportunity, or by necessity – policy thinking has been fixed on two opposed views of return. One is return as ‘success’: migrants have achieved their aims, completed their project, and are returning to their ‘home’ country. The second is return as failure: migrants are forcibly (or voluntarily) returned to their country of origin (or last country of transit) because they do not have the right to stay. In the policy discourse, return is somehow the opposite of mobility and ambivalence: it brings the migrant back to their ‘natural’ situation of being in their ‘homeland’ where they ‘belong’; or, it re-establishes order and security as it forcibly removes those who do not have the right to reside in a given destination country. The perspective adopted here is different, we explore the nuances of real or imagined return.

Recent research on return and remigration in south-eastern Europe (Loizou et al., 2014; Maroukis & Gemi, 2013; King, 2018; Gemi & Triandafyllidou, 2021) points to the need of further developing an analytical framework within which to make sense of return in a context of increased and more fluid migration in twenty-first-century Europe (Triandafyllidou, 2017). We conceptualise return as part of the wider mobility process in which the migrants engage. Return is seen as one dot in a non-linear course that may include multiple emigration and return sections as well as remigration (whether to the same destination country or to third countries). In our analytical framework reintegration is not necessarily about sedentarity; it is not about staying put and not emigrating again. Rather we conceptualise preparedness (for return) and reintegration as two processes that ‘frame’ return since preparedness precedes it and reintegration follows it; and in that sense, these factors condition further decisions of staying in the country of origin or remigrating. We see reintegration as a separate dimension from intentions of remigration. A successful reintegration may be a precursor to a new migration project rather than a factor for staying as it allows the migrant to gather both material and social resources. At the same time a failed reintegration may be a factor discouraging remigration because of lack of resources – or, of course, it may be a driver for remigration because of the lack of prospects at the country of origin. In other words, the relationship between return, reintegration, and remigration is more complex than has been argued thus far.

Several stories in this book speak of return although by definition our contributors are at destination rather than at origin. Khajeh speaks openly about return as she tried to return and then found her ‘homeland’ as inhospitable to her and decided then to leave ‘for good’. Her imaginary dialogue with her deceased grandfather exemplifies this dialogical relationship with the homeland that is longed for but has now passed, is no longer there. Triandafyllidou also notes her challenges of returning to Greece for a period, after 15 years abroad, and the realisation that after migrating you are never ‘at home’ in one place but rather you have multiple ‘homelands’. Baksh too speaks of return and this feeling of alienation and warmth at the same time. While her return is only a temporary one, like da Costa’s too in her visit to Brazil, they both debate about the redefinition of destination and origin and the real and imaginary returns and remigrations that one performs.

1.13 Conclusion

In conclusion, when it comes to personal storytelling then, it can often be difficult to delineate clear themes and to highlight points of focus in a narrative as so many little ‘life stories’ tend to crisscross and become braided together in a lived experience story. We share excerpts and insights from three stories as examples of the way self-narratives about lived experience have used creative writing in this edited collection to open a slice-of-life window through which we can see and understand the migration experience ‘differently’ than we might from conventional research studies that use qualitative research methods.

For example, although Liou, author of ‘My Taiwanese Mom Peaches,’ who self-identifies as a Buddhist and who comes to Canada on a student visa, hers is by no means ‘**the** story’ of an international student. In her narrative, through explorations of her fractious and conflicted relationship with Peaches, her mom back in Taiwan, Liou also shares with the reader a detailed snapshot of her life from the past that reveals not just her personal history, but it is also a vivid account of the sociological and political contexts of the time in which she came of age; as well as the difficult life and times her family members lived through in Taiwan for longer than half a century. Further, this story is a narrative about her parents’ upbringing, and the conservative values that shaped the punitive parenting she experienced. Through the story, the reader can peep into a window into Liou’s own lived realities and beliefs that emerged from the interwoven fabric of her life at the time-conflicts she was able to resolve, and dreams she could pursue in Canada when she came here as a graduate student. She writes: “My 80-year-old dad said he could not see me off at the airport when I visited them in Miaoli before coming to Canada in 2019. But he took me to the Highspeed Rail Station. When we pulled over in front of the Station, my 72-year-old mom asked me when I got out of the car, “Did you bring your phone, keys, wallet, and water bottle?” Before, I would have talked back to her without thinking, “Stop nagging! Of course, I did!” But at that moment, I felt as though I had been hit by an electric blast. I paused and said to her, “Yes. I’ve got everything. Thank you, mom.” Then I got out of the car and gave her and dad a big hug. I walked into the station and waited for the train to come. I could not stop my tears. It turned out that accepting mom’s care is such a happy thing to do. Why didn’t I see mom’s kindness earlier? Why did I stop mom’s love for me?”

Javaher’s story, ‘Things lost, things not lost, and the ones that were found on the way,’ is another moving story- about the migration journey to Canada a teenage woman undertakes with her family, carrying with her a secret box full of memories and longings; the box also contains a collection of mundane objects that signify for her not just her relationship with her best friend but the entirety of her life in Iran. She writes: “Leaving Tehran, and my friends, especially Leili, was never my choice. I never believed that some random place on the globe that I had only seen pictures of could have been better than the life we already had here at home. No one ever asked me whether or not I wanted to leave, and now I had to leave everything behind that I loved, and that felt like home. Among the long list of the ‘things’ that

“immigration law” would not permit us to take with us, according to our family lawyer, was my grandmother. Although such an important part of our family, she could not receive a permit to travel with us. Too many obvious and subtle changes had already transformed the essence of our life ever since my parents started their immigration project and because *we are going to Canada*- a phrase I had heard a million times in the recent months and had hated every bit of it.” For her, the start of her young new life in Canada seems to her already marred before it can begin, by a mishap with her secret box, and she ends her story in the following painful words: “My Tehran is so thinly dispersed on that security desk that I cannot pick her up as my hands could only catch the bigger objects. I take the box with me, and I leave behind about half a million feelings and memories in the particles of my childhood garden’s dust that remain on top of the white security desk and are destined to be wiped off. This is the last time I cry, as a teenage woman, on the soil of Tehran.”

Finally, Kumar’s story, ‘My PhD life, and Connecting the Dots between Here and There....’ is a reflective personal essay told in an autoethnographic mode. Using the metaphor of boundary-crossing, and the PhD journey as a key experience in her life-not only at a personal level but also one that highlights structural challenges in systems of higher education- the author connects the dots between the past and the present. In addition to being about serendipity, and finding personal and professional joys that can become the inspiration that carry us forward, this is a migration story too. Kumar writes about her migration journey, “I came to Canada as a ‘trailing spouse, and although I was the principal applicant for permanent residency, the process took so many years that eventually my partner got a job offer before our family application for permanent residence was approved; and we moved to Canada on his work permit. As it turned out, I switched categories, transitioning to ‘becoming’ an international student when I decided to go back to school. Although immigration policies are structured pathways through which to streamline cross border ebbs and flows, they impact lives of individuals and families in different configurations. They play out in unique and specific ways in the lives of immigrants and are not always straightforward, just as integration is a non-linear process that does not follow the path of a straight line.”

The collective journey that all of us- contributors to this volume-have walked on together through participating in the StOries Project, has been not only an experiential and safe learning space; it has also transported us to a place of togetherness and passionate commitment. We will always remember the joyful times we spent together in virtual settings during our momentous pandemic times, sharing our personal stories, tears and laughter. It is a leap of faith too as through this work and this volume our objective is also to disrupt current paradigms and conspire together to create some new and additional ways of thinking about and doing migration related work. This edited collection is a collective and collaborative product, co-created through all the contributors working, thinking and writing together. We hope, above all, that our stories will resonate with you, and that our unique and many voices will be that bridge that connects you to us. We also hope that our stories will inspire you to gather together and tell your own.

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Chapter 2

Experiments and Interventions: Re-envisioning Qualitative Research Methods in Migration



Alka Kumar

To be a person is to have a story.

Isak Dinesen

This chapter on methodology goes behind the scenes to tell the story of the book project that led the way to this edited collection. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, a call was sent out and a competitive recruitment process employed, to invite current and recently graduated Canadian students to participate in the StOries Project: Strangers to Ourselves. Not only does this chapter make quite explicit the raw and messy process of ‘workshopping’ that helped the contributors in processing and birthing their stories to produce this edited collection, it also explores our *raison d’être* for doing so. Starting then, with early ideas and a core vision to help us understand the lived experience dimensions of often complex personal and intergenerational migration stories, we used a scientific and rigorous approach to grasp what it meant for this cohort of authors—a group of academics, in most cases first time creative writers— to be so positioned; and how we explored the challenges of claiming our selfhood (and our stories), using the medium of creative writing. While the project and its contributors being situated in the contemporary Canadian context of racial diversity and multiculturalism was an important aspect of this initiative, the epistemological and methodological implications have a global reach, and the migration themes we explore are likely to have resonance for readers in other parts of the world. Given this (virtual) project came into being and went through all stages of its implementation during COVID-19 times, the current pandemic is a critical component of its backdrop.

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2.1 Our Process, and Our Objectives ...

We employed a pedagogical format similar to the graduate seminar to implement our vision and our objectives, but we also challenged it through re-making it. In line with how Giroux (2021) describes pedagogy, as a ‘moral and political practice... that presupposes discourses of critique and possibility as a part of a broader democratic project deeply implicated in addressing matters of economic and social justice and the grounds upon which life is lived and experienced,’ we too wanted, through this project, to deliberately rethink the ‘how-to’ of creating a teaching-learning environment where we could influence the production of knowledge and subjectivities, situated as they always are within a variety of sets of social relations. Among other strategies to achieve this-with the objective of democratising by not prioritising academic knowledge alone; and for the teaching component of this process, we included a range of educational resources that anyone situated in mainstream and popular culture contexts would also find intellectually engaging and emotionally stimulating, as well as easy to access. Among mandatory course-work readings then, in addition to academic essays, news and feature stories from a variety of media sources were included, including from social media; as well as audio-visual materials like Ted Talks, podcasts, and relevant YouTube discussions, especially interviews and panels with writers who work with personal writing forms like memoir and creative non-fiction, as well as with editors. We employed these materials to initiate brainstorm sessions, respond to writing prompts, and to create momentum for collective reflections, generating ideas and creative writing tasks in a virtual classroom setting.

More detailed discussion on some relevant specifics follows in this chapter and in others as some of the methodological approaches we used are described, and we show how our approaches emerged from the pedagogical ideology we pursued. The discussions we had were instrumental in creating a respectful environment for engaged and difficult personal conversations about migration that we had aspired to start in a group setting. This outcome, which in turn helped surface and initiate several stories in this collection, was closely aligned with our proposed research methodology, grounded as it was in narrative inquiry, personal storytelling and self-narrative. For instance, activities like collective reflection emerged from the need to use the theoretical lens and methodological approach of reflexive practice, collaboration and peer-to-peer learning (see, for instance, Lake (2015) and Weatherall (2019)). Employing such strategies created space for participants to explore techniques like sensory memory, and pursue the potential of multi-generational storytelling to surface missing moments from their past, to finally tell many of their concealed family stories. This was done by some contributors using research-based conversations with family members, or visual methods like photography or documentary filmmaking, and through utilising other arts-based strategies; including seeking out archival family materials, journal entries, and meaningful personal artefacts to excavate their own past; and using storytelling to re-visit their relationships with loved ones and with homes left behind. Several stories that

emerged from these experiences are part of this collection, while some of these raw experiences that contributors went through, while processing their thoughts and emotions, are part of the reflections included in Chap. 23, 'Becoming through Story.'

Our intention was to explore the potential of the above conceptual paradigm and methodological process to learn more, and also 'differently,' about the migration experience. As the process we followed was innovative and experimental, we did not know at the start, what this experience would feel like, or where such a method of creating knowledge about migration would lead us, but the objective was to centre lived experience and narrative inquiry, creative writing and autoethnography as ways for amplifying bottom-up discourses and personal voice.

2.2 Centering Methodology, Connecting the Dots Through Story

This chapter is, in a sense, the centerpiece of the anthology based on three significant factors: One: our objective in this discussion is to articulate the 'how' this anthology came to be, namely, the 'storying' of the vision we started with, leading to the process, and the actual journey that was instrumental in bringing forth this book. As we discovered during this trajectory of moving through these life stages, acts of 'storying' are hardly straightforward as competing realities can emerge for story owners as narrative anchors to the story that wants to be told. This is especially true where memory-work is concerned, and as Gubrium (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001) observe when describing the relationship between experience and narrative, that the local spheres of meaning become an important part of the specific mediating conditions that shape the story.

The chapters in this collection point then to the milestones that we encountered, starting with the collective experience of the StOries Project initiative that all contributors to this volume participated in. For a detailed discussion on this collaborative experience, see below. The other significant aspect was the one-on-one mentoring, including in many cases, peer-feedback that was given and received mutually; and these learning and writing strategies supported the authors in finalising their stories. Another important milestone on this journey was the day-long workshop where the internationally acclaimed Canadian writer M G Vassanji joined this group to share his writing journey, process and his insights on migration experiences and topics- to engage project participants, now authors, who have contributed their stories to this edited collection. Other milestones came about serendipitously as an outcome of our process that we had no way of anticipating; and these were the relationships that developed among and between project members that led to the creation of an environment that the group experienced as safe, and where difficult reciprocal conversations could take place. For many contributors, this led to therapeutic healing when they experienced loss of loved ones, parents and other family members, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic or otherwise. It was indeed a

generative work in progress, and new ideas emerged for topics that we saw as aligned that later have become additional chapters in the collection. Together, all these became stepping stones that lighted the way forward, leading us to achieving not only the objectives we had envisioned, but also others we had not imagined. Many of these unexpected outcomes of our process could be categorised as its relational elements and they contributed to our understanding of this process as one that helped create spaces where emotional safety led to fostering of trusting relationships and community building among contributors, leading to healing-in many cases, from deeply embedded migration traumas. Chapter 23, a kind of conclusion to this collection, discusses some of these outcomes while also teasing out the tensions and intellectual dilemmas this gave rise to, given this project was initiated and pursued in a context where we were also bridging academic and non-academic divides.

Two, it makes an argument for the rationale- for our 'why'-so, why, in the first place, did we feel the compulsion to explore topics like the lived experience of race and multiculturalism, intersectionality and solidarity (and others) in the context of living in Canada today. What current methodological gaps did we perceive in the migration field that led us to define our overall purpose, pushing us to pursue and implement such a hands-on teaching-training-writing project; and what did we, in our role as interdisciplinary academics and researchers, aim to contribute to the migration field by pursuing such a journey?

Three, we ask and we explore, how this workshoping process of the pilot StOries project, as well as all the discussions and stories that have emanated from it, help us see more clearly the potential of exploring alternative methodological approaches in qualitative enquiry to study migration: focusing it as we have, on lived experience and narrative practice, creative writing and autoethnography? Shifting between the voice of the researcher and the protagonist, we seek to deepen our self-reflexivity, offering the perspective of both the observer and the observed (see also Kaplani's sociologist and novelist gaze on his short border handbook (Kaplani, 2009)). Our own 'lived experience' of participating in this project and contributing our stories to it, both verbally and in literary and creative genres, has demonstrated that such engaged approaches in migration research have great potential locked in them. Our experience also makes evident that these approaches, and processes that emerge from such perspectives, are indeed resonant, innovative and value-added, and should be expanded. Not only do these alternative theoretical and methodological frameworks help us build knowledge 'differently,' but they also provide bottom-up ways to tell and begin hearing silent and missing migration stories.

Finally, as the stories in this collection demonstrate, if such experimental projects in migration garner interest from students, early-stage researchers and academics searching for new areas and methods of exploration in this field, pioneering work in cross disciplinary fields could be brought in conversation with each other, and insights from such contributions would help bring new ways of seeing and thinking to migration studies; and of 'knowing' about the migration journey more from the perspective of individuals who have experienced it. For instance, what

Khosravi (2007) describes is pertinent here; in what he terms as his border biography—an autoethnographic narrative of the time when, after finishing high school, he was called on to military service during the Iran-Iraq war. In line with the way Reed-Danahay (1997) describes self-narrative as a form that places the self within a social context; or as Pratt (1992) terms it, as an alternative form of meaning different from the dominant discourse, in Khosravi's words, he shares his journey of the night he became 'illegal,' but this is not just his personal story but also 'a narrative of the polysemic nature of borders, border politics, rituals and performances of border-crossing... (the story of the) 909 kilometre border with Pakistan and the 936 kilometre border with Afghanistan, as one of the most profitable (place) for smugglers, traffickers, and corrupt border guards in the world (322).'

2.3 Blurring a Few Lines, Exploring New Approaches for 'Knowing'

Our experience also made evident that pedagogical initiatives similar to the StOries Project could pave the way for creating learning, research and training environments in the field that focus on exploring alternative ways of knowledge production. Further, this manner of blurring the lines between research, teaching, and practice in migration highlights, in a way, that the feedback loop is much needed, between these forms and processes of producing and disseminating knowledge. Based on our collective experiential learning experience in the last few months, we argue that new possibilities can emerge through de-silo-ing these so far segregated entities—teaching, research and practice—as they relate to migration, to create a reconceptualising framework for 'knowing' more about the lived experience of migration transitions.

Murris (2021), and other contributors—among them, Taylor and Kuby—in an exploration of feminist, new materialist, posthumanist and postqualitative (FNMPHPQ) approaches, explore ideas and forms of 'knowing' in multiple disciplinary contexts; in their discussions, they reimagine how such re-conceptualizations enable the rethinking of ontologies, epistemologies and ethics. They ask how such a project, of grounding forms of 'knowledge-making' in FNMPHPQ approaches, is aimed at, (or can achieve) 'paradigm-ing,' i.e., disrupting ways of thinking of paradigms as we usually do, as tidy separate boxes that we need to fit into, but rather exploring how the tensions between paradigms can produce new ways of thinking, knowing and doing. They also ask why these new approaches matter, and in what ways these rearticulations have the potential to lead to new implications for re-tooling methodology, methods, research design, and researcher positionality.

In the case of migration studies, this is even more resonant (and needed), given a majority of individuals who work in the field—taking on roles as researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and in other support capacities—are motivated to select this field professionally due to their personal experience of mobility and migration transitions; they believe, quite rightly, that they understand in-depth the challenges and

issues immigrants, refugees and newcomers face. Also, this work for many comes from a personal place of passion and commitment, advocacy and social justice ideologies; arising from the desire for making a difference, and for impacting transformative change. Besides, we know well that, both in Canada and globally too, not everyone who studies migration has interest or aspirations to work in the academic or research sectors. It is important to also add a side note here that for many individuals aspiring to situate their work in the academic sector, lack of opportunities and other complex structural barriers exist. These challenges often lead them to experience these spaces as inaccessible, precarious, or low-paying, and this causes many to change sectors or leave the field completely to seek other more sustainable areas of work (although the context is not exactly the same, there are significant similarities between the above discussion and employment conditions prevalent in the settlement sector; and it is a well-known fact that access to permanent status in academia is even more difficult. For aligned discussions about precarity, uncertainty and lack of career mobility for employees who work in settlement and integration [often immigrants and newcomers, refugees and women of colour], see Turegun (2013), and Bauder and Jayaraman (2014).

Exploratory projects in migration, similar to the StOries Project, could then be a practical and engaged way to bridge the so far silo-ed worlds of teaching, research and practice in this field. This would also help disrupt power dynamics that create hierarchies between academics, researchers and practitioners, leading to democratising and leveling the playing field through expanding partnerships that value collaboration and co-creation between diverse stakeholders who work across sectors in the fields of migration, settlement, and integration. Given the global numbers of migratory populations currently on the move, and growing, based on international scenarios-from refugee movements to environmental disaster-related mobility and the consistent flow of economic migrants, and international students-the importance of this sector cannot be underestimated. As per the latest available statistics (MPI, 2022), if the number of global migrants-280.6 million in 2020, representing close to 4 percent of the world's 7.8 billion people- were to form their own country, it would be the fourth most populous country in the world in 2020, after China, India, and the United States. Hence, new, innovative and additional ways to understand these experiences and stories of movements, as well as the needs, challenges, and opportunities that arise on account of such unprecedented transnational mobility, will add more depth to our understanding of migration.

2.4 Workshopping a Book Project, Using a Research Lens

Although this is not a conventional research project leading to a book; but looking back, and wearing (my) researcher hat, I do retrospectively see a series of research questions that guided us in the envisioning, planning and developing the project, and this collection. I would frame these as follows: how can research methods grounded in lived experience and storytelling- that consider narrative practice,

creative writing, and autoethnography as alternative methods of qualitative enquiry—shine a light on the migration experience? How might we articulate the *raison d'être* for putting these methods front and centre in migration practice, for producing knowledge about the (migration) experience?

Further, as the project proceeded, the following sub-questions began to also emerge: is such an approach a methodological gap in migration studies so far, and if such perspectives and frameworks were used more widely, what additional insights might they contribute to the study of migration? Following from this pilot project, viewing it as a case study and a model, what might the potential be of strategies involving ‘workshopping’ and storytelling in the migration field as an ‘alternative research process’ to address current absences and silences that are too complex to reach using conventional research methods? How does this approach, and a process that stems from it, contribute ‘differently’ to knowledge production in migration?

Finally, we also ask a bigger question in presenting this innovative and experimental approach—how do we define the boundaries of research; is it possible to entirely separate the spatial, temporal and methodological parameters in which projects are developed and pursued; and how can the specifics of these multiple contexts contribute to shaping the knowledge being produced? For instance, as Sjöberg and D’Onofrio (2020) note regarding the conditions under which anthropological research is being done in the present, the research field has ceased to be a geographically contained and a temporally bounded space in the strict sense. Accelerations in this way of thinking about research have been ongoing pre-COVID-19, but the pandemic has further accentuated many experiential realities, including helping us to reimagine a completely new dynamics within the relational. As Barad (2007, p. 466) expresses it, (cited in Murris, p. 14), naming the pandemic not an “abstraction” but rather “an entangled state that reworks notions of contiguity and identity... (not just touching) us here and there, or just offering us individual moments of reflection, but rather (getting) inside our skin and (reworking ontologically) who we are.” Is it then not logical that these seismic shifts that compel us to live and ‘be’ different in a hyper mobile transnational world will lead us to pursue ‘different’ heuristic processes, and these will shape insights about migration that are more fluid, emergent and ongoing? Certainly, the above discussion is rooted in approaches that centre resistance and theoretical frameworks that go against the grain, using counter-storytelling to disrupt dominant narratives.

2.5 Exploring Some in-Between Spaces, the Shape of Things to Come

As previously noted, in the StOries Project, the participants—all researchers who share a common positionality through being graduate students (or recently graduated) at a Canadian university—turn the lens upon themselves. They use the

standpoint of self-representation and storytelling, to examine- authentically and deeply- the (selfie) picture that emerges from such a self-construction and self-configuration of their selves, shining a light on their understanding of their own experiences of migration, be they personal and immediate; or deeply buried in the histories, psyches, and stories of their families and of their past homes where these multigenerational narratives originated.

Given the interest and stakes civil society actors at large have in migration related contexts and issues- from all perspectives, economic, sociological, and political- the hybrid nature of this collection has the potential to appeal to a range of players in the migration field. Emigrants and immigrants, as well as individuals who work in settlement agencies and community organizations, the educational sector, employers and businesses, as well as policy makers are likely to find the 'lived experience' lens in this collection not only innovative and refreshing but also intellectually engaging and emotionally resonant. Further, we hope that readers across the spectrum will also find the experiential narratives showcased here as relevant in contributing new insights in relation to the overall experience of migration and settlement, integration and return (and other migration tropes); and that they will add new dimensions and nuances to our current understanding of migration trajectories, themes, and motifs.

Although all stories in the collection are authored by writers who currently reside in Canada, their backgrounds and their profiles vary greatly; and the personal experiences they recount in their stories are transnational, often being inter-generational too. They communicate a kaleidoscopic sense of the migration experience with a feel that is both international and multi-layered. This is obvious when we note that the personal narratives that live between the covers of this collection- to be found in chapters three to twenty-two are situated in spatial contexts that range from Iran to Brazil, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, to many countries in Asia- like China, Taiwan, India- to Turkey and Italy, and of course Canada. Avoiding though the trap of 'methodological nationalism,' we do not want to present these stories as 'an Italian origin Canadian' or a 'Brazilian migrant in Ontario'. We rather emphasise their complex trajectories and biographies and seek to highlight the ways in which these emerge through their own narratives and from workshop-writing.

Memory, involving travels into landscapes of the mind, the heart, and the past are some common denominators several stories share. Some essays and stories are analytical, others meditative and reflective; above all, mostly they are told from personal standpoints but they go beyond being the story of the individual alone, becoming often starting points to explore their relationships and their interconnections with the societal and the ideological, the political and the historical. In doing so, these narratives inhabit the creative spaces between autobiography and autoethnography, and some of the nitty gritty of these approaches will be discussed in later sections of this chapter.

In terms of the temporal realms these stories inhabit, the author-protagonists often seamlessly travel between generations and histories of homes past and present; and they use sensory memory as one of the important tools to re-visit (and re-construct) their relationships with loved ones, and with their 'homeland.' The idea

of home, in some shape or form, is a powerful and pervasive presence in most stories; and these writings also re-create-using rich description-emotional states of loss, belonging, and un-belonging through navigating an individual's own intersectional identity sites, as located not only in their deep longings, but also shaped by their complex everyday environments. This makes it easier to see how belonging is located simultaneously both in the past and the present.

What follows in the second section of this introduction are some insights about more recently developed migration tropes gleaned from research studies found relevant in the context of substantive migration themes the stories in this collection highlight. The studies cited below are grounded in a narrative inquiry framework. They also align with methods and strategies we used to develop and present our experiences and our standpoints in our stories, using creative writing formats to amplify our voices. Our objective was to employ expressive and literary writing genres to tell personal stories of migration, giving voice to dilemmas and contradictions, often leading to highlighting complex societal issues, relevant in Canada and globally. The concluding section of the introduction uses the takeaways, both from the project process and also from the stories in the collection, to show the relevance of these emergent methodological directions as a way to decentre and decolonise migration research and practice.

2.6 Setting the Methodological Stage, Using a Storying Approach

Using a critical pedagogy approach, based in radical educational politics and pioneered by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and subsequently, into the 1970s, we used teaching-facilitation practices grounded in reflexive practice and peer learning for the birthing of this edited collection. Strategies were employed that encouraged experimental and iterative processes for co-creation of personal and family stories rooted in self-representation. For example, using the metaphor of a 'braided river,' Comer (2015) writes about the personal essay (in migration) as a literary form that communicates the experiential elements within migration as an interweaving of the external worlds that need to be (simultaneously) navigated by a migrant while they journey into the innermost recesses of themselves and their identities. Aligned with Comer, and using reflection and analysis, the authors and their stories in this collection also probe complex spaces that lie between 'inner and outer, home and journey, experience and meaning-abstractions intrinsic to our sense of self and world'(vii). Further, from a research perspective, our objective was to explore the potential of self-narrative and storytelling to oppose dominant migrant narratives presented by researchers and media depictions.

Following on Freire who argued for education to think critically about power structures, and who encouraged educators to interrogate established practices with the objective of promoting freedom, democracy and social justice; in the process

that went into creating this collection, we too valued principles of relationality and equality rather than maintaining classroom status quo hierarchies. Freire's framework of critical pedagogy was rooted in intervention; and to do this through conceptualising education never as neutral but as always taking a stand, either on the part of dominant culture or actively critiquing it. Our working sessions alternated between being instructor led, and others being organized and led by project participants-the contributing authors of this collection. This reduced the sense of pressure and top-down power dynamics that are (often) normative in academic environments; and members felt ownership of the big group dynamics and the free-flow process, feeling engaged to create intimate spaces through group interactions with peers in their own small group, or across groups. They led sessions, and they initiated and accessed collaborative thinking, participating in other activities involving group-think and collective reflection, collaborative journaling and peer mentoring. We kept an online collaborative journal too. Weekly teaching-learning sessions-modeled on the graduate seminar format of discussion-ran over nearly six months, culminating in a writing seminar and workshop with a renowned Canadian writer of international fame, MG Vassanji.

2.7 Challenging Mainstream Narratives, Focusing on Self-Representation to Impact Action

Methodologically speaking, from the first stages of envisioning the StOries Project, to its implementation, and finally, to its culmination in this book, a few elements have remained constant; and these are also the core principles of this project. One of these is the impulse for counter-storytelling. The very first brainstorm session we met for, made it clear that the only way participants could tell their stories in their own words was by asserting personal voice, through using a process of contradicting many of the story versions about them that had been forever in mainstream circulation. As an example-and similar stories were reiterated by many participants- if, as a racialized female-identifying individual, someone carried an Arabic-sounding name, it was quickly assumed by 'others,' that they were a practising Muslim. Further, for those who perceived them so, these few external and visible signs were enough reasons to stereotype them as immigrants from certain parts of the world (even if Canada had been their only home for most of their lives); and it was assumed that these individuals followed certain cultural practices, consumed (or would not consume) specific foods and drinks.

Many upon whom these categories were imposed found such assumptions problematic as they believed them to be not only one-dimensional, but also stereotypical and offensive. They felt misunderstood and restricted by these categories thrust upon them, especially as in many cases they believed these descriptions about them were simply inaccurate; and nobody had bothered to ask them how they self-identified, or what their real story was. In fact, in the academic environment, and

although they were often in a researcher role themselves, there was neither context nor safe spaces where they might narrate or lay claim on their own counter-story.

Moreover, the authors in this anthology believed that dualities, multiplicities, and paradoxes were the stuff upon which their own constructions and articulations of self would begin; and they wanted to tell their own story from a nuanced perspective that encapsulated these differentiated aspects of ‘who they are.’ See Vassanji’s *What you are: Stories* (Vassanji, 2021), a collection that uses story-ing to enter into complex intersectional worlds of identity constructions and representations, with the ‘immigrant’ individual or the family always at the centre.

As an example, and making a similar case for self-representation in a bid to challenge dominant media portrayals of migrants and refugees-with the objective of changing the grand narrative- Ruzic (2021) proposes a counter-visual approach where fragmented, subjective, and personal migrant stories are foregrounded. The rationale provided for this is the need to challenge media narratives about refugees that present a complex and unsettling paradox; their depictions in popular culture, on the one hand, ‘giving’ visibility to their struggles in an en masse kind of way that is stereotypical and monolithic, for instance, refugees making unsafe passages across the oceans-hungry and desperate, appearing threatening or a burden to host societies, and being queue jumpers. On the other hand, as these mass images fail to individualise and personalize-even when they shape a response that is humanitarian and human rights based-Ruzic argues that their impact can dissipate without creating real affect. In a similar vein, Slovic (2007) observes too, “If I look at the mass, I will never act: Psychic numbing and genocide present us with research and statistics on human emotional response...(and) as the psychophysical research indicates, constant increases in the magnitude of a stimulus typically evoke smaller and smaller changes in response.”

The point then is that such homogenising representations about refugees as a broad category-including pervasive visual images that are often faceless- can then end up creating stereotypical grand narratives that de-personalise rather than humanize them as individuals, thus carrying the danger of rendering a generalised population of individuals invisible.

The multiplicity of voices that expand the reader’s understanding of complicated grey areas in the migration experience- with the spaces and cracks in-between – are easier to access through creative practice and literary writing because the experiential canvas has more possibility to become vast and luminous in such a medium. Intersectionality theory, as developed by Crenshaw (1989; 2017) -who in turn drew upon black feminist and legal theorists’ discussions of multi-layered oppressions to come up with it- was one of the key theoretical frameworks we used for our discussions. While being extremely useful as a feminist theoretical approach relevant for academic discussion, we found it applicable not only for understanding our lived experiences of marginalisation, social exclusion, and discrimination but rather more for individuals to use as an ‘agentic’ tool to see how it felt ‘being boxed’ by pre-assigned categorisations. It also became a way to collectively share experiences of how such perceptions (on the part of others) had negatively impacted the self-perceptions of most individuals in the group (and in many cases, their self-esteem).

It was in fact, from such a place of courageous determination that as story-owners, authors contributing to this collection decided to tell the ‘actual’ ‘what you are’ story from their own perspectives; and their personal voice became for them a political tool of resistance. Their telling of their own stories also became a pathway to own their counter-stories, and claim such self-constructions as a way to push back against any labels that had been assigned to us by others.

In the academic study of migration, since the predominant approaches have been sociological, (or situated primarily in social science oriented disciplinary contexts), there has so far been little interaction with literary studies, or with migration literatures, diasporic and immigrant writing; and with postcolonial critical approaches. King et al. (1995) note that while there are commonalities between academic literature in migration studies and literary writing on migration, when it comes to exploration of themes, motifs and tropes—in the case of the former, the focus is more on societal forces and underlying structures that impact immigrant movements, like political, economic, social—rather than the individual as an entity, or their experiential realities.

As the review and analysis of literary writing on migration by Burge (2020) demonstrates, this significant absence can be addressed by literature, given literary accounts centre individual experience and its expression; King et al. arguing that “literary accounts focus in a very direct and penetrating way on issues such as place perception, landscape symbolism, senses of displacement and transformation, communities lost and created afresh, exploitation, nostalgia, attitudes towards return, family relationships, self-denial and self-discovery, and many more.” (x).

Further, postcolonial critical approaches have directly delved into issues of critique in relation to dominant narratives, especially in the context of representations of refugees and asylum seekers. While this is a diverse and fertile field of ongoing cross disciplinary inquiry, Edward Said, a leading literary critic, and father of postcolonial and post-structuralist thought, in *Orientalism* (1978), theorised the relationship between power and knowledge, deconstructing the assumed supremacy of the west over an orient *seen as* (italics mine) inferior. Other postcolonial theorists, Homi Bhaba, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak among many others, have since created well-established frameworks for resistance, for ‘writing back to the (colonial) empire,’ while also shaping pathways in the discourse that construct an ‘us and them’ binary that (constructs) and excludes ‘the other.’

2.8 Inversions and Disruptions in Our Experiential Journey, Leading to Paradigm Shifts

Creating inversions and causing disruptions was part of the process of the making of this edited collection. We focused on making the private public; and this was one of the inversions that helped many of us in surfacing our memories, leading us to excavate challenging moments from the past, to claim space in the present moment

but on our own terms. This also meant making somewhat explicit the messiness that is the raw material and the underside of whatever looks outwardly shiny and finished, through recording and documenting the incremental journey of this project that has led us to this stage of culmination. One of the ways to achieve this is to share the feel of the experiential journey we, its participants, walked on together, as well as the nitty gritty of processes we employed to create conversation hubs every week where we could hold space for each other, and feel empowered and free to speak our truth.

For instance, during the six months of workshopping substantive migration-focused themes, as a group we also navigated topics related to the craft of writing as well as the purposes and objectives we wanted to achieve through employing self-narrative techniques to tell our untold stories. Such a ‘storytelling’ focus in the methods employed, that helped contributors in the journey to get to our final chapters, was relevant as these stories were often those most important to us, maybe also the most challenging to tell. We collaboratively reflected and journaled about why in the first place we wanted to write, and who we wanted to write for; or what kind of readers did we imagine would read what we wrote, and why did we-as individuals and as a collective- find the process of writing enticing. Many offered that they had always wanted to write; others shared that they were good writers in their first language and it was the migration transition-and the spaces that opened up between their first language and English, their second language, that had caused their self-expression to freeze up, often due to the plummeting of self-confidence and self-esteem; and now they felt like they were falling through the cracks, incapable of writing creatively in any of the languages they knew. For others still, those bilingual or multilingual, writing in English as a second or additional language offered a sense of freedom to write about their experiences in ways that may have been prohibited or imprecise in their ‘other’ language(s).

As members of a kind of collective space, we did spontaneous free writing on a regular basis in response to writing prompts, with a timer set for 6–7 mins. Some examples of writing prompts we used were:

Have you ever wondered...When I saw those familiar streets...My greatest strength is...
 When it rains, I feel...If I allow myself to think...
 I'm a really respectful person but... For me writing is...I love writing because...
 On my walk last night, I saw that beautiful... I wish I could write everyday...

These brief writing exercises turned out for writers to be pockets of time that they experienced as productive in the thoughtfulness-space they inspired. Most individuals experienced these exercises as interesting and surprising ways to get into a stream of consciousness kind of writing where although there was pressure created by the timer but it was relaxing as nobody else was going to read this raw overflow of spontaneous emotion, or powerful thought. If they wanted to share what they had written, with their peers in the larger group, they were welcome to do so. Many did, and even sharing how the process felt for them-of engaging in these activities with the group-felt inspiring for others; and as these prompts enabled the writers to delve into hidden spaces within themselves, often without self-consciousness or

self-censorship, some of the ideas for final stories or their pandemic writing emerged from the spontaneous vignettes they wrote. Contributors to the collection were encouraged to develop regular writing habits, and reflection prompts they could use in free pockets of time were provided as home tasks.

A few topics we used are noted below: recounting a story associated with our name, the history and the meaning of the name if it was a word with a meaning, or any connection their name may carry to their family, and what emotional resonances, if any, did our name evoke in us; recalling a key memory from childhood that still lingers; vividly describing a place where you played as a child—was there a swing, a tree, were other children playing, describe them too, were you happy or sad, and what did the remembering of that experiencing now feel like; a time when you were fearful, describing the feeling, the situation, the trigger; your participation in a racist incident, either if someone displayed racist behaviour towards you, or when you were complicit in a racist act, either as a perpetrator or a bystander. These are just a few examples to communicate a sense (and flavour) of the collective journey we experienced during this first phase of the project.

The approach throughout was envisioned, and implemented, as exploratory and evolving, provisional and emergent; most significantly, it was based on a responsiveness principle so that it was important that each of the project's segments proceeded and flowed into the next stage, and that we could ensure that all along the way individuals felt ready and supported to delve into the difficult emotional terrain of memory and nostalgia, storytelling and self-assertions. In that sense, since this was the first iteration of its kind that had been initiated at our centre- and even elsewhere, we had not come across similar examples that brought the particular muti-elements together as this project did- there was a distinct experimental feel to this journey.

Moving from margin to centre, to co-create reflexive spaces to 'be ourselves' in, was a kind of reversal we achieved, and part of this was also about making explicit the messiness at the heart of research, usually peripheral to the main story. Both the research process and the space it created evolved as we inhabited it together. Our being together in this-what became for many a passion project-and through sharing personal anecdotes and difficult stories, we were creating conversation spaces that felt respectful to ourselves and to each other. Built by us in collaboration- all of us academics and researchers-it was jointly owned by us; and this place also felt strangely different as here was somewhere we could be truly 'ourselves,' a feeling so far not experienced by any of us in the academic environment that we knew so well. We found that we could more easily show up in this space in our fullness, as our holistic authentic selves- personal and professional rolled into one.

As a group we began to feel a kind of strength in our collective vulnerability, feeling enabled to participate in engaged conversations about experiences of migration and of living in Canada, and write about these—for some, being newcomers, and others as the second generation born and raised here; still others, being a part of the 1.5, or as first-generation immigrants. This process of sharing and group-think was a place to co-create that helped many of us remember and surface pieces of our missing memories; and the momentum built by these discussions led many of us to

pursue research into stories of family, and of our relationships, with homes past and present, and with loved ones, now passed, or living in far off parts of the world. Encouraged by the sharing, and using strategies for reflection and writing prompts, we were able to find common ground as well as validation from each other. This made us feel further affirmed and empowered to process our personal stories, excavate them using a kind of stream of consciousness form of journaling, and other expressive creative writing forms to explore deeper connections between who we are; the societal issues we felt impacted by; and the bigger context of the world we were living in. These contexts we were situated in were often shaped by discourses of migration and integration, racism and transnationalism, and they also carried simultaneous intonations of the past and the present that felt immediate and passionate for many, being close as they felt to our lived realities.

Needless to add, all this while, as we participated in this project workshops and built brick-by-brick our self-narrative stories through going deep into the recesses of who we are, the COVID-19 pandemic was raging full steam around and within us. The realities being exposed around us were inequities and systemic fragilities; highlighted and exacerbated, these vulnerabilities disproportionately impacted racialized groups, immigrants and refugees, newcomers and women, added complex new layers to our experiences, our conversations, and also to our understanding of ourselves and our writings. Chapter 23 in this collection delves into the details of this broader context that was the backdrop of the StOries Project; it is both a compilation and an analysis of pandemic times and themes provided by the editors, Ari and Atar; and individual submissions by the authors are written in a variety of narrative styles, from stream-of consciousness journal entries, arts-based and autoethnographic analytic vignettes.

The last chapter in this collection, Damiano's "Becoming through Story,"- although a chapter by itself, is also a kind of continuation of this chapter as it houses the behind-the-scenes processes, and in some cases, 'raw' material that for many contributors shaped their final stories. The introduction to that chapter provides an overview that analytically situates this material in the context of the methodological frame of this anthology while it also provides a rationale that highlights the theoretical significance of its positioning in this work. Demonstrative of a paradigmatic shift, it brings to the centre of the discourse the unfinished notes in the margins that help recount the methodological journey of this book project by not only taking the reader backstage but by shedding a light on the underpinnings of our heuristic and methodological approaches. It does this by considering our views of knowledge and the ways it can be created in relation to migration and storytelling. The purpose of the chapter, originally conceived as a collection of 'field notes' of the story-writing process, is about our shifting concern with belonging, to one about the role of story in 'becoming,' especially in the context of migration.

As mentioned previously in the introductory section, this chapter also shares with the final chapter, submissions from contributors, including journal entries, individual and collective notes and reflections- in some cases visualizations- to curate that chapter. Narrative analysis is provided by the chapter editor, linking these artefacts to an overview of research methods used throughout the life cycle of

this project. The objective is to help the readers simultaneously experience several stages of this evolving journey while they read not only the contributions that emerged from it but also some of the additional evidence of ‘truth-telling’ processes that produced these writings.

2.9 Qualitative Research and Truth Telling, Learning from Indigenous Research Methodologies

Speaking of ‘truth-telling,’ when we examine conventional non-positivist qualitative research processes, the emphasis is on premises of authenticity and credibility, the objective being trustworthiness in data gathering. Tuckett (2005) maps strategies for attaining rigour, relying on Guba and Lincoln’s trustworthiness criterion, to discuss research modalities like triangulation, researcher as instrument, and field notes and personal journals, as aimed at getting as close to the ‘truth’ of experience as possible. When we re-examine the ‘process’ leading up to the creation of this collection, and we assess how closely it followed the above ‘trustworthiness’ criteria, we note close similarities but also a paradigmatic reversal. When conducting qualitative research, the researcher broadly employs techniques like interviews, focus groups, life-history methods, including participatory research methods, to explore and excavate participant stories. Applying analytical tools, this data is studied and the findings used to arrive at conclusions. In the most essential and central sense, the objective of the StOries Project: Strangers to Ourselves- the project and the collection- is not so different.

Guba and Lincoln also emphasize the need for social science research to be emancipated from hearing only the voices of Western Europe, as well as from generations of silence, and seeing the world in one colour (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 212). Further, Chilisa (2012) makes a similar argument to note the disconnections these predominantly western ways of knowing create – from multiple relations we have with our communities, including with the non-human world. How then can we create spaces of inquiry that centre decolonial discourses when colonialism is ongoing?

It could be argued that indigenous research methodologies are not as prevalent or being employed in other parts of the world to the same extent as they are in Canada, given the history of colonization of indigenous peoples in Canada, as well as the pervasiveness of structural inequities that marginalise these groups in present time. Further, the stories and testimonies provided to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (conducted from 2008- to its conclusion in 2015) provided opportunities for the documenting of this history, impact, and legacy of the residential school system. This has created visibility in the mainstream, both in Canada and internationally, around historical wrongs perpetrated against indigenous populations, as well as resistance and calls to action in which everyone can participate to redress these in the present.

Given this collection, and the StOries Project that led to it, are both situated in the Canadian context, the alignment that indigenous research methods share with this migration-focused project appears natural and organic as storywork and counternarrative are foregrounded in both; and possibilities are abundant to explore research methods that can help researchers, educators and practitioners to conceptualise frameworks for 'knowing differently.' The objective of the following discussion is to highlight the close relevance and conceptual alignment of indigenous research methodologies with postcolonial research approaches.

Wilson's (2008) discussion, articulating research as ceremony, is relevant here. As a researcher, to understand his own work and methods as an indigenous researcher, Wilson finds that creating his own unique pathway to 'knowing' must happen firstly by being fully cognisant of the tradition he is currently situated in- for instance, the well-travelled path already out there- and engaging with it. The next step, the discussion suggests, is for the researcher to come to one's own reckoning about the 'how to' of research that's authentic to them, and this means becoming aware of the dissonances and the gaps with current methodologies, and understanding why things seem out of sync, and the pre-established framework does not work. In other words, Wilson's reflections take him on a journey where he first maps the phases within western research frameworks- moving through stages, like positivist, post-positivist, critical, and constructivist- till he arrives at a place of developing indigenous research methodologies he finds relevant for 'knowing,' i.e., finding (and creating) emergent indigenous research frameworks that mesh authentically with his worldviews and life's everyday practices, thereby leading to truth telling.

Smith (1999, 2021a) cites Audre Lorde, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'; and she describes the challenge of decolonising methodologies as a set of knowledge-related critical practices that must simultaneously work with colonial and indigenous concepts of knowledge, decentering one while centering the other. In other words, the need to engage with both at the same time is key to this process as it is also about 'confronting the Western academic canon -in its philosophy, pedagogy, ethics, organizational practices, paradigms, methodologies and discourses and, importantly, its self-generating arrogance, its origin mythologies and the stories that it tells to reinforce its hegemony' (xii), and reimagining and bringing forth Indigenous epistemic approaches, philosophies and methodologies.

Furthermore, the case studies by practitioners in Smith's *Decolonising Methodologies* demonstrate that 'decolonising practices are not all about theory or all about action but they are really about praxis and reflexivity that is necessary for the integrity of research and of the researcher themselves.' Some of the personal notes written by conference participants engaged in case studies where decolonising knowledge is at the centre, and shared by Linda Smith here, are telling. For instance, Martinez-Cruz and Vasquez from Nicaragua write about the ways this book helped them reframe the 'social problem,' reflect on our practice, and problematize our ways of seeing, feeling, thinking and writing. They go on to say that in their

experiences, decolonisation as a process, situates them within ‘a multi-layered social dermis where imperial and colonial powers have impregnated politics and cultures. For instance, in Nicaragua, the left and the right, academia and intellectuals, civil society organizations and political parties, everyone with power to speak and be heard in the public sphere, portrayed the insurgents without thought and without history, reducing them to simple boxes such as ‘proletariat,’ ‘popular classes,’ ‘indigenous,’ ‘campesino,’ youth’ and ‘women.’ Those with power to classify apply old categories without questioning their own assumptions, histories, motivations and values that charge such ways of producing the social.’ Smith (2021b, xv). One of the core elements in the case studies and in Smith’s discussion is a reiteration of the foundational significance of relationships and connections, as well as reciprocity and accountability embedded in indigenous understandings of ethics and knowledge as a way to decolonise theory and praxis.

Following on Smith’s articulation, the (ideological) research framework that Jo-ann Archibald et al. (2019) propose when they discuss Indigenous Storywork as Methodology, is also relevant here. The principles and values that undergird this framework are the most important, for instance, that it should be a ‘holistic meaning-making process (that includes) understanding the impacts of colonization on people, families, and communities, (ensuring) that Indigenous values, philosophies, resilience, and resistance that are at the core of Indigenous stories help ease the pain of intergenerational trauma that may surface when sharing lived experience stories’ (p. 9). Further, situating Indigenous Storywork in the context of decolonizing methodologies, Archibald describes it as giving voice to the “lions” (7), seeing it as a way to “equip our communities not only to voice, listen to, and understand our stories with “respect, reverence, reciprocity and responsibility” (Archibald, 2008), “collectively become an Indigenous research community across tribal nations, borders, and countries...encompassing powerful forms of academic knowledge creation and production, enabling us to collectively assert a space that contests and challenges colonial research conventions” (2019).

Interrelatedness and synergy are additional core principles highlighted by Archibald; similarly, aligned with the above reasoning, it was important for us all collaborating on this project to produce this collection, to work through personal storytelling and story-ing to mine our lived experiences, grounding our self-narratives in the relational and in creative practice- to also re-imagine a theoretical and a methodological framework that would ‘fit’ with our vision, and our objectives; and these factors would then shape the outcomes, whatever these be. In line with such an evolving kind of methodology, later sections in this chapter explicate several significant theoretical disruptions and inversions that occurred along the way-some deliberate and others serendipitous; and these led us to re-imagine and argue for the use of methodological approaches and research methods that have so far been little used in the migration field to study important mobility-related themes.

2.10 Confronting the ‘Who You Are’ Question Ethically, Approaches for Navigating Complexity and Power

The StOries Project and this edited collection are premised on exploring how we can use narrative methods (and practices of narrative inquiry) as well as creative writing as conceptual and methodological tools to expand our understanding of the lived experience of migration. Regarding the interpretive narrative approach in anthropology, Eastmond (2007) observes that it is a way to illuminate diverse aspects of human life; pointing to the relevance of largely subsumed personal narratives and life stories to explore lived experience. Not only that but these personal narratives also provide a commentary on the subjective dimension of social life and the dynamics of embedded power relations.

In our role as researchers, ethical concerns are front and centre as we must always ensure that other people’s experiences are represented with accuracy, and that justice, not harm, is done. About the authenticity of data that is gathered, we can only know what our research participants tell us, and also as researchers, we need to be reflective regarding the baggage we bring to our interpretation of what we hear. For these reasons, research outcomes vary hugely, reliant on multiple subjective factors, like the personality traits of the narrator and the listener, the quality of the communicative act and the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the power dynamics within the research environment. Other relational elements, and intersubjectivities, are important too, and these are subtle and nuanced, for instance, considering questions like the following is also important: are we fostering non-hierarchical research relationships; have we established trust and mutual respect in the research process; and are we always being ethical?

Cederberg (2013) and Wolf-Knuts (2014) (cited in Bucitelli, 2016), argue for diversity and complexity in the interpretive approach when it comes to making sense of migration narratives as these are not only multi-faceted; they are often embedded in complicated broader social structures and power relations. Context is critical, and attention must be paid to factors that constrain interviewees. What Buccitelli (2016) observes, making a case for combining a life ‘history’ approach with oral history and narrative practice to study migration narratives, is somewhat resonant in relation to the StOries collection, especially in the case of second-generation immigrants for whom remnants from the past are ever present in the way family relationships, and cultural practices define individuals’ self-constructions of identity and how their subjectivities play out in the present. Hybridity and experiences of always living in in-between spaces are factors that end up impacting the coming-of-age experiences 1.5 and the second-generation immigrants have- be it in educational or romantic, social or political settings- and these formative times can lead to shaping their futures for always. For instance, one of the authors in this collection, James, in their intent letter, articulates the interest they have in contributing to this project process, and the collection as follows: “My experience as a 2nd-generation Canadian has been full of complexity, uncertainty, and a yearning to belong. How is it that I don’t feel entirely at home in the one place I’ve called home

my entire life? Why do I feel proud of my Jamaican heritage, while simultaneously feeling ashamed for not being “Jamaican enough”? For James and for other authors too, there were struggles with continuously interrogating how their positionality and self-perception was impacting their sense of finding their community, or how these emotions were making them experience deep feelings of personal isolation, which in turn end up blocking pathways for healthy movement into the future.

In the reflective personal story James writes, and also through engaging with the experiences of peers, the author explores questions that confront and confound her deeply. It is through the process of teasing out the many pieces of the puzzle that come together for her that she creates the complex self-narrative that leads to new understanding for her. She puts the pieces back too, again through storytelling, but taking them apart has helped her to better understand where the misalignments are, and also, through experiencing the process of this journey, she is better able to learn what course-correction she might try to effect change. Perhaps, using story to simply understand things better, or pushing back against dominant narratives, was all that was needed to feel more comfortable being the person she herself believes that she is. Other contributors to the collection followed broadly similar paths to storytelling, but as you will see when you read the stories in this collection, the uniqueness of each individual’s circumstances, and also their particular ‘who you are’ going into the mix, and in a personal and creative (non-academic) style, always led to new ways of knowing and translating experience into story.

2.11 Self-Representations, Self-Narrative Viewed Through the Lens of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry, as described by Collins (2022), is a framework within the narrative turn that re-imagines representation, from how in the context of migration, people are seen and how we see ourselves, to who we become, and how we act in new environments where we create new lives. Referring to the ‘big story, small story’ approach of narrative inquiry to understand the experiences of African Caribbean immigrants who moved to England, experiences of navigating specific processes of transition and meaning-making in relation to their post-colonial identity are referenced here. Collins breaks down the approach as the former being about the stories told and reflected upon by the first-generation teller; and the latter about the process of next generation African Caribbean participants reflecting on what they heard and how they made sense of these stories. Multiple issues come together to complicate these representations, from histories of slavery impacting family and community lives in new contexts; issues of language and fight for survival, and these intertwined trajectories of movement leading to overrepresentation of migrant individuals in mental health and social care systems.

Self-narrative, a term described by Gergen and Gergen (1988) as ‘the social process whereby people tell stories about themselves to themselves and others’ is

relevant as it has implications for methodology in the framework we're trying to explore and articulate through this anthology. In such a context, 'small story' is especially relevant, as, given it relies on others' interpretations, it is likely to contain ambivalences that lead Kim (2016) to describe it as a term used in life-story narrative work to refer to the 'atypical, non-canonical, unpredictable, and fragmented' (cited in Collins, 115). The use of lived experience, translated into self-narrative, if used as an additional element within the research process to further illuminate and triangulate 'data,' perhaps has chances of representation of migrant experience that has further reliability built into it. Although in self-narrative too, there is reliance on memory work, and that too is partial and selective, and in that sense may be viewed as unreliable; but if the story is about the self and told by the story-owner, it is also about the freedom to self-construct and pursue missing narratives that have special significance to particular individuals and communities, with them owning the act of 'sense-making'-often a political one- in relation to the past in the context of the present. The emphasis in discourse can then shift to highlighting values like voice, agency, and choice, rather than elements like accuracy and credibility. Re-framing of this kind, in turn, has potential for positively impacting ways in which we create our new lives in homes of our own making, what Collins describes as the shift from 'constructions of self to paying attention to the performance of self in different contexts' (114). Certainly, while such ways of thinking about research processes carry implications that are foundational to methodological thinking, they could lead the way to re-imagining interventions in research that can enhance bottom-up approaches, thus enhancing values of inclusion and social justice, as well as disrupting power dynamics in environments where there are racisms and other forms of systemic discrimination.

2.12 Re-Thinking the Normative, a 'Moving Stories' Paradigm for Crafting New, Mobile 'Immigrant Identities'

The common ground between narrative (or storytelling) and migratory movements is quite obvious as every individual, family, and community has a particular unique migration story; often they may also carry complex historical stories of movement from one place to another. Further, as Clandinin (2006) observes, qualitative methodology, and within that, narrative inquiry, analyses the *telling* or *living* of stories, using a range of research methods; it is the task of the researcher to interpret these stories in ways that are open and flexible. As argued by Fabos et al. (2021), narrative inquiry provides researchers the tools to interrogate not only dominant cultural and institutional frameworks, but also established migration-story tropes that lead researchers, practitioners and policy makers to make sense of migrant experiences in certain entrenched ways; these default ways of understanding lived experience often leading to certain directions in policy making.

Centering lived experience stories while amplifying the voices of individuals is an alternative way for such experiential stories to be owned by story-owners and integrated into research methodology. As an example, research projects, coming at research from approaches that include perspectives emerging from social justice, human rights and advocacy ideologies; and that employ methods grounded in co-creation and collaboration between researchers and research participants-like photo-voice and other visual co-creation methods-are increasingly being used to foreground lived experience stories and voices of refugees. In the context of migration studies, other creative and innovative projects- already most abundant in the refugee mobility and diaspora space- are participatory and co-created in collaboration with communities, and often they are arts-based. Lived experience is methodologically at the centre in research studies conducted in these contexts.

Fabos et al. focus on the refugee experience too, and they offer the 'moving stories' framework as a new narrative turn that disrupts the normative place-based understanding of forced migratory movements. For example, traditionally, the forced migration condition is understood as always being temporary and full of continuous movement, with refugees fleeing from conflicts and violence, always leading precarious lives marked by victimhood. A kind of nomadism exists in this discourse that flattens difference and complexity between individuals, focusing rather on refugee aspirations as a group, to return to re-employment solutions (and sedentarism) as a normative strategy to find solutions to the refugee cycle they are stuck in. Naming the regimen of border regulations 'methodological nationalism,' Wimmer and Schiller (2003)'s term, Fabos et al. go on to show how analysis divides the world into citizens and lawful residents, grouping many other vulnerable people as temporary or undocumented, with unidirectional movements.

The 'moving stories' narrative paradigm they offer suggests a counter story-making migration trope with potential to shift the narrative focus to bring in fluidity, a sense of multi-sited mobility, and agency that aligns better with ongoing diasporic movements in our current time of transnationalism. These lived experience narratives can be moving, and they can simultaneously also come from an enablement-focused paradigm that can challenge the stereotypical dominant representations of refugee displacement as the single story. These narratives that disrupt established mainstream discourses (often rooted in deficit, representing refugee as being a burden on receiving societies) highlight instead the complex and resilient journeys of these individuals, with the fluidities in their identities intact, and the potential of their diasporic (and digital) networks active at a time when new modes of social organizations are shaping a world defined by global mobility quite differently. This kind of representation is contrary to the often more typical refugee narratives that are predominant not only in popular culture but also in academic studies. That said, employing a storytelling approach that centres self-narrative is a way to reiterate that neither of these versions is necessarily 'truer' than the other; and the point is that both may be equally true depending on the individual who gets to tell their story. This is why we need an abundance of stories, and research methods and processes in the migration field that can diffuse power in a way that can support and see as equally valid, these multiple ways of seeing, being, and knowing.

2.13 Using an Autoethnography Lens, Writing the Self

As previously articulated, the objective of this project, and the edited collection, was for contributors to use non-academic writing modes, employing a lived experience lens and personal storytelling approaches. Following such a focus, and given that none of the story-chapters are written in an academic format, the contributors to this collection did not explicitly employ autoethnographic research methods to craft their stories. However, given this project straddled the spaces that lie in-between academic and non-academic, and the authors are all academics and researchers, we discussed autoethnography as an approach for telling stories about the self that would also help us connect purposefully with the social context- helping us better understand the (autobiographical) experiences we were having, situated in the world around us.

As an example of autoethnography relevant in the context of this project, Murphy's (1987) *The Body Silent*, a personal narrative about his disability, is telling. Being an anthropologist, the sudden onset of spinal cord disease set him off on an investigation of the social context and the medical infrastructure surrounding disability, and he describes his narrative as "research among the motor-handicapped, and (he shows how) participation in these organizations forced me to see myself in their lives, and this left me feeling that my own status was insecure and threatened.... I had learned a valuable lesson about the relationship of social standing to disability. I had also learned a great deal about myself (1987, 126). As a research method then, auto-ethnography as a genre, appropriate for writing the self, and intermingled with the social, is explored and complicated in multiple ways in the forms of "self-ethnography" (Okely & Callaway, 1992; Reed-Danahay, 1997), and "interpretive-ethnography" (Johannsen, 1992; Lichterman, 2017), and in its countless other manifestations. It is important though, as Keles shows in their review of studies (in Applied Linguistics), that when employing the autoethnographic method of research, that researchers be clear about the epistemological foundations and methodological alignments with their research topic to ensure its appropriateness.

Some of the other implications of the autoethnographic approach that underpin the telling of the stories in this collection align with Muncey's (2005) analysis of the autoethnographic approach; when she shares in a journalistic and research mode, personal account of her teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse, they trigger questions about her integrity, when the real reason is that her story cannot be told as it is about taboo topics; this is the case even though she believes it would contribute a body of knowledge to help inform practice. Her memory is called into question, and she is asked questions like, why now, why not then, and could the passage of time have altered her story. This is a common challenge with personal storytelling if used for the purpose of research; for instance, Kierkegaard (1957) (cited in Muncey), suggested that life must be lived forward but can really be understood backward, confirming again the messy nature of interactions between lived experience, the selectiveness of memory, and reflexive practice. Muncey states, "Autoethnography celebrates rather than demonizes the individual story." If a version of the story does

not align with the dominant narrative, and it gets dismissed as a deviant story, she adds that perhaps, “my story is deviant just because no authority voice is telling it, I am left with a puzzle. Perhaps there are no deviant cases; perhaps there are just lots more individual stories waiting to be told, stories that are sometimes difficult to tell, that need support and understanding in the telling.” (78). The above perspective aligns with the experience we had participating in the StOries Project that some of the authors affirm in their own words and voices in the next section.

Further, as a research method, we argue that autoethnography, including collaborative autoethnography is particularly relevant for the study of migration, given the reliance such theoretical and methodological tools have on lived experience and positionality, as well as their focus on in-between and liminal spaces and reflexivity. Moreover, while the story-chapters in this collection do not deliberately employ the autoethnographic approach, they are informed by it; and in line with these perspectives, they bring the personal in communication with the sociological and the political.

2.14 Concluding Reflections, and Pathways for Moving Forward...

Borrowing from theoretical underpinnings around what Phillips and Bunda (2018) term ‘research through, with and as storying,’ in this concluding section, I tie in some of the central ideas highlighted in this chapter with a few ‘storied’ reflections the contributors of this collection have shared with me. I asked them to reflect upon what this experiential journey was like for them that culminated in their developing and submitting their story-chapter for this collection, and what the entire process meant to them; how their experience compares with the anticipations and expectations that had first motivated them to join this group of academics in the first place to share their migration stories using the medium of creative writing. Phillips et al. observe: “Through storying, we come to live, breathe and feel deep penetrating understandings of identity and place” (39); they also reiterate the importance of ‘declaring’ our standpoints that we bring to our stories, locating the self within the entanglements of our ancestral histories when we tell our stories, acknowledging the presence of our past in our living present.

Given that the following generous contributor reflections are personal, emotional, even intimate, it seems more befitting to honour their words when I share them here, through including both the first and the family names of the authors. Melanie Zuzarte notes, “I experienced the loss of my father (while this project was ongoing). I used the grief that I experienced to reflect on how my father’s life trajectory shaped my life as a racialized Canadian woman. I realized that faith, although I had denied it most of my life, was a gift that my father had offered me to support me in my healing in the present and in the future. I also embraced through my work on the StOries Project that it was important for me to slow down and truly consider

all the gifts my father had offered me through his lifetime using the written word. Without this project – I don't think I would be where I am in my healing today.”

Born in Canada to Italian and Azorean parents, Natasha Damiano was keen on exploring the transnational, intergenerational, and multicultural aspects of her family's migration stories. These aspects included the legacy of her parents' and grandparents' resettlement difficulties, and her own complex feelings as a settler on Indigenous territory. As an academic, she understood the importance of decolonising methodologies in this process, in order to grapple reflexively with her place of identity within the complex tapestry of her family and Canada, past and present. In the additional chapter she writes for this collection, we learn much more about the dilemmas of her positionality, also the vantage point of her story.

For Sarah Ostapchuck too, the need to piece together and record her Christian-Trinidadian legacy was important as it was for her a way to understand her complex identity as a mixed-race woman of faith. The process of navigating these complexities-with the project compelling her to build in time and space for personal memory work in a communal setting to tell her story- helped her see, “those parts of my grandfather that are alive in me and make up large portions of my identity, and though I may not carry very obvious physical markings of him upon first glance, there are both physical and non-physical parts of me that will always bear his legacy.”

Nabila Kazmi wrote, “Stories, even though deeply personal, are equally political; when I said this in my motivation letter, I was establishing that my story as a recent immigrant to Canada was both personal but also exposed systemic ideas behind migration of people to the western world. As I reflect on this now, I find myself amazed at how the project exposed me to the political ideas of migration while at the same time placing my own experiences at the center of them. I am glad to have joined the project and to have an opportunity to write my story of migration. This gave me confidence in my own writing while at the same time assuring me that the struggles of a new immigrant are not merely my own but shared across people with similar stories.”

At some level, the lines are blurry between the two stages through which the StOries project was implemented: one was the experiential communal nature of this project, in the way it drew us all in, committing to participate and actively ‘be together,’ for a few months. The second phase was the actual process of writing and submitting our stories for this collection that writers completed independently; although the formal mentoring structures and activities remained ongoing throughout. The relationships of trust and support that were fostered-at personal and professional levels- are still ongoing, based on the strong mutual bonds that we formed, manifest now through voluntary collaborative learning-oriented initiatives and, in some cases through implementing other professional partnership initiatives. Methodologically speaking, the experience of participating in the project was instrumental in moving us from an individual-centric place of just writing and submitting our stories for this collection, and the collective identity construction that happened through engaged storytelling in community.

Karen reflects, “I was interested to be part of this project because of how it would build onto my budding interests in exploring immigrant and diasporic experiences using unconventional approaches to research, reflecting, and creative writing. I realized, however, how approachable of a space this felt compared to challenging experiences I had entering an online graduate program as the first in my immediate family pursuing graduate studies. The learning experiences felt familiar enough to graduate level seminars yet more informal where fellow participants and I led peer-based sessions that were sensory-based and fun; I found a profound connection with each and every one of the participants through the vulnerability we shared and expressions of how much this intersection of research, writing, and reflecting meant something unique to each of us.”

Jenny Osorio shares her reflections too, “I think this is the first time that I am given the official space to tell my story, not as an anecdote one tells at a party, but as my truth. And that was what drew me to send in my application the same day I saw the announcement.”

In the context of the contributor reflections shared above, I find extremely pertinent and resonant the way Louise Gwenneth Phillips and Tracey Bunda articulate the imperatives of their collaborative story-work and writing—both as a counterpoint to their standpoint as being part of the academy, and also as a continuation of it. Framing ‘storying’ through the play of words, (and the metaphor) of ‘Together/two gather,’ they tease out the differences between outcome-driven and competitive scholarship on the one hand and the more friendly value-driven work they do that reminds them of their ‘humanness.’ In their words,

In this spirit we commence with a play on words through naming our shared interests, not only as a coming *together*, but also *two-gather*. *Together* as known in normalised grammar conventions calls attention to our joining, but we are also signalling our warm-smile-on-the-face desire to transform conventions through a thoughtful playfulness with words, to rewrite our connection and therefore give breath to another grammar convention of coming *two-gather*. In reflecting on our practice, that is, what we have done and what we are aiming to do, our affinity with stories draws us close so that we *two-gather* to write this text.

There are similarities too, between the work they do as academics, and what they do outside through their story-work, influences from indigenous methodologies being an important aspect of their standpoint; and although the worldviews that shape the academy are different from those that define community, in both realms they ensure they lead with accountability and transparency.

Some final reflections add other dimensions to the experience and the learning we went through together. Arun Rajavel observed, “I am fortunate enough—and even privileged enough—to be an economic migrant who had the luxury to choose. The case is not the same for other kinds of migrants who are forced to migrate due to various external factors. It is of utmost importance that we listen to both the stories, to avoid the narrative being dominated by the former—as is, unfortunately, the case now. I think that StOries is one such initiative that will help bridge this gap. My experience listening to my fellow participants’ life stories and their perspectives made this a rewarding experience. The activities we did together such as meaningful

objects added an additional dimension to the people I participated with, and even made me introspect and cement a part of my own identity.”

“Creative writing is something that I lost when me and my family moved to Canada,” Negin Saheb Javahar shared in her reflections, “and participating in this collection as a contributor gave me a reason and structure to pursue my passion in creative writing while allowing me to incorporate all the experiences I had achieved since I migrated. The workshops had a different vibe than academic circles, and for me it truly became a space to just talk about a shared passion and finding the space to work on tying all the pieces of me (the migrated teenager, the student, the researcher, the maturing professional) together. I believe that the project helped me grow closer to creative writing substantially even though I struggled with a very busy schedule; we explored experiences and identity crises in migration from an angle I had not encountered in my academic experience, and I have been impressed from the nuances of understanding I believe I gained from them. I am more than ever convinced that we cannot have a more understanding and inclusive Canadian society unless we give each other the space to tell our stories and to speak about ours.”

Finally, looking ahead to ascertain what the way forward might look like, I go back to the shared love of story, and to the multiplicities of interpretive potential stories carry within them. Their power also lies in their ability to challenge hegemonic status-quoist grand narratives. It is helpful that the human need for storying in our lives is a primeval and visceral urge. In this collection too, it is story that is our common ground, between the worlds (and worldviews) of research, pedagogy, and practice. Further, ‘declaring’ our dual standpoints as contributors to this collection—positioned as we all are, both within the halls of academia and outside of them—and it is from these points of overlap that the voices in this collection are together/to-gathered.

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Part II
Identity Negotiations, Othering the Self

Chapter 3

How I Became an Alevi Muslim Woman



Esra Ari

Is he one of those who burned or those others who were burned to death? Ever since I could remember, this was the first question my mum asked me when I had a new boyfriend. She always wanted to learn if this man was a Sunni or an Alevi. My reaction was always the same: “Mum, I don’t care whether he is an Alevi or a Sunni as long as he is a good person.” Even though I come from an Alevi family, I had never identified myself with my religious identity.

With this question, my mum was referring to the Madimak Massacre, which took place in Sivas, Türkiye, on July 2, 1993. On that day, some intellectuals, mostly Alevis, gathered in a hotel for a conference organized by Pir Sultan Abdal Cultural Association (PSAKD), an Alevi organization. Some locals targeted participants of this event on the grounds that they were infidels. They also protested Aziz Nesin, one of the guests of the conference, because of his attempt of translating Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* to Turkish. This novel was not well received by some Muslims because it was accused of ridiculing Islam. After Friday prayers in a mosque, a group of extremist Sunni Muslims marched to this hotel and set it on fire. Thirty-three Alevis, mostly intellectuals and artists, were killed in that mob attack. It is a known fact that this was a state-backed incident and the lawyers of the perpetrators had been actively engaged in politics with the ruling Islamist party AKP (Justice and Development Party) in Türkiye. Unfortunately, it was not the first time Alevis were massacred, and it was not an isolated incident either, but rather, just another attack against them for centuries, both during the Ottoman Empire and its successor, the Turkish Republic. Some recent attacks against Alevis include, but are not limited to, the Maras massacre in 1978 and the Corum massacre in 1980.

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The followers of Alevism, Alevis, are a minoritized religious group in Türkiye, a country where the majority of citizens are Sunni Muslims. Alevism is a liberal and an alternative theology when compared with the orthodox interpretations of Sunni Islam. Alevis are known to be secular, peaceful, and respectful of differences in faith. They have always been keen supporters of democracy, and of the modernization process in Türkiye. The religious practices of Alevis are quite different from those of the Sunnis. While Alevis gather in a “*Cemevi*” (their place of worship), Sunnis worship in a mosque. Unlike Sunni Muslims, Alevis, both women and men, pray in the same room during their rituals. However, Sunni Islam does not allow women and men to worship together. The two groups’ ways of worship are different too. In the case of Alevis, worship includes singing and Samah (a spiritual dance), whereas Sunnis perform *Namaz* (prayer).

My parents have talked about their Alevi identity all the time. My dad was telling us some stories about his dad, a “*dede*” (elderly religious leader of an Alevi community) in their village. As an elder, his dad led religious and funeral ceremonies, acted as a judge to resolve day-to-day conflicts between community members, and so on. However, my parents did not practice their religion strictly. Maybe it is because they migrated to Germany when they were young. My father was fifteen years old when he went to Germany as a guest worker. My mum was around twenty-two years old when they got married and she joined him in Germany. Living in an urban setting, mostly with German neighbors, would have distanced them from their traditions, I’m guessing. They returned to Türkiye after staying in Germany for about twenty years. As non-practicing Alevis, they often talked about how Alevis have been systemically oppressed since the Ottoman Empire. I would hear my parents talking about how some of their friends hid their Alevi identities so they would not be discriminated against. My parents never hid their Alevi identity. Indeed, they were proud Alevis. I remember how my mum was persistently ridiculing one of her friend’s comments on her Alevi identity: “Even though you are an Alevi, I still love you.”

The state and some in society have been suspicious of Alevis for decades. Therefore, Alevis had to worship secretly for the fear of being discovered and persecuted by the authorities or fundamentalist Muslim groups until recently. They have been systematically forced to assimilate into Sunni Islam. For example, the Turkish state has built mosques where Alevis were the majority in number. However, being isolated from everyday clashes between Alevis and Sunnis, and growing up in a secular environment, I never had to think about my Alevi identity seriously. *If not an Alevi or an assimilated Sunni, who was I? Did I have to choose between being one or the other, I asked myself?*

The Turkish Republic was founded on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. The New Republic claimed a fundamental rupture from the Ottoman past and its Islamic culture. It turned its face to the “West” as the so-called West symbolized “civilization” and “progress.” On the contrary, the East was associated with fundamentalist Islam and backwardness. From a very early age at schools, we were taught

that secularity was one of seven principles of the Turkish Republic that differentiated the Turkish Republic (“our” country) from *other* Muslim countries. With the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the New Republic adopted the Latin alphabet and dropped Arabic. The new dress code, introduced in 1925, made it mandatory to replace traditional headgear with the western hat for men. Women were banned from wearing hijab in public institutions until the election of an Islamist party, AKP, in 2002. Political parties associated with Islam were shut down to keep the secular state intact, usually with the support of the Turkish military.

However, it is not easy to break ties with the past. The identity of Turkish society has been caught between Ottoman/Islamic culture and Western identity. The Turkish Republic has always carried the social and political heritage of the empire. Indeed, the election of AKP with the majority vote, first in 2002, and until now as of 2022, has clearly indicated the Ottoman legacy. Alevis were amongst those who felt most insecure and anxious. The newly elected AKP’s rhetoric of freedom did not calm the feeling of insecurity among most of them.

The Ottoman empire had a very cosmopolitan structure because of its expansionist policies. Although the empire was a caliphate- an Islamic state governed by the Muslim community’s ruler-it gave non-Muslim groups the authority to govern themselves in exchange for being taxed. On the contrary, passionate about Western modernization, especially the French model of nationalism, the Turkish Republic was founded as a unitary secular state. It established the Directorate of Religious Affairs in 1924 to have control over religious groups and prevent their attempts to intervene in secular governance. However, the Turkish Republic, although claiming to be a formally secular state, continued to promote the Sunni interpretation of Islam through a generously funded Directorate.

The Republic emphasized Sunni Muslim Turkish identity as the constitutive element of the nation. Accordingly, it pursued Islamization and Turkification policy to construct an imaginary unitary nation. This policy attempted to assimilate all groups other than Sunni Muslim Turks, including Alevis, Kurds, Jews, Armenians, and other Christian groups. Acts of violence have taken a systemic form of controlling these groups. Indeed, it would not be speculative to suggest that violence is ingrained in the psyche of the people of Türkiye. The history of the Turkish Republic has been marked by the conflict between different groups, including massacres of Alevis, civil war against Kurds, the 1915 mass deportation of Armenians, ongoing harassment of those deemed others such as non-Muslim groups, and the tension between secular and radical Muslims.

Interestingly, in an atmosphere like this, my Alevi identity never stood out until I moved to Canada. My family sent me to a private elementary school in a midsize town, which shielded me from the realities of Türkiye to a certain extent. I had to take a mandatory course on religion built on Sunni Islam; it was a watered-down version of it, though. For instance, as an Alevi student, I was never forced to pray in Arabic, which has always been a big problem for Alevi students. Indeed, our teacher was more like a grandpa telling stories about Islam. But he never told us stories about Alevi Muslims: his stories were always about Sunni Islam. Although Sunni Islam was the major narrative in my school, and where I then lived, people around

me always had liberal interpretations of Sunni Islam. They were passionate defenders of the “Westernized” and the secular Turkish Republic.

When I got to high school, we moved to Ankara, the capital city of Türkiye, in 1998. This time, I went to a public school. My high school was not the best in Ankara, but it was similar to my elementary school as ideologically it aligned with a secular and modern Türkiye. That was the first time ever that I realized the extent of poverty. I also had friends who self-identified as Kurdish for the first time. I began to understand how some Kurds had suffered at the hands of the Turkish state. My interaction with different ethnic groups crystallized my Turkish identity. At that time, I saw myself as a secular Turkish woman, with an emphasis on my gender. My life was mainly shaped around my gender identity more than anything.

My body defined my everyday challenges when I lived in Türkiye. I knew that when it was dark, the streets were not safe. Like most women in Türkiye, I received comments about my body all the time from total strangers, friends, family members, and even educators. I was ridiculed because of my weight a great deal during this time. When I was in high school, one of our teachers surprised us with baklava (a Turkish dessert). He turned to me and said: “Obviously you have eaten enough, it is okay if you don’t eat.” It was a joke for him to cheer everyone in the class but it was not fun for me. Another time, when we, girls, lined up for our physical education class, our gym teacher commented that other than me everyone was in good shape in front of my peers. When I was at university, after a gathering with friends and professors, one of my professors begged me to go home with him. However, I was so numb from my previous experiences that I did not even think much of it, let alone make a big deal of it. Sexist comments and jokes were so common. When we reacted against them, we were treated as frigid women; singled out, stereotyped as being oppressed and so unable to experience our sexuality freely; or worse still, accused of exaggerating. Men always looked up and down our bodies walking on the street. Overall, it was inevitable that in my self-perception, my gender identity stood out among my multiple identities.

All women’s bodies are controlled in different ways. When I was an undergraduate student, women wearing hijabs were denied access to public institutions, including universities. Some female students would wear wigs to hide their hair. When I ran into them in the washroom, I could not help but stare at them looking into the mirror and fixing their wigs. I always felt sorry for them. However, their eyes always seemed confident. Rather than being victims of the state policies, they were resilient and created ways to acquire a university education.

It was the summer of 2002. I went to the United States to spend my summer holiday. Not even a year had passed after the 9/11 attack. Before getting onto the plane, after already passing security checks, I was searched a second time. The airport security stopped me just after the security checkpoint so that they could go through my carry-on luggage in detail. They made me sit and take off my socks. I thought it

was odd. Why was it me? It was embarrassing. Everyone passing by looked at me. Back then, I did not have the tools to evaluate my experience. I would have never guessed that I was seen as a threat to the United States of America.

I stayed at my uncle's apartment in New Orleans. He was travelling back and forth between Washington DC and New Orleans, and I was enjoying staying alone almost all the time. A few days into my American holiday, I began to meet and mingle with new people. Most of them were university students working at my uncle's restaurant, or they were his customers. After having numerous questions thrown at me, I came to see that they were curious about me and where I came from. It became clear from their questions that Türkiye as a "Middle Eastern" country was an "exotic" place to them: *Do you ride camels in Türkiye? Oh wow, you wear mini-skirts and shorts, you didn't buy them from Türkiye, right? You should have bought them from here. Oh wow, do you drink alcohol?* Although I did not see myself as a Middle Eastern woman, or Türkiye as a Middle Eastern country, the people who asked these questions certainly did.

There were some Orientalist assumptions about "Middle Eastern" countries and people: We were all suspended in time. Our culture was not open to technological advancements and "modernization". All Middle Eastern women are oppressed. I came to understand that the Middle East was seen as one homogenous entity. To them, all the countries in the region, and all the people living there were identical. Interestingly, though they had never been there before, they had a lot of ideas about this part of the world, and its inhabitants. Now, I understand better where their information comes from. It is the news, the Hollywood movies, and maybe the educational institutions as well. Indeed, let alone the ideas about the Middle East, even the term "Middle East" was not proposed by its inhabitants. It was first coined by the British and later used by the U.S. and became widespread.

I was shocked by the questions. I lived in my little bubble, and I was not exposed to the outer world so much. I was just out of high school without a critical understanding of politics and cultures. I was very defensive about Türkiye and the Turkish people. As a racialized woman with a colonized mind, I tried to prove the contrary: "We" in Türkiye were very different from *other* "Muslim" countries. We were a Westernized democratic nation with its secular institutions. I sometimes felt like a diplomat who had to present their country successfully abroad. When I look back, I can see three things. Firstly, their questions reflected an Orientalist approach- a set of European assumptions and knowledge about the Middle East. Secondly, I noted that I had internalized the superiority of Western values, and there was this constant effort in me to prove that we were just like them. We, "secular Turkish people," waited for an approval from Europeans to be counted as one of them. And finally, I reproduced the dominant discourse about the Middle East by claiming that "we" were so different from "them" (the rest of the Middle Eastern countries).

In response to these loaded questions and assumptions, I continuously told them- I mean my interlocutors- that I had nothing to do with religion. I mean, I was Muslim because it was on my national identity card, acquired automatically upon my birth. However, nobody asked me or my parents if we preferred to have it on my ID card. During these discussions, I resented that the Turkish state imposed this "Muslim"

identity upon me. Now, it was white people who imposed a Muslim identity upon me. In my mind, I shouted at them, “Hey, I am a free soul. Can’t you see it? I am a nineteen-year-old woman travelling alone. Why would you think that I am an oppressed woman?”

Almost ten years after my U.S. trip, in 2011, I arrived in Canada as an international student. Following three months of homesickness, I went out with some of the Ph.D. students from my department. I had jeans and a simple tee on me. We were out for drinks. One of the Ph.D. students in my cohort, a self-identified Muslim woman, asked me if my parents were upset because I did not wear a hijab. I smiled and said ‘no’ to her. To myself, I said, on the contrary, they would be very upset if I wore a hijab. But I did not get into a potentially controversial discussion. I thought to myself that even a Muslim woman has some assumptions about *all* women in the Middle East.

After my arrival in Canada, driving from Canada to the United States, I was always made to wait at the border by police officers. While every white person made it across in 5–10 minutes, I always waited at least two and a half hours in a room full of people like myself, i.e., not white. I grew more nervous each time this happened because I knew it was not coincidental. They targeted me because of my Middle Eastern passport. Driving from Canada to the U.S. became a nightmare for me. To this day, I still try to avoid going to the U.S. via car because of the fear of being stopped and questioned. These border police officers have a typical attitude: intimidating, snobby and rude. Subconsciously perhaps, in response to such a treatment, when I see police at border crossings, I feel anxious and nervous.

I have learned from these experiences that even if I don’t feel like a Muslim, I am seen as a Muslim. As a member of a minoritized group, I have understood that how I identify myself is less important than how others see me. Tired of explaining myself, I began to play the part. *Yes, I am a Muslim woman.* My experiences and interactions with people have definitely turned me into a Muslim woman.

If I am a Muslim, what kind of a Muslim woman am I then? I did not have to think about this question previously. Certainly, I am not a Sunni Muslim. I was brought up in an Alevi family. I remember our neighbours fasting and celebrating Ramadan. As a tradition, my friends’ families would buy them new clothes before celebrations. I always asked for new clothes during that time, too. But it was always a “no.” My parents’ explanation for “no” was never about our Alevi identity. It was because I had enough clothes. They would have bought me new clothes if I had needed them. Still, I was very aware that we were different from most people.

To my understanding, being an Alevi is more like a lifestyle rather than a set of religious practices. There are some adages I have consistently heard from my parents growing up. For instance, “watch your hand, tongue and waist.” In other words, don’t steal; don’t gossip and don’t commit adultery. Another adage I heard was that

both heaven and hell are earthly. Don't dream and imagine that heaven and hell are unknown places. We -human beings- are the ones who create a dreamy or an unbearable place on earth.

So here I am, close to my forties, thinking about my Alevi Muslim identity seriously for the very first time.

London, Ontario, Jan. 19th, 2022

Esra Ari My name is Esra. I came to Canada from Türkiye as a PhD student in 2011. Currently, I am an assistant professor of sociology at Mount Royal University. Before joining the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Mount Royal University, I was an SSHRC postdoc fellow at the Toronto Metropolitan Centre for Immigration and Settlement (TMCIS).

I decided not to go back to my country after completing my PhD in Canada because of the social and political turmoil in my country. With a tendency to view everyday experiences with a sociological lens, I'm critical of oppressive systems, including capitalism, racism, and patriarchy.

I have realized that writing is an empowering process. In a similar tradition of *counter-storying*, *talking back* or *writing back* (Hooks, 1989; Smith 2021), I respond to representations of Muslimhood and Muslim women through storytelling as part of my anti-racism stance and work.

My story is about the process through which I have become an Alevi Muslim woman. This story focuses on how identity construction is never simply a personal choice for racialized groups. Instead, it is formed by an interaction between how a person sees themselves (asserted identity) and how others perceive this person (assigned identity).

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Chapter 4

Kingston Blues



Ozlem Atar

December 2021

How to begin a personal story of migration and un/be/longing? One must find a port of entry. Blessed are you if a story beckons you.

Recently, my nephew has asked me what it is like to move to Canada in midlife and without your family. I couldn't help noticing his condescending tone. "Was it worth it?" was the question he repeated. I smiled and told him we would talk about it when he grew up. My nephew doesn't speak English. If he did, I would share my diary with him and ask, "What do you reckon?"

How does it feel to be in a foreign country on your own? Any insights into making space for yourself in a new place that is alien in many ways? There is the 'alien' language you rely on in day-to-day interactions. Then there is the let-me-tell-you-who-I-am desire you keep suppressing inside yourself when someone asks you questions about where you come from but doesn't really show genuine interest in what you have to say. Toss in silence. Lots of it. There is embarrassed silence in graduate seminars: the turn-taking strategies you learned in artificial classroom settings prove useless when you find yourself among native speakers. Incompetent silence at the cash register when you watch smooth banter between the cashier and the person in front of you but don't have the courage to initiate such small talk. Oh yes, and puzzled silence when watching locals mark their calendars and approve minutes at board meetings at lightning pace, long before you get that they are going over the agenda and setting the dates for the rest of the year.

Surely, I cannot speak for others who have made a similar major life change in midlife. But, for me, one way to capture my feelings of being in a new country is through the songs I listened to repeatedly when I was 'home.' They say music is

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closely connected with identity, and familiar songs evoke personal emotions and re/kindle memories in unique ways.

So, here is my textual album where you, the reader, may encounter some of the music that sustained me in my first year in Canada. The tunes map a geography where the multi-origin paths converge in Kingston. They provide clues about who I am and how I experienced my new surroundings.

4.1 By Lake Ontario

October 2018

I am by the lake. Late afternoon. I am gazing at Shoal Tower in the harbour. “A little nippy,” said Poppy, my landlady, as I left the house. A Canadian expression added to my vocabulary. I take out my phone and capture a few shots of the lookout, abandoned long ago. I am listening to a piece from Björk’s 2011 *Biophilia*: the second disc of her Crystalline Series. “Mawal” has a distinctly Middle Eastern tune.

The Middle East is a peculiar term. It denotes the transcontinental area that falls to the south and east of the Mediterranean. A legacy of the British colonial enterprise. A label that ushers in other words: Muslim, Arab, belly dancing, fierce-looking bearded men. It is home to an estimated population of 371 million. Some stretch it to include Türkiye: a cartography and a gesture of inclusion I’ve always felt uncomfortable with. This expanded area’s largest cities include Istanbul, a city I call home.

“Mawal” is very slow in beat. The emotional instrumental interlude is longing for someone. *Hayati*. My life. The quirky and riotous Icelandic singer is collaborating with Omar Souleyman, a Syrian singer. I save the song on my “Kingston Blues” list. Later, I will find out that Souleyman comes from a village in north-eastern Syria and has been in exile in Türkiye since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

I associate the song with weddings in my village in northern Türkiye even before I read somewhere that Souleyman started his career as a part-time wedding singer. This song reminds me of forlorn tunes local musicians play during the day as they are adjusting the sound equipment and announcing to the villagers that there is a wedding in the village. Everyone is welcome to attend later that night. After the cows are milked. After the hens are safely locked away in the shed. After everyone is washed and has put on their best outfits.

I press the repeat button again. And again. A wedding scene in my village. I am in my early thirties. I am sitting on a makeshift bench strategically placed around an imaginary stage for the dancers. A handful of girls are folk dancing. It is early yet. The bride, a distant cousin’s daughter, must be 18. I am looking past the dancers. A few drops swell in my eyes. I swallow. Then and now. I haven’t spoken to my parents since I last visited them in August. Ten weeks. My father won’t speak to me. A daughter must remain in the community. Am I homesick? No. But I feel rootless. I don’t belong in Kingston. Not yet. And I am longing for another place

and another moment. “*Mawal*” carries me away from the Confederation Basin Marina. Even the images I captured early on will not anchor me to the nation’s former capital.

4.2 Walking to the Isabel Bader Centre

18 January 2019

Today’s blues tune is “*Zolf*” by Mohsen Namjoo. I’ve recently discovered a version recorded live with The Netherlands Wind Ensemble. I am listening to it for the zillionth time now. The xylophone opener is timid. So are my first steps out the door this morning. Voices in my head are in a heated debate. I am leaving home for my theory class. I’ve got to be at the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts before 8:30 a.m. The instructor does not appreciate folks streaming in after the session has started. Another crispy day. “Don’t worry about the wind chill,” says my landlady. The dispute in my head? Should I walk? “Take 501 Express,” says the other. Should I take the bus from the downtown transfer point? I’ll have covered a quarter of the total distance by the time I get to the downtown transfer point. A few false steps down Princess Street. Maybe I should skip today’s class. A change of heart. Reverse. Steps up Princess. “It is only a 35 minutes walk to the Isabel Bader,” the dominant one convinces the weaker ones. Got to be careful. Black ice. Another expression added to my personal Canadian English dictionary.

Zolf is *zılıf* in my mother tongue. Is it a face? I’ll look it up later. The beloved’s hair. Hair undulating over the beloved’s temples. Using his voice as an instrument, Namjoo holds my hand as I take faster yet cautious steps. Thus, my thoughts begin to wander. I am drawn to a rainy evening in Ankara. Was it January 28, 2015? Maybe. The melody is closing my heart and ears to Kingston’s frosty morning. Willem van Merwijk’s saxophone pierces the morning chill as I pass Chalmers United Church at the intersection of Clergy, Barrie, and Earl. How very odd that I am listening to this fourteenth-century love poem in a loveless Kingston? I restart the song at the traffic lights. Got to hear it again. Namjoo’s whistle sequence and van Merwijk’s saxophone take turns. The trumpet joins in. Namjoo’s fluctuating feminine and masculine vocals are trickling in. Each syllable is taking its time to spill out. Hafez’s reproachful lyrics ripple in Namjoo’s voice. Together, they flow through the riverbed of Merwijk’s saxophone. The Persian poet’s pleading with his sweetheart is etched onto the surface of Kingston while I am walking along Union. Namjoo’s voice peaks and valleys as I stride down a side street towards the lakeside building.

Later in class, I think about my new discovery. Fifth month in Canada. I am itching to share the song with someone. Anyone. I haven’t made real friends yet. I turn to the ghazal in my head while my classmates are busy self-authoring themselves, with statements squeezed in the main discussion, as smart graduate researchers. Embodiment. Trajectory. Intersectionality. I feel swallowed by these big words, which push me away. Out the window. Southeast over Lake Ontario. Past the winter land. Across the rolling ocean waves.

4.3 Quality Time with Parents

Part I.

11 August 2018

My last visit with my parents before I leave for Canada. My father does not know yet that I'll be leaving Türkiye in about two weeks. He also does not know that I want to leave for good. The two of us are picking plums. Some are tart; most sweet. Firm and juicy. They have purple skin and amber flesh. "It sells well," says Babam. He is content. We listen to folk songs on my phone. "Ozlem, play Gışlalar," he demands. We listen to "[Kışlalar doldu bugün](#)" as performed by [Neriman Altındağ Tüfekçi](#). It's our song. He won't tell me why he likes it so much. I love it because I associate it with my father.

Part II.

Summer 2021

I am on a video call with my parents. Out of habit, I place my left hand under my chin. Babam: "You've put your hands over your ear as if you are going to sing. Sing Gışlalar." I have a better idea. I turn to *YouTube* for help. We become silent when the performer croons about a visit and a farewell. Muffled sobs on each side of the camera. Babam and I are hiding our faces from each other. Separated for a few years and not knowing when (and if) we will embrace each other again, we remain silent. I don't tell him that I've missed him. I don't want to encourage more tears. He has dropped the tough father mask he's worn for years. Ageing has softened his edges. But he will still not say he misses me. His "When are you coming home?" is to be interpreted as such.

Ozlem is longing. Yearning. Coming to Canada, I thought I would also leave behind the nagging feeling. Now I am yearning for what I left behind.

4.4 Month of Qualms

February 2019

"February just drags," complains my landlady. For me, it is the month of "[Gretchen am Spinnrade](#)" (Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel) by Franz Schubert. I've encountered this *Lied* in the German culture course I am assisting. It is from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*, the tragic play written in rhymed verse. They say Goethe penned this part at 17. He must have been a wildly romantic soul.

Gretchen, the main female character, is captivated by Faust, the disillusioned scientist and all the promises he has made. She sings of her heartache. The object of her desire is after illicit worldly pleasures only. Unaware of her tragic end, Gretchen is ready to be drawn into Faust's arms. "My peace is gone/ My heart is heavy" confesses the young woman. The song escalates in intensity and peaks at Gretchen's remembrance of Faust's kiss. My thoughts pace with Gretchen's feet at the wheel.

I added the word "earworm" to my glossary the first night I heard the song. The ballad runs in a loop. I am obsessed with the opening bar. I've listened to recitals by

Waltraud Meier, Jessye Norman, and Wallis Giunta. No one could dramatise Gretchen's emotional turbulence better than the American Soprano Renée Lynn Fleming.

Gretchen, Renée, and I meet through a desperate poem about a ruinous love story. Gretchen is sharing her heartache. Renée, on stage, is singing of the girl's anguish. I am tucked in my bed listening to this classic song in a language I barely understand: my German is rusty. My headphones are building a no man's land between the song and the cold tiny rental room. The song spins my head like the wheel under the girl's feet. My feet replace Gretchen's on the pedal. I spin and spin. Gretchen sounds as if she has lost her sense of reality. I, too, have drifted away from the immediate world around me listening to her sing of her heartache.

Why this song? No. I am not a hapless Gretchen. I haven't fallen in love with a man. Or a woman. In fact, I connect to the discontent of the beloved in the text. His dissatisfaction with his life is very resonant. My initial excitement at being in a new country wore off. I stopped taking photographs of the city. I am questioning my decision to leave a secure job and a warm apartment in Ankara behind. Life in Kingston is cold, and I am almost always by myself.

4.5 Divine Encounters

March 2019

Loreena McKennitt, the queen of Celtic music says "[in one way or another, we are all an extension of each other's history](#)" on her webpage. My connection to McKennitt goes back to the 1990s, when I first listened to her "Tango to Evora" with [Turkish lyrics](#). I have been listening to this fiery-haired woman for more than twenty years now. Who could tell that, one day, I would live just miles away from Perth County, where the composer resides? I had never associated McKennitt with Canada, either. Maybe she sat on the same couch where I often read in Stauffer. After all, she holds an honorary degree from Queen's!

There is something about McKennitt's music. It takes you along the [Silk Road](#). For me, "Tango to Evora" is a walk along Istiklal Street on a spring day. The moment I close my eyes, I tango in Istanbul. Such is the charm of its melody.

January 2021

But "[Tango to Evora](#)" is now accompanied by other McKennitt songs. Some of her tunes taste divine. "[Caravanserai](#)" is another favourite. The Persian word refers to the roadside inns dotting the trade routes weaving the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa, and Southern Europe. McKennitt places more stones along the way to help the Silk Road extend beyond the ancient roads. Those ancient guest houses were not only safe respite for travellers and their caravans from near and far but also centres for the exchange of goods and culture. McKennitt's piece, too, doubles as a hub for the exchange. It calls to mind memories from other places and maps them onto Kingston as Rueben and I take our afternoon walk. An ebb away from Kingston, a flow towards the road that pulls me elsewhere every time I hear McKennitt sing:

What is this life that pulls me far away/What is that home where we cannot reside/What is that quest that pulls me onward/My heart is full when you are by my side/Calling, yearning, pulling, home to you...

4.6 From Elsewhere: “So Where Is Home?” and Other Questions

“Masar” is an instrumental piece by Le Trio Joubran. The rumour goes that the three Joubran brothers composed this piece during a rehearsal break. I tend to listen to it when I am taking a pause from “So where is home?”

Home is a geography of the heart, wrote bell hooks. I need to close my eyes to be able to touch that geography these days. This tune from elsewhere puts me on a winding path towards home.

I shut my eyes tight when Wissam, the older Joubran brother, picks up his oud. The first notes amble away, taking me to a warm Istanbul afternoon. I am roaming the crowded streets in downtown Kadıköy. His brothers Samir and Adnan join us. Wissam, Samir, and Adnan on their ouds; me in a trance. We are strolling through the busy town centre. I am setting my eyes on fresh produce in Kadıköy Çarşısı. The brothers are playing the same melody again and again. We are trotting slowly at first. I remind myself to buy pastry from Beyaz Fırın. The Joubrans’ percussionist friend is pointing at the coffee houses on each side of the street. I am choosing to have tea at Piraye Café. I am fond of the cats sunbathing in the sunny patches of the garden. In my mind is a poem by Mahmoud Darwish written in a language I cannot read. We are taking a sharp turn onto the left. We are picking pace. We are running. We are following the afternoon crowd up the street. We are climbing. We are stumbling. We are lurching. It feels as if we are running downhill when we are going ‘home’ at the top of the hill. We all know we’ve reached a state of ecstasy when the piece suddenly ends. And again.

“Masar” places me on a meandering route to home. It is one of those tunes that make me reflect on how I have become a Middle Eastern in Canada.

How did I become a Middle Eastern? Is it possible to wear with pride what was given to you with a touch of scorn? How do you digest an identity shovelled down your throat along with a few other not-so-savoury labels?

I remember the sting of that first rejection well. I was still in Türkiye then, far removed from associating with the Middle East. The elaborate enquiry emails I sent to many Kingstonian homeowners who were advertising their spare rooms were mostly unanswered. I later discovered that seeking rental housing from afar with the label Middle Eastern on my back negated my laborious descriptions of myself as a mature, clean, and reliable woman. I didn’t know that my ‘spicy’ food would trigger potential landlords’ food allergies. Polite racism, I would learn later, is the term to capture the essence of an email I received from a homeowner: “I am sorry, but ... allergies to spicy food.” Never mind that they hadn’t asked me what I really ate.

Then, there was that moment when I stared at a world map in a public park in Vancouver. Each continent was painted a different colour to help children, the target audience, locate the countries of their choice easily. Türkiye was placed in Asia although the country sits uncomfortably on the edges of two continents. I was furious. Obviously, the creators of this map had not done their homework. How could they miss that my country is in Asia *and* Europe? Why would they push it further east? I remember looking for some contact information. I would write to the cartographers and get them to correct the error. ... I have given much thought to the politics of representation since then.

Besides, there were random questions and comments at informal gatherings. One: Did I speak Arabic like my Saudi companion whom I met in Canada, and with whom I happen to be in the same graduate program? After all, we are both from the Middle East! No, not everyone from the region you call the Middle East speaks Arabic. Two: Did I wear sleeveless tops in Türkiye? Yes and no. Certainly yes in Istanbul, where I lived eighteen years. And yes in Ankara, the city I found difficult to call home though I made certain neighbourhoods mine over the period of six years I was there. No, not when I was visiting my parents in my rural birthplace once or twice a year. I covered my shoulders and legs in the village because my parents would not appreciate it if their neighbours gossiped about their eldest daughter, and I wanted to make them proud by looking modest. My transformation from a peasant girl who left home at ten to an educated woman evolved to accommodate their wishes; in time, I softened my usual I-can-do-whatever-I-want-with-my-body attitude. Three: Was I not acknowledging that I was queer because I come from an ‘oppressive’ country, as one of my classmates insisted in my first year in Canada? No. I am not queer. Just because I sport very short hair and an androgynous dress sense doesn’t mean I prefer to date women. Let’s talk about the adjective ‘oppressive’ at another time.

“So where is home?” A taxi driver asked me one day, after I told him I was relatively new to Kingston. “Take a guess!” I responded, feeling less nervous about interacting with locals. Nova Scotia? No. Latin America? No. Spain? No. Let me clue you in. A country in the Middle East. Silence. ... Then, I thought to myself: the Middle East is not wedded to a definite physical territory. It is a place of the heart where songs like “Masar” take me.

“Leaving to Come Back”

January 2021

Music is thought to help alleviate pain and boost performance during physical exercise and study. It is praised for its potential to reduce anxiety, too. I would add that it may deepen or ease feelings of loneliness and displacement. Also, the music someone likes speaks volumes about them. It reveals where they belong.

Going through the “Kingston Blues” list I listened to during my first ‘Canadian’ year, I see a woman who has stronger ties to places that look and feel different from Kingston. The tunes seem to de-territorialise the actual places I have passed through in this limestone city. That’s what happens when a place is being claimed by a migrant. You leave a place and it comes back through songs.

Ozlem Atar I moved to Canada from the Republic of Türkiye on 1 September 2018. I hold a master's degree in English Language Teaching (ELT) and a doctoral degree in Communication Sciences, with a project sitting at the intersection of women's post-9/11 literary fiction and Intercultural Communication inquiry. I am halfway through another PhD degree at Queen's University.

I write because I have something to say. If you find that my reflection resonates with you, we will be companions through words. Ideas for my writing come from my lived experience. I often scribble memories of single incidents from my early life because I fear that I may lose these memories. I hardly share these personal notes with anyone. One day, I will. Other times, I write academic essays and my dissertation. To me, writing is a messy process. I tend to do a lot of research before I put a word on paper. I use pencils and paper to give shape to my thoughts.

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Chapter 5

On Immigration, Religion and Home



Bibi Baksh

I prefer to leave Toronto in January when short, cold days, and overexposure to fluorescent light crashes down on my mood. But this summer trip is a much needed escape before I return to in-person teaching for the fall semester of 2021. Covid travel restrictions were recently modified allowing some international travel and I took the opportunity to visit Guyana, my country of origin. The journey was by no means long; Cheddi Jagan International airport is only a five-hour flight from Toronto. But it is a tedious trip, all the ‘new normal’ of travelling is very complicated and costly. As I observe fellow travellers, many with small children and oversized luggage, my hope for a comfortable flight diminished rapidly.

The full Caribbean Airlines flight, with a stopover in Trinidad, and mask requirements are the perfect combination to make passengers more grumpy. I focus my thoughts on the journey ahead and contemplate my three destinations: my primary school, my secondary school, and the house where I grew up in. I must have drifted off to sleep as I was jolted awake by the shriek of an infant. By the time the plane landed, I was tired, but eager to get through the slow immigration/customs rituals and out of the stifling building. The hummer was waiting outside and the drive from Cheddi Jagan Airport to Zeeburg is less than an hour; anticipation shrunk time and excitement overcame fatigue.

I recall the drive to get to those familiar streets on crowded buses from the distant memories of my teenage years. A community of travellers that you recognise and come to appreciate - or, in some cases, dislike - would be on the bus. You knew who would hold your backpack if you didn't get a seat and who would not. It is always difficult to hang on to possessions as sudden incessant, yet unexpected jerks result in dropping things in the scramble for a handhold. The best thing about being on the bus is that the public road runs almost parallel to the seawall – the barrier between

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the Atlantic Ocean and the below sea level coast. On one side, a window seat provides an unobstructed view of the ocean stretching into the horizon allowing the imagination to wander as far as the ships and boats out on the water. On the other side, the unending rice fields meet the sky at some distant point. Window seats are coveted and provide ample nothingness to stare off into with an excuse to ignore the person next to you. You would jump off at your stop and there is sure to be people: friends standing at the street corner, women in their brightly-coloured dresses – some wearing romals or head-kerchiefs – chatting, street-sellers trying to entice with their fruits and home-made treats, children playing, drunk men staggering around. There was life and energy in the hustle and bustle of the main street corner. But the windows of the hummer are tinted, and the air-conditioning is on. This is a quiet ride with a hazy view, carrying only myself and the driver, my cousin once removed. The scenery is familiar yet engulfed in the mystery of the eerie silence and hazy scenery.

At my first stop, the driver pulls onto a side road that is the main intersection of Ocean View, a small village on the ocean side of the main road. The big potholes on the street made the ride feel similar to the ‘Sledgehammer’, the one ride at Canada’s Wonderland that I could not tolerate. However, this is an important stop: around the corner would be the primary school I attended from 1966 to 1972. Like other schools, children were provided with a morning snack; a cup of milk made from powdered milk and two sweet biscuits. Ms. Singh allowed me to bring a bottle to school and fill it with the extra milk to take home along with broken sweet biscuits. She knew I had younger siblings at home. I arrived at the corner but could not see the schoolhouse. My heart sank! I was hoping to see familiar faces, retrieve old report cards, visit the library that fuelled my imagination, and find something that would direct me to the one connection I had with Canada before moving there: a pen-pal, through a school-to-school project.

Her name was Carol Brown and she lived in Canada, a land of snowfall, Halloween and houses with white picket fences. Carol Brown was my age and like me, she was a good letter writer. My teacher hardly had to make corrections on my letters to her. Anyway, Ocean View Public school no longer existed; the tent-like structures that housed the two kindergarten classes, the main building, and the library were all gone. The only thing left is the Mandir that was connected to a section of the school. I stood on the now overgrown field where we used to have our assembly every Monday. Assembly consisted of saying the pledge. I still remember it... ‘I pledge myself to honour always, the flag of Guyana’, after which we will sing a few verses of the national anthem. And naturally, we concluded the assembly with the Lord’s prayer standing right next to that Mandir. No one spoke of tolerance or religious diversity. It was as natural as the sunrise and the heat it brought with it in July, or as expected as the tropical rains that flooded the villages in December. As I stand where my school used to be, I remember.

I remember going to Sunday school, singing Hymns and learning Bible verses. What was that about? Both my parents were Muslims, albeit with different levels of religious commitments or practice. I recall a story of my paternal grandfather coming on the last ship, the SS Ganges, bringing indentured servants, “bound collies” to

what was then British Guiana (1917). The trans-Atlantic trip was similar to the slave trade it replaced as a more “humane” option to slavery. The approximately 9500 miles took over three months. And we now know of the untold horrors: the mortality rate, bodies being thrown into the sea, the beatings and starvation on board, but my grandfather was tight-lipped about all of that. According to the narrative, the only one he told was that, if caught praying on the ship, Muslims were beaten and as the story goes, groups of Hindus would surround the Muslims to hide and protect them. This tolerance stayed with people of religion and it is what I recall. No policies, no state rhetoric. But I must stop this useless retrospection and move on to my second destination, my high school.

Photo credit: Abbas Mohammed.



My high school, my second stop, is a short distance from Oceanview, over a high bridge build so that the sugar plantation can use the waterways to transport sugar cane in large pontoons. This was a frightening bridge with no pavement for pedestrians who competed with the two-way traffic. Off the main road and past the back street is the familiar building. I could hardly contain myself; it is still there! This was the centre of the village. Now, here I am in Zeeburg, a small fishing village on West Coast Demerara in Guyana. Beyond the back street is a bridge that crosses over a trench to a narrow strip of land bordered by the seawall stands Zeeburg Secondary School, the pride of the village that drew students from the entire West Demerara and the Island of Leguan.

Leguan, situated at the mouth of the Essequibo river, is my maternal ancestral village. My grandmother’s house is still there. It used to be a bustling place with ferry services four times a day to get passengers to and from the island and, like the bus ride on the West Coast, this ferry had a community on board. What is significant about Leguan is that it had good schools. My mother was a brilliant student and was awarded a scholarship for a nurses’ training program. However, there were two conditions. She had to become Christian and change her name. Colonization? Guyana was a British colony up until 1966. And what better way to suppress people than to deny them education?

I had many friends and some great teachers at Zeeburg school. And again, our school day started with the Lord’s prayer even though Christians were an almost

insignificant minority in the school. Being the seventh of nine children, I wore my older sisters' outgrown uniforms. I hated that word uniform then and I hate it now. Uniform, confirm, accept, agree! Looking at my old high school, it appeared maintained. I could see the classroom I sat in on the second floor where both the view and the sound of the ocean were clear and would often be my fixation when I should have been paying attention to my physics and biology classes. I did not want to be in the science classes but wanted to be reading Shakespeare and the novels that were part of the art classes. However, I had to be in science because like my clothes, my textbooks were my older siblings' hand-me-downs. I was channelled into the sciences for the practical reason of we *already* have the textbooks.

I recall the notion that reading stories and novels was a waste of time. After finishing homework, there was housework and yard work. Animals to be fed, plants to water, younger children to care for. But in school and during any science class, I could look out at sea and forget about physics and chemistry, I could forget my existence. I read and I imagined. I got a glimpse of Moby Dick under the surface of the rough brown Atlantic water. As boats and ships passed by, I would pick out the Pequod and see right through to Captain Ahab on his one leg. I could even see the sailor Ishmael watching Ahab as he schemed to get Moby Dick. I got lost in their names. There is something familiar sounding about Ishmael and Ahab. Where would an American writer in the 1851 know about such names? Maybe the world was smaller than I thought. I remember my mother reading stories about a Prophet named Ishmael, but surely, he could not be on the Pequod. He was an Arabian Prophet in the desert far away from the ocean.

The green wire fence surrounding the school kept the cows and the goats grazing in the area off the school property. One could smell the salty air and hear the sounds of the waves. At the entrance to the school, a huge gate locked with a chain barred the entrance. Disappointed with the blocked entry, I made my way back to the vehicle across the bridge. Seeing my disappointment, my guide made a call that got the security guard to come over, which he did grumbling because school was already out for the day. He was either talked to, or bribed, into coming, it didn't matter which. I got into the grounds and eventually into the school building. Walking the halls of the building brought back memories of carefree days running in the corridor with friends whose names I could hardly remember at this point. Nonetheless, the feeling of close bonds and camaraderie, coupled with a sense of belonging, overcame me. I went into the classroom, it looked different, the furniture seemed old, and the wall prompts were different. I took a seat next to the window overlooking the ocean. This time there was hardly anything on the water which was pounding and crashing against the battered seawall with waves high enough to cause any ship at sea to worry; it was spring tide. That meant dark nights and high seas.

I fell into the old habit of looking out at the ocean and fantasising. This time the fantasies were mingled with historic realities. I imagine the Pinta, Nina, and Santa Maria sailing across the Atlantic in 1492 bringing Columbus to discover America. How can he discover America? It is not like electricity or penicillin. It does not help the Arawaks, Wai Wai, and Caribs. Instead, they are stripped off of their land, demonized and driven into the interior. I wonder whom Columbus brought on those

ships to *discover* America. And why did they come? As the story goes, supported by Spanish rulers Isabella and Ferdinand, Columbus's discovery was motivated by the expansionists seeking power, control and opportunities to spread Catholicism across the globe.

This trip down memory lane is raising more questions than answering. Why were we never able to say a Muslim or Hindu prayer at school? Why did my mother not qualify for higher education because of her name and religion? There was nothing wrong with my sense of belonging, I was happy with my family and friends, but it seemed like I was missing something. There was a gradual erasure of the precious cargo of religion that came with my grandfather on that ship. Uniforms for school that depicted a particular style of dressing incongruent with Muslims' dress. Saying the Lord's prayer, and having to speak "proper" English were some of the strategies that eroded the knowledge of religion. Even the religious leaders had to make concessions to survive. Their daughters and sons had to wear the same uniforms that show what good British subjects they were. Why is this memory returning to me as I sit in my form 5 classroom?

During my high school years, there was a time of economic hardship and political instability, but Guyana was still the land of "One People, One Nation, One Destiny." Maybe not so politically, even now I recall the colonial strategy of divide and conquer that created racial fissures, but religion was not a barrier. Despite religious differences, people cared about each other: we had national holidays for Yaumun-Nabi, Eid ul-Adha, Phagwa, Diwali, Easter, and Christmas. On Eid, most people from the village would come to our house for a meal or treat; likewise, for Easter, all the children were happily making and flying kites; and again, for Phagwa, Hindu friends will show up with powder and abeer to include everyone in the festivities.

I started learning about Islam in a more systematic and life-changing way after high school. I began to wear hijab, much to the disappointment of some members of my family but I stuck with it, and by 1980, I had fully integrated into my Islamic identity; in my worldview, this was progress. I had reclaimed some of what went overboard on SS Ganges, some of what my mother had lost through education. I will always remember the Lord's prayer but now I also know the Fatiha. And like the legacy lived out on the ship, I continued to have friends from all faiths.

On my way out, an orange-covered book sitting on the corner of a dusty shelf by the door of the classroom caught my eye. Oh, the days I spent with that book! It was the all-in-one fountain of knowledge that contained figurative expressions, similes, abbreviations, geographical and historic facts, and proverbs. The proverbs were often quoted by my mother in her admonitions, particularly when reminding us about the importance of education. I could hear her voice now, "As you make your bed, so shall you lie on it", she would say to us. I wrack my brain to recall if I used such encouragement with my children while they were attending school in Canada and what comes to mind is my daughter being tested for ESL in her grade 1 year. What an irony that after I had lost my ancestral language through colonisation and had become a good English subject, my daughter who spoke only English was tested for English skills.

Walking back to the waiting vehicle in the semi-darkness of the late afternoon, I can hear the frogs croaking. I gingerly make my way avoiding the cow dung that is sure to be littered on the path. The walk requires attention and I cannot become absorbed in memories until I arrive at my third stop, 4B Zeeburg North, my childhood home.

Photo credit: Abbas Mohammed.



My home, full of memories of a large and bustling family with friends and neighbours all enjoying the shade of the mango trees. No one is here now. The little house can barely be seen through the overgrown mango trees and lush vegetation that replaced the once well-kept yard. This scene, quiet and empty, signals a loss of home.

If one listens intently, the sea can be heard from here and the setting sun is casting long shadows. My mind drifts off to the place I currently call home: Canada.

Canada is my home; it has been my home for close to 40 years but still I feel like a stranger there. This thought sparks an overwhelming sadness that settles in with the night. As I look at the place I grew up in, I think of my children in Canada and recall a question from my youngest. On June 21, 2021, after the horrific Islamophobic attack that killed three generations of one family, my daughter had asked, “Mom, do you regret leaving Guyana now?” I was unable to answer her question then and as I stand here enjoying the warm breeze, I still don’t have an answer. With initiatives such as Bill 94, Bill 62, and resistance to Motion –103 – how would the new generation of Canadian Muslims experience home?

Maybe we all have that primordial home within us, beyond the temporal and spatial. Maybe home is in the consciousness, something we have before we start movement and migration, something we carry wherever we go. It may be difficult to detach one’s heart from the subtle bonds that we form to attach us to each place we visit, each city we stay in for a while, every country where we create a home. Or maybe home is inside each other, the dialogical spaces that are created as we hold up mirrors to each other and reveal our true selves. Maybe acceptance, compassion, love, and belonging can create a home wherever we are.

Bibi Baksh I am a Guyanese-born Muslim woman of Indian descent. I migrated to Canada in 1982 and have lived in Hamilton, Ontario since 1990. My PhD research focused on the experiences of Muslims/refugees child welfare clients. As a registered Social Worker with the Ontario College for Social Workers and Social Service Workers, I have established a private social work practice, Shifa Services, which provides services for immigrant clients grappling with settlement, generational and parent-youth conflict, identity disruptions and stress.

Aside from academic writing which I find prescriptive, I write to engage with my long-forgotten memories of my recent and ongoing experiences of migration. Writing provides an imaginative space for me to bridge who I was with whom I have become, helping me integrate my past with my present.

In reflecting on my past and present, I wrote *On Immigration, Religion and Home*, a journey into the past that transpires with a trip to Guyana. In the narrative, I revisit schools I attended to unpack how a colonized British state exercised control through an education steeped in religion. I draw on my grandfather's transatlantic trip as an indentured servant from India and my migration to Canada to reflect on migration and belonging through the lens of my relationship with religion. My final stop in the story is my childhood home where I take time to reflect on the meaning of home, growing up in Guyana, and living my adult life in Canada.

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Part III
Am I a Work in Progress?

Chapter 6

WIP (Work in Progress)



Jenny Osorio

Canada Day



July 1st 2020

Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio.

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When does one start being Canadian? Is it after landing for the first time on a scorching day of June, wearing boots and a heavy jacket, because Canada equals winter all year long?

Is it when you successfully order a medium black with a plain bagel, toasted, cream cheese on the side at Tims, without being looked at as if you are speaking an unknown language?

Is it when you first travel abroad using your Canadian passport, as if wearing an invisible cape? No one at customs is interested in your travel business anymore, or if you're carrying *something*, or if you're meeting *someone* from your country, or if you're really really sure of your answer, because *I can repeat the question and you can rectify your answer*.

Is it when your colleague tells you about her gardening project and her mortgage payments, but *Oh, you wouldn't know what that is, you guys just arrived in this country?*

Is it after signing the sale of your house while wearing matching red and white outfits proudly posing for a picture?

Materials: Shweshwe fabric from South Africa, white embroidery floss from France, bamboo hoop from China, embroidery skills from a Colombian in Canada.

6.1 A Winter Scene



2000–2020

Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio

I started this cross-stitch piece when I was 13 years old as part of the Arts and Crafts class at school. A winter scene in which mama bear and baby bear contemplate a supermoon. I remember my mother telling me that the project was too big and that I should choose something smaller to submit. I didn't complete the piece and left it abandoned. Last year, I received my mother's collection of cross-stitch fabrics, threads, and projects. She had kept my unfinished embroidery all these years. I had kept the pattern in an old book. I looked at the piece thinking *Little did I know then that I would be living in Winterland one day.*

I got myself to work and finished the winter scene 20 years later. It now adorns the gallery wall of my son's bedroom.

6.2 Fulfillment

Sept 2018

Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio



Voice over: *What do you want to be when you grow up?*

5-year-old Me: *Mmm...* (gets interrupted).

Nona: *Mija, estudie. The most important thing is the studies. Your father was a very smart man. Life can take away many things, but no one can take away the knowledge you acquire.*

1st grade teacher: *Your daughter is very smart. She would benefit from a school like this one. We would like to offer a scholarship.*

13-year-old Me: *Mami, I won the school knowledge contest. My school fees are covered next year.*

10th grade teacher: *You're very good at Math. I am sure you will be either a physicist or a doctor.*

Man at news' stand: (reads in the newspaper) *The young lady won the regional spelling bee that took place last weekend, and comprised students from over fifty schools.*

Voice over: *So, you finished high school, what are you applying for at university?*

16-year-old Me: *Mmm...* (gets interrupted).

Stepfather: *Well, it has to be engineering, something useful. And don't be silly like your cousin, wasting her life and a career as a microbiologist to raise kids at home.*

16-year-old Me: *Mmm... What about literature? I could write and be a teach...* (gets interrupted).

Stepfather: *I won't pay for nonsense. Apply to the TESL program, at least you will learn English there. It will be useful in Canada.*

Auntie: *You can be whoever you want. Just make sure you are the best at it. If you want to be a baker, do it, and make everyone dream of your rolls and sweet pastries.*

Mami: *We're in Canada now, you can fulfill your dreams. There are no barriers here.*

19-year-old Me: (Reads letter) *We are pleased to inform you that you have been admitted to our Creative writing program...*

Classmate: *how did you do on the assignment? How come you got a better grade than mine, if you don't even speak this language well? How long have you been in this country? And you aspire to be a writer? We've been reading and studying the classics since we were kids.*

20-year-old Me: (inaudibly) *Well, I've read them in both French and Sp... never mind.*

University Advisor: *Well, yes, you could apply to the teaching program, but I am not sure you will get in. I mean, people want their kids to be taught by a native speaker. No one wants their kid talking with a foreign accent, am I right?*

21-year-old Me: (To the audience) *I remember a substitute teacher we had one day in our French program for newcomers. She was from Romania. She stood confidently in front of us as she introduced herself, articulating every syllable so clearly, we could see the words get written in the air as she spoke. We were in awe. She was just like us. she had come to this country as an adult, attended the same language courses, learned the language and fulfilled the Canadian dream (as far as we could see)...*

I don't remember any of my classmates' names from that time, and we lost contact afterwards, but I can still vividly see their expression and motivation to keep on learning.

(to the University Advisor) *I will be my substitute French teacher. Just not at this university. Merci monsieur pour votre temps.*

6.3 La Main



WIP. Started in October 2020

Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio

Madame Odette was my first French teacher. We were 16 newcomers, from 18 to 60 years old sitting in her classroom. She was not a big person, but her hoarse voice gave her an imposing appearance. She spoke clearly and loudly. She made sure to correct all the mistakes we made as she did not want anyone to make fun of us, *you guys already have enough on your plate figuring out how things work in this country.*

We learned grammar and pronunciation, along with some basic history of Canada, but her favorite activity was role-play. She used task-based language teaching when it was not yet in vogue. With a rotary dial phone she would announce: *Hussam, you are calling your landlord because there are cockroaches in your apartment, are you ready?*, or *Yerlis, you are calling the school to tell them your daughter is not feeling well and she is staying home today.* She would challenge us, making counter arguments to our requests. With her, we learned what to say to open a bank account, what to ask when renting an apartment and most importantly, how to assert ourselves. *Vous êtes la crème de la crème, and that is why this country wants you. Never forget that. Whenever someone is trying to diminish you, show up your hand: Attendez s'il vous plaît, I am learning French, please speak slower, not louder.*

La main honors this process. When we arrived, we were invisible, we felt invisible, we felt empty. Slowly, one stitch at a time, we started filling our hand with new experiences, with new hopes and with new skills. Until we were seen for who we are, not for the linguistic gaps, or the cultural differences. *La main* still has some blank spaces, it is a work in progress.

6.4 Bilingualism, or a Linguistic Fight

July 2020, *Rue Galande, Paris*



Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio

So, is it a reality?
 Utopia?
 Je n'avais jamais pensé
 Pouvoir vivre et gagner ma vie
 Avec la langue de Molière.

Thinking back
 I use more French in Alberta
 Than when I was in Québec.
 Même plus que l'espagnol
 Réservé uniquement
 À l'intimité de chez moi
 Mi familia, la cocina
 Las canciones de cuna para Jules.

..

Je suis bi
 Et ma famille aussi.
 Mais pas dans le sens politique du terme.
 Et c'est correct.

6.5 The Kiss. Reflections on Love and Identity



May 2009

Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio

The question of identity is usually related to space. For instance, in the case of national identity, subjects often identify themselves as members of a country, subscribing to or at least accepting the values and principles associated with it. Before coming to Canada, I never had to question my national identity, or how it had an impact on the choices I made or on the ideas I shared. Now, being part of two worlds, and being able to communicate and to love in three languages, a new difficulty arises. How to negotiate between the three? How not to be less Colombian by being more Canadian? How to provide a safe common space for these identities to emerge? Ted Aoiki (1983), when describing his reality as a Japanese Canadian said: "I was both Japanese and non-Japanese. I felt I was both insider and outsider, 'in' and yet not fully in, 'out' and yet not fully out" (p. 323). I have experienced that same feeling of belonging and at the same time, not being part of it anymore.

In this particular moment in my personal life and in my learning journey, many vital changes are taking place and more questions arise. On one hand, my family has expanded as we became a family of three. Which one of my identities will shape my son? In which language should I cook to tell him I love him? Will he bond with our extended family in Colombia? Will he embrace or despise our core values and beliefs?

On the other hand, after more than fifty years of civil war, Colombia has finally signed a peace agreement, putting an end to years of death and suffering. The road towards peace is still to be travelled, but at last, conversations are taking place. So, the questions many of us ask are: does this mean we can return? Is my home country

safe enough to raise my child? Is my time and living and learning in Canada over? Should I pack sixteen years of memories, languages, winters and new recipes in two 23 kg suitcases and go back?

As I ask myself all these questions, a possible answer emerges: The only way I can be Colombo-Canadian is by not trying to be either one or the other, but something different, an intertwined thread with which to embroider the stories I will tell my son and the upcoming generations. Stories of immigration journeys, peace agreements, and returns to the land of forgetfulness.

6.6 La culpa en los tiempos del COVID-19



May 2020

Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio

Guilt is
 Knowing you must be productive
 You are home
 "More time" to work on your PhD.
 But all you can think about
 Is the cross-stitch embroidery
 Lying on the table
 Calling you...

Guilt is
 Hiding in the basement

Hoping to get some work done
And listening to your son
Upstairs
Running
Laughing
Waiting for you to join him.

Guilt is
Watching TV
Taking a nap
Playing with J
without being completely there
“You still have work to do.”

Guilt is
Choosing to fold laundry
Instead of watching a movie with family.

Guilt is
Longing
For some quiet time alone.

6.7 Apsara



WIP. Started in May 2009
Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio

Women in my family have always told stories. My nona would tell me the story of how my grandfather lost their house at gambling, and how she bought a new one, with no money, only with a promise to the owner that she would open a bakery and pay him in bread. Every week, on our way to the cemetery to visit my father's and my grandfather's graves, she would show me the house. She would also tell me about her successful corn business; I remember being little and playing hide and seek around the big jute sacks of corn. One of his employees proposed to her, and when she turned him down, he scattered salt in front of my nona's house, cursing her business. *I have lost it all, but I know I can always start again*, she would say, *I still carry my experience and my memories of this life, and as long as I tell the stories, I will not forget.*

I still wonder what stories are worth telling. Stories from back home? They seem so far away now. Stories of migration? The laughs, the tears, the resilience. Stories of citizenship? Taking a stance, speaking up. As I add stitches to my life embroidery, I am reminded of the importance of telling our stories: *To not forget*. In my case, when the story is not yet ready to be told, I can always look at the embroidery hanging on the wall, patiently waiting for me to unfold its secrets.

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Jenny Osorio My name is Jenny Osorio (she, her). I immigrated to Canada with my parents and sisters in 2006. I am a French and Spanish instructor and a PhD student in Education at the University of Alberta. My research interests are at the intersection of language and identity, specifically the liminal spaces in which multiple identities converge and the ways learners negotiate their multilingual identities. When I am not teaching or studying, I am embroidering and knitting.

I write so that I don't forget. Since I was a kid, I kept dream diaries and reading them always takes me back to the places I dreamed of. Writing allows me to document the struggles and victories of life, especially the small ones most likely to be forgotten.

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Chapter 7

Journey Through the Self



Chelsea Nyomi Richards

7.1 My Reflection

At times, I stare at myself and think about what other people see when they see me. My thoughts envelop me until I don't see anything that I like. I am happy to be me until I meet someone who says something, or does something, that makes me feel out of place, and then my immediate reaction is - I wish I could be different, somehow. But when I think about changing myself, and what I would change, I don't want to change anything. This constant state of flux - wanting to be different but not wanting to actually change - has torn me both mentally and emotionally. So, for example, I question myself and my appearance with more scrutiny when I've had an unpleasant encounter. I notice the way people tense up around me when I am alone with them in an elevator. Do I look threatening, I begin to wonder? I feel sad when I meet someone for the first time, either in person or on Zoom, and they seem surprised that I am Black. What were they expecting? Do I not meet your expectations? I almost ask them, but I never do.

After many micro-aggressions, macro-aggressions, and other subtle insults that appear to be targeted towards my Blackness, I've dressed myself in protective armour. But this so-called armour hasn't exactly protected me, instead, it has prevented me from reacting. I am still negatively affected but I cannot seem to respond with any presence of mind. For instance, I have never 'lashed out' even on the rare occasion that I wanted to. These aggressions though, and all those unsaid thoughts inside me, collectively chip away at my confidence, and sadly, they end up impacting my interactions with others. I find myself becoming more skeptical and non-trusting, and I may even have become a bit delusional, creating narratives from a stunted glance, a change in body language, or the slightest adjustment in intonation.

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Sometimes, I don't even know if it's really happening outside of me, or if it's just ruminating inside my head...

One thing is finally clear though - I don't actually want to change, I just want to go unnoticed, or instead, not be noticed for being Black. Some of the most troubling experiences that resulted in how I perceive myself have been because of my hair, my Blackness, and my Jamaican ancestry. I've dedicated this story to those experiences.

7.2 Thick 4c Hair

I long to visit Jamaica again, the birthplace of my parents. I vaguely remember myself on my first visit 'home', a rambunctious toddler at age 3, climbing that mango tree in my grandparents' frontyard. I was eager to pet a donkey at a petting zoo, a donkey in a bad mood as it turned out, that gently kicked me in my stomach. I was fascinated by the small lizards that roamed throughout the yard and into the home. Another memory is of my hair being braided by a Jamaican hairdresser. She told me to sit still so that I could have an even hairdo, but it was hard to sit still for what seemed like so long. Looking back now, some 22 years later, she was quick, but I was fidgety and I definitely didn't like the feeling of my hair being tugged, twisted, and cornrowed.

My mother, a Jamaican native herself who immigrated to Canada during her late teens, never learned to cornrow (fashionably), and I was therefore never subjected to having my hair styled that way as a child. Instead, my mother styled my hair in thick, single braids using scrunchies or "bubbles" to secure the braids tightly to my scalp. They were often referred to as "doo-doo plaits" by those who looked down on the hairstyle, or those who were attempting to attack Black culture. In 6th grade, someone even said to me "your hair looks like penises". Another said my hairstyle looked like long pieces of poo. When I got home, I told my mom that I was being teased at school, and I asked her to make the plaits smaller. She gave me a hairstyle with many small single braids, each secured by a small scrunchie. I went to school the next day with the feeling that I would dodge the negative comments, instead, I was told that my hair looked like spider legs.

As I grew older, I was eager to straighten my hair to avoid being teased about my hairstyle. My hair is very thick, and it doesn't stay straight for long, especially with intense humidity. The first time I straightened my hair was in 7th grade, I wanted to look 'nice' for my friend's birthday party. A local hairdresser styled it using an old-fashioned flat iron. The iron made a *hiss* sound every time it touched my hair, and I felt chills run down my spine whenever the iron came close to my ear, it was SO HOT. I think my scalp got burnt a few times. When I arrived at the party, I was anxious to see how my classmates and friends would react to my new hairstyle. Everyone was fascinated to see a new version of me. A white boy called me pretty for the first time. I felt so beautiful.

Unfortunately, that straight hair didn't last long, and in a desperate effort to avoid hairstyles that brought me mockery, I begged my mom to purchase a hair

straightener from a retail store. I demanded that she blow-dry and straighten my hair, and I swore that I would never wear her plaits again. I soon learned that poor technique, the absence of products tailored to Black hair, and lack of care led me down an unexpected path. My hair became heat damaged and broke considerably. I was used to having such thick, sometimes unmanageable hair, that it was weird for me to see my scalp with almost half of that abundance. It didn't worry me too much at the time as I knew it would grow back eventually.

When I started high school, I was determined to associate with people who understood me and my Blackness. The high school I attended merged eight elementary schools together and had a total upwards of 2000 kids at the time. I essentially dropped all my acquaintances from elementary school and spent my time with a group of Black girls and guys, most of whom had Caribbean parents. For the first time, I felt accepted for who I was, and I loved it. The people who teased me in elementary school and called me "whitewashed" or "oreo" had nothing to say now. My hair grew back (and I kept on straightening it after learning how to treat it better), and I hung out with Black girls who seemed to intimidate my former friends. There were still occasions when a white person or non-black person of colour would have a comment or two about my hair. In tenth grade I wore cornrows again, someone said my head looked like a pumpkin. In eleventh grade I wore long braided extensions, I was told I looked like JarJar Binks, from Star Wars. In twelfth grade, I wore my natural hair in a big puff on top of my head. People liked to stick pencils in there and see what they could hide. As frustrating as these comments and actions were, I continued to wear whatever hairstyle I felt suited me. I had the feeling that the teasing would never end as long as I associated with non-Black people, and I lived in a predominately white town so there was no escaping that.

7.3 Shocked

When I went to university, I thought I could recreate my identity. I'd be in a new town with new people. Only a few people from elementary or high school got accepted into the same university as I did, but the school was big enough for me to make new friends and not depend on my old connections. I'd grown up in a town where most of the residents were white, so I was used to living as a racially marginalized individual, but there were still enough Black and brown faces for me to feel somewhat comfortable at times. To say that I experienced culture shock at my university would be an understatement! Imagine this: In a school of almost 22,000 students at the time, I was the only Black girl on my residence floor, the only Black girl on my sports team, and one of three Black girls in my general science lectures (which seated about 500 students). I had hoped to feel included and welcomed into a new community of Black folk, but instead, I felt isolated and alone. It wasn't until my third year of undergrad that I discovered and participated in two student-run organizations by and for Black students. I felt more at ease than I had ever felt while at school. And I slowly dissociated from the friends I had made during my first and

second years... Now that I am living in Toronto, I am surrounded by people of all different appearances and from all different places. I still have trouble with my hair though, and it is quite tedious to take care of. I have tried many styles. Sometimes, I find myself just giving up and not styling it at all. I now wish my mother knew how to cornrow, maybe, she would have taught me...

7.4 To Be Black

What does it mean to be Black? Some of the assumptions I've heard are that Black people are exceptional athletes, great basketball players, and naturally good dancers. I've encountered positive stereotypes and derogatory stereotypes. There are many things that a Black person, and even a Black woman, *should* know how to do that I don't know how to do. Back to the topic of hair for a moment, I can't cornrow! In one of my former relationships, the Black male that I was seeing asked me to cornrow his hair for him. Vulnerably, I told him that I didn't know how to but that I would try my best. To my surprise, he said "how do you *not* know how to cornrow, you're Black. In fact, you're blacker than Black". I didn't expect to hear that from him - he is the darkest child out of five children, and he made it clear that he didn't quite like it. He probably had some unresolved issues with colourism, but then again, he was a few shades lighter than I was... I always wondered how he really felt about the colour of my skin.

Hearing stereotypical and anti-Black comments from Black males hurt me deeper than when I heard them from non-Black people. It felt like they didn't accept me unless I looked or acted a certain way, a way that wasn't often natural for me. For example, various Black men have told me that my "hair looks better when it is straightened" or that I "don't really speak/act like a Black person". These experiences impacted the way I viewed myself, I felt unwanted and less attractive. I never expressed to them how their comments made me feel; I kept those emotions bottled up inside, but I would distance myself and put up a wall around my heart so that I wouldn't be swayed by their conditional love. I truly didn't feel they could ever love or appreciate me for who I was.

Recently, I've encountered Black men who were interested in me for what seemed like all the wrong reasons. As in, they didn't see me as the 'stereotypical' loud and boisterous, or angry, Black girl, instead, they saw me as cute, sweet, and kind. They liked that I was rather soft-spoken and reserved in most situations, and (bonus!) they loved that I wore my natural hair. Then they would proceed to mock and belittle other more 'stereotypical' Black women. When I encounter these men, I feel conflicted and angry. I see them as being in denial of their own anti-Black views and consumed with a subconscious self-hatred. I pull myself away from these situations without mentioning how I truly feel, or what turned me off. I have a habit of disappearing, silently...

I must add, many people I meet are shocked to hear I am a graduate student. "A Black woman in grad school?"- that's the look on their faces! Another layer of

befuddlement gets added when they learn I studied Neuroscience at Queen's University. They pry and they pry until they get a response, but it never fits their predetermined biases. Unsatisfied, they hastily change the topic or say something like "Oh, Queen's students are really smart." In a condescending tone!

I often juggle many things at a time; multiple jobs, a few extracurriculars, hobbies, and passion projects. The more people learn about the number of things I'm up to, and the opportunities I've created for myself or have been provided, the more they ask me "how do I do it", as if it is uncommon for people to do more than one thing at a time. Or is it just uncommon for Black people to have so many positive things going for them, despite the world being stacked against them, I wonder?

The responses I receive make me question how deeply ingrained these biases and stereotypes are. Are Black people still not thought of as intelligent, ambitious, or elegant? Am I an anomaly or am I being made to feel so in an act of psychological manipulation? Oh, perhaps they are gaslighting me! I have started keeping my successes to myself now, especially when I meet new people. I am tired of being a surprise.

7.5 Art Is a Language

Did I mention I am an artist as well? That is an additional layer of complexity. The act of expressing oneself through art...

As an artist and storyteller, I feel my identity seeps through my work. I want to express myself and my feelings through my creations, and explore what arises from the intersection between art, culture, and identity. I believe that art is a form of communication, a practice of mental and emotional release, a window to understanding. Maybe my identity crisis will come to an end, but in the meantime, I will use art to document my journey. The first destination is to understand my heritage, and what it means to be 'of Jamaican descent'.

Of Jamaican Descent. A short poem.

I am the child of two immigrant parents and have always felt somewhat displaced. I am not as Jamaican as my parents, and I belong to a marginalized culture in Canada. It's an unsettling feeling to not feel at home in the country where you were born and raised. My parents don't expect me to be as Caribbean as they are. They see me as 'Canadian' and I see them as 'Jamaican'. What does it mean to be Canadian anyway? There is a disconnection.

The disconnection that I feel between myself and my parents because I cannot speak the language as well as they can. I cannot cook the traditional dishes. I am not aware of the references they make. I do not share their memories of the place they call home. I am the other.

The disconnection that I feel between my non-Jamaican and non-Black friends, colleagues, and peers, because I do not share the same culture that they do. I do not understand the references they make unless I happen to be familiar with the current trends of 'popular culture'. I do not look the same. I am the other.

But whose culture is it anyway? My existence is situated in an uncomfortable hybrid of Jamaican-Canadian, Canadian, Black (but with Jamaican heritage, not African-

American, and far from African...), and somehow, I am still not Jamaican enough, and I have yet to understand Canadian culture.

Remember when I said I was happy to connect with Black people during my undergrad after feeling alone when surrounded by non-Black people? I slowly learned the cultural distinctions between Caribbean Black and African Black. It's complex to me: Caribbeans were once Africans, and although I am Black, I am not African, but am I *really* Caribbean?

So how do I identify? Well, I'm not African-American because I am not from the U.S.A. Black culture in America is very different from Black culture in Canada, and although I am aware of my lineage from Africa, I want it to be clear that the Jamaican is in there - somewhere. What about just straight-up Caribbean? But then...I was born in Canada, and raised as Jamaican at home but Canadian otherwise - whatever that means. According to Jamaican locals, and even to my parents, that makes me not as Jamaican as someone who was actually born and raised in Jamaica, they feel they are more Jamaican than me. There are times when I say "I'm Jamaican!" with pride and other times when I feel the need to explain that "no, I wasn't born there, but my parents were". Sometimes I am Jamaican, other times Jamaican-Canadian, or just Canadian, or "of Jamaican descent". I change the labels I wear based on the context of the situation, and honestly, based on how I am feeling on that day. Lately though, I am just a person. I'm exhausted with the categorization of every aspect of my identity.

7.6 Migration

I've moved around a lot and have called many places 'home', but I usually grow uncomfortable after some passage of time. I've never lived with a Jamaican roommate. When I left home to go to university, I was just a few weeks shy of 18. I was so excited to finally be independent, yet, I missed the feeling of a Jamaican home. There were times when I would go to a grocery store and visit the international aisle to find Grace coconut water, peanut punch, bulla cake, and hard dough bread, but these were joys that I could only share with myself. I brought these great finds back to my room and enjoyed them silently.

I have always been in a state of wondering and wandering. For instance, I wonder what my parents' lives were like "back home," and I wander between friend groups, trying to find someone to whom I can relate, someone who understands the difficulties of being a culturally watered-down version of your parents, and a marginalized individual in a diverse community.

There's a high population of Jamaican immigrants who settled in Toronto, and a substantial amount of Jamaican culture to temporarily transport me to a place that reminds me of my parents and my extended family. My heart smiles when I encounter a passerby on the street who is speaking Jamaican Patois on the phone or to a

friend nearby. I've indulged in cuisine from a variety of Jamaican restaurants, since I don't live with my family anymore and I can't cook Jamaican food as well as I wish I could. Jamaican music, dances, and phrases have crept into Toronto's popular culture. There is enough for me to reminisce about moments that I shared with my family while growing up, but not too much to keep me satisfied or dispel my desire to re-visit Jamaica.

As the child of two immigrant parents, I've dealt with the impacts of immigration from a second-hand experience, and I recognize that my immigration experiences are completely different from that of my parents. I've longed to know what my family history is beyond the little island of Jamaica. We have been immigrants twice, however, the first time was not by choice. There is a 400 plus year gap between my family roots in Africa and their freedom in the Caribbean. It's an unsettling feeling to have a fragmented history, for I carry a last name that was not bestowed through marriage, but rather, through slavery. When you strip away someone's language, their cultural customs, their way of living, and their name, you strip away their identity, and I believe, I have been lost for a very long time.

Chelsea Nyomi Richards I am a Jamaican-Canadian film maker, multidisciplinary artist and video editor working in the film & television industry. I also operate a small business, Vagus Creatives (www.vaguscreatives.net), which is a blog and magazine dedicated to sharing the stories and work of artists and creative entrepreneurs around the world. Through my creative practice, I strive to explore the connectivity of the world through art.

Recently, I received my MFA in Documentary Media from Toronto Metropolitan University. I also hold a diploma in Broadcast Television & Videography from Humber College (2020), and a BScH in Life Sciences, with a specialization in Neuroscience from Queen's University (2018).

Most of my work is reflective of my personal experiences. My interests are artistic identity, cultural identity, sentimental stories, and community building through shared experiences. I express these interests through the mediums of film, photography, graphic design, creative direction, and writing.

I find writing to be a process of mental and emotional release as I work through my convoluted thoughts. Writing helps me make sense of my feelings and ideas, and allows me to draw connections to social issues.

Journey Through the Self is a reflective essay in which I share my experience of navigating identity from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood as I struggle to feel accepted and understood in my friend groups and by the local communities around me. I also express when my Blackness appeared to be an obstacle, and contrast these experiences by highlighting the moments of redemption when my Blackness was celebrated. The piece ends with a wider perspective of what it's like to be a Canadian-born Black person of Caribbean heritage, distant from my long-lost African roots.

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Chapter 8

My Journey as a Writer



Owen Guo

I'm a grammar vigilante now.

Verbal blunders—a CNN correspondent describing “a lot less” women on the streets of Kabul, or Justin Trudeau touting his approach “on” climate change—hit me the same way a piano tuner catches off-tune notes.

During pandemic lockdowns, I've turned to books and podcasts to compensate for lost companionship. Some books are read more than once, their ideas profound and their language elegant I linger when I read, sometimes to appreciate the beauty of the language. Often, I put my editor's hat on, frowning over typos and wondering why certain words were picked over others. The pandemic is turning me into a wordsmith.

It wasn't always like this. Ten years ago, I could barely string together a sentence in English. Now, I'm trying to build a writing career using a language that seemed at once foreign and perplexing.

I consider myself an aspiring writer, albeit an insecure and self-doubting one. After almost a decade in journalism, writing still doesn't come easy, not least because I'm doing it in my second language. Having grown up speaking Chinese, a language without verb conjugations, I find it tricky navigating a dozen English tenses. Nouns are never pluralized in my native language, the reason why I'm never sure whether I should use sky—or skies—to describe the vast space above our head (*or is it heads?*). Preposition rules are convoluted. When I write, I feel compelled to find synonyms, leading to many wow-this-is-actually-a-word kind of eureka moments. Writing is the laborious work of crafting cogent sentences from which ideas flow.

My forays into English writing started with something mundane: translation. It was 2011, and I was a 24-year-old graduate student in Shanghai, idealistic and eager

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for a career with purpose. That fall, I landed a job as a news assistant at *McClatchy*, an American news outlet, in its Beijing bureau. China, still basking in the post-Beijing Olympic pride, was a superpower in waiting, its yearning for global recognition stronger than ever. A rising China—it eclipsed Japan in 2010 to become the world’s second-largest economy—was a global story attracting growing interest in capitals from Brussels to Washington. I wanted to tell that story in a language the world could understand.

Translation was the ticket in. Under China’s draconian media law, Chinese citizens hired by, say, *the BBC* or *the Economist*, are barred from independent reporting in that country. Our job was largely confined to translation and research, and many foreign correspondents rely on us to file their stories. For many Chinese employees, foreign news bureaus are little more than revolving doors. Dismayed by dim career prospects, many Chinese who worked for foreign press took up plum jobs in public relations or consulting, having learned to cope with tight deadlines and stress.

I stayed for seven years, a journey that proved instrumental in shaping my writer identity. In the newsroom, I learned through osmosis and clumsy imitation—and plenty of mistakes.

In the early days, the learning curve was steep. Not long after starting my job at *McClatchy*, I mistranslated a phrase that, if I were working at the United Nations, would have caused a diplomatic incident. On an autumn day, my boss came to see me in our small Beijing office. Grim-faced and with a notebook in hand, he had questions about a newly released Chinese Communist Party document. “What exactly did Wen Jiabao say? Does he want to change the political system?”

Wen was then the Chinese premier, who, once again, was trumpeting the need for political reform. The Chinese word for reform, *gaige*, appeared multiple times in an official readout carried by state media. My translation gave the impression that something big was afoot. In an earlier email to my boss, instead of indicating a modest tweak, I translated *gaige* as “revolution”. Oblivious to the word’s connotation, I received a quick lecture about semantics. My boss, still seething, explained to me the gulf between overhaul and overthrow as an English teacher would. I listened, red-faced. Then I apologized. Since then, I’ve never looked at translation—or words—in the same way.

With practice, my translation improved. But I wanted more. In 2015, I joined the Beijing bureau of *The New York Times*. Back then, the *Times* was the only international newspaper where the Chinese staff could write bylined stories. For some reason, the Chinese authorities went along with that practice. At long last, four years into my journalism career, I did more than translation and research. I pitched stories and wrote them. It was hard. Words came haltingly, the blinking text cursor a witness to my fitful writing. To get the opening paragraph right, I slogged through multiple drafts, like an app developer would when testing endless beta versions before official launch.

China was full of stories waiting to be told. During my time there, I shadowed a correspondent in a frigid Siberian town to interview a Chinese entrepreneur, investigated how western deodorant makers tried and failed to conquer billions of Chinese armpits, and documented China’s efforts to fight pollution. Time and again, editors

came to my rescue. In *the Times's* newsroom, copies change hands at various editing desks before publication. One editor, I learned years later, occasionally taped long drafts vertically, stretching for as long as eight feet. Then he'd cut some sections and rearrange them. The *Times's* editors were true wordsmiths, whose deft hand showed me what good writing looked like. When a copy returned, the story often took on a new life, every word shining brighter. I'd place printouts of my draft and the published version side by side, ruminating on the edits and the trimmings of my clunky prose. There is no quick way of becoming a better writer; you learn to do so by knowing your bad habits. Then you chip away at them, one at a time.

Just like translation, my writing got better. Meanwhile, the media environment deteriorated. Amid rising geopolitical tensions between China and the West, international media outlets found themselves in the cross hairs of a government hostile to foreign influences. Many of my Chinese colleagues left the newsroom to attend graduate schools in North America.

I, too, was pessimistic about my career prospects. Once, a Chinese friend doing her PhD in New York implored me to improve my data skills. You'll never be able to compete with native English speakers when it comes to writing, she said, convinced that honing hard skills would be wiser—and a necessary step toward a career makeover. Attempting a writing career in English as a Chinese person, in North America, she added, would be as futile as “an egg trying to smash a stone.”

I concurred. No more journalism. A decision was made: Writing was hard and too unattainable.

I followed in the footsteps of many Chinese colleagues. In 2018, I enrolled in University of Toronto for a two-year master's degree in global affairs. Writing did not stop, of course. During the two-year graduate program, instead of newspaper articles, I wrote term papers on issues from international law to trade. Events of global and local significance were analyzed from a distance, through reading and reasoning. I wrote in a voice befitting a journalist, the voice of a neutral, impartial observer. Unbeknownst to myself, a quiet transition was underway—not the kind of career pivot I had envisioned. Quite the contrary, I found myself gravitating toward something I was intent on abandoning.

It all started with language, reminiscent of my early struggles in the newsroom. In the first week of my arrival, I drew a blank when a barista asked how I would like my coffee, the first of many encounters that laid bare an anxiety over my lack of colloquial dexterity. A simple task like ordering a coffee stumped me. Suddenly, daily errands demanded serious mental effort. I could write papers for my graduate course, but when it came to everyday tasks, I felt like possessing the vocabulary of a three-year old.

Two weeks later, although I had prepared an answer in advance, I stammered again at a cafe, while a dozen eyes drilled into my back. “Hmm, I want the cheapest coffee you have here please,” I said, flush with embarrassment.

Slowly but surely, I learned to take my naiveté in stride. My friends had to correct me more than once before I remembered how to pronounce Doritos. They explained what Benedict breakfast was. After calling spaghetti “western noodles” for months, I felt compelled to consult the internet to learn the various types of pasta and how to

say them correctly. Then there is the Canadian corporate world's use of "flip" in lieu of "send"—as in, *let me flip you that document*. That, to this day, remains a semantic enigma I, nor the internet, can crack. Observe, learn, and repeat. My vocabulary grew, and the city felt less foreign.

But perhaps Toronto is inherently foreign, with nearly half of its population born overseas. Immigrants flock here. So do Canadians from other regions. The city exemplifies Canadian values, be it multiculturalism or Canada's embrace of diversity. Yet some people argue that Toronto is the least Canadian city, citing a slew of urban sins they say undermine the very core of Canadian-ness. As a newcomer, one particular Canadian trait piqued my interest: niceness. To many Canadians, niceness is a badge of honour. A national pride of sorts. The beaming faces and never-ending apologies point to the mild decorum that dictates everyday interactions.

But there is more to niceness than meets the eye. Look no further than the exuberant, sometimes perfunctory, "sure" in conversations that sometimes mask tepidness and half-heartedness. In many other cultures, affirmative language around nicety can be an invitation to deepen relationships and connections. The brand of niceness I have experienced in Canada seems to build walls of insularity and cliqueness. I once thought niceness would help me find plenty of friends easily. Not only did it not help, it became an obstacle.

I took to the Toronto Star to say so. In a 2019 op-ed, I argued that Canadian niceness is often steeped in aloofness and indifference, almost like an on-demand gimmick meant to keep confrontations at bay. It doesn't help forge strong bonds in the society.

Within a week, messages began pouring in, via email and social media platforms. To my surprise, my interpretation of Canadian niceness resonated with many readers; some implored me to dig deeper. Thousands of comments trickled in on Facebook, a chorus of voices trying to dissect niceness and how it shapes social ties. The comments felt like a collective therapeutic heart-to-heart, with people sharing their own struggles in forging lasting bonds in a big city.

And the pandemic is not helping. Recently, a friend snapped a picture of a cardboard she saw, taped to an abandoned storefront in downtown Toronto. Signed by "R 2022," it read, "In a passive society, smiles are not the faces of happy people."

If my writer identity was in hibernation, that op-ed and my experience as a newcomer had awakened it. For the first time, I felt the power of storytelling inspired by personal experience, a departure from journalistic writing where writers must keep their sentiments at arms' length to ensure objectivity.

In my journalistic role in China, I sought to document a changing society. But those stories I told had low personal stakes, observed from a distance, narrated through interviews and research. In Canada, my desire to write is still driven by curiosity, but some things have changed. I've become a narrator of my own story, in a country full of immigrants who have moved here in search of a better future, nursing different dreams.

Meanwhile, my obsessiveness with language precision will persist. I'll keep critiquing what I read. My struggles as a writer will also continue. That insecurity, perhaps, is a good thing. It keeps me grounded and humble. And it keeps me going.

As I was wrapping up this piece, a Canadian-born friend commented on a short story I recently finished. “You’re creative in your expressions and articulate in your language, but it’s the ESL quality that gives everything a kind of alien tone,” he said, “I don’t think it’s a bad thing. It’s charming.”

I started my writing career in China, but it was in Canada where my writer identity was finally born.

Owen Guo I’m a freelance writer and a news junkie. Born and raised in China, I moved to Toronto from Beijing in 2018, after a seven-year journalism career there. I’ve reported for *the Financial Times* and *the New York Times*. In 2020, I completed my master of global affairs degree from the University of Toronto.

I write to satisfy my curiosity about the world. If my past writings aimed to inform the public, I’ve taken a more personal approach these days. As a newcomer to Canada, writing allows me to be introspective, as I seek to explore my relationship to my adopted home. When I’m not reading, I think a lot about how to write better.

My essay looks back on my journalism career in China, where my budding writer identity took shape. In this piece, I also reflect on navigating my newcomer identity through language as well as how I’ve evolved as a writer. Currently, I’m researching a book project about Canadian niceness.

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Part IV
An Ode to Our Loved Ones Far Away,
Some Messages in a Bottle

Chapter 9

My Taiwanese Mom, Peaches



Galina Liou

My mother is one of the reasons why I moved to Canada from Taiwan.

I still remember that day in a 10th grade composition class. The teacher asked us to write about “My Mother”. Suddenly, I was stunned. Usually, I was never at a loss for words. But I was dazed by this challenge and could not help crying. Before the bell rang, our teacher walked up to me and asked me to go with her out into the corridor. There, *she* asked me, “What happened? Are you okay?” I did not know how to respond. My emotions overcame me and I could only sob. She patted me on the shoulder and asked, “Do you want me to talk to your mother?” I could only shake my head. 23 years later, separated from mom by the immense Pacific Ocean and the entire American continent, I can finally finish the story now.

Mom was born in 1947, two years after WWII and the end of Japanese colonization, in a typical Hakka farm village in the countryside of Miaoli, Taiwan. In that era, rural areas relied heavily on human labour and cattle to plow, and therefore rural families were very large. Mom had six brothers and three sisters. There were two other siblings whom she never met. They were given away to others by my grandfather. In mom’s family, the girls had been given very special names in the hopes that they would bring good luck to the family. Mom’s sisters all have names with “Zhao”, which symbolizes “bringing”. Mom was named “Zhao Tao”, directly translated to ‘Bringing Peaches’, meaning to bring love.

Grandpa’s mother (that is, mom’s grandmother) was snatched by a local tycoon to be his third wife. Her children could not accompany her, so she secretly gave money to my grandpa, and grandpa used the money for gambling until she found out. Then she stopped sending money to him. He continued to gamble and gamble. By the time he sold most of his lands and properties, he was still not favored by the God of Fortune. His wife and the ten children were treated as his punching bags.

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Every day they were beaten near to death. Mom once went home late and was hung under a tree and beaten by grandfather. She fainted. Later she woke up slowly, not knowing for how long she had been hanging there. She broke free of the ropes and ran home.

Mom landed a job in a textile factory in Toufen town. After work, she went to night school to study Child Development and Education. She dreamed of a better life which, for her, meant getting married. I still remember vividly that in the living room cabinet there was a very delicately lacquered wooden horse with a fancy outer box with printed Japanese letters. Mom said it was given to her by a Japanese man who pursued her. It is a shame that her fate does not correspond to her name. She has never been in a relationship her entire life, because she is actually a very superstitious person. She said that there must be an age difference of four or eight years between spouses in order for them to stay together for a long time. The spouse's earlobes should be large, indicating longevity. The other spouse's parents should be alive when they get married, meaning that the spouse is very devoted to his parents. Every night mom cried herself to sleep, because grandfather kept arranging dates for her, but all in vain. All of her siblings got married, except for her. She was a stigma to her family.

Despite it all, mom actively filled up her schedule. After studying in night school, she went to college, obtained a substitute teacher's certification, and began to work in elementary schools. She was a substitute in a wide range of classes, from general subjects to kinetics. In her free time, she climbed many of Taiwan's mountains, including the One Hundred Peaks that are over 3000 meters in height. Regardless of her being active, she still did not meet her Mr. Right. Not until she was 32 years old.

At a gathering of friends, she met a man with giant earlobes. She finally got the answer she wanted after a short conversation with this man. Despite the fact that he raped her after the party, she asked him to marry her, and he agreed. They had their wedding after one month's acquaintance. On the wedding day, my grandfather was overjoyed. He lit up a ton of firecrackers so that all the neighbors knew - Peaches got married!

Mom moved to Taipei with dad. The stress of life immediately overwhelmed her, as three daughters were born when she was 32, 34 and 36. There was a deep scar on her belly, because all of her daughters were delivered by C-sections. The financial pressure had also taken its toll. Dad, who had worked full-time as a typesetting mechanic in a newspaper company at night, and part-time as a security guard in a building during the day, spent most of his time sleeping while at home. So as soon as mom and us children interrupted dad's sleep, dad would beat mom. Slaps in the face and fists on the stomach. Once he hit mom's head with a heavy bucket. She had to have five stitches, and there were long scars on her scalp.

Mom also beat us. She plucked thin bamboo branches from the field of her old home, bundling one end of the branches as a handle. I remember one time I refused to hand in my blanket for laundry, the scent of familiarity helped me to fall asleep. Mom quietly took the blanket away while I was sleeping, but then I woke up and chased her outside the room. I fought to rescue my blanket from mom. She lashed me fiercely with the bamboo branches. When the knots on the bamboo branches

whipped my skin, the blood and bruises surfaced immediately along with a painful throbbing feeling. I was not an obedient child and often made my mom angry, so I was the most beaten one among my sisters. Once I was beaten by mom so heavily that even my sisters cried and begged her to stop.

Mom always said that only because grandpa beat her nearly to death, she did not go bad, and so beating us was actually for our own good. Whether I cried because when cutting my nails, she would cut my fingertips so they bled, or because she made promises that she never kept, she just hit me and told me to stop crying. She used the bamboo branches to educate us about everything. Once she was attending a preschool education seminar, and I wanted to go with her. But she asked me to stay home. I still wanted to go, fighting with her with all my strength. So mom got a neighbor to beat me. It broke my heart completely as a seven-year-old, and I never trusted her again.

Mom did not let us do the housework. She asked us only to do our homework well and get good grades in tests. She dressed us in long skirts, saying that we looked more elegant. Every day she got up at five o'clock in the morning and cooked breakfast for the family of five and grandpa. Then she went to the school campus nearby to play Tai Chi. Later, she woke us up for school and then she went to work at 7 o'clock, returning at 5 to cook our supper. Afterwards, she corrected our homework and that of her students.

Our house had the latest newspapers because of dad. While other children in kindergarten were reading *Children's Daily*, I read the newspapers my dad brought home, and I asked them whenever I did not comprehend. Thus, I often won prizes in language competitions. I started to learn English when I was 13. Immersing myself in American pop music and culture was the only relief for me. When my parents quarrelled, I could put my headphones on and let *The Cranberries* scream for me.

As we grew up, mom beat us less frequently, but the scars she left on my heart were getting deeper and deeper. I dared not to confront her about her parenting and the beatings she gave us because such questioning is not considered to be filial. Filial piety in Asian culture means that one must obey everything one's parents do, especially when they say: "I do this for your own good". Even if I did not resist mom's beating, the doubts in my heart became louder and louder: is this really good for me? Am I bad?

Once, when I was in the 10th grade, mom forced me to correct my writing composition homework. I told her that all the words and phrases she used were very outdated. She said angrily to me, "Now you have become full-fledged and you are ready to leave the nest?!" Then she picked up the bamboo branches to hit me. A fit of anger surged in my chest. I was already taller than she was at that time, so I grabbed her hand, and pushed her away with my knee against her belly. She was stunned. The next second she burst into tears. "How can you do this to me? I'm your mother." Then as she tried again to pick up the branches, I grabbed mom's hand firmly and shouted, "Don't hit me ever again!"

That was the last time mom hit me. Later, mom asked me why I did not hide when I was a kid. I was startled, because I did not know that was an option.

When mom said she would hit me, I would wait for her to take out the branches and be beaten obediently. Mom said that my sister would run away and hide, so she could never get beaten.

Now, mom is not as indescribable to me as she was when I was 17, but she is still a great mystery. She is a very contradictory person, often changing her own words, over and over again. She is very conservative; there is no way for her to tolerate and accept thoughts and people that are different from her. But she never hesitates to express her care and love for us. Maybe in her heart and eyes, we have always been three-year-olds. She also insists on loving us in a meticulous way. Her care is so strong, sometimes even unreasonable. Once she phoned my sister's ex-boyfriend to ask him to make it up with her. Mom single-heartedly hoped that my younger sister's ex-boyfriend would marry my sister. Mom even told his parents, "My daughter is a virgin." After I broke up with my ex-boyfriend, mom also phoned his home to tell his parents, "They are very suitable for each other. They should get married." All of this happened because she thought that marriage is good for us.

Her domineering love for me was like being under the July sun in Taiwan. Without shade, I would be cooked to death. So, I avoided her. After I enrolled in university, I was finally able to move away from home. I went to Russia as an exchange student, to China to work, and to Europe to travel. I did not spend the Lunar New Years with my family.

Although mom no longer hits me, the quarrels and verbal conflicts between us have never ended. From the very beginning when we were able to vote, mom would tell us whom to vote for. Until now, in all the big and small elections in Taiwan in the past 20 years, before and on the day of voting, mom still tirelessly instructed us to vote for the candidates she liked. She never stopped caring even after my sisters got married. Mom wanted to join my big sister's honeymoon in Australia, so it became a family trip. Then she joined my younger sister's honeymoon in Europe, saying she could be helpful with the luggage. Then naturally, mom took care of my younger sister's children and stayed at her house helping her bring up her children. Sadly, it was also mom who found out that my sister's ex-husband cheated on her, while my sister was too absorbed with work. When they divorced, mom asked my sister's ex-husband why he divorced her. He said my sister was too gullible and did not have her own ideas.

As a political fanatic who holds dominant status at home, mom sees me as a traitor, whose political views are inverted. In mom's upbringing, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) which advocates Taiwan's independence, has always been regarded by the long-ruling Kuomintang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party) as the source of social chaos. Mom only absorbs information from the media that supports her political views. Mom and I are getting more and more divergent in terms of our identities. It is not that I like the DPP, but that I do not agree with the KMT, and I am worried that one day, Taiwan will lose its democratic voice. I hope that one day we can declare ourselves confidently, "Yes, I am Taiwanese," because Taiwan is de facto a country. But mom cannot express her identity. She might be afraid that China will reunite Taiwan by the use of force as soon as Taiwan declares independence. She has been brainwashed by KMT's state media since she was a child. She resents

the DPP, and this hatred has gradually turned her into choosing to vote for the KMT. Mom and I are, thus, polarized by our political views.

Then I became vegan. It is generally believed in Taiwan that if people want to make their wishes come true, they should quit eating meat. My older sister was pregnant with twins in 2012. One of her fetuses was in poor condition and might not have survived. My younger sister mobilized the whole family to ditch meat so as to send blessings to our sister. I changed from being a heavy meat eater to being a lacto-ovo vegetarian. After my sister gave birth to healthy twins, I carried on being a vegetarian. In 2016, the heartbeat of my younger sister's second baby could not be detected, so I raised the stakes, and switched to being vegan, quitting dairy products and eggs. After my sister gave birth to a healthy boy, I actively chose to continue leading a vegan lifestyle. My mom thought that eating meat was healthy; she always wanted me to eat meat. We used to have frequent fights over this, but gradually she began to practice Buddha's teachings and changed her views on veganism.

Death was a forbidden word in our family. Every time I mentioned the word, mom would be furious, urging me to shut up and beginning to chant the Buddha's name. But now she started to make a will with dad after a group discussion with fellow Buddhist practitioners, and she has begun to discuss with us how to deal with things after her death. She used to have a strong negative sentiment against homosexuality, scolding them with resentment. But now she practices Buddha's teachings and uses what she has learned. One day mom said to me, "In fact, homosexuals, like all of us, also want to stay away from suffering and obtain happiness. I am learning to be more inclusive."

Thinking back to when I was in college, I often went to consult with our class instructor about my relationship with mom, and often the instructor would persuade me to start learning Buddha's teachings and to start observing mom's merits and appreciating her kindness. The conflicts and friction between me and mom may have been reduced in the past few years, but there is no way to get along with her in real peace. I did not tell mom about my personal feelings because I always felt that if I revealed too much to her about what's going on in my life, she would interfere. That could cause more misunderstandings and unnecessary tension. My college instructor recommended that I join a Buddhist session. Not until I started to go to the sessions regularly and participate in events organized by the Buddhist institute, did I realize that mom and I actually had been going to the same institute. But mom joined it much earlier than I did. Before college, she would talk about the sessions and events organized by the Institute, and I sometimes mocked her or didn't pay her any attention. Now I finally see my own ignorance.

Mom has been working very hard. In addition to being a full-time substitute teacher, she also took on a lot of family work folding carton cases and other hand-crafts, so as to cover expenses and give us a better education and life. In the summer when I was going to be a sixth grader, I went hiking with the whole family. After that, I had a high fever and could not eat or drink. The medication prescribed by the physician at a nearby clinic was not helpful. Even after taking bed rest at home for a month, my condition worsened. Mom and dad sent me to the Main Hospital and I was diagnosed with peritonitis. My appendix had to be removed immediately.

During the month of hospitalization, mom stayed with me in the hospital for the nights. I still remember that I was always in a bad mood when I was sick. Mom tried her best to calm me down. After I was discharged from the hospital, I was only 160 cm in height and my weight dropped to 37 kg. During the month of rest at home, mom took care of me, and my health gradually improved. Mom also invited my teachers and classmates to visit me so I could adapt to school life easier.

Mom has always been supportive of what we wanted to do. Even when my studies in Russia were fully funded, dad opposed my going. But mom supported me mentally and financially. After that, I worked in China for a few years. I received packages from her regularly: large packages full of Taiwanese food and thick stacks of letters written by her asking me to take good care of myself.

As I participate in events and sessions held by the Buddhist institute more often, I want to be closer to the mentor in learning how to be altruistic, and to stop worrying. The conflicts between the political parties in Taiwan continue to exacerbate the tension and anxiety that fills the air. So in 2018, I applied for a master's program at the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada, and hope to stay in PEI after graduation. In the summer of 2017, mom came to PEI for a Buddhist meditation retreat. She was full of praise for the island and the Institute, and was fully supportive of my choice of coming to PEI.

My 80-year-old dad said he could not see me off at the airport when I visited them in Miaoli before coming to Canada in 2019. But he took me to the Highspeed Rail Station. When we pulled over in front of the Station, my 72-year-old mom asked me when I got out of the car, "Did you bring your phone, keys, wallet, and water bottle?" Before, I would have talked back to her without thinking, "Stop nagging! Of course, I did!" But at that moment, I felt as though I had been hit by an electric blast. I paused and said to her, "Yes. I've got everything. Thank you, mom." Then I got out of the car and gave her and dad a big hug. I walked into the station and waited for the train to come. I could not stop my tears. It turned out that accepting mom's care is such a happy thing to do. Why didn't I see mom's kindness earlier? Why did I stop mom's love for me?

I feel incredibly grateful to be able to stay on Prince Edward Island where I have the space and time to reflect and contemplate. In Taipei, it was often difficult to do so because of my living conditions. The city is so densely populated that I could hear my neighbors talking while I was sitting in our house. One thing that has enabled me to listen to my inner voice has been my study of the teachings of Buddha. Maybe in the future, mom and I will still have friction and conflict due to the differences in our opinions, but I am more willing to be patient.

Although we are separated by the Pacific Ocean and the entire American continent, I have never felt closer to my mom. Mom, I love you.

Galina Liou I am currently in training to qualify as a Registered Massage Therapist, and I live in Montreal, Canada. A former sales representative, I moved to Canada from Taiwan in 2019, hoping to find purpose in life. I completed my master’s degree in Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island.

Writing to me is a process of self-reflection. It helps me to see things from different perspectives.

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Chapter 10

Dear Bâbâjân



Sadaf Khajeh

I have left home again, only to arrive at home, or to arrive at my second home as immigrants often call it. And once again I feel a whirl of emotions that pull my insides, emotions that I physically feel in my stomach, my throat, and the back of my eyes. I can cry any second but I don't because I know these feelings too well, I know they won't last but they're never really gone either.

Dear Babajan,

I write to you in a language that you never spoke. I love you. I never really knew you, but I know you are a part of me. Babajan, this summer I traveled back home to the city where we were both born, to our very own Tehran. You weren't there, but your traces were everywhere. I went back for you, I want to know you better. Memory is such an odd thing, I rely on others' memories to give me a notion of you, of who you were, and how you spoke, walked, laughed.

Your laugh I remember a bit though, from what fragmented memories I have of you that are my own. It is from a time when I was in your bedroom, and everyone else was there too, certainly everyone that mattered to the three-year-old me. Mom, Dad, Sara, Mamani, and you. You were talking and I was playing with your pills in that tinted tiny glass. The glass was small, like me, toddler size, so it belonged to me. I would not tire of emptying it, sipping from it, putting the pills back in and including you in the process. It's a blur, but I remember hiding under the couch next, upset at you. Was it the same day? I don't know, memory has a way of playing tricks, condensing time, or stretching it, disposing of the in-betweens but keeping the essence of every encounter. I remember seeing you kneel down on the floor to get me. I remember your apology, not the words but the gesture, the feeling, and I remember loving you again. I loved you so much, Babajan. I have a vague image of you in my mind, giving me a chocolate bar in your room. It must have made me so

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happy, because to this day I still look for the same purple and yellow wrapping of that same chocolate bar in convenience stores of Tehran.

I have all of three memories of you, and in the very last one, you weren't really there anymore. You were on the bed, motionless, sleeping. Everyone was there, people I didn't know. They were towering over us, I was standing next to you, and I was high enough to reach up to your eyes. I tried to open them to show Dad you were just sleeping and there was no need to cry, but he yelled at me, I think, because the next thing I remember is being really upset and running to Mom who was also crying. Everyone was so sad Babajan.

Babajan, I wish you were still here, to see how much you are still loved. I wish you were here to see our Tehran; it has changed so much. I think Tehran misses me each time I leave, just as I miss it, do you miss me too? Tehran is tired, and old, but it holds you and me in it still. Every time I walk in the streets of our city, I can feel you. The bakeries are the same, the sidewalks, the stray cats, the alleys and the people. Do you remember the doorbells the old houses used to have? They were like little white buttons begging to be pressed, kids would always press them and then they would run away, so fast! Oh, and the mulberry trees that had such a grand presence in the city. Every summer people would pick mulberries off the trees. It was one of my favourite things to do, and you must have done it too! I don't know why, but the mulberry trees don't have the same presence anymore, maybe because there are fewer of them now. How I loved the streams along the streets that used to be full of water. Our summer afternoons would be spent with our feet in the cool water that came from natural springs, but now they seem to always be dry. Tehran has aged, but there are things about it that will remain forever ageless like the gentle mountains to the north that watch over the city, or the stray cats that never miss a chance to greet you. I know you too loved cats, Babajan, like I do, like every Tehrani does.

I know now, Babajan, that you grew and changed with Tehran just as I did. The more I learn about you the more I feel closer to you. You were 14 when you took the role of the breadwinner of the family, to support your mother and brother, something I could never imagine doing at that age. I was 14 when I migrated to Canada with Sara, and flew to the other side of the world, something you probably never dreamed your grandchildren would do at your age. But back then, did you ever cry? Because I did. I felt the weight of every single letter of the phrase "Cultural Shock." When you were passing with your permit through the alleys of Tehran at night, to get to the print shop where you worked as a typesetter, during the second world war, I'd take shelter in Toronto's underground subway stations from the freezing cold winter storms on my way to and from university. All the while longing for the same alleys and walkways that you had rushed through long ago.

I doubt you ever felt as alienated in Tehran as I did in Toronto. It took the city a long time to grow on me. You can't just call a place home from the get-go. There was a lot of back and forth before I got to where I am now. For nine years, Sara and I would book a ticket back to Tehran the first chance we got. Maybe only immigrants understand this helpless feeling of constantly wanting to go back home, but knowing staying somewhere else is for the better. Your home was always Tehran, and I like to think the Tehran you knew embraced you, helped you grow to the point

you were able to build your own house for our family. The same house I was born in, and the same house you passed away in. I love Tehran, Babajan, but I think Tehran is tired now.

After nine years of constant back and forth between Tehran and Toronto I decided to book a one-way ticket back to Tehran. Babajan, you don't know how hopeful I was, there was nothing that could get between me and my city. Tehran was going to love me, Tehran was going to understand me, like it did you. There would be no self-doubt because I'd finally know myself in Tehran. I'd speak Farsi fluently without ever having to worry about mispronouncing a word. I'd know the city like the back of my hand like you used to. I'd spend my weekends with the family I loved so much like you used to, and on weeknights, I'd go to the lively downtown with my friends, to exhibitions, movies, and plays filled with the culture I knew and felt so well, with the exception of the cabarets and the bars, of course. It was your generation, not mine, that got to enjoy those. For me, the bars, cabarets, and clubs stayed back in Toronto. But no fret, I was home, and for a while, home was welcoming.

I wonder now, Babajan, were you ever hurt like I was? I stayed for exactly four years, and over time I grew more and more tired. By the fourth year, my mind was exhausted. I felt belittled from subconsciously lowering my head every time a man entered an elevator, or looked at me in the street, in the taxi, or in a store. I felt drained for having to pretend I didn't miss Toronto, and frustrated for having to argue constantly with managers, and accountants for my paychecks. I grew angrier from seeing the value of my savings drop as more sanctions were imposed on Iran. Having to make it home before the curfew at night had worn me out, and I was infuriated for being silently pressured by the society and the culture to constantly think about my age and marital status. Being a Tehrani exhausted me, but what finally broke my heart, Babajan, was seeing how exhausted everyone else was. You'd feel that immense pressure too, if you were here, from the weight of not seeing a desirable future... the weight of despair. The Tehran you grew up in, Babajan, grew with you, expanded and thrived, until the people became enraged and took to the streets of our city to revolt. Dad told me you grew sad when you saw the buildings burning, the city bombed. You told him Tehran will never go back to its old self in your lifetime, and I think when you passed away, Babajan, you took a part of that Tehran with you. Because my Tehran misses you, I miss you.

Were you ever hurt like I was? The first time I immigrated to Canada, it wasn't a decision of my choosing, but the second time, it was. Babajan, I cannot begin to explain just how much it hurt knowing I was the one that finally decided to leave my own home. Because when you decide to leave home, it feels as though it is your home that leaves you. There is a void inside that you can't fill with anything, not even with what you just left behind. It takes time to learn how to live with this void, without feeling guilty. But now, although I have made my peace with leaving, and accepted Toronto as my second home, I feel like I'm still on rocky ground.

My dear Babajan, this summer I traveled back home to the city where we were both born, to our dear Tehran, and for the first time in my life, I faced this void inside of me. I finally saw it for what it is, the life I was never meant to have, the life that I'd like to think you got to live. You were born in Tehran and grew up there. It

was very hard, but you raised your status in society, started your own business. You built your own house and raised your family in your home city. Maybe I should call you lucky because you lived during a time when Tehran was growing and expanding, and Iran had a prominent place in the world. Maybe you never felt the need to leave Iran because your city was growing with you. So you watched your children and your grandchildren grow up in the same land and country that you did. You witnessed my birth and when you passed away, you were buried in the land you always knew as home. But Babajan, you and I both know by the time my life began, Iran was slowly losing its global status, and the Tehran you grew up in changed its face after the revolution.

Babajan, now I am as much a part of the diaspora as I am a Tehrani. They say the void is a “feeling of nostalgia for the future.” A longing for a future that could have been but is not, a future that can only be imagined. I can’t count the times I would catch myself on my way to school or work, thinking about the trajectory of my life had Iran been different, or had you been alive. I still do it... old habits die hard, and I have had this habit ever since I first moved to Canada. No wonder I hold on so tightly to the very few memories I have of you. How I’ve always tried collecting every little detail, like precious pebbles, from the tinkle of your laughs, to the way you talked in order to capture your likeness. No wonder I can’t fully leave our dear country behind. Because somewhere in my mind, a future has taken shape that needs you to be alive and needs Tehran to be the perfect version of itself.

When I moved to Canada, the initial alienation I felt as a newcomer pushed me to imagine myself in a world where I didn’t have to leave my first home. Where I would grow up, with you in my Tehran, my Iran. I’ve always longed for this imagined life, and while you have passed away, Tehran is still here. This void, or this pain, Babajan, is knowing that my city, that my ideal life in my city, is in sight, but out of reach. It’s knowing I alone don’t have the power to fix my city, to help my people. It’s knowing that the only future I can build which might resemble that imagined ideal life will have to take shape in a city other than our very own Tehran.

My dearest Babajan, I have written all of this to you in a language you don’t speak, but I imagine you do. I think with longing, of you and me in our perfect Tehran meshed with parts of my Toronto. I imagine us speaking Farsi or English, or a mix of both whenever we please. I imagine us hiking the mountain trails of Tehran on early Friday mornings and canoeing in the lakes of Ontario on Saturday evenings. I imagine us walking together in narrow alleyways of our Tehran, by streams of water and trees laden with mulberries. I imagine having my hair down and you picking the saturated red berries off the trees for me while we talk about our day, as a little fawn cat purrs at us. And for as long as I dare to imagine, I will wonder if somehow, by some miracle, this future could have happened to you and me. I hope you know I love you and I will forever miss our walks together, the ones we never got to have.

Your loving granddaughter,
Sadaf

Sadaf Khajeh I am a Toronto based artist with a background in Film, Photography, and Visual Design. This has allowed me to explore different mediums and skills to create more diverse projects and push my creative boundaries. I hold a Master of Fine Arts degree in Documentary Media from Toronto Metropolitan University, and for this I was also awarded the Graduate Toronto Metropolitan Gold Medal for highest academic achievement and extraordinary community contribution.

Through creative writing I get to transfer my inner dialogues onto paper. I do not consider myself to be fluent in the two languages I speak. Since moving to Canada at the sensitive age of 14, I never fully learned the literature of my mother tongue as English quickly became my second language. Therefore, my inner dialogues are always a mix of Farsi and English; however, writing in either language brings my thoughts and ideas some order, which in turn gives me peace and perspective. My creative narrative is often informed by my own experience of immigrating to Canada, and it often becomes a bridge between the two cultures I belong to, helping me explore their sociocultural similarities and differences.

In my personal essay, *Dear Bâbâjân*, I have written a letter to my grandfather in a language he never spoke. As part of my Master's Thesis, I made a short documentary film about Babajan's life story, and the process of making it inspired me to write this letter. Since my grandfather passed away when I was three, I have only a few memories of him, and so I have had to rely on others' memories and stories to learn about him. At some point during the Stories Project, I realized that I needed to have a conversation with my grandfather, even if it was one-sided. I needed to transfer my feelings onto paper; this letter to my grandfather is a conversation I wish I could have had.

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Chapter 11

Guerrico



Melanie Zuzarte

*Three o'clock in the morning.
It's quiet and there's no one around.
Just the bang and the clatter.
As an angel runs to ground.*

*Songwriters: Adam Clayton / David Evans/Laurence Mullen / Paul David Hewson.
Stay (Faraway, So Close!) lyrics © BMG Rights Management, Universal Music
Publishing Group, Peermusic Publishing.*

11.1 A Preamble

I hoped to collaborate with my Dad on the StOries (Strangers to Ourselves) project, but he sadly passed away on July 4, 2021, at 81 years of age. This piece will honour my family's migration story that happened somewhere between Pakistan to Canada, ongoing more specifically between Montreal and Toronto.

My Dad, Guerrico Mark Zuzarte, was known as Gerry. His parents, as the case was for many Indian families from Goa, immigrated to Karachi, Pakistan, to give their children a prosperous life. My Mom met my Dad in Karachi and they married in 1972. I was born in 1973 and my sister followed. My parents immigrated to Montreal, Quebec in 1975 during Canada's immigration boom. My second sister and brother completed our family unit. My parents were eager to set up their family home in Canada and raise my siblings and me as Roman Catholic and Canadian.

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Each chapter of this work will celebrate a theme from the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The gifts were interwoven into the catechism when I was in school. My Dad's role was to illustrate the gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord during his parenting journey with me as a child. You will also find a photograph that either my Dad has taken, or in which he appears. I invite you, dear reader, to consider each prayer as a reflection point. The piece will begin at my Dad's funeral mass and then take you on a journey into our shared past where my Dad offered me gifts of the Holy Spirit.

11.2 Chapter 1: Introduction

Good Afternoon, Father Peter and invited parishioners. My name is Melanie Zuzarte, I am Guerrico Zuzarte's eldest daughter. My siblings and family thank you for being here with us to celebrate my father's life.

Instead of a short eulogy, I thought I would share with you a letter that I wrote to my father so he could hear my words alongside all of you.

Dear Dad,

To say that I am missing you would be an understatement. I'm not alone, I have heard stories in the last few days from your friends and family from near and far who also miss you. Dad, please know you were loved, cherished, and appreciated for all your life's contributions.

It feels like just yesterday when you were driving us to school, work, and church for mass. You worked so hard to ensure that we had everything that we needed and more. You worked long shifts and sometimes we would only see you as you were going to bed or waking up to drive us to school. You never complained. You showed us what it looked like to work hard and be successful on our own terms.

I remember summer holidays when we used to go camping in Albion Hills, trips to Canada's Wonderland where you would buy us funnel cakes, nachos and fudge, and long drives to Buffalo for shopping sprees. You travelled to Australia and overseas to see family when you retired, and it was the first time you travelled far since immigrating to Canada in the 70's. I always thought how remarkable it was, that you were never afraid. If you wanted something, you went for it.

In those early days, you used to call my sisters and me 'your sons'. It may sound funny to some, but to my sisters and I – it felt great. You didn't treat us like girls; instead, you prepared us to take on life's struggles with full hearts. Your words stay with me, and they continue to guide me, "Don't let someone say no to you, go for it. If you don't try it, you will never know."

Dad, you truly made a mark on our lives. The gifts you gave us daily were purposefully hidden with the intention that we would discover them when we were ready. Father Lawrence reminded me that you were an accomplished cameraman back home in Karachi and that you had your own crew. You drew from that experience when you documented through your photography every birthday, Christmas Concert, and school production of ours. At the time, I must confess, it was pretty

embarrassing seeing you walking around with a massive camera, taking shots of every single student performing. But now, as an adult, I understand that you were capturing beauty, love and kindness, frame by frame. We also have your photographic artwork that we will treasure for the rest of our lives. Thank you.

You showed us what a leader looked like in your work with the union, the church and the Knights of Columbus. You created a space for us to connect with our spirituality and learn what it means to be close to God, to be of service to our community, and to provide the same generosity and selflessness that you showed to friends, family, and those who needed support. It is no surprise that your children grew up to work in fields like social work, education, and technology. Your sacrifices became the guiding posts that supported our growth as successful adults.

When you were sick this past month, I sat with you in the hospital, and you asked me about your brothers, and even your Mom. I know you missed them and wanted to see them again soon – but I, with selfish hope burning inside me, wished you could stay with us just a little longer. But I accept that God was ready for you to come home. I’m grateful to Father Peter for blessing you and for preparing you for your life in Heaven. We can’t wait to see you again, Dad. Please keep the space warm for us.

I love you, Dad.

11.3 Chapter 2: Counsel

Oh, what consolation, what sweetness, what confidence fills my soul, when I pronounce thy sacred name, or even only think of thee...

Our Mother of Perpetual Help

I dreamt about my grandmother 2 months before my Dad died. I couldn’t understand her words in the dream. I assumed that she was warning me that death was coming. A mere few weeks later, my Mom’s dog passed away unexpectedly.

After the dog passed away, I started to look at my Dad differently. I felt like our time was limited. My Dad had cardiac struggles and diabetes. In the last few years, I had watched him slow down. I thought it was a phase. As a child, I would scramble to keep up with his long strides. He would make us climb hills in the local park and help us learn how to catch tadpoles from the Humber River. Those evening walks were a way to spend time with him, but also an introduction to nature. I remember my Mom saying to him, “there will come a time when these girls will not want to spend time with you, you better take them out now while you still can”. She was right; once we became teens, we drifted away from him.

On the day of my Dad’s second COVID-19 vaccine appointment, we returned home and I watched him enter his apartment, almost unsteady on his feet. He thanked me for coming with him to the appointment as he typically would. In that curious moment, my grandmother must have gently whispered a message into my ear to stay a little longer. I left, but returned quickly, with a meatball sandwich from

Subway. Perhaps she was warning me that it would be one of the last gestures I would share with him.



Photo Credit: Melanie Zuzarte.

11.4 Chapter 3: Piety

O Blessed Trinity, we thank you for having graced the Church with Pope John Paul II and for allowing the tenderness of your Father's care, the glory of the cross of Christ, and the splendor of the Holy Spirit, to shine through him.

Prayer for John Paul II's Intercession

I was ten in 1983 when my Dad took my sister and I to see Pope John Paul II at Downsview Park. I remember seeing the Pope on a big screen while eating my Mom's homemade chicken sandwiches. My Dad lifted us up from time to time to see the Pope who was standing at an altar. I wonder how my Dad managed to get two kids under ten in a rainstorm for an all-day religious gathering alongside thousands of other pilgrims. My Dad unveiled the importance of holding onto our faith and literally going the extra mile, by subway, to North Toronto for a meaningful, once-in-a-lifetime encounter with the leader of the church.

Every day by 1:30 p.m., as a devout Roman Catholic, my Dad would finish watching an online mass and would be waiting for my phone call. He would then have brunch, watch Border Patrol, Animal Planet, and Just for Laughs. Prior to the pandemic he would be out of the house and visiting with friends at Albion Mall, grocery shopping, checking out Salvation Army, or be present at his local church for mass. In the last few months, I wondered if my grandmother whispered to him that he would be seeing Pope John Paul II very soon. Did my Dad know that the Pope was calling him home?

11.5 Chapter 4: Understanding

*I will let fall a shower of roses, I will spend my heaven doing good on earth.
St. Therese, The Little Flower*

Whenever I would visit my Dad on Friday afternoons, he would always give me a gift. These gifts of care consisted of cartons of juice, pudding snacks, or canned food. The last gift he gave me was a wooden TV table. He had lovingly packed the table into a huge recycling bag as I was prepared to leave one afternoon. I happily travelled home with it because I knew it made him happy that I accepted it.

My Dad spent the majority of his adult life working overnight shifts at different factories. Some of these made plastic cups, and others made cookies. On winter nights, my Dad would leave his factory job, and pick me up from my part-time job to ensure that I got home safely. It now makes me sad that I never asked him how the journey back to work was for him.

During summer holidays, my Dad would drive us to Albion Hills and Our Lady of Fatima Shrine. My Mom, Dad, three siblings and I would pile into our Reliant car for summer adventures. Those days were filled with laughter, prayer and baked goods. My Dad took pride in getting the car all ready for the long journeys while my sisters and I would lock into our yellow Walkman, blissfully unaware of his love.

Today, when I look at the TV table, I see his glasses, old photographs, a rosary, and his wedding ring. This makeshift altar provides me with a space to acknowledge all the good he showered upon us as when we were children.

11.6 Chapter 5: Wisdom

*Eternal God, in whom mercy is endless and the treasury of compassion—inexhaustible,
look kindly upon us and increase Your mercy in us, that in difficult moments we might not
despair nor become despondent, but with great confidence submit ourselves to Your holy
will, which is Love and Mercy itself.
The Chaplet of Divine Mercy*

In my twenties, I moved to England for a boyfriend. I couldn't wait to leave Canada. Today, I wonder if my Dad felt disrespected that I was turning my back on a country that he worked so hard to immigrate to. On the day of my flight, my Dad drove me to Toronto Pearson International Airport. He quickly took my precious pieces of luggage out of the car and put them onto a cart. I remember his middle-aged body bundled up in a warm winter coat and his signature woollen hat awkwardly seeing me off. Before we departed, he said, "if anything happens, just come home". I knew then, as I do now, that Canada would always be our shared home.

When I was in England, I remember receiving a birthday card in the post from my Dad. It was a pink children's card which, upon reflection, reminded me that I would always be his little girl. My Dad always showed his love through quiet gestures. The biggest demonstration of his love was bringing his family to Canada, which in the last years of his life he never spoke about. I wondered if my Dad

reflected on the distance he had travelled, and the sacrifices he made, to provide us with a safe home and a good education, leading us all to pursue purposeful careers. Were the sacrifices he made worth it? Did he have any regrets? Was he proud of us and how we turned out in the end?



Photo Credit: Melanie Zuzarte

11.7 Chapter 6: Fortitude

REMEMBER, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession was left unaided. Inspired with this confidence, I fly to thee, O Virgin of virgins, my Mother; to thee do I come; before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful.

Memorare

On June 3, 2021, my Dad was experiencing stomach pain as a result of an ulcer that had burnt a hole into his duodenum. For a month my Dad fought a series of health issues, two minor heart attacks, and a helicopter flight between hospitals. Doctors would often ask, “How is he doing it?”, I would reply, “That’s my Dad, he’s a fighter and he always wins”.

All through my childhood, I observed that my Dad was a fighter. At times, his anger would terrify me (us). As he aged, he became a field mouse and I inherited his roar. Growing up in Etobicoke in the 1980s, my Dad stood up to racism in our Toronto Housing neighborhood. He demonstrated fearlessness when people screamed “Paki”, punctured his car tires, or threw bricks through our bedroom windows at night. We felt safe knowing my Dad was there as we slept on the living room floor as a family at night.

When my Dad was in the hospital, I prayed the Memorare repeatedly. I implored Our Lady to save my Dad. My sister said to me one day, “I don’t know how you are doing this, it takes immense strength.” I replied, “I don’t know how I’m watching

Dad die, and yet I am still advocating for his life in the hospital”. My sister replied, “God gives strength to those who need it”.

11.8 Chapter 7: Fear of the Lord

*O Holy Mary, Mother of God, queen of heaven and earth, I humbly beseech you from the bottom of my heart to help me in my needs for there are none who can withstand your grace.
Prayer to Our Lady of Mount Carmel*

The morning of July 3rd, 2021 my sister was insistent that we have a priest visit with my Dad and give him last rites. When Father Peter arrived, my Dad’s eyes were closed, and he lay restless in bed with the sound of oxygen whirring. Father Peter anointed my Dad on the forehead and on his chest, and thanked him for his years of service to the church. For a moment, my Dad’s eyes fluttered open. I wondered if he saw me standing over him with the priest, my face full of pain. Did he see angels, or perhaps his family beckoning him to come home?

I held his hand for close to eight hours after the priest left that day. It was warm and his grasp was firm. I knew that he felt my presence. That night before I left, I told him it was okay for him to return home to God, that I forgave him for everything, and that I loved him. Things that I would never have said to him in person. I saw a single tear slide down the side of his face. I hoped that he didn’t feel that I was giving up on him. I went home that night, a heaviness pulling down my mind and my body. Was this the last time that I would see him alive?



Photo Credit: Melanie Zuzarte

11.9 Chapter 8: Knowledge

*Come follow me and I will give you rest.
Be Not Afraid*

I arrived at the hospital at noon on July 4th, 2021 and found my Dad like I left him the night before. His eyes were wide open, his hands were limp and his grey hair looked unkempt. Weeks before, he had told me how much he wanted a haircut and

a shave. My Dad's doctor advised me that he had deteriorated significantly over night, and was suffering from kidney and respiratory failure. We spoke about palliative care, and this felt like a signal to me that the doctor was giving up on him. His doctor reassured me that it wasn't so, and that it really meant that my Dad's body was slowly shutting down.

I called my siblings and tearfully gave them the update. I still couldn't stop hoping that we would have him for a few more weeks, that he would somehow miraculously bounce back to life. Instead, within the hour, I was calling them back to tell them that he was gone. My Dad had waited for me to arrive so he could leave when we were together. It was his last gift to me. The heartbreak felt like every window in the hospital shattered at the same time. It was piercing and yet silencing.

I remember feeling a presence in the room after the nurses had confirmed his passing away. My Dad and I weren't alone. My ancestors surrounded us. I looked up at the ceiling in tears and wondered if he was staring down at me. Was he afraid, or was he finally at peace? Although, I'll never know for sure, I felt a reassurance that he was being guided to Heaven.

After my Dad's funeral and burial, my sisters and I cleaned out his apartment. We found prayer cards, religious medals, and rosaries interlaced within address books, prescription receipts, investment paperwork, and old Christmas cards. Faith and family were always top of his mind. When my sisters and I bought his burial plot at the Catholic Cemetery, we found one near a shady pine tree. We also noted that there were three burial plots available right beside his final resting place. Remembering that our Dad did not want to ever leave 'his girls,' we purchased the plots so we could one day rest alongside him. A fitting tribute to his immigration to Canada, which as adults has allowed us to contribute his gifts of counsel, piety, understanding, wisdom, fortitude, and knowledge to our communities and professions.

11.10 Conclusion

I have illustrated how much I love my Dad in this piece, dear reader. But I have a secret; my Dad was a stranger to me up until eight years ago. You see, even though my Dad lived in our family home, there were issues which created a strain in our family. As a result, for many years I barely spoke to or saw my Dad. These days, I struggle with regrets that come and go that sound like, "*I wish I could have done more,*" and most of all I sometimes wish I had shown him how much I loved him.

When my Dad suffered a heart attack eight years ago and required triple bypass surgery, I made a deal with God that I would forgive him for those absent years. I am so glad that I did. I changed the course for my sisters and I to start to make things right, because we knew he couldn't do it on his own.

Reflecting back over the years, my Dad showed me his vulnerability when he was sick. His vulnerability brought us back together. I dutifully worked alongside him in mending our relationship. It wasn't too late. Perhaps it was God intervening, perhaps it was his faith shining through him, perhaps it was me – I was ready to heal and this gave him an opportunity to heal as well. Our relationship was a valuable one, and it was blooming through the path created by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. You see, the gifts were always there between us, teaching us lessons throughout our shared lives as father and daughter. They were silenced at times, perhaps packed away in boxes and buried in a basement during difficult family times. Maybe their lights were dimmed so no one knew they were home. Now that Guerrico, my Dad, is gone, I have found myself putting the lights back on again, opening up those dusty boxes and looking at the photos he took of our life. I am reminded of the greatest gift of all, that it was me that made him a Dad, my precious Dad.

Melanie Zuzarte My name is Melanie Zuzarte. I immigrated with my parents as a child to Canada from Karachi, Pakistan by way of Goa, India in 1979. I have a Master of Arts in Child and Youth Care from Toronto Metropolitan University. I am a Crisis Counsellor for a national youth mental health agency in Toronto and an Instructor with the Faculty of Social & Community Services at Humber College and Toronto Metropolitan University.

My research focuses on the provision of anti-oppressive mental health support for post-secondary students and clinical counseling with a lens focused on culturally responsive practice. My research project entitled, "Incorporating Praxis into Child and Youth Care Post-Secondary Education" for Humber College will be published in 2023. As the Investigator, I gathered data from Humber College Child and Youth Care students and illustrated, using a humanistic lens, to Child and Youth Care Educators, how students would like to experience elements of care in the classroom.

I have been writing creatively since I was 8 years old. I used to fill notebooks with stories and poems in my spare time. As an adult, I make time for self-care by writing articles related to culture, travel and lifestyle editorials for my personal website. Writing creatively even after all these years continues to keep me happy and healthy.

I hoped to collaborate with my Dad on the StOries (Strangers to Ourselves) project but he sadly passed away on July 4, 2021 at 81. In my creative piece entitled, "Guerrico", I explore the spiritual and emotional gifts he offered me as a South Asian youth growing up in Etobicoke, Ontario. I also use my piece to reflect on prayer cards that I found in his apartment after his passing to make sense of my grief and celebrate our shared history.

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Chapter 12

For DYee... Walking in These Shoes



Christian Hui (he/they; Undetectable)



Photo Credit: Christian Hui

As a first-generation immigrant settler living with HIV originating from Hong Kong, the Dish with One Spoon Territory has now become my homebase for more than half of my life. While I am presently a doctoral candidate, writing has often been a difficult process for me. Yet when I learned of the opportunity where I can write freely and creatively for *StOries: Strangers to Ourselves* project, I jumped on

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the idea so I can utilize this rare opportunity to share the often untold stories about BIPOC people living with HIV.

Acquired Immuno-deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a global pandemic that affects 38 million globally. While HIV is a communicable disease that does not discriminate, it often disproportionately affects those who have been historically oppressed and marginalised such as Indigenous peoples, members of the African, Black and Caribbean communities, migrants, trans people, people who use drugs, sex workers, and gay, bisexual and other men-loving men, people with experience of incarceration, women, and youth, amongst others. While the mere utterance of HIV/AIDS might conjure up silence due to its associated stigma, I wear my poz and *Undetectable* identity proudly today. In fact, I often find opportunities to educate others that people living with HIV with suppressed or undetectable viral loads cannot pass on HIV sexually to others, or in other words, that there is zero risk in sexual transmission.

Reflecting on my intersecting *identities* often rouse up multiplicities of emotions and memories which often stay buried deep inside me. I was excited to write for this project not because I wish to reprise the challenging experiences I faced as an immigrant settler: as a racialized queer living with HIV who yearned for love, or the intense bullying I experienced as a gender diverse child at an all-boys catholic English primary school in Hong Kong, or having to face the double bombardments of being called a “chink” and “faggot” during junior high as a teen in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States—experiences which I had written about previously and shared through published blogged articles as a young poz and queer activist. Instead, my conviction to engage in this piece is to make space for stories of others like myself, racialized queer poz settlers, whose passion and contributions to the HIV/AIDS response on this stolen land would otherwise be lost or erased. This is particularly important as the COVID-19 pandemic has further deprioritized HIV/AIDS as a global pandemic, which one would rarely hear about in the news unless during the Pride festival season or around World AIDS Day.

Up to this day, I still recall clearly how Derek, or affectionately called by some as Dee (after the signature “DYee” he would use on himself), had called me the Thursday prior to his passing. It had only been four days since I last saw him at his apartment when I learned of his ill-health as a result of a two-year drug holiday he took from antiretroviral medications. Although he was so weak he could not sit up to greet me, I remembered clearly how determined and ready DYee was, and how seriously he wanted to get his health back on track. This story is written with love, and as an act to memorialise my dear friend, mentor, peer, colleague, Derek Yee, so that his legacy as a poz POC activist will not be forgotten.

“I Just Want a Hug”

The day in late March 2021 was cold, wet, and grey. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and people were still hesitant to venture out as many wished to avoid contracting the highly communicable infection, the tragic Asian spa shootings in Atlanta, USA, had nonetheless riled up a sense of unity amongst Asians and allies to demand for racial justice. Since I often tend to rush to get ready before heading out the door, I clearly remembered how I heard my phone ring that day. I almost

ignored the call without even bothering to see who the caller was. When the caller ID showed it was DYee, whom I had not seen due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, I swiftly picked up the phone and greeted my beloved kindred soul.

The COVID-19 pandemic had altered the lives of citizens involuntarily in such fundamental ways. Given the transmissibility of the novel corona virus, public health measures recommended people to limit social contacts, and where possible, work from home and reserve their outings only for essential trips. While these guidelines were effective in containing the spread of the SAR-COV-2 virus, the stay-at-home orders had heightened additional layers of vulnerabilities for people belonging to marginalized communities such as people living with HIV. Not only did AIDS service organizations have seconds to switch from in-person to virtual service provisions, service users living with HIV who might already be socially isolated often became even more alone as a result.

“Christeean?” DYee called out my name in his usual Trinadadian drawl. I felt both happy and embarrassed as I realized I had neither called or seen him for almost a year. “Derek!!! What’s up?” Though I responded with excitement, I prefaced our conversation by informing DYee in a hurried manner that I only had limited time to speak as I was already running behind to attend the Anti-Asian racism rally with an second generation Asian Canadian friend. In reflection, I was extremely grateful that DYee paused me and explicitly told me what he needed. *“I really want a hug”* were the words which he pleaded with me, words I can still hear clearly in my mind. Although I did not know why DYee needed a hug so badly, just hearing those words convinced me to see him that day, despite us both knowing the visit would only be a brief one.

I told DYee I would be ready in about twenty minutes and would meet him downstairs outside his apartment building. I then headed off to a local popular fresh-baked cookie store which sold decadent baked goods mixed in with childhood favourite candies so I could cheer him up with a surprise gift. As I was waiting for the customers to leave the store in the rain, I called DYee so he would not be waiting in the cold. He learned of my plan to get him a fancy crowd-pleasing baked treat, and immediately stopped me in the act. “Get me a bubble tea! I can’t chew with my dentures,” he explained in a firm tone. DYee also insisted that I go up to his apartment, and let me know that someone would let me in. The exchange frazzled me a bit, as I knew I would be late to meet my protest buddy, and I was conscious of the public health recommendations to limit the number of contacts with others. Nonetheless, I was also determined not to disappoint DYee.

“I Have No Intention to Die...”

When I arrived at DYee’s building, a young gentleman came out of the building and asked if I was visiting Derek. I nodded. The lad was a guest who was experiencing housing insecurity and someone whom DYee had offered a roof over his head. After the young fella finished his cigarette, I followed him up to DYee’s apartment. I was surprised by the huge number of items DYee had accumulated since I last saw him. The apartment door could barely open all the way, and I found myself having to swing my body sideways and squeeze through what used to be a short hallway into

his living room. Once I made it to the room, I was able to see DYee, not standing, but laying flat on his couch. I can still recall the image like it was yesterday. I was struck by the amount of weight DYee had lost, and more so because he was so weak he could not even sit up to give or receive the hug which he so loudly demanded.

Being a person who had experienced homelessness in his own life, DYee often offered a helping hand to the less fortunate. Seeing DYee resting in a horizontal position due to his frail state, I put down the bubble tea which he requested me to bring him. Stricken by concern and apprehension, the first words that spilled from my mouth were, "Oh Derek... what happened?" Although DYee was unable to sit up to greet or hug, he nonetheless seemed quick-witted and said, "I haven't taken my meds for the past two years." A sense of panic overtook me and I immediately asked DYee if he planned to get back on meds.

To my relief, DYee gave me a definite "Yes," and proudly noted that he had contacted his doctor about resuming medication, and had gone to get his regular blood tests. He also informed me that he had already contacted the local HIV specialty hospital a few weeks prior and was put on a waiting list for respite care. He then went on to let me know his CD4 white blood cell count was 40. As a fellow person living with HIV, I knew that having a CD4 white blood cell count under 200 copies/ml meant we did not only have HIV, but it meant our immune system was so weak that we would be diagnosed as having AIDS.

While medical advances have helped preserve the lives of many people living with HIV, we as poz folks must continue to take our daily medications as prescribed or we may risk the virus to mutate within our systems, rendering the medication ineffective due to resistance. "You know, if you don't get back on meds, you won't be able to wear all the beautiful dresses, gowns and shoes you have bought and stuffed in your closet..." I said affectionately to DYee as I attempted to crack a joke to lighten the heavy mood we were in.

What gave me comfort was when DYee responded with an invigorated vivaciousness, "Christean, don't worry. I have no intention to die..." Having gained assurance that my friend's spirit is strong and that he wished to get better, I told DYee I would contact two former colleagues who worked at two different ethnocultural AIDS service organizations, ACAS and ASAAP, which provide support to East/Southeast Asians and South Asians/Middle Easterners respectively so they could coordinate and advocate for his admittance to Casey House, an HIV-hospice turned HIV-specialty hospital, where he could utilize their respite services to regain his health.

About Derek and I

Prior to working in the HIV sector, Derek was a visual merchandiser for a high-end department store. I suspect his love for fashion and shoes must have grown immensely while he worked Holts, a high-end department store which hosted mainly designer goods. When DYee contracted HIV, his declining health eventually forced him to leave his work and he was admitted to Casey House, then an HIV hospice. As opposed to dying, the institution helped nurse DYee's health back and saved his life. Since then, DYee became a long-time volunteer at the HIV-specialty

healthcare facilities as well as many other organizations, such as a member of the Speaker's Bureau at the Toronto People with AIDS Foundation, served as the Chair of the Toronto Candlelight Vigil Committee, and was a Co-Founder of Ontario Positive Asians, an independent network of Asians living with HIV/AIDS, or *OPA!* as he would call it.

When DYee's health rebounded, he became engaged in Toronto's HIV/AIDS sector as a committed volunteer and staunch activist. DYee was a champion for the Greater Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GIPA) principles, and advocated to ensure us poz folks are fairly compensated as peer workers or staff at AIDS service organizations. Eventually, he became a coordinator for the Legacy Project at the Committee for Accessible AIDS Treatment, a mentorship program which matches people living with HIV/AIDS with mentors so they can be supported in reaching their personal life goals.

I met Derek back in 2011 when I started volunteering at local AIDS service organizations after receiving a year of interferon treatment for my HIV/hepatitis C co-infection. One day, I saw a flyer for an upcoming training for racialized folks living with HIV/AIDS where participants would be paired up with a mentor. While I was definitely drawn to enroll in the course, the application form stated applicants were required to have completed either a volunteer or leadership training offered by other agencies---requirements which I did not possess. Hoping that I could take part in the course, I nonetheless took a chance to email the program coordinator, Derek Yee.

I did not hear back from DYee for about a month. As the training was going to take place within a week, I called the office and inquired if I was registered for the course. Derek was not in then, but the manager asked me to visit the office to meet him the day after. Expecting to see a fellow Chinese like myself, I was surprised to see Derek with dark skin and a Caribbean accent. Being a Trinidadian Chinese settler, Derek would have been a perfect model for the United Colours of Benetton. DYee possessed smooth, soft, brown skin from his Indo-Caribbean heritage, a lankier build which must have passed on from his Chinese ancestors, and spiraled, curly hair which he had proudly worn in Afro-style as a young queer fashionista.. With his multicultural background, Derek was a service user and volunteer at many ethno-racial and mainstream AIDS service organizations in T'karonto, and was genuinely well-loved by many.

After learning of DYee's mixed heritage. I was immediately drawn to his fast, melodic speech which was often interspersed with laughter, utterances which he would often pair up with taps of his feet like Michael Jackson. Upon seeing me, DYee turned around with excitement, and spoke with his manager sitting across from him. Displaying genuine concern as if we had been kindred spirits, he pleaded with the manager so I could be considered for the mentorship training program he was coordinating which was to begin that weekend. The quiet and stoic looking manager nodded. With a big smile, DYee told me to come back as a registered participant for the mentorship training a few days later. I felt elated and immediately felt connected with DYee hereafter. This interaction showed me how much DYee cared about the community, and how much I owe to him for advocating on my behalf the first day I met him. From that day onwards, DYee became one of my

mentors in the poz community. I was drawn to DYee from the start because we shared a number of commonalities. Our identities as poz queer Asian settlers allowed us to understand the common challenges which Asians living with HIV/AIDS might often face in silence: racism and xenophobia from white Canadians, HIV-stigma and AIDS-phobia from one's cultural community, and for some, alienation from one's family or friends. DYee and I formed strong bonds as we both lived with an HIV/hepatitis C co-infection at some point in our lives. When I first met Derek, I was undergoing my 48-week treatment on ribavirin and peg-interferon for hepatitis C, a condition which my body was ultimately able to get clear. Given that Derek had waited to commence his own hepatitis C treatment when newer, more effective treatment became available a few years later, my experience of undergoing and fully recovering hepatitis C had created opportunities where I also became DYee's mentor and a friendship that is based on reciprocal love and co-learning.

A Community Giant

On the Thursday prior to Eastern Monday, my phone rang. It was just the weekend when I last saw DYee and witnessed how thin he had become. As I picked up the phone, I heard my frailed friend spitting out words at bullet's speed. "I am so upset, Christeean," said DYee. Recognizing that his Trinidadian accent became stronger, a sign that gave away he was mad. "What's the matter?" I asked. "I am so upset at Casey House right now. I was just on the phone with a staff there, and they told me they have 3 empty rooms upstairs," declared my well-connected activist friend who often served as resourceful community worker and peer navigator for other racialized poz BIPOC in the city. Before this time, DYee had often spoken fondly of the HIV-specialty hospital, a place which had previously saved his life and where he had devoted much of his time as a committed advisory committee member. His rage was sparked by the fact that there were unused inpatient beds available at the facility, yet as a long-time volunteer at the HIV-hospital, the irony was that he could not gain access to its services when he needed it most.

I asked DYee if he had been in touch with the workers from the ethnocultural AIDS service organizations, and if the support staff had been able to advocate for his admission to the HIV hospital. It turned out he was infuriated because despite his own advocacy along with the efforts of support staff from other agencies, Casey House insisted that they would not be admitting him until after the long weekend. I tried to console Derek, by noting that it might be an institutional policy matter and tried to downplay the seriousness of the issue by asking if he had eaten as a cultural way of comforting him. As an activist who was greatly inspired by DYee and one of his mentees I turned my social worker hat on and inquired if there was anything either I or the agency support staff could bring him to cheer him up. "A Chinese barbecued duck, with low salt soy sauce and no rice," demanded an upset DYee in a tone which demonstrated the usual assuredness he would often display as a community leader. "I will use it to make duck soup...you know I can't chew anymore because of my dentures..." After the call, I immediately contacted the support staff at two different agencies to ensure Derek will get the meal he wanted delivered.

That was the last conversation I had with Derek. Having been given the message from Casey House that he would be processed for intake on the Tuesday after Easter and no other options, DYee spent the long weekend at home. I learned from an instant message sent by a close friend, Samuel Lopez, that he had passed alone at home the evening of Easter Monday, 2021, a news which was a shock to many, including myself. Losing Derek was literally losing a community giant. A most unfortunate part about DYee's death was that one the HIV-specialty hospital's empty rooms could have served as a respite for a fierce HIV selfless activist and advocate who had done so much for others. What's even worse was that if DYee, being a well-connected community activist who knew the HIV service delivery system so well, could fall through the cracks, that would mean others living with HIV who do not know how to navigate the system or do not have the ability to self-advocate would very likely to be dismissed by the neo-liberalized AIDS industrial complex and face a similar fate.

The Black Suede Shoes from Derek

Learning of DYee's death prompted me to look for the black suede shoes which he had a couple of years ago. I remembered the occasion when I was gifted the shoes, the day when he invited me to visit his home after a community training so we could catch up with one another and let out any frustrations we might have as fellow poz BIPOC activists about what was not going right in the system. As I got myself ready to leave, DYee, being the fashionista and good friend he was, offered me a pair of his black suede dress shoes. Initially, I politely declined as I knew he was not working at that time, and I would feel guilty for taking something from him then.

As a fellow poz peer, I have shared the common experience with DYee where, like many people living with HIV/AIDS, we were advised to go on social assistance to access life-saving medications which would otherwise have cost tens of thousands per year. I understood how living on assistance could be extremely challenging as it meant we rarely could spend extra money to pamper ourselves with things we loved and liked. Yet with his loving yet at times devious humour and infectious laugh, his insistence convinced me to take the footwear with me. He told me that since he did not need the shoes as his closet was already filled with many other pairs, asight which I was privy to witness as DYee's sister was clearing up his belongings after his passing. The visuals of DYee and his artefacts are memories I would cherish and forever hold dear to my heart.

The black suede shoes DYee gave me were not new, but slightly worn bargain finds that had been kept in an almost pristine condition. The geometric patterns lightly etched on the suede leather exuded a refined elegance, while the small silver circular buttons gave the footwear a flashy call for attention. Given that I worked in a non-profit setting and tended to dress more casually, there had not been many opportunities to wear such fancy shoes. As such, I stored the shoes away, not knowing when would be the appropriate moment or occasion for me to wear and walk in them again.

When I learned of DYee's passing, having seen him only a week prior and having spoken to him on the phone four days earlier, I immediately searched for the shoes and placed them on my altar and said a prayer. As I reached for the shoes, I noticed a sense of love, joy and camaraderie that is often evoked through remembering loved ones who are no longer with us. I then lit an incense stick and envisioned positive, loving energy surrounding my dear late friend so he could be reborn in the Sukhavati. On the day of his community memorial organized by his close friends, peers and colleagues to honour DYee's legacy and to celebrate his life, I purposefully dressed up wearing a crisp white shirt and red bowtie, and made sure my feet were wrapped around by Derek's black suede shoes.

"Walking In These Shoes"

While members of our poz BIPOC community were all born from different parents and originated from different countries and cultures, and some of us may be gender-diverse and queer as sexual beings, we are all bonded by our experiences as Indigenous and racialized people living with HIV/AIDS where we must collectively resist systemic and structural racism and xenophobia in addition to the everyday HIV stigma and discrimination which continue to haunt us for decades in the first discovery of the AIDS pandemic.

As a beloved community activist, Derek possessed a unique aura and always spoke with passion. His death had come as a shock and great loss to so many, especially for members of the BIPOC poz community. Bearing the gift of Derek's shoes had inspired me to follow and walk in his footsteps. The black suede shoes have since evolved from being a gift of friendship into a baton in a relay amongst poz BIPOC in our journeys of resilience and resistance as we continue to show love, care, compassion towards one another, and speak up and rise against the injustices which we face on a daily basis.

Knowing how upset my mentor was at the HIV-specialty hospital because it refused to admit him until after the long weekend stuck with me. It is something I myself and other concerned poz BIPOC activist friends of DYee would not forget and an incident we would collectively seek justice for. As someone who had taken part in more than one Casey House #SmashStigma fundraising campaigns, I felt betrayed by the institution knowing that my fellow dear friend, mentor, colleague and peer was not offered the needed care during his critical last days due to outdated institutional policies and bureaucratic red-tape. I have a particularly difficult time comprehending why a well-funded health-facility which would use our faces to front their high-profile fundraising activities could not have admitted DYee when there were empty, unused beds. Even worse, why the CEO of Casey House would ask the mutli-stakeholder group of DYee's blood and chosen family members and concerned executive directors of AIDS service organizations who requested a meeting with the HIV-specialty hospital in an effort to fix the systemic gap facing Poz BIPOC that we need to "change our tone."

I have decided to write down what took place during DYee's last days so his love for the community, and his legacy of speaking out and taking actions against social injustices can be honoured and continue within our community. It is my hope, as I

am sure it would be DYee's as well, that life events like these as experienced by poz BIPOC folx would be documented and be used to address service gaps that exist within the HIV/AIDS sector. Following the death of DYee, a number of his friends and peers including myself gathered to take part in a documentary short film project, "*Walking in These Shoes*" to honour, memorialize, and pay tribute to this community giant. As friends, peers, and chosen family members of DYee, we invite you to watch the short documentary as a way to gain additional insights on some of the issues we face as poz BIPOC people in T'karonto. In closing, we ask you to join us in celebrating and honouring the lives of BIPOC living with HIV/AIDS who have come before us, and those still among us, as well as the legacy of our dearest Derek Yee.

This StOries: Stranger to Ourselves Anthology piece you just read is meant to serve as companion piece to "Walking in These Shoes," a multi award-winning Poz BIPOC short documentary film commissioned by the Viral Interventions Research-Creation Project, which premiered at the Toronto Queer Film Festival on April 23, 2022 at 8 pm and can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/ggnp69jLOVE>.

Christian Hui My name is Christian Hui (he/they; Undetectable). Born in Hong Kong, I moved to North America as a teen. I am a person living with HIV (poz) and a POC settler, first-generation immigrant currently living on and benefiting off the Dish with One Spoon Territory/Toronto. I am a trained registered social worker, and am a Vanier Scholar and Policy Studies doctoral candidate at Toronto Metropolitan University's School of Public Policy and Democratic Innovations. In addition to my scholastic work and being as a global HIV/AIDS and Undetectable = Untransmittable (U=U) activist, I co-directed, co-produced, and co-wrote "*Walking in These Shoes*," a Viral Interventions commissioned short documentary film about the living experiences of the lives of poz, BIPOC people.

I participated in the *StOries: Strangers to Ourselves* project because writing, in general, is a difficult process for me. Given the intensity of doctoral programs, I joined the project as I wish to have an outlet to engage in creative writing and to improve my craft as a writer.

Through the *StOries* project, I hope to honour the living experiences of BIPOC people and settler immigrants, as their stories are often not told, or they are erased. My written submission to the project is my tribute to memorialize the legacy of a poz BIPOC HIV activist, friend, peer and mentor of mine, the late Derek Yee, as well as other poz BIPOC people who have passed but did not have the opportunity to share their stories or their legacies celebrated.

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Part V
Border Trespassing, Citizenship as Process

Chapter 13

Some Timeless and Contemporary Borders



Arunkumar Rajavel



Photo Credit: Arunkumar (Arun) Rajavel

13.1 You Lie in Wait, You Observe

Long before all these divisions were opened between home and the road, between a woman's place and a man's world, humans followed the crops, the seasons, traveling with their families, our companions, animals, our tents. We built campfires and moved from place to place. This way of traveling is still in our cellular memory. Living things have evolved as travellers. Even migrating birds know that nature doesn't demand a choice between nesting and flight.

— Gloria Steinem, *My Life on the Road*.

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Dear reader, prepare to embark on a grand narrative. The great story of my migration, your migration, our migration. First things first. In this journey, I shall play the narrator, and you the character. Let us go back to a time circa 6 million years ago and make our way slowly to the current day.

A gentle breeze wakes you up. You look around. You see green and brown things. You feel the wind. You hear some sounds. You are confused as to what these sensations are and mean. You are not sure where you are, or even what you are. You see little shapes run by, followed by big shapes. The big shapes make a different sound than the little shapes. The little one swiftly moves in front with the big one behind, tracking it. The big shape catches the little shape and starts to engulf it, with the little shape letting out a shrill. You wait and see. You are still confused and uncertain. You stay motionless. Something comes over you and you find yourself floating about, the distance between you and the brownish ground increasing. You feel both scared and excited as you enjoy this sensation. You try to go and touch the big shape, but nothing happens. You mimic the big shape and try to open what you thought is the hole that opens and closes. You engulf the remains of the little shape, but nothing happens. You realise you cannot do things these little shapes and big shapes do. Your presence does not seem to have any effect on either of these shapes. You lie in wait. You observe.

Having observed quietly for a long duration, you grasp the concept of time and space; at least you think you do. Although you cannot quantify anything, you grasp the concept by taking note of how everything around you gets dark and light. You come to know that you are a massless, shapeless, imperceptible thing. Your attempts at interacting with objects all fail and you stop interacting altogether and resign to merely observing. You also realise you do not need to eat or sleep or do anything that these animals—the ones you previously saw as mere shapes—do. You recognise different animals and their varied habitats. You see their reactions to different weather conditions. You realise that those immovable beings that you later call plants and trees are also similar to the moving animals in many respects. They grow, they respond to weather, and they increase in numbers, just as these animals do. Among the animals, some move quickly, some move slowly; some are massive, and they let out a huge cry, some are small and meek; some chase, some get chased. In time, you understand that what is distinct about these beings, and other things such as water and soil and rocks, is that the former have some animating force within. This force stays inside them for some time, lets these beings grow, and then all of a sudden, it leaves. With your omnipotent perception, you see life being created, and you also see it fade out and die. You understand the concept of life and of death, and the agency that these organisms have. You also come to realise that you can freely float anywhere you want. Just a handful of animals can do that. You also go into the ocean freely, see all the majestic beasts and come back unscathed. You squint your eye-like appendage and see so many particles just floating by in the air, in the sea, on the trees, on the animals – they are everywhere and anywhere you look. You find it fascinating. You un-squint and come back to the previous scale. You lie in wait. You observe.

You see a particular species change rapidly. You have been here for a very long time and have seen massive changes in all the animals and plants, and how they happened. These changes have all been gradual. But this species, the furry one on trees, seems to be undergoing quick changes, compared to other animals. They start to shed a lot of external furs, and they start to move on their hind legs. You see them use other animals' skins and furs to compensate for the fur they lost. You see this animal spend more time on the ground than on trees. You see them build caves and use interesting ways of getting food. You see them go in packs and coordinate in ways no other animal does. You see them take material from trees and animals and build tiny arrangements under which they live. You see them grow in size, fight amongst each other, and split up. You see separate groups of these animals doing things differently. You see remarkably visible differences between each and every such animal of this species, which you find curious. You see them imprint their palms on cave walls. You see them build and create. You are particularly drawn to these animals. You lie in wait. You observe.

Yes, you are right to zero in on this species. This species is called the humans. They will undergo massive changes and by the time we arrive at our present age, they will be vastly different than how they look now. But for now, it's going to be a heady journey. Buckle up!

You see them, despite having no claws or sharp teeth, defeating animals multiple times their own size by using various creative methods. You see them share their food with each other. You see the younglings being incredibly weak compared to all other animals but surviving merely through care from the elders. You see them face food shortages, and in response, they move and cross very large distances in search of food. Other than some of those flying animals, you haven't seen other animals do this. The ones that fly usually follow a fixed routine and come back, whereas this species permanently leave their places. You see them change their environment and you see them adapt. As time goes on, you see them produce a vast number of different sounds that seem to carry some meaning. You later see these early communications develop further and become what these beings called a language. You are impressed and cannot wait to see what they will do next. You lie in wait. You observe.

You see them create those blazing things that they call fire and control it. Although you have seen forests make this fire to rejuvenate itself, this is quite new to be able to create it at will. You see them putting their food in it and eating; you find it amusing. You see how fire becomes a symbol of group cohesion; you see them sitting around it – talking, dancing, singing, gossiping. As time goes on, you see them bond with a completely different animal that used to be dangerous to them. A new companionship. You see this other predatory animal slowly losing its predatory instincts and gradually beginning to trust humans. You see the former listen and cooperate with the latter for an exchange of food. You call the former wolves. You see humans disperse even more widely than ever before and cross very large distances, in packs, and set up new places to live. You see them stay at one place and

exploit the resources to depletion and then move to another place. You see them develop complex forms of expression that they leave as impressions on caves and rocks. You lie in wait. You observe.

Later day humans will find these cave drawings and marvel at them. They would compare themselves and think that their ancestors were intelligent. In their judgment will be hidden their superiority complex and their condescension.

Humans have started to experiment with other forms of movement. Having seen trees float on water, they realised they can use it too, to reach lands that are separated by large bodies of water. They take on such ventures and move from one island to the next. You see them slowly make progress with their trees. Seeing some drown, they start shaping the trees. They shape, they build, they experiment, they invent, and you witness – you witness it all. Their trees become bigger and bigger, and they have started to join multiple tree trunks making it safer to move across great distances. Islands that cannot be seen with their naked eyes (but you can see them) can now be discovered after a long voyage. You think they are brave. Many humans did drown and perish in their journey but that doesn't seem to stop them. They go, they go, they go. They discover, they camp, they move. They eat new kinds of foods. Some die in the process but they continue exploring. You see them grow in unprecedented numbers. They seem to be everywhere you see. You float high above and see many different groups live in far off regions, too. You are more and more intrigued. You lie in wait. You observe.

Human lifespan is, you notice, very short, compared to how long you have been around. Yet the changes each successive generation displays are extraordinary. Although you have also been observing other living organisms, you continue to pay almost exclusive attention to humans. You see them realise that they can sow seeds in the soil and that this action can give them food. No longer is there a need to hunt; no longer is there a need to scourge the forest for edible foods that won't kill them. Nonetheless, they do both—hunting and growing food. They eat everything safe to be eaten—fishes, animals, plants, fruits. They live in small groups eventually making tribes. As you float from one tribe to another, you realise that they are so well-adapted to the locality they live in that they fundamentally change their diets. Humans at this point are mostly shaped by their environment. They also shape their environment in minor ways. You lie in wait. You observe.

Take note, dear reader. This is major! Let this sink in. Other animals also shape their environment, but this is different; this has intention; this has planning.

You see that in some areas the tribes start growing bigger. They form small villages. They hunt, and they share their food. They start dividing their labour as set by the strongest member of their village. You see that living together does create some tussle, and they fight. You notice that the intensity and frequency has increased now. They resolve their issues with the strong member intervening, and you find it remarkable. You go from one village to another to essentially find the same behaviour. They eventually start making tools from their environment, and this improves the efficacy in their growing food and hunting. Their nutrition improves and

they shed even more of their fur than before. They learn to make better clothing. They invent ways of storing food so that even if a particular yield fails, they don't have to rely completely on hunting or moving away. As a timeless spirit with nothing to do and nowhere to go, you lie in wait. You observe.

Noticing how rounded rocks roll down the hills, some humans have started to deliberately create rounded rocks from irregular rocks. That eventually takes the shape of a primitive wheel. With the wheel, they start transporting their food easily. You see them make new, sophisticated tools. They realise they can heat the soil and make containers that can hold their food and water efficiently. As more and more generations do it, the shape improves, and it no longer is a solidified lump of soil. They acquire distinct shapes, they become pottery. You are fascinated. They start building stronger tools by mining resources from the earth. They work together to get out of floods and such natural calamities. You see that these calamities destroy everything the humans built. In some such floods, entire villages end up dead. With no powers to help or intervene, you lie in wait. You observe.

You see that humans, by now, have occupied almost every place on earth. Having lived here for generations, their outer skin changes, their languages change, their foods change, their ways of living together change. By now they have started to exchange their food and tools with nearby tribes. You notice that such a system is pretty much prevalent throughout the planet. It seemed as though it was in their nature to do so. The wolves that initially sought refuge, helped hunt and ate scraps, have changed completely. They are barely recognisable from their other ancestors who did not go to the humans. During this time, most species have changed drastically, but of them all, humans display the greatest change. They have discovered better ways of telling stories than painting on cave walls. They begin inscribing on their pots and tools. Tiny villages become big cities. Multiple cities become kingdoms. Humans have started to create an artificial system of living together harmoniously (for the most part). The strongest member of such kingdoms starts dictating to other humans what to do. Having been amid the humans for a long time, you start to mimic their facial expressions, although no one can perceive you. You find yourself reacting to events the way humans would. You lie in wait. You observe.

With their mastery of the wheel, you see them engage in trade across great distances. You see them write stories and paint. Yet, you see them fight with each other more than ever.

Take note, reader: new ways of territoriality have emerged!

You see them raise armies, invent weapons and kill others. You see their kingdoms grow in size. You see them mine shiny metals from the earth and use these to trade with each other. You see them invent more tools, more ways of recording their stories. You see them invent gods. You see them invent demons. You see them wear colourful clothes. You note that their curiosity makes them study everything—other animals, sea, landscapes, stars, and so on. Different human kingdoms in different parts of the world do things differently. You feel like you cannot keep up. You witness it all. You find yourself become the timeless hoary timekeeper here. You remember it all. You lie in wait. You observe.

You see a few humans embark on long sea voyages in their giant ships. You remember that these lands have changed significantly and that the gap between them is very large. But that doesn't seem to stop the humans. They go over great distances to trade. Some humans have started to fight the locals instead of trading. They find their weapons much more sophisticated than the lands they visited, and with the help of these, they start enslaving these humans. They see the skin colour differences and think that those with darker skins are inferior to them. You cannot help but chuckle at their ignorance.

Would it surprise you to know that even some of those so-called lovers of truth—the philosophers—also failed to see this? Well, I'm telling you. That's the way it was!

You see them build huge factories and produce lots of goods and items. You see them take more and more from the earth and dump more and more. You see them commit mass violence on these local people. You have no option but to witness. You don't understand how the pioneers of the planet have become destroyers. You lie in wait. You observe.

You see large nations engage in war and kill countless living organisms, both humans and non-humans. You see that the harmony that they intended is no longer there. You see them raid and pillage. You see them kill and bury. You see them shoot and bomb. You see that eventually after so much bloodshed, things have come to an end. Humans have started to draw boundaries around their kingdoms. Not that these were new, but that their rigidity is new; the rigidity is now enforced by other boundaries. Boundaries lost their fluidity and became fixed. You do not understand the need for that, but you continue to hover over and see it all. Amid all this, the harmony with which things in nature have always been begun to shift. You know that change is inevitable, but the pace at which it happens drives natural forces to behave erratically. This was dubbed climate change by some learned humans. You see that the number of humans who move great distances due to conflicts and climate change have become huge. You have always seen that movements have caused their lives to get better and so you are happy that they will be fine. Your head spins (figuratively). You lie in wait. You observe.

I assure you this is how things happened, reader. I'm not rushing with my narration.

The last few million years we saw gradual, steady changes and then a dizzying ride in a very short span.

With rigidities in boundary-making and border control came rigid rules. These rules decide who can enter and who cannot. You are furious. You want to scream the way humans do. You who have seen it all think about their history; you are disappointed that they fail to recognise their deep connection to movement; disappointed that all that the humans ever knew was migration and yet they impose new arbitrary rules to stifle it. You want to tell them that restricting that is to deny their fundamental nature. But you cannot do anything. You know you are condemned to observe for eternity. As you notice, the humans behind that boundary allowed a few humans in but turn away most others. You find yourself hovering above a modern-day refugee camp. They have installed a wire fence and armed guards stood on the other side

keeping many fleeing humans out. A massive violence was ongoing on the other side from which these people had managed to flee. But they were not let in. They were told to go back home. They were threatened and told that if they tried to cross, they would be killed. Whichever way they move, they will get killed. With no choice, some try to climb the fence and die in the process. Some go back and get killed. Some just set up camps outside the fence. You see the commotion, you feel their pain, you hear the helpless screams of many desperate children. You listen to the lamentations of the grown-ups. You want to do something; you want to push the fence away and move them to safety. You cannot help but lie in wait. You cannot help but observe.

You are all of us, condemned with the knowledge; all of us who can see the absurdities of borders and yet cannot do anything. We have become the immortal spirit that sees and knows everything but lacking power, we are doomed to lie in wait; doomed to observe. Knowing all this, dear reader, what would you change if you had the means?

~ Not the end ~

In the final analysis, we are all migrants, armed with a temporary residence permit for this Earth, each and every one of us incurably transient.

— Gazmend Kapllani, *A Short Border Handbook* (2010)

Arunkumar (Arun) Rajavel (one/they) I am a recent immigrant to Canada currently residing in the traditional Lekwungen territories (colonially: Victoria, British Columbia). As a mechanical engineer by training, I quit this field to pursue my passion: philosophy. I'm a graduate in Philosophy from the University of Victoria, where I specialised in human rights and global justice. For my Master's thesis, I studied migration using Arendtian political philosophy, arguing that immigration policies should consider past injustices such as colonialism in making their decisions. Born and brought up in India, I moved to Estonia in 2017, where the political and cultural environment somehow always made me feel like an outsider. Then, I moved to Canada in 2021, hoping to find my belonging. Still searching...

Having written stories since I was a child, I consider myself a lifelong narrator. I write because writing and photography are the media through which I feel at ease expressing myself. I like to experiment with different ways of writing, and thus, the second-person narrator in my submission. I'm a vocal opponent of borders and of arbitrary immigration policies that are, by their very design, discriminatory. I hope to continue to work in this field and contribute to the growing literature.

My submission for the StOries Project deals with a larger-than-life narrative: the grand story of our migration. I envision the reader as a timeless spirit that wanders about since the dawn of *Homo Sapiens*. I capture some of the important historical moments such as the discovery of fire, invention of the wheel, domestication of dogs, etc., all the way up to the modern day. I finish the story by placing the reader in a modern refugee camp where the reader laments their helplessness, having learned all about human history and how ingrained migration is to our species. Then, the reader is invited to ask for themselves what they would do to change this situation if they had the means.

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Chapter 14

Suitcases: A Story of Migration During the Pandemic



Nabila Kazmi

*I have my father's name, but I am partly made up of my mother
As I housed inside her, we bonded,
latched on together by the inseparable connection of blood and bone.
I am built out of friends that I have hugged and enemies I have tried to forget
I consist of places I have been to and those that I long to visit
My composition is every experience I have ever had – good or bad
I am not complete without all of these, but I am enough!*

Every time somebody asks me about my doctoral degree, I inadvertently tell them that 2020 was not a great year to start anything new, let alone moving to another country. It seems obvious to me now why one would say that. But in November of 2019, when I was finally deciding to do my PhD in Canada and jumping with joy at the news of securing admission, I did not know what awaited me. People say, “I had a long journey!” and it generally means that they travelled thousands of miles or long hours to reach their destination. For me when I finally landed in Canada in August of 2021, the term ‘long journey’ meant something totally different. It felt like light-years had passed as I traversed the tricky parts of travel during the pandemic. So, yes, like I was saying, unaware of what was to come, I decided to move to pursue higher education at the University of Victoria in British Columbia in January of 2020. I was excited at the prospect of moving from India to Canada and living in a country ‘in the West.’

I had one of those childhoods where I lived in my head a lot! Hardly aware of the world at any given moment and yet too conscious of it. My siblings till date relate stories at the family dinner table that I do not recollect. Mind you, I am there in the story, just that I cannot recollect witnessing the events in them. It’s a running joke

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in my family about me, that I seem to have both accepted, and been thinking about a lot lately. Where was I? What was I doing when things were happening around me? What was I thinking? But of the few things I can recollect from my childhood, I remember wanting to travel to different parts of the world, living independently and walking snow-covered streets during Christmas. Yes, I wear romanticised Hollywood Christmas glasses, if there is such a thing. For me, moving to the West meant I could create a life I wanted, have everything I imagined and be filled with joy. Did I tell you that I was 10 years old then, and clearly hadn't met 'life' yet?

Even though much of my life happened in the 20+ years that followed, my dream of living in the West did not fade away. At 18, I moved to Malaysia for my undergraduate degree. It was the most exciting 4 years of my life, filled with independence, making friends from across the globe, and discovering myself. However, it was still not the West, and that experience did not completely match the images that had been planted in my head, especially by all those movies! It was close but not the same! As I moved back home after my education, I lived in the big cities of India, like Bangalore, Mumbai, and Pune, and continued my journey through life. I learned to maneuver the scary streets at night, budget my money, and fall in love, and then out of it, too. All these experiences I value dearly as they taught me so many lessons about life! However, the quest for snowy nights continued to haunt me, growing even stronger when a close friend moved to the UK for her degree. That served as a reminder that if I wanted to move, there was no point in waiting. That inner voice egged me on, that the time was now. Certainly, I questioned myself later when the world came to a standstill.

It was March of 2020, and India shut down! With a two-day notice to gather all the food and goods you could; we were told to lock up our doors to friends and family. Those of us who could afford it, hoarded the grocery stores and stocked up on products we needed, and also those we would never actually use. We were among the privileged few who had bulk orders placed online and awaited their arrival while scrolling on our gadgets to track the progress of our next orders. People lost their livelihoods, migrant workers in metro centres having no choice but to make a mass exodus overnight, to return back to their villages as our cities that needed them till yesterday, for construction and other manual labour, no longer had any use for them. In the comfort of our isolation, we witnessed people travel 1000s of kilometers in trucks, overflowing buses, hitchhiking, and families even walking long distances on foot. People were displaced from the cities they had just recently started to call home, and in many cases, abandoned by the same people they served. As the government was busy marketing the effective management of the situation, it forgot all about the economically marginalised, migrant, homeless, and youth population groups. These people with uncertain earning options were losing jobs as prices of necessities skyrocketed. The images flashed on our electronic devices everyday.

I must admit that these images made me momentarily grateful about my situation throughout my struggle to move to Canada. I was constantly reminded of my transitory state when friends and family inquired about my travel plans, these questions sneaking their way into my already exhausted brain. I used to haunt the walls of Facebook and YouTube reading and watching peoples' stories of being stuck and finally making it to the other side. Thousands and even more across the globe. That, too, offered some solace, albeit temporarily! *Suitcases are usually known for holding things in them, but they keep things out too.*

Things we decide are not worth carrying around

As we lug our baggage through life, we decide to keep some stories in our suitcases and others we leave behind.

I still remember the day my parents bought me a suitcase set as a gift for my accomplishment of securing admission to Canada. It was a sturdy 3-piece set, black in colour. As it arrived at my doorstep, I ripped open the cardboard and the plastic. As I sat on the floor, popping the bubble wrap that it came wrapped in, I suddenly became aware of how real this whole thing was. As much as I was looking forward to moving, I knew it would be hard to transition to a totally new country where I would hardly know anybody. During the pandemic, as I spent a lot of time at home, I built back some of those bonds that had rusted with distance. My parents live abroad, and I used to visit them once a year when they came to India. All this changed in 2020! We were in close proximity: parents, siblings, and our extended families too. I knew I was going to miss them! We figured out ways to reconnect with each other by cooking and eating together, watching movies, and also taking our 'me' time locked behind the closed doors of our respective rooms, when we had enough of each other.

As the world was grappling with the uncertainty of figuring out what the future would look like, in September, 2020, I started my online classes with an over a 12-hour time difference. We were introduced to the infamous Zoom meetings that soon became our lifelines. I met my peers through the rectangular black boxes of zoom; all 12 of us crammed up in the gallery view. With our living rooms blurred in the background, I vividly recollect my first 4 am class where the instructor asked us to introduce ourselves. Iran, India, Azerbaijan, Canada and Brazil, our virtual classroom was buzzing with stories from such diverse contexts. After months of classes, meetings, and teaching assistantships, I found myself living at once in two worlds. The other one started as I shut down my laptop in the middle of the night and picked it up again as I prepared myself for the 'after 10 pm' work schedule. As exciting as it was to live simultaneously in these two parallel worlds, a feeling of being in a constant state of transition became my way of life, taking up space in the empty pockets of my mind and time.

After a long tiresome process of filling long forms and standing in endless hospital lines to get my medical tests done while every innocent cough was treated with suspicion, in January 2021, I finally received my visa. As we grappled with what the future would look like, I took a leap of faith and decided to book my flight. I remember my hands shaking at the keyboard of my laptop as I looked up tickets. It was a mix of excitement and wrecked nerves as I imagined getting on a long-haul flight boxed up mid-air for 15 hours. However, for somebody who fears flying, the longest flight of my life would be the easiest part of my journey, and it was only after months that this realization dawned upon me.

I booked my first flight to Vancouver for April 2021. It was in February of the continuing unpredictable year that I got an email from Air Canada telling me that my flight was rescheduled to May as Canada had red-listed India, based on the rise in COVID cases. It was unexpected and threw me off, but I told myself, "Oh! It's

just another month". This went on for a while, because on random days, I got unexpected emails from the flight wizards about my reschedules. I had sleepless nights, full of nightmares, about not making it to Canada, losing friends because they were tired of my reschedules, and of never fitting in because I was too late. Did I tell you that I am an overthinker and create a web of anxious thoughts that make me forget where I am in time and space? I had my flight rescheduled 5 times until they finally cancelled it, taking away any hope that may have lingered deep inside, of ever making it to Canada, my destination.

During all this time, I was hooked to stories of people who were getting similar emails, and some fake news about what the future would hold for travelers like us. Many were stories about Indian students across the country stuck in difficult situations, and not knowing how to get through it all. Among the morbid images of funeral pyres burning in bulk and dead bodies washed up to the shores of the holy Ganges, all this gloom highlighted by international media outlets (often unsuccessfully denied by their Indian counterparts), we were making sense of our surging sorrows stemming from the unknown.

The only option left for me to get to Canada was via a third country, and there, too, my choices were minimal – Mexico, Egypt, Ethiopia, or Qatar. Apparently, our COVID testing and the vaccine did not stand the test of authenticity and due diligence for the world around us. I fluctuated between twin emotions, of anger towards the world, and frustration towards my own homeland. At this moment, I must admit though, that perhaps I was just angry at myself for reasons unknown. As new countries continued to be added to that list, and some existing ones started red-listing India, I knew that I had to overcome my fear of travelling to an unknown in-between place and just take the plunge. And it finally happened! I saw that the list had a country that I always wanted to travel to. A holiday in disguise? Perhaps, it was a sign from the universe.

I have seen sunny photos of the Maldives on pages titled, "Places you have to visit before you die", and other such attractive pitches to tourists that assume that the only thing standing between beautiful places and people wanting to travel to them is their determination to do so. However, with all my limited options of getting to Canada, Maldives appeared to be the one that felt like the relaxing vacation my tired body and restless mind so needed. I took a leap of faith and booked my flights and the hotel. As heartbreaking as it was to leave home and loved ones back behind, I knew the time had come. And that I had to do this for myself, and for that little girl who was still craving for her ongoing dream. A dream that was almost starting to fade in the dimming lights of a pandemic world. But as I swam in the vast ocean in the picturesque Maldives, some larger meaning of life was slowly starting to unfold.

Travelling during COVID takes away the joy of reaching the destination, I can assure you that. Queues get longer, people panic more, documents get heavier and under the mask of it all, trying to breathe yourself into relaxation does not help. However, you must believe me when I say that the universe was gently nudging me towards my destination. Processes were smoother, and although life events were creating large hurricanes in my brain, things suddenly didn't seem so tough. People right in front of me were pulled out of lines for missing a single entry in the

numerous self-declaration forms that had to be filled. And I just walked past! Mistakes were miraculously corrected, and I felt a force of life energy telling me that all I had to do was overcome my fear.



Photo Credit: Nabila Kazmi

Canada greeted me with wide open arms. Friends were waiting in anticipation at airports; others were leaving beautiful notes on kitchen counters with breakfast. It felt peaceful to not be in constant moving mode anymore. As the endorphins started to fade off, a quiet awareness dawned inside me that life is ultimately about sudden surges of highs and deep troughs of lows that either pass on like the tide or linger longer than we would like them to. But it's mostly not-so-straight a line on a graph that is all about being in a constant state of receiving and living life as it comes to us. I am in that state right now!

Migration is tough! It is tougher when the world is scared to even move an inch. But I can see the snow outside my window, and, on some days, I must remind myself why I decided to do this.

*I read somewhere that migratory birds are protected
And they very well should be!
It's tough to leave your home and build another from scratch somewhere else,
to find food and allies in new places.
Ask me, I can tell you all about it.*

Nabila Kazmi My name is Nabila Kazmi (she/her). I am a doctoral student at the University of Victoria. I'm interested in researching women's stories, especially those pertaining to reclaiming voice and space in a male-dominated world. I was born in India and moved to Canada in 2021.

Stereotype-defying stories about female empowerment have long informed and inspired my research. As a woman born in a patriarchal society, I'm drawn to stories of women like myself who have made brave choices of questioning the rigid structures that shape our world.

Participation in the StOries project was my way of connecting to other immigrants with stories similar to mine. It was also an endeavour to use language to frame my experiences and give meaning to them. My story is a journey into my migration experience during the pandemic times. Through my story I attempt to give words to my feelings and struggles during this troubled time when the world came to a standstill, and slowly crumbled.

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Chapter 15 Eyes and ‘I’



Karen (Ming) Young | 杨明明 (she/her; they/them)

15.1 Having a Say

THE TORONTO STAR Online, January 26, 2014 F5

HAVE YOUR SAY



Meet Karen and her friends
Cuddling up with her collection of stuffed toys is 1-year-old Karen Young of North York. The picture was sent in by her parents, Yukuen and Mario. If you have a picture you'd like to share, send it to: Have Your Say, The Sunday Star, One Yonge St., Toronto, ON, M5E 1B5.

Wife despairs as man deported

An open letter to an immigration official: "I thought you out to purchase what, since you were only one of the players involved in deporting my husband to his native country, Slovakia. The reason there are many players is so as to cover yourself. I have to be sure mentioning the decisions the cases other people so much harder to find." "Even so I have talked to so far back, "most of the policies are on file, but we're just doing our job." "I have never heard that about before!"

When my husband and I were called in for our "marriage" interview, you informed us that because his religious rights prior to our marriage, we refused, he was required by law to leave the country. Did not to worry, you said, he could go back and come back immediately.

I told you that we have been married for 21/2 years, that we have the backing and support of all my relatives and in some church congregations, who will vouch for the validity of our marriage. I told you also that if my husband was returned to Slovakia, I feared for his mental health, that because of the stress of being without family or country for four years, he had had a breakdown the previous Christmas and ended and ended his days.

In spite of all this, you decided that there were "sufficient humanitarian and compassionate grounds" to allow my husband to empty go to Halifax and we soon received his deportation notice.

He was ordered deported on June 23, 2013, and, having learned that the judge had ruled that the Federal solicitor general would respect to the language of religious used by converted people, related to book-keeping the night before.

The response was negative: he spent the entire night reading and the next morning on with the airport. I left him at a hotel, only to discover later that my husband hadn't been cleared through U.S. immigration in time to catch the plane. He was rescheduled to leave two days later and we went through the whole process again!

Presumably my husband was returned to Slovakia to please the Canadian people, who don't want their top citizens to go to court through immigration. I am sure forward to my home. I was told my husband would be able to return in eight months, but other people tell me it will be a year or two.

Only a handful of the government that deal with visaless people would dare to grant an job would be part of such a process and what?

CHRISTIAN PILLAYAKKAR
Toronto

Southerner loved winter visit here

I visited your city for 10 days in early December and would like to thank all the many folks I met who helped make my stay for me such a pleasure.

In those 10 days, I enjoyed some holiday parties and the lovely holiday atmosphere, some of the best I have seen. I met at art galleries, the Holiday Hall of Fame, the Top of the Rock Museum, several shopping districts and finally, a restaurant at your glowing skyscrapers and beautiful downtown. I even stayed under the stars at city hall — a real treat for this southerner!

Everyone I met and talked with, from the police, Ontario uniform, helpful personally, local neighborhood people to every holiday entrepreneur, whom I know had for entrepreneur — everyone was courteous, gracious, kind, by and, most important, seemed genuinely proud to live in Toronto.

I was a bit hesitant about everything since it is a southern city but, for me, Toronto had to be in my opinion as a beautiful, exciting and safe destination for the visitors. P.K. Lewis

Judith Ann Swanson
Wilmington, N.C.

A photo of the author at a one-year old, posing together with stuffed toys, published alongside with two neighbouring headlines, “Wife despairs as man deported” and “Southerner loved winter visit here”.

Photo credit: Mario Young (the author’s father) and Yukuen Young (the author’s mother); photo published in a local newspaper

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In this picture, I see what everyone else can see — a much younger Karen with eyes matching a smile in cuddling with a collection of stuffed toy friends. Behind this picture, I see my parents’ attentiveness to opportunity, answering to a call, “have your say” with a passion for arranging animated life to meet light, inviting anyone from the public eye to join in meeting us.

Gazing at my parents and probably at a camera too, it is easy to warm up to their energy and dedicated spirit for life. It’s interesting to notice how bigger beings capture your attention, call to (how they see) you, while strengthening narratives that may reflect differently felt on the inside.

In between kindergarten classes, Mom would refer to me as her little tail, because I would follow her everywhere she’d go. With our matching bowl haircuts, at the local grocery store, a cashier would greet me as I sat by the cart handle bars, “Hi Karen!”, easing a 90° head turn to my Canadian born name every time I heard it. At a beginning age, my body began to immediately train in alignment with formed realities and with (shared) identities.

15.2 Molding Values

As far back as I can remember, I recall a first day of kindergarten surrounded by snacks on brown paper napkins pulled out from above the sink. Unlike the stuffed toys, my classmates and I surrounded each other, usually sweaty, moving, and unpredictably lively. I remember how a brief passage of time felt like to me, between seeing stuffed mouths with crackers to hastily wiping off the remnants on the brown paper napkins before dipping their hands into the shoe box filled with buttons during arts and crafts time. This swift transition would allow any of us to create artwork with food particles that missed our mouth cavity. It’s a detail difficult to miss because it contrasted deeply with values of sharing resources at home, perhaps pre-dating me for at least over a couple of millenia.

So, at our dinner table at home, we used chopsticks specific for individual plates and ones with shared food dishes embedded in principles that were about sharing equally. These utensils looked almost as asymmetrical as 二 (èr) (‘2’ in Mandarin). My siblings and I had shorter chopsticks: theirs were green, blue, yellow, while mine was pink. Our parents had bamboo. An image of these chopsticks at work (before the pandemic) is gathering around a restaurant table eating dim sum with family friends from my grandparent’s generation. Mom greeted everybody with equally lowered head nods to each person, including the restaurant hosts, in Cantonese. After the restaurant hosts directed us to an empty circular table nearby, we received our guests in this seat-specific yet shared space. As I heard chopsticks clacking together, a family friend from Mom’s generation turned to me, exclaiming how in little time the dumplings Mom made for her parents disappeared from their bowls the day before.

An earliest memory was of us sitting in front of our family round table, a menu of geometric shapes in front: rectangular sheets of pulpy wood, water bowls branded

with a circular blue line, circular dough wrapping, and the biggest stainless-steel bowl I had ever seen anywhere outside of TV and YouTube to this day. These shapes were also placed on top of principles that extended to ensuring that each round wrap was consistently packed with filling. Looking beside and upwards at Mom as she placed a round wrap on her left hand while scooping onto it a mix of filling arriving aromatically in front of me: sesame oil, protein, coriander, chives, napa. I decided to try out folding the next dumpling. After noticing the proportion of the almond-shaped fillings alongside Mom’s hand size, I tried placing some filling that matched my hand size on the next wrap. “Put some more feelings (fillings) into it,” Mom advised as I sat there confused for a moment, then believed what I heard versus what she meant to say.

15.3 Learning English Together

Dumpling gatherings at our home, receiving family from outside Canada, would remind me of a cultural inversion of Toronto’s predominantly monolingual (English) culture when navigating formal institutions. In contrast to this, throughout many publicly-funded institutions in the city, I met unexpected faces from unexpected parts of the world. Hosting family visiting from abroad revealed to me how familiar faces reflected genetic overlaps, while there was little overlap in languages. These gatherings though, would be impossible if Mom was not a holder of languages in our family. Before she enrolled in classes to learn English as an additional fourth language, she would learn Mandarin with her family, and grow up learning Cantonese in Hong Kong, and Portuguese in Brazil. After becoming pregnant with my older siblings and then me, she would eventually learn English again with Sesame Street with my siblings and then with Barney and Friends and me. Switching on closed captions / subtitles was a multisensory way she found that helped her and her *caçula* (youngest child in Portuguese) both learn how to read and spell ‘proper’ words in English.

After showing up for Chinese school on Saturdays, our parents would sometimes treat us with hamburgers. I would stand in line and chuckle at Mom with a black purse over her shoulder every time she would order a hamburger, “Could I order a hambooger, please?” As I grew taller, I began to see experiences closer to her standpoint. When visiting São Paulo for the first time in 2007, Mom and I stood in line ordering hamburgers at the airport. As we were waiting, we heard a customer who ordered in Portuguese, “Quero um hambooger, por favor.” (“I’d like a hamburger, please.”) As they ordered, I found myself to be the only one giggling, as everyone around us wasn’t doing the same. Mom whispered in my ear, “See I’m not the only one.”

Three years later, when I took accounting class, our teacher asked me to read out accounts in a trial balance exercise. As I read out ‘merchandise’ as “merkandise”, the way I heard Mom pronouncing it and without presence of the ‘proper’ ‘ch’ sound, I heard and felt my classmates laugh, many of whom were also of East Asian

descent, chuckle at the “foreign” error of how I pronounced. I felt just as bewildered, confused, and as upset as Mom must have felt when she would order hamburgers for us, then to feel humiliated by her own kid. How is it possible that I could fully respect Mom while laughing at the way she pronounced things that actively decentered this North American way of pronouncing? Whose way of saying things was really ‘correct’?

With pressure from anywhere but home to learn what is the most spoken language in the world, Mandarin, I opted to take Portuguese classes instead. When a pen would drop on the floor, my teacher who taught us European Portuguese would exclaim, “Aiyaiyai”. It sank in then that this expression wasn’t an extension of ‘aiya’ that Mom would say the same way in a similar scenario. However, if an umbrella broke in the middle of the rain, it would be “aiya”. In hearing both expressed in undesired situations of varying severities and hearing this from family (friends) who spoke English, Portuguese, and Chinese, I conflated the two expressions to be Chinese. I sat in silence with the discomfiting idea of how much more I had to learn. What good could actually come of this leaving what-I-didn’t-know-what-I-didn’t-know unquestioned?

15.4 A Foreigner, Perpetually

In a community program I participated in that required using computers, a classmate of mine asked, “Karen, do you know why I’m getting all these porn ads of [East / South East] Asian women?” We were both speculating how ads target viewers based on the probability of conventionally desirable-looking people for clicks. We laughed because we knew they misdirected their (not-so) nuanced efforts towards someone uninterested in the demographic that targeted them. A less hilarious aspect is why these ads had to reflect women who looked like ‘me’. With the thought of being likened to that of a tourist attraction, I can sense my eyes tightening, locating a constellation of bodily sensations signifying immediately at being taken for face and body value.

In July of 2007, a long-time friend of Mom’s took Mom, my sisters, cousin, and me to see Iguazú Falls, the largest waterfall system in the world. The falls themselves lie within two United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site parks in both Brazil and Argentina yet predominantly within the latter’s borders. This is very similar to Niagara Falls where accessing it from the Canadian border offers a more intimate glimpse than from the American side. However, anyone inviting themselves to enter the park from the Argentine side would have to access the falls with a train, jeep, boat, bridges, and foot power along centralised routes and pathways.

On the train, we boarded onto a section with the seats that were most empty. These were wooden bench-like seats that would face into each other, almost knee to knee with anyone sitting across from us. I noticed that the earliest seats may have also been the most coveted seats facing towards the front of the train, moving along

with inertia throughout most of the ride. We took our seats facing away from where we were to be headed as the forward-facing seats across from us were already taken.

Sitting across from us were a group of all-boys, the not-yet-20 types, with matching khaki shorts and tops with distinctly British accents (likely non-Australasian, as I heard a close friend in school would speak). Sometime after the train took off, the one who definitely seemed to be the 'leader' with blue eyes, sang aloud what seemed like a chorus of an improvised folk song, "I'm married to the girl sitting in front of me. I bet she can't understand me." As briskly as this entourage around him erupted in laughter, I tried to locate their social status back. I took note of their glistening white teeth (likely classed), school uniforms (likely in boarding school). Throughout the rest of the ride, a riled part inside of me wanted to prove them wrong.

As I internalised this imposed identity as a 'foreigner', I sat with the unbelonging that I had less experience on how to navigate this part of the world (Brazil-Argentina) even less than Mom did. Mom sat there without a word. It definitely wasn't that she wasn't incapable too of speaking English. When we took a boat ride near the falls in a steadier river channel, our guide told stories of the Guaraní legend behind Iguazú Falls. With the overlapping similarities between Spanish and Portuguese, Mom translated from Spanish to English, through the Portuguese that she knew. In this way, I presumed that silence was a way Mom's generation at least dealt with encounters of xenophobia, racism, and sexism, maybe even until now in at least two different continents.

Was there a connection between the fact of Iguazú Falls being a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and me receiving uninvited assumptions reminiscent of being a docile and subservient 'girl' who can't communicate back? Perhaps inviting a flurry of tourists from all over the world may have helped muddy a sense of who came from where that made it easier to jump to crude, automatic, prejudiced responses? Could sitting in close proximity, with physical space as a limited' resource, across from our counterparts make them feel uneasy? In locating a plausible relationship between the structure of the context and what unfolded, I can feel a familiar sense of vigilance in my eyes as I type this and how much more I give attention now to expressive changes in one's eyes (mis)matched with deeper (un)met needs.

After visiting tourist attractions on rare family vacations, it is a stark sight to see people of varying heights, shapes, skin colours, speech tones, gaits. I felt like this seemed comparable to the diversity of dogs in steeply appreciating areas within Toronto. When strolling in these areas, I see people walking these dogs that seem to pale in comparison.

15.5 A Furry Collaborator

When I took driving lessons, the experience informed me on how to be a safer pedestrian whenever trying to cross the road. I learned that making eye contact with the driver can be the first and single most effective way to allow the collaborative possibility of us moving past each other without lawsuits or law enforcement

back-up. That way, we can have a mutual yet foundational understanding of our positioning in relation to each other before making our next move.

Someone who models this is one of our family cats, a snowshoe tabby my sister named Bella. Snowshoe tabbies are a descendent of Siamese cats (indigenous to now-called Thailand) and American shorthair tabbies (indigenous to Europe). Whenever Bella would find me horizontal, in between after waking up and before getting up, they would arrive at the bedroom door announcing their presence with a soft 'meow', tail topped with a gentle curl, leaping onto the mattress and walking onto my belly insistent on face-to-face contact before purring and kneading on my chest. Overtime, Bella would arrive unannounced, collapsing a desire to make cuddling happen on demand with a single look—softened yet steady eye contact signaling you, me, now, cuddles, in no order. I can count a few moments where I wasn't in the mood to cuddle together. In those moments, I would shift my body by facing in the other direction. The next moment where I'd sneak a peek to see if Bella was still there, they'd already gone on their own way. By sensing both of us, Bella didn't waste time.

Why was meeting Bella's gaze so gratifying on the human end? We do have two other cats who are darker coloured. As I reflect on how they are one of the first out of the three cats usually to meet the eyes of family (friend) visitors from outside Canada, I draw the congruent connection of how much their eyes look like ones in YouTube ads, almond-shaped blue eyes with undeniable white features. Each time Bella sits by the computer monitor to watch their favourite show on YouTube, I wonder if these ads' insidious messaging also sinks in with them the way it does with me. Behind obsessions with how being beautiful is to look a particular way, I sometimes meet self-identifying women who look like 'me', of East / South East Asian descent. I believe there is an indignation in their eyes for a differently felt reality. An anger that finds its way directed outward eventually, sometimes directed towards themselves from the outside in, skin deep, under the knife. I wonder if that helps them feel happier now and later. With Bella born this way and their markings easy to identify and locate their breed as a snowshoe tabby, I wonder at this commonality we share, being born with undeniable close(r) proximities to whiteness that also mark us as being outside from the West.

After visiting the family (cats) after a while during the pandemic, I woke up rolling around in bed, kicking something soft. I feel a soft paw on my right foot. Half an hour later, I woke up to Bella and we gazed at each other, unabatedly. I saw it in their eyes that they wanted to stay. Although, I can't speak to why they'd wanted to stay, I know the intention I carry towards Bella. I try to keep an open heart-mind to what Bella enjoys doing unprompted from anyone else: sunbathing, watching outside birds and squirrels, playing fetch, covering up skat already there in the litterbox (perhaps without blaming others) before then covering their own droppings. There's a certain order that plays out in Bella's world, familiar values there. And chances are, it has nothing to do with seeing me as an inferior gendered slave unable to articulate back.

While cleaning up Bella's eye poop, I see how I've also been socialised to see Bella as perpetually endearing to observe. With this came my noticing of their

tactful eye contact patterns, strategic enlisting of support based on each human's strengths, sophisticated vocalisations with varying rhythms, tones, tempos specific to the context. With an observable kind of industrialised-prized intelligence, I can only presume that Bella knows themselves more than I could ever claim to know their inner realities. And yet, the quality of rational intelligence that is easily observable somehow overshadows underlying emotions undeniably part of the process too. Overtime, I feel a respect towards Bella in attuning honestly to their own needs, locating personal needs in a situation before enlisting surrounding support to make needs happen. There is an integration of embodied noticing and taking action that reminds me that an accord among this can be possible. It's interesting to see how beings capture your attention, call to how you see a mirrored reality, while strengthening narratives that may reflect differently on the 'other' side, in black and white.

15.6 Having a Collective Say

Names can be brands, meanings that carry feelings that are felt in front of one's eyes and not behind their eyes, disembodied in this way. With plenty out there on the backlash behind the name 'Karen', I'd like to focus this section on having a family name centered in Crazy, Rich Asians. 'Young' is a phonetic translation from 杨 (yáng), literally meaning 'poplar tree'. It can, too, sound like it's "from the West". With a name that can blend across cultural contexts also means never questioning the denial of classed opportunity that comes with the absence of familiarity, particularly for written-based applications. With the ongoing stigma that comes with the ageing process, the ambiguity of guessing an 'Asian' person's age is romanticised. However, with speaking English like a Canadian born, queries of whether I'm adopted do arise. Curiosities stem from a confusion of being hard to locate. This mismatch can bother people as it bothered me as I grew up.

Remember when I felt confused when Mom pronounced fillings as feelings? There was nothing incorrect about this belief in itself. I genuinely believed for the longest time that she meant to say 'feelings' as the key missing step needed to make dumplings. And when seeing family (friends) from Brazil, Mom got us to practice giving two to three air kisses to anyone we visited. It was also a way that I opened myself with affection to people we just met. Practising being emotionally open with others allowed me to process why confusion was also tied to feeling comfortable and entitled to this feeling. Immediately evading this comfort meant locating the anxiety outwards, towards 'other' bodies, before locating the discomfort of why hearing Mom pronouncing 'feelings' didn't make sense in my body. When I perceive confusion from my fellow white-passing Canadians, those born in Canada, towards 'me', I can imagine a subtle assertion of hierarchy staring back. I wonder whether we really do see each other as equals.

When I cleaned my room before moving out for graduate school, I found the newspaper clipping with my baby photo that starts off this narrative. I decided to locate the article to understand more about the broader context the image was placed

in. Below the baby photo lay two headlines that seemed oddly siloed next to one another. Both are juxtaposing first-person accounts in this newspaper article published in the mid-1990s. One account is by a ‘wife’ from Toronto outlining personal, emotional, financial, and public sacrifices following the denial of her husband’s refugee claim. Another is by a visitor from Wilmington, North Carolina who referred to Toronto as a “beautiful, exciting, and safe destination for visitors.” If voices are linked to “where they come from” as a fixed place, then how accurate is this in aligning identity with fluid movements of people between places? How is it possible for all these lives mentioned here to co-exist in real life and in black and white?

Growing up without living grandparents added to the anxiety of navigating life, of navigating between differing cultural worlds. Wading into this uncertainty has allowed me to see values in welcoming and befriending the strengths of opportunities this reality offers. The only way for 筷子 (kuaizi) (chopsticks) to work at once is when one is static, and the other is moving. If both were moving or if both were still, they would be as asynchronous as evidence-based public health values and ‘public’ policy approaches during a pandemic. In graduating to bamboo chopsticks and growing taller, I’m seeing a great cost to “being right”, losing opportunities for conversations to learn something new. I see how much society loses out on collaborating with unquestionable talent while taking you for body value. If I saw Bella as a stuffed animal, I wonder if I would have experienced seeing their multiple abilities, modelling many ways of self-caring, collaborating, and enjoying the present moment. I see my parents’ influence on how we treat beings around us, welcoming them with respect and care, without expecting anyone to come back for more.

Karen Young HBSc (she/her; they/them) Born in Scarborough (East Toronto) to first generation settlers of Han Chinese descent, I decided to pursue an Honours Bachelor of Science in social psychology and health policy at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC). I call Toronto a meeting point as a home to Indigenous people and others from the rest of the world. Now, I’m beginning to understand where my own roots are indigenous too, and where my home is in the world. I’m curious about well-being & disability, social and structural identities, self-determination, and near-peer learning. With federal funding, I study migration at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) towards a Master of Arts as a first-generation graduate student.

I write to make sense of past, current, and future experiences that move beyond words, processing experiences through the mind, emotions, and even more so with the body. I write to also trust in my own truth, no matter how others arrive at theirs. For me, among other things, writing is about nurturing skills that help to navigate health care systems too, including honest, comprehensive, accurate self-reporting. My writing is usually interdisciplinary, intersectional, and evermore, it is intergenerational.

In *Eyes and ‘I’*, I thread together a series of reflections about conforming to cultural forms and realities growing up in Toronto, with an openness to investing in passion. Carrying within in values like respecting shared spaces, realities, and truths, I explore what it can look like to navigate cornered spaces in grocery store line-ups, shoeboxes, trains, newspapers. In this process, I explore how embodied realities from the inside out can add value in understanding identities in formation across the life course, structures, and imaginations. Voices mentioned other than my own gave explicit permission to allow their thoughts, emotions, and words to be included here.

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Part VI
Longings and Belongings, and the Idea of
Home...

Chapter 16

Trinidadian Trinkets



Sarah Ostapchuck

16.1 Hair

Papa's oxygen tank sat obtrusively on the living room floor: discoloured steel against dusty pink carpet. I traced the tube with my eyes from tank to man; its plastic coiled into his nose like a tentacle creature that was keeping him alive. He talked slower these days, but he still talked: a lot. He was sitting facing us, the bay window to his back, and the overcast sun illuminating the back of his bald brown head. That head had been bald for as long as I could remember, except the strip of hair that extended from ear to ear, which I used to comb as a child. That was years ago, when Papa had a padded neck and bulbous belly. Now, it was diminished, deflating a little each day.

Ever since Grandma died, Papa could only talk about two things: God, and his wife. It seemed that he had forgotten that his kids and grandkids were all saved and that we had also been raised by his wife. He was going on, yet again, about Grandma's hair; he had been repeating himself a lot lately.

"We used to go for a drive with the top down, and she was sitting in the passenger seat, and her long black hair would blow in the wind," I think he used to be brought back to that moment every time he saw me.

"Never cut your hair, it's just like your grandma's."

There was once a time a few years back when I had gone to a family event at my Papa's with straightened hair. Straightened hair was cool: it made me look older, thinner, whiter. It took an hour and a half to do, as my hair was naturally very curly. Smoke would billow from the iron as I applied to my curls my hair retained moisture really well. I did it occasionally, and I always felt beautiful when I did. When I went to the family event, Papa confronted me. He said,

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“Why do you do that to your hair?” It wasn’t the first time he’d asked me that question. But it was the first time that he added, “it look ugly.”

My immediate reaction was to be offended and embarrassed. I was a teenaged girl riddled with insecurities. But in that living room, I realized what he was really saying. I made a point to never straighten my hair for family events after that.

I woke up from the anesthesia slowly at first, only experiencing a quick, blissful moment of forgetting where I was. Before I could open my eyes, the sounds of the OR reminded me, and then I was hit with an intense pain in my abdomen. I cried out; a weak, uncontrollable moan. I tried to open my eyes, but things were blurry.

“Where’s my baby?” Also uncontrollable were those three words that kept tumbling out of my mouth, over and over. I knew where my baby was, I knew he had had an infection and was in the NICU. I knew I couldn’t see him because I might have COVID-19, but my heart still asked, “Where’s my baby?”

The nurses assured me that he was fine as they wheeled me out to meet my husband. He joined us on our way down the aisle to the maternity ward. Tears were streaming down my face and the moaning continued. My vision was blurred by my watery eyes and the clouds of anesthesia still clinging to me, but I managed to catch a glimpse of my husband, who was holding my hand. He looked broken, tearful: helpless. I had never seen him in that state. His blurry, pained face woke me up, and I realized I was still moaning. I stopped moaning and switched to, “I’m okay, I’m fine,” still saying it through tears. I was not very convincing. When I think back to the pain, I do remember a dull, intense disturbance in my body, but that’s not the pain that I remember clearest.

“Where’s my baby?” is the pain I remember. That’s where the moans were coming from.

After calming down and waking up a little, Steven asked if I wanted to see my son; he had a picture. Part of me yearned for it, part of me recoiled. I looked at the baby and thought, that could be anyone’s baby. I didn’t feel him being pulled from my body; I didn’t see him emerge or hear his cry.

My second thought was about his brownish body, broad nose, and full head of black tendrils. It made me almost laugh, even in that moment. He had my hair.

16.2 Nose

He was a dirty blond boy who desperately needed a haircut and a few more pairs of clothes, but that didn’t stop me, or my best friend, from having a huge crush on him. I had known him for years, her for much less, but he chose her. She was small, slight, light caramel pin-straight hair and dainty features.

Me and my friends decided to go to a movie that happened to be the exact same movie and showing time they had chosen. They were with another couple. We sat in the same row, a couple of seats apart, with me on the end closest to them.

He had started throwing stuff at us, I thought to tease us at first, like a boy with a crush; I still hoped he liked me (hence why we were at the same movie and in the same row). Then I realized he was throwing pennies at me. I turned to him in the quiet theatre and he said,

“Get a nose job!”

I was so sensitive about my nose. This was such a blow, so crippling, that instead of leaving, making a scene, or telling my friends what he did, I ignored him, and tried to pretend I hadn’t heard him.

Crook

1. Bend, curve, hook.
2. A dishonest person; a criminal.

Between your eyes, down
the jagged slope where he aimed his loose change
when he suggested, “get a nose job!”

1. A candy-cane, a solid shepherd’s staff
2. A jutting facial protrusion that says

“I’m not white”.

Remember needing to convince them you are?

Today it’s a point of pride,

yesterday it earned you a penny

from the shaggy blond-haired boy you had a crush on.

He was complaining about his nose being too big early in our relationship, well before we were engaged. I was surprised to hear it; I didn’t think his nose was big. I admired how straight it was; a normal slope.

“Your nose is fine, *mine* is messed up,” I freely admitted. He looked at me funny; I felt self-conscious for a moment.

“Really? I love your nose.”.

Stomach

“What’s for dinner?” I had asked Grandma as she held my hand to cross the street. The bus stopped right in front of our house, on the other side of the road. She still always met me at the stop. It was noon (kindergarten was still only half a day) and yet I already wanted to know what was on the menu for later. This became my famous line. Papa would quote it back to me for the rest of my life. I would be embarrassed of it as a teenager.

There was a very good reason why I always asked what was for dinner, because it could have been any one of the following: pilau, dhal and rice, geera chicken, stew chicken, curry goat, curry dear, dumpling soup, and her own homemade roti; dhalpuri and buss-up-shut, which I only recently learned is also called paratha.

One afternoon, Grandma let me help make the roti. I came in for the last step, but she let me roll a very small, six-year-old-Sarah-sized roti and cook it on the pan. I still remember how it tasted and felt. It was greasy and warm, with little brown marks, and it tasted like her roti, but a little chewier (I hadn't properly rolled it). I was wearing one of her aprons. It extended to my feet, like a special dress.

The doctor had said to give him whatever we eat and not to make special blended food just for him. She said to take whatever we cooked for dinner and throw it in the blender. The thought of blending chicken grossed me out, but it was a cheap and healthy option, and David was not a picky eater.

I had made stew chicken; the recipe was from my dad, who got it from my Grandma. Well, Grandma didn't have recipes, so he tried to replicate it, and I tried to replicate his. The result was a far cry from the original, but it smelled right. I scooped some rice into the Magic Bullet, then scooped the curry stewed chicken and veggies into the strainer and rinsed them off. I added them to the blender with a little bit of water, and blended.

I sat down to an eager David, ready for dinner. I gave him the first spoonful; he didn't want it. I tried again; he spat it out.

"Put some sauce in there, it's so bland," my husband suggested. I had thought the curry flavor would be too strong for him. I scooped the sauce from the pot and poured it in. I tried again. The first spoonful was a success, and he finished the whole bowl.

16.3 Soul

It must have been hot and sticky, not in an intense way, because the sun had gone down, but in a way that crowds your lungs and clings to your skin; humid. I can hear the crickets and other insects and animals native to the island in the thick foliage and up in the coconut trees. They could probably hear the sound of the dirt road crunching under their feet, little Papa's steps making smaller and quicker noises than his grandmother's.

"There, over there, see that, Keetah?" His Christian name was Ivan, but his real name was Keetah. Little papa looked up at his grandma, who was pointing to a statue at the centre of the road up ahead. It was old and eroded, but you could still tell it was a large cross with a half-naked man hanging off of it, his head bowed, something jagged and pointy sticking out of the top of him. Keetah looked on at this sad sight; he felt bad for the man.

"That's where God is," she said it with such confidence, and it surprised little Papa. He confusedly looked at this weak, dying man and thought of him as God. What a fascinating mystery, he thought. He never forgot that moment as long as he lived.

I regret not wearing a bright colour. I had thought about doing it, but chickened out, worried that people might think I was being disrespectful. I had put on black and blended in with the crowd of mourners. There were many; some who knew my Papa very well, some whose lives were only casually touched by him, but his reach was far and it showed in the form of a very full sanctuary.

He had told me long before he was even sick that he wanted people to wear colourful clothes to his funeral. He said it would be a day of celebration, not mourning, because he was with Jesus. It was hard to celebrate when we had lost him on earth.

I sat in the front pews reserved for close family. My step-mom was comforting my dad, my sister's boyfriend was comforting her. I sat alone and thought about the last time I was here, a year and a half ago, for Grandma. I was much sadder then; we all were, because she was the first. Papa had been sick for a while, going slowly, so we all knew this was coming. Near the end, I would pray to God while driving home from the hospital in tears, asking Him to just take Papa so the pain would be over. He was at rest now.

Above on the two large screens, the projector showed a video of Papa before he was admitted to the hospital, looking skinnier than ever, hooked up to his oxygen tank, leading bible study in his living room. The men in the video were all there in the sanctuary. I wanted to try to be just like him.

We sang some hymns, and when the pastor started playing *The Old Rugged Cross* on the piano, my dad leaned over to me and said, "That was Papa's favourite."

Sarah Ostapchuck I am a writer at heart, and I have been since my childhood. I went to the University of Toronto for my undergrad and majored in English with minors in Italian and History. While there, I also studied creative writing and had two pieces published in student journals. I completed my Master's of Professional Communication at The Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University), where I had the opportunity to intern with the City of Toronto Arts Services. I have worked in communications for an immigration consulting association and currently teach communications at the Saskatchewan Polytechnic college in Regina. I am currently the writer and host of a YouTube show for CAPIC (Canadian Association of Professional Immigration Consultants) as well as their Assistant Communications Coordinator. I reside in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan with my husband and sons.

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Chapter 17

Making a Place for Our Selves: A Story About Longing, Relationships, and the Search for Home



Natasha Damiano

“You still alive?”

My father’s greetings are always a matter of life and death, especially when I haven’t called in a while. His tough guy way of saying he misses me. I laugh and pace the kitchen as we try to talk, shaking my head at his steadfast predictability.

“Yeah, I’m still here.” I instinctively match his aloofness, setting aside my need for his affection and the desire to play my role differently. “How’s it going up there? Are you guys *really* ok?” My words feel repetitive of years of trying, like a ricochet of sounds in a dark tunnel, uncertain of the beginning and wary of the end. Searching for light that never reveals the truth. Our conversations have always been this way, but the reverberations seem louder this past year.

“We’re fine,” he insists, dismissing my weakly veiled concerns. A few years back my father and his wife bought some property in the BC Interior with the plan of building a house on it. Though everyone thought the move was foolish, it had proved a positive one for both his cancer and their marriage. My dad had never seemed happier. But the ongoing crises since the start of the pandemic had set us all on edge. We worried not only about his chronic health condition, but also the low rates of vaccination in the region. This was on top of a summer heat wave, forest fires, and the more recent floods that ravaged the highways connecting us. The potential for compounding risks if disaster sent them fleeing was difficult to set aside.

“I am still wondering if you guys have thought about getting out of there for a while. Maybe you could come to Vancouver?” I say the words tentatively, anticipating resistance.

“What are you always so worried about? From up here on the mountain, water flows downhill.” I struggle to improvise a comeback to this straightforward logic. This summer when I had asked about the forest fires, he had insisted that the smoke

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was only affecting the nearby Village of Lytton, a town ancestral to peoples of the Nlaka'pamux Nation in "British Columbia". Within a day of our conversation, this town was engulfed in flames under a heat dome that shattered average temperatures locally and nationally, displacing tens of thousands. Now, I can't shake my sense of another looming emergency, though I have no way of knowing that in a few weeks my dad will be medivacked to Vancouver for cancer treatment. Ever the responsible one, I press on.

"At the very least, you should still consider getting a bag ready with your important documents – so if you have to get out of there, you can move quickly." I hear him suck down his breath and imagine him frowning, the creases on his forehead rippling thickly as he speaks to me in blunt strokes.

"Natasha, maybe you should just organize my life for me." He sounds out each syllable in my name through nearly clenched teeth, the way he did when I argued or questioned him growing up. To my regret, our relationship has always been a struggle of wills, perceived judgments, and mutual misunderstanding. The eldest of three, my parents relied on me to take on family responsibilities, and my father in particular expected that I look after myself. Prematurely independent, I scrutinized my father's decisions, which in turn fueled his defensiveness and disregard for my efforts to be seen and heard – responses I naturally reciprocated. What our relationship has taught me is how difficult it is to know ourselves when our closest relationships fail to reflect back our own sense of who we are. Or, the flipside: how difficult it is to relate to anyone, but especially a parent, who may not fully understand themselves.

Facing futility once again, I try to smooth things over by changing the subject.

"Never mind, it was only a suggestion. How are the roads? How's the property? Maybe we can come for a visit again in the spring, like we did last year."

In August of 2020, as public health restrictions began to ease, my two sisters and I embarked on a four-hour road trip to visit my dad and finally see this property that was now the centre of his life. When we arrived it was late afternoon, and the sun had migrated eastward. As the engine ceased and the wheels halted on the crackling gravel, the silence fell around us. The quiet left me with an overwhelming sense that I'd been there before. Unmasked, my father approached the vehicle just as I grabbed my camera and pulled on the door handle. He was limping again on one side and trying to hide it, exaggerating his bowlegged gait. Otherwise, he looked remarkably well, the picture of health for a man his age. Lean and muscular, he wore a bright yellow t-shirt over his faded work jeans and steel-toed boots. A dark grey beret capped off his small stature, and in him I saw my Italian grandfather, an elfin man who in life had been deceptively quiet though always observing. Swaggering toward us in the late afternoon sunlight, my dad's eyes squinted proudly, reminding me of my nonno even more. I wanted to ask him about vaccination, but knew better. He was happy we had come, and was eager to show us around his humble, and largely outdoor, abode. Instead, I hung my camera around my neck and fell in step with my sisters as he gave us the grand tour.

Together we walked toward the back of the property where the vegetation was dry from the hot sun, and the land opened to a view of the roads and valley across

the horizon. A few feet from the cliff, I snapped a photo of a plastic patio chair weighed down by three varieties of large, brightly coloured gourds. A set of tough-skinned squash that attested to our shared lineage, a history of working the land to ensure the survival of one's family. My nonno had been an avid gardener, a skill he learned in Italy working the land *his* grandfather had purchased after working in Philadelphia for nearly a decade. Impressed by this fact, my father impressed it upon *me* that if it hadn't been for the hard work of my great-great grandfather, our family would have continued to be 'landless labourers'. Culturally speaking, property was something to be parceled, not shared, so at sixteen my grandfather left Italy to find work in a Belgian coal mine, leaving the family land to his two brothers – his only sister having married and emigrated to Venezuela. Years later, after moving his family from Italy to Belgium, and then Belgium to Canada, my nonno would frequently phone them to find out how the family vineyards were faring. He eventually forfeited his share of the Italian property to one brother – but not before my father had a chance to visit there in the 1980s, rekindling a love and connection to his birthplace that had laid dormant, but was integral to his very being. I know this because the shadows of those rolling hills and orchards were ever present throughout my childhood. Indeed, they were present still, imposed even, on the land that as settlers we were now walking. Land that is animated by shared language and stories that sound through the echoes of these cultural shadows, even though we can't hear them.

The property was home to an array of life and activity that included everything but the house he had yet to build – the one whose foundation and framing had been constructed symbolically, if not actually, over a lifetime. In place of the house was an illegally parked trailer, a small red tractor, and an eclectic smattering of outdoor furniture, gardening supplies, and building tools. One of those tools was my great-grandfather's large metal wine press, a cylinder of bright green wooden slats wrapped snugly with red-painted metal. Like something out of Santa's workshop, the bright colours of the Italian flag seemed out of place against the rugged landscape of muted brown hues. The only real structure was a small cantina my dad was still finishing, an above ground pantry in the shape of a tiny house with a gable roof and brick facing. A temporary stand-in, or so it seemed, for the home he still planned to build.

The inside of the cantina was more like a small kitchen, equipped with a sink, stove, and shelves brimming with canned and dried goods. With my camera, I captured several still life images against the backdrop of half-done walls stuffed with pink fibreglass. On one shelf, a can of olive oil parked between a flat of Campbell's soup and a bag of dried chickpeas. On another, an Italian moka pot stationed by a large can of Tim Horton's coffee and some oranges. The look of it reminded me of being a teenager, when my dad would semi-annually bulk shop at Costco to feed us all. We ate a lot of pork chops in those years, but we never did starve, and only once did I come home and find the heat had been cut due to unpaid bills. This man may not have acquired the wealth expected of his generation, but he possessed a kind of fortitude that only develops through making do with one's circumstances, a characteristic I appreciate and emulate in my own life. Nevertheless, the precarity of his

existence has always made it difficult for me to fully trust him – not to mention the world, or perhaps even myself. In trying to have a relationship with him regardless of my mistrust, I have come to understand he is also vastly more complicated than his simple lifestyle suggested, though for years this was all I could really see.

Growing up, I was keenly aware of how my dad was different, and visibly so. Unlike my friends' clean-shaven fathers, my dad wore a stereotypically-Italian moustache – a thick whack of bushy, brown facial hair that made him look strikingly like Tom Selleck. He would play this up for us kids, cocking an eyebrow as the American actor did in the hit TV show *Magnum PI*. His year-long tan revealed the outdoor, manual nature of his work, setting him apart even further. Rather than a suit and tie, my father wore grubby jeans and hard hats and drove flatbed Fords and dirty pick-up trucks. I recall one such yellow pick-up that didn't have proper seats for my sisters and I. He would lay a piece of plywood across the pull-down seats in the back so we could either sleep or bounce around unbelted while the Eagles or other classic rock blared from the cassette player. Always a bit unorthodox, my father was decidedly not the typical Canadian father I wanted and idealised. Yet, neither was he the stereotype conveyed by his macho persona.

My friends were often surprised to learn my father neither played 'Italian football' nor watched it. While their fathers were watching hockey and drinking beer Canadian style, mine was perpetually in motion—building, fixing, painting, constructing – or when he wasn't working, playing his guitar. Talented in the arts, my father was especially fond of music and dancing – so much so that he taught his entire graduating class, including the teachers, how to waltz. Team sports, however—like organized religion—were just not his thing. Once, when a high school football coach reamed him out for *not* attacking an opponent, he tossed his helmet and marched defiantly off the field, never to play a team sport again. The year I was to be confirmed he stopped taking my family to church just as suddenly, turning heel as we walked tardily across the church parking lot, grumbling something about the priest being a hypocrite as he marched us quickly back to the car. Needless to say, I was never confirmed and I didn't step back in that church until my grandfather died. What confused me was that my father's intolerance of injustice rarely translated into empathy for us kids, or more specifically, for me. Especially if I was upset with him, which I often was. Like the time I refused to speak to him because he had taken my five-dollar bill without asking. I was furious and he was amused by this. Rather than apologize he promised to pay me back with interest – a whole ten dollars' worth!

Though wary of manipulators, my father, himself, was both rough around the edges and a smooth operator who could charm the gold rings off a fortune teller. Born into lingering post-war poverty in Southern Italy, he honed his survival skills hanging out on the streets of East Vancouver while my grandparents worked to pay off their family home. To supplement my grandfather's cobbled together wages as a labourer in those early years, my grandmother worked first in a garment factory, then in a slaughterhouse, and later helping out as a dishwasher in Italian restaurants. Restaurants which, by my father's recollections, were run by notoriously shady characters. Walking himself to the doctor at age six, by fourteen he could cook and knit socks and do odd jobs to make a buck.

School, however, did not come as easily to my father, beginning from his earliest experiences after immigrating to Canada. Though fluent in French upon arrival, he laments that the teachers scolded him for speaking it ‘incorrectly’ in his Belgian manner. This rejection was amplified by the stigma he was internalizing about ‘speaking dialect’ rather than ‘clean’ Italian within his Italian-speaking community. Though he excelled in a high school drafting class, my father never pursued his aspirations to study technical drawing or architecture at a college level. As the eldest son, he was expected to work in the same way that his sisters were expected, and indeed wanted, to get married. At the time, these were their pathways to ‘freedom’. But work and marriage were the opposite of freedom for my father. My mother’s pregnancy at the ripe young age of twenty meant a hasty Catholic marriage and little time for youthful aspirations. Rather than pursue an education, he immediately began working as a stone mason, a trade he had learned from his maternal grandfather and continues to this day.

Exiting the cantina, I joined my sisters to wander around the small building, just in time to see my father starting to lay brick on the incomplete outer wall, a small bucket of cement hanging from his right hand. I watched as he rhythmically placed each brick on the wet cement, methodically scraping away the excess muck with a pointing trowel and a flick of his wrist, his knowledge and expertise embodied through years of daily practice. The moment felt orchestrated, designed to show us what he can still do, though something about the way he moved struck me as odd. Later, I realised he had been relying on his left hand to lay the bricks, evidence of the stroke that almost cost him his life.

Despite recovering from two serious bouts of illness, including a massive heart attack that stopped his breath for ten minutes, our father remains determined to live out his life doing what he loves to do most. *Work*. However, it would be wholly inaccurate to call him a workaholic. For my dad, ‘work’ means making stuff with his own two hands, on his own timeline, and for his own reasons. Distrustful of authority, he couldn’t fathom that anyone but his family should reap the rewards of his blood-sweating labour, making it difficult for him to work for anyone but himself. Perhaps in resistance to external expectations, he did only what was required, saving the rest of himself for what mattered most – the work that would quietly express who he was in the world, without having to claim it outright. This notion of work does not fit neatly within the confines of a professional world that rewards perfection and productivity, and has brought him few recognitions or trappings of so-called success, like big houses and bank accounts. People saw my dad as a manual labourer, but he’s more like an artist (or writer), making new worlds out of old ones, creating a place for himself in the process. Watching him lay bricks, he seemed truly at home, despite the fact he slept in the trailer. The last home he owned was with my mother when I was eleven, the second of two houses that my maternal grandparents helped to finance after my two sisters were born.

My parents met in a pizza parlor in East Vancouver in 1975, and in a short time, they were married by the local Italian priest. A two-hundred-and-fifty-person shotgun wedding to save the extended family from the disgrace of a pregnancy of which I am the result. The ‘illegitimate one’ as my father likes to joke. When my second

sister was born nineteen months later, my mom had to quit her office job at CN Rail, becoming completely reliant upon my father and support from my grandparents. To buy their first home, my mother's parents loaned them funds for a down payment. As an independent contractor my father struggled to maintain consistent income, and therefore repay the debt, despite working all the time. No one (including him) seemed to acknowledge that he did so under enormous pressure, with little formal education, and all the while managing a neurological condition that had recurred since early childhood. A condition that began, according to whispered family lore, when he fell from a highchair and hit his head on a stone fireplace, an accident that left my grandmother in a state of perpetual guilt and shame. In the end, my parents' marriage became a casualty of the financial help that had been intended to support them. No one ever considered whether the expectations were fair or realistic, or if they actually reflected the best interests of either of my parents.

I'm not sure at what point my father started to dream of building his *own* home, but prior to my parents' separation, he became intensely preoccupied with making elaborate house plans. Mesmerized, my sisters and I would clamour around him as he ritualistically rolled out the drawings and explained to us the meaning of the mysterious lines and symbols. In retrospect, these were precious moments, as it was often frustrating and disillusioning to have a father that was so single-minded and solitary. Having to work triple-time to get his attention, I grew up both resenting his passion projects and aspiring to copy him in my own life, obsessively building houses with Lego the way he would, or begging him to play backgammon, his favorite table game, and teach me chords on the guitar. Resentful of married life, my father's real commitment was perhaps to the home he wanted to build, a dream he would work tirelessly to realize. Though he struggled to make these house plans come to life, over the years he took other opportunities to create smaller versions of his dream, including elaborate birdhouses, an amazing treehouse for my cousins, and a life-sized playhouse for my sisters and I when we were kids. I can still recall this younger and more hopeful version of my father, whistling contentedly as he demonstrated for us kids how to build a granite wall on the playhouse. A playhouse that was perhaps my first real connection to my father's world.

We called it The City House, my sisters and I and our two best friends, girls our age from an Irish-Canadian family who lived around the corner from our house in North Delta. My father built the playhouse with his broad hands and whatever left-over materials he could appropriate from his various job sites around the Lower Mainland. It was The City House to us because, as part of their friendly rivalry, our friends' Irish-born father built a playhouse of his own under a large pine in their backyard. Theirs was a one room cottage out of plain, untreated wood that we kids affectionately called The Country House because of the pinecones that littered the yard and that we pretended were potatoes. In a way the houses were extensions of stereotypes that associated our fathers with immigrant labour or histories of poverty – the Italian construction worker and the Irish potato farmer – stereotypes whose darker versions our fathers would sometimes invoke in jest of each other, though said little of who they really were.

Adorned with brown beams, granite, and stucco facing, my father's playhouse was the size of a small garage and modeled after a Tudor style cottage. Though small, it was a real house with drywall on the inside and granite retaining walls on the outside. What fascinated me even as a child was the attention to detail my father poured into its construction, right along with the concrete. The inside was fully equipped with a kitchenette, a loft for sleeping, and props including a miniature table, matching chairs, and a play telephone. Our playhouse was as authentic as it could possibly be, intentionally leaving little to the imagination. To make it appear as though the playhouse had its own garden, my father built it into the terraced landscaping of our backyard. To the left of the door were steps leading to a concrete patio with dark brown wooden lawn chairs that he had crafted himself out of left-over wood and an unused box of joist brace. As a finishing touch, he arranged a trail of flat stepping stones that led to the front door amid smaller white rocks, and asked my mother to sew curtains for the window. The day the playhouse was complete, my father remarked to my sisters and I with a familiar smirk, "Now *your* job is to weed it!" Though we got out of the weeding, his words clearly conveyed his understanding of children's play – that it was practice for the adult world of hard work and personal sacrifice.

My father's penchant for making something out of nothing was a trait he shared with his father and many immigrants of the time. If something in the house broke, my nonno would find some ordinary object to replace it. He once popped a tennis ball on top of a large spike poking out of a wrought iron gate when the metal picket snapped off. When the handle of my grandmother's flour canister broke, he used a dial from an old stove to replace it, good as new. Their generation didn't need to be taught how to reuse or repurpose. Creativity was second nature and necessary for survival. This was also how our backyard play-structures came together. Inspired by our playhouse, my mother's Azorean father and brother transformed leftover welding materials into a swing-set and teeter-totter. These became our imaginary cars, and 'playing family', we would race each other 'home', swinging back and forth as high and as fast as we could. I can still feel the cool metal on our hands as we raced vigorously back and forth on those swings, intimately connected as we were to the material world that made up our play and became part of who we were becoming.

This real though imaginary world gave us scope to embody the histories, and play out the modern-day stresses, of the adults in our lives. Like the town and country mice in the Aesop fable we all knew by heart, we understood the playhouses in relation to each other. The inseparability of these two worlds – the city and the country – intertwined in our minds and imaginations presumptions about the urban and the rural, the rich and the poor, culture and nature. If the playhouses symbolized these modern binaries, our play expressed them as interpretations of our 'ethnic' backgrounds and our parents' immigrant aspirations. As links to the past and bridges to the future, the playhouses also became part of our understandings of the adult world, and maybe even ourselves and our places in that world. Playing the parts of moms, dads, and kids, we recreated the kind of family we'd come to know as the *only* family. We couldn't have known we were imitating the very life my father had grown to resent. Or, that unlike the country mouse in the Aesop story who *chose*

the poor, simple life over one of riches and risk, my father's life of simplicity and precarity was more likely the result of both *his* and *society's* failure to imagine otherwise.

The events leading up to my parents' divorce started when they sold our family home, including our beloved playhouse. These were years of bitter arguments between not only my parents, but family members who wanted the best for my mother and us kids, sometimes at any cost. The embroilment of family in my parents' disagreements rendered them infinitely more complicated and difficult to resolve, resulting in many fractured relationships. Locked in intergenerational conflict, my parents and grandparents never considered how unrealistic expectations might have contributed to the eventual 'breakdown' of both my mother and my parents' marriage. The result for me was a sense of both parental and cultural alienation, especially following my mother's 'mental illness' that unfolded in the aftermath of myriad social, financial and familial pressures. In time my father gained custody of the three of us, albeit reluctantly. I spent the next two decades separated, emotionally if not physically, from my Portuguese background and the woman who had once raised me, her mothering rendered invisible and meaningless by stigma and disability. Struggling to rebuild his life financially and maintain his identity as a provider, my father spent those years growing further from his dream as he worked, sometimes paycheck to paycheck, on an income that didn't keep pace with the cost of living.

Though I always understood that my father lived on the margins, I now see how those margins existed between the cracks of intersecting norms and expectations. That house we lived in, where he built the playhouse, was the last he would ever own. A house that fulfilled my immigrant grandparents' expectations, but not my father's own aspirations – aspirations that they likely didn't understand. The house that my father envisioned was not just a building or a roof over our heads. It was a whole world, a place that promised to replicate the nostalgic imaginary of the village of his birth. As a teenager he had sketched a mural of this town with its rolling tree-speckled hills and the silhouette of a small village in the distance on one of the walls of my grandparents' basement. I remember the mural because it had remained unfinished throughout my childhood, a symbol perhaps of a story yet to be written. Like the mural, the dream of the family home never completely materialized, but the reasons for this had more to do with difficult life circumstances and incongruent expectations. Maybe what my father wanted was not a house at all, not a place that *belonged to him*, but rather a place that felt like the home he longed for, a place where he felt *he belonged*. Maybe the dream of the family home never materialized because it was connected to a time and place in his imagination and forever beyond his grasp.

"What's that?" my dad asks me, nodding toward the bag in my hand as I close the door and turn on the light. Approaching his hospital bed, I place a thermos of hot fluid on his table along with a bag containing several pastries.

"I thought it might be too late for coffee, so instead I brought you hot chocolate and some treats." He nods quietly, but I can see the corners of his mouth turn up ever so slightly, letting me know I made a good call. I walk to the window to place my

backpack on a chair. Outside the window, the dark Vancouver night is lit softly by sparkling Christmas lights on the buildings below. I remove the dinner tray the nurse had brought earlier, and then sanitize the rest of the table, placing the garbage in the trash can by the bed. Turning towards him, I catch a glimpse of the results of his recent bloodwork on the white board. "Looks like your counts are going up, that's great," I say to encourage him. Then I pull up a chair by the bed as I have been doing at each visit. Unlike our brief phone conversations that often revolved around current events or the weather, being sick and in hospital has made my dad surprisingly more open to my questions, and I wonder if he is grateful for the time to speak more candidly. I have also learned stuff about him I didn't know - like how he had taken to reading more history recently, especially about African history, and about Indigenous peoples here in Canada.

"So where did we leave off? Oh yeah," I say, trying to sound spontaneous, "you said that if you could change one thing about how we are all educated, you would make history mandatory, do you remember?" I laugh. "You also complained that kids today don't know the value of work." Clearly, I hit a chord because he dives straight back into our previous conversation.

"Natasha, when I was a kid, we had very few toys, and usually it was something you made yourself." A familiar refrain, one I heard for much of my life. But this time a question comes to mind, something I had never thought to ask.

"What was your favorite toy? Did you even have one?" He takes a sip of hot chocolate, his face lit up by the memory I have stirred.

"GI Joe," he says after a few pensive moments. "And my dad bought me a gun and holster once. He couldn't afford a belt so he tied it with a shoelace," he looks over at me, laughing as he tells me this, revealing the gaps where a few teeth are now missing. Then he falls quiet for a few moments, the memory of his toy perhaps sparking a deeper recollection of his youthful dreams and ambitions.

"I should have done what I wanted to do years ago." He glances at me quickly then looks away, making me think he hadn't necessarily planned to say that. I respond in kind.

"So why didn't you?" He stares at me unsmilingly from his bed and then picks up a magazine from his side table, pretending to read the cover.

"I fell in love and that was the end of it," he replies matter-of-factly, resting the magazine back on the table. I hide my surprise at his admission that he loved my mother and wait patiently for him to continue. "We had you, and then along came the other two." He sounds tired now, both physically and emotionally, and I remind myself not to get him too worked up. As if reading my mind, he continues, his voice a little louder this time. In it I hear the accumulation of both regret and resistance to senseless realities. "Life shouldn't be this difficult. In the old days, life would follow the pattern of the sun. You're born, you live, you die. It's the in-between that sucks, and the in-between is man-made." He looks at me from the corner of his eye before staring at his reflection in the spent television that is suspended from the ceiling. The truth is, my father's life consisted largely of chiselling granite and laying brick and stone for those wealthy enough to afford a dream that would remain forever beyond his own reach. He pulls the thin white hospital blanket over his chest

and arms, hooking the worn flannel under his chin. “If I could do it over...” he says, stuttering slightly before repeating himself, “If I could do it again, I wish maybe I could have just been a father.” There is a kind of gravity in his words that takes me unawares, and I need a few seconds to register that having children was *not* among his deepest regrets. That it didn’t factor into his resentment at being forced into marriage.

Although the playhouse was likely my father’s way of teaching us the purpose of grueling hard work and the value of owning property – which we also were to him in some archaic way – maybe it was also the result of a tremendous and unacknowledged loss. The loss of his youth, his independence, and of his time to freely create the world of his imagination. Maybe it was also a way to repair that loss within the confines of his duties as a father. A way to nurture his inner world even while the outer world felt suffocating. It is also possible that all of these things or *none* of them add up to the so-called truth of the matter, and that even after a lifetime of accumulating questions and seeking answers, I still don’t have a full picture of who my father is. Though I will never really know, I take comfort in this version of the truth as it is something I can finally relate to.

“I can understand that,” I tell him. “I’m sure I wouldn’t be doing my PhD had I had more children.” I don’t bother to tell him about the profound sense of loss I had also experienced at the dawn of my own parenthood, as I watched my husband pursue his career aspirations while my own developing identity as an academic all but evaporated. And how the road back to myself, however much I enjoyed being a mother, often felt like an endless climb out of a pit of expectation dictated by everyone but me. My father never had sympathy for feminist lamentations so I leave these things unsaid. Instead, I mention my conversation with my uncle on the drive over. “He says when you get out of here, he’s going to help you get that builder certificate.” I don’t tell him about the emotion I could hear in my uncle’s voice, the concern he felt that we might really lose my father this time.

My dad shakes his head, almost disbelievingly, and then lets out a weary sigh. “God willing, when I get out of this hospital, I will build that house. It’ll be my last kick at the can.” I can see the determination in his face, and know it would be wrong to remind him of how complex his health situation is, or that he used most of his money to buy the property, leaving little for him to live on, let alone to build a house. It would be wrong not only because these words might cost him his dignity, but because within all formidable circumstances are the seeds of both risk and possibility. This is not to naïvely imagine that my father might finally have the house he certainly deserves after a lifetime of unrelenting work, but rather to believe that despite the potency of such circumstances there may be something more to be experienced, something greater than our individual selves or the context that neither of us can remotely control or foresee. For this reason, I choose hope over despair.

“You will get out of here. It’s just going to take some time.”

Though my fingers are crossed that he will finally abandon his impossible dream, my father has shown me through his resilience and determination to continue living, that the future, whether our own or that of another, is never what we think it will be. What matters now is not whose version of my father’s story is or becomes true,

but rather how we are together in this moment, and how we respond to the realities that shape the unfolding of our uncertain futures. As I sit patiently with my father and contemplate the wonder of his life and the meaning of our deepening relationship, I have the feeling that this may be the only real path to the sense of home – our selves – we both so deeply desire.

In dedication to my dad, Carmine Damiano, May 11, 1954 – May 22, 2022.

Natasha Damiano I am an ‘unsettled’ second-generation settler Canadian from a family with transnational and intergenerational migration history. A first-generation post-secondary student in my family, I graduated in 2011 with a Master of Anthropology from the University of British Columbia, where I am currently a PhD candidate. Now situated in the discipline of occupational science, my PhD research is a narrative and arts-based inquiry of ‘musicking’ and belonging among children and youth, including those with recent migration histories. I am driven in my work by a deep interest in the complexities of migration and mental health, and curiosity about intersections of research, the arts, and education. I write to make sense of things I want to understand, to unravel their complexities and then re-make them into something that, to me and hopefully to others, makes sense. Whenever possible, I write to express myself.

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Chapter 18

Things Lost, Things Not Lost, and the Ones That Were Found on the Way



Negin Saheb Javaher

I am a walking piece of geography. I hold within me the borders of *my* country, Iran, infamously shaped like the outline of a sketched cat. I take the Caspian Sea in my belly, the Zagros mountains and the Damavand peak on my chest, and the intertwined leaves of the northern pine trees in the curls of my hair. I take a step forward, holding my mother's hand, and we pass through a short glass door where we are greeted by a man in a khaki-green uniform who stares at us after opening our passports, takes a deep look into our faces, and gives us the hint that we can pass through. There, in the moment's notice, with just about five or six steps, the border of Iran separated itself from the entire land that I encompassed in my fourteen-year-old body. We pass the Iranian border into the transit hallway of Tehran's airport, and I can no longer see my cousin waving at me or my grandmother's watery eyes.

It has been a long night of saying goodbyes. Earlier that night, my mother hosted her last family gathering at our home as a goodbye party just before we left for the airport. Everyone who was close to us was present; my favorite cousin, my grandparents, my uncle, a bunch of family friends, and many more of my countless cousins. Around the dining table, it felt like any other family gathering night we had hosted- the chandelier above the dining table shone like a majestic dress tying the happy voices and sounds of laughter together as it lit our home and our hearts. My mother and her sister bustled around adorning the dining table with the many mouth-watering dishes my mother had cooked. My brothers and boy cousins tried to crack open a plastic water gun to get it to work, while my dad and some family friends joked happily as they poured homemade wine into tall glasses. Behind the din, my grandmother's voice called out, asking my mother whether this dinner called for the fancy silverware – reminding everyone that it wasn't just an ordinary evening. Around the corner from the dining table, in our living room, however, you could see all the signs of a family about to leave their belongings and evacuate their home to

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move into a location far away. Furniture was covered under white blanket sheets, the rooms felt empty, painting frames were removed, and the six suitcases stood in a row in the middle of a now rugless living room- big, dark, and menacing.

Nobody entered the living room, and no one wanted to talk about the fact that later that night, at about 4 a.m., our family would be leaving our home and Tehran forever. No one wanted to acknowledge that my mother, who loved her kitchen to be sparkling clean right after each party, was going to leave everything as it was, dirty dishes in the kitchen, sink included, and leave the country! My aunt was to come back the next morning and clean the kitchen and the leftovers and that was to be the last visit from any family to our home for an unknown number of years.

Me and Leili, my favorite cousin who was about the same age as I, and also my best friend and partner in crime, watched the dining scene in silence, attached together as we normally were. We were the only two girls in the family and we always had ways to disappear from the family scene to talk about our secrets and our dreams.

Leili was sad. I could see it in her eyes, but she didn't want to say anything about my impending departure to an unknown forever land named Canada. I was looking for a way to occupy ourselves and break the ice with Leili when the doorbell rang. I prompted Leili to follow me, and we ran to be the first ones to open that door. I pulled the door open and I saw one of my mother's distant friends standing in the cold of that winter night. She had one of those luxury looking fur headbands on in dark brown which matched her extravagant brown fur jacket. She was wearing red lipstick and leather black gloves and in her hand; she had a box wrapped in newspaper. She gathered herself, looking suddenly half a head taller than a moment earlier, and she asked for my mother. Leili stepped forward and pinched me by reaching her hand to her back, a sign we had for knowing that the pinched person should stay quiet and go with what the other was doing. Leili told her that my mother was eating dinner and could not come to the door. The woman was surprised for a second, her black eyeliner seeming to grow longer as she hopelessly looked down to think. She reached her head to see me behind Leili, and asked: are you Sima's daughter? I automatically said yes. She asked me to go closer, and I complied. As I stepped forward, I exchanged a look with Leili whose black eyes were sparkling with curiosity and fire. I knew she wanted me to go on with the lie and not get my mother to the door. The woman came closer to me and said: "my dear, I am in a rush- I can't wait. I need you to give this box to your mother. She knows I was supposed to leave this for her tonight. She has to take this box to Canada with you to give it to my daughter. Would you give this to your mother as soon as I leave?" I nodded, still a bit awestruck. I was distracted by her lean hands reaching towards me with the wrapped box, handsomely covered as they were in fur and black leather. I took the box from her. She then said with despair: "please give it to your mom immediately- don't you forget." Then suddenly, her perfectly groomed eyes filled with water and turned into sad bowls of despair: "I promised my daughter I would send her a box from Iran. She...she misses home." Her voice descended as it was beginning to shake- it was as if the moist redness in her eyes had turned into bits of ice inside her,

falling into her diaphragm. Then, before we could conclude that she had started crying, she turned her head and quickly walked away down our street.

Leili closed the house door behind us, and I stood there with the newspaper box in my hand. We stared into each other's eyes for a moment. I was thrilled that there was something that got Leili as excited and playful as she usually was on our last night together. Then we heard footsteps approaching—my aunt and my mother were walking towards us, so Leili pulled my hand and we hid in my brother's bedroom which was the closest to the house's entrance door. Leili turned the bedrooms' lights off and carefully looked through the keyhole to see whether anyone saw us going inside that room. I loved her in moments like these. This was probably the hundredth time that I was seeing Leili doing the same action, but I could just not forget that this was the last time. Her shiny-soft and long brown hair cascaded like a halo around her face and down her back and made her look like an angelic being who might just sit quietly and watch life go from spring to spring. I knew her real self though, and Leili was no ordinary girl. She was smart, courageous, and indeed adventurous. I learned from her that being a girl does not have to look like how our mothers behaved. Not that they behaved badly. But me and Leili, we wanted to live differently from our mothers who in our eyes were living without their desires. They lived for others and we wanted to live for ourselves. We wanted to travel, to be stylish, and to experience all the things we were told were not meant for girls.

When Leili was convinced that no one had noticed us, she took the box from me and we went to the other side of the room where there was a window and balcony door facing the garden behind our house. In the weak light that we had found by the window, Leili stared into my eyes and said: "We need to know what's inside."

"What if it's something private?" I asked.

Leili countered: "More private than our secret box?"

I took the hint. She was talking about the little box we had hidden in the garden behind my house which held all of my and Leili's valuable things, and which I had no way of taking with me to Canada without my mother knowing. These were not dolls nor jewelry. These were objects and letters that Leili and I had gathered since as early as we could remember and we had hidden them inside a box, about the same size as the newspaper box that was dropped that night. We had been hiding the box in a particular hole we had dug in the garden behind my house since we were eight years old. We started hiding the secret box after our older brothers had made an attack to reveal its belongings to try to annoy us.

It was also about the time when the belongings of the box started to become secret in the sense that if found, we would get into serious trouble with our families. For example, butts of the very first cigarettes we had tried together, the sketch of a guy Leili had a crush on, and the diary in which we documented our every love story and first kisses. One time, just recently when Leili and I were about 14, we had lied to our parents that we were going to an after-school event at Leili's school. In reality, we were going to a small gathering, invited by one of Leili's guy friends. Leili's school was next to a school for boys. Her parents let her walk from school to their home because it was hardly any distance. I had heard many stories from Leili about how when she and her friends got off from school, they met boys around the corners

or at a park in between school and home. On that particular day to which the secret belongs, my parents dropped me near Leili's school. When my parents' car disappeared, Leili and I started walking to the gathering we intended to get to. Walking the streets of Tehran with Leili was the best experience a teenage girl could have—we laughed the entire way, making faces at bold men who looked at us with pride and lust, and we waved at the kids in the cars. Leili's friends' house was not too close and we got lost in the streets of the neighborhood as we were trying to figure out where this house was. Suddenly a man on a bike pulled alongside us. He called out to us, and as we turned to tell him off, we saw him exposing himself while sitting on a bike – he just started masturbating in front of us. Living in Tehran as teenage girls we got all sorts of positive and negative attention, but this was a shocking experience. We were terrified and stood there in shock not knowing what to do. The alley was empty, and it was only me, Leili, and the exposed man on a bike in front of us staring into our eyes and pleasing himself. Leili gathered herself faster than me, yelled at the man, pulled my hand, and we ran from the other side towards the main street. But before we had the chance to get distant enough, the man kicked the bike engine into gear and sped past, threw something at me angrily as he went up ahead. It was a brand new condom.

That very condom had been inside our secret box since that time. Leili had picked it up that day- we were both scared to our bones, totally rattled as this was the first condom we had ever seen with our own eyes. We never shared the story with our parents because we were not supposed to be there in the first place. Leili wanted us to hold on to that condom because she wanted us to remember how it felt like not knowing what to do, feeling defenseless. She wanted us to always remember how we felt so that we don't ever have to experience that kind of terror again. Strangely enough, the condom was a noble symbol to us-of the terrified little girls we were back then and the strong grown-up women we wanted to become one day. But this whole situation, and how we saw it, would be understood very differently by our families if our secret box was found by them. Their reactions would have real-life consequences for Leili and I, so naturally, we kept our box under the ground in our safe place, with extra precautions thrown in.

Inside the box, there was a little "happy anniversary" card that I had stolen from my favorite bookstore when I was 11 years old. I wasn't proud of what I had done but I kept the card so I could one day give it to the love of my life. Even though it was very cheap to buy, I had slipped the card down into my pocket, because I had wanted to keep it for my love. Leili laughed as I did that, and she told me I am crazy to think that a stolen card could be part of a love story that has a happy ending. But then, like we always did for each other, she did the same thing. She too picked a card and slipped it under her sleeve. I did it for a future man, she did it for me. Leili eventually ended up losing her card on the way, but I kept mine for the both of us. As a shiny memory of reminiscence of my romanticism, her endless, law-breaking personality, and of course, our unworldly, crazy sisterhood.

One day, when I was staying at Leili's house, she told me that the guy living in the apartment right below them had offended Leili. Leili's room opened to a very narrow balcony- the same layout as the room of the neighbour guy living below her.

He had one day noticed Leili and asked her out and when she had said no, he had made fun of her nose. Leili wanted to express her anger and we decided to throw eggs from her balcony into his. We went to my aunt's kitchen, packed our hands with eggs from the fridge, and to be discrete, we covered them with scarfs when passing their living room. We went to Leili's room, reached ourselves as far as we could bend, and tried our hardest to throw the eggs in a way that not only they would land in the balcony of the neighbour below but to get them in deep enough to hit his room window. One after the other, we aimed the eggs at our target, giggling at the uncertainty of how far they had reached, hoping to create as big of a mess as we wanted. The next day, Leili's parents received the complaint and Leili took all the blame for herself, just to protect me. Leili's parents grounded her in her room for an entire week and had banned her from talking to me. Leili had cried endlessly in her room- I heard this from my mother later. I felt horrible for having gotten away with what we did, and I was in deep admiration of Leili's sacrifice. All I could do was to write her letters every day, sometimes every hour, which I placed in our secret box every single day of that week. When Leili and I finally got together after all the banning and the grounding was over, we read those letters under candlelight an entire night- we didn't sleep, we hardly blinked that night as we read each letter and talked endlessly about each minute that had passed.

That is what the secret box was- a collection of mundane objects and letters that to me and Leili symbolised our entire youth. We had a contract about who was to be responsible for holding the box. We had decided that until Leili and I turned old enough to rent our own apartment where we could freely locate our secret box on a bookshelf in our living room, I was to take care of it. Leili's family home was very small. She also had a very nosy brother and no gardens where the box could be buried in the ground for safe-keeping. For that reason, we had made a pact that I would take care of the box. But the box was not small. I could not slip it into our luggage and surely did not want to spill its secrets to my mother. I was also quite worried about leaving it behind, so Leili had comforted me by saying she would try to sometimes take the spare house key her mom had for our home which she was supposed to use if there were any emergencies, and Leili could come and check on the box. But we both knew this was not a feasible plan- mainly because we did not know when her mother, or how often her mother, would come to check on our house. On the other hand, my family's tickets were open-ended and there were no concrete plans for when we would return to Tehran. Me and my family were migrating to Canada for good! This was the plan my parents had hatched so carefully and meticulously for the past four years. My parents had shared that we would be visiting Tehran from time to time. However, to me this seemed unlikely. Looking at the way my mother had packed everything into suitcases we were taking, boxes that were to arrive shortly after we landed in Toronto, and boxes that were neatly packed into our storage, I could already sense that returning to visit Tehran now and again was a white lie only good to comfort my younger brother. So, in a way, the box could remain in our garden, be exposed or poked at, and neither me nor Leili would even be aware of what was going on.

Leili slowly started to peel off one side of the newspaper wrap of the box my mother's friend had so intensely dropped off earlier that night. Leili said: "we will switch our box contents with what is inside of this. Your mother will never open this because she will think it's what that woman dropped." I instantly agreed. I was old enough to know that this was wrong, but I could not say no to sharing a new secret- a very important one- with Leili. This secret would accompany me to a new country that I knew nothing about and for all I could imagine, could be a land with no secrets, no memories, and no gardens. This was the perfect plan for now.

We opened the box, and there were only a few Iranian souvenirs inside- the common patterned and designed objects that showed bits and pieces of Iranian culture and arts. The things that any Iranian could instantly recognize as being made and purchased in some Iranian little market. A turquoise-colored salt shaker with little miniature drawings, a small key holder with a tiny doll wearing an Iranian traditional dress attached to it, a bracelet with patterns similar to a Persian carpet, a small mirror with Mina Kari (enamel work) in blue around it, a pack of dried mint, which is essential for any Iranian household, and a few other little trinkets that held within, a sense of life and culture in Iran.

Leili said: "It's all the usual souvenirs ... she can buy these again at any store and send it to her again with mail." I looked at the little beautiful gifts with hesitation. Leili reassured me: "what are you thinking about? Can you take our box if we don't do this?" We both knew the answer to that question. Leili said with confidence: "then, we don't have a choice. It's either our secret box, or, these which she can definitely buy again." I took out the little doll to feel her dress and we noticed a small paper pocket- it felt like a letter. I turned to Leili to see her reaction.

- "What do we do about this Leili?"
- "If we do this, you can't take anything from this box otherwise they would figure it out that we have opened it and emptied it. You are going to have to take our stuff out of the box as soon as you get there, and then seal it back like we never opened it."
- "Her mom knows she put stuff there... what if the letter is about something important?"

Leili stood up with frustration, she massaged her forehead as she usually did when she was thinking:

- "Well, she can call her and tell her, can't she? What do you want me to say? It's not a perfect plan but it's the only way."

Then she got a little calmer- I knew Leili very well. I knew she was full of empathy, and I believed her when she said, this is the only way. She was right.

- "This is the only way". Leili said slowly. "You know that our box is not replaceable, but these gifts are, they usually are. Unless..."
- "Unless what?"
- "Unless you don't care enough about the secret box because you are leaving."

This was the first time Leili had directly acknowledged my departure. I could feel her pain, and I felt it too. Leaving Tehran, and my friends, especially Leili, was never my choice. I never believed that some random place on the globe that I had only seen pictures of could have been better than the life we already had here at home. No one ever asked me whether or not I wanted to leave, and now I had to leave everything behind that felt like home. Among the long list of the 'things' that "immigration law" would not permit us to take with us, according to our family lawyer, who, by the way, looked like the most charlatan person on the planet, was my grandmother. Although such an important part of our family, she could not receive a permit to travel with us. We also went through a long list of medical examinations, and my siblings and I attended the torturous English language classes from which we learned nothing. Too many obvious and subtle changes had already transformed the essence of our life ever since my parents started their immigration project and because *we were going to Canada*- a phrase I had heard a million times in the recent months and had hated every bit of it. No! I was not going to leave the secret box, and Leili's hope, behind. The decision was made.

I pulled the box out of Leili's hand rather aggressively, flipped it, and had all the things inside it dropped on the floor- the salt shaker cracked open just as Leili's eyes popped out at the sound it made. I immediately got up, opened the glass door that led to the garden from the room, and ran towards our secret hiding place. I sat down on my knees and dug our secret spot with my hands. I could feel the moist soil sticking under my nails and pushing to get under my skin as I pulled the ground with my fists. Leili arrived shortly after me, and cautiously yelled:

"Are you crazy? Why did you throw everything all over the floor! It took me so long to pick them up, someone could have heard us".

I turned back and gave her a quick look; and continued with all the force I had in my arms and dug the soil that held our box intact. Leili's brown silky hair around her, she sat beside me trying to help me dig faster. I continued digging- not too long after we had our secret box out, we emptied our memories and objects and placed them in the card box that my mother's friend had dropped. Leili threw the gifts and souvenirs, along with the envelope, inside our ex-secret box with a rush:

"There, we simply switched their places. It's the fastest way we get rid of these now".

We buried our secret box, that now held the souvenirs, as deep as we could inside the hole and before we pushed the excess garden soil on top of that box, Leili reached her hand inside the hole in the ground, took a fistful of the dirt, and poured it into the cardboard box that was to come with me to Canada and said in a meaningful voice:

"This way, wherever you end up hiding the box, you will have some of this soil that has been its home for this long."

I always admired Leili's sentimentalism- she was right. Having a fistful of the dirt from my childhood garden, the soil that had embraced me and Leili's memories for so long, was worth more than anything in this world to take with me to Canada.

We hid the box underground and went back to the room the same way we had come out and Leili carefully slid the cardboard box that now held our secrets back into the newspaper wrap. We then taped the box, and it was ready to be presented to my mother. Leili smiled at me, she handed me the box, and with all the enthusiasm in the world, she said “let’s go!”

I entered the dining room first- everyone was sitting around the table eating. My mother looked at me with surprise asking where me and Leili had disappeared to again, right at dinner time. I brought up my hands and reached the box out to her: someone was at the door, it was your friend, she dropped this for you.

My mother jumped out of her chair, she rushed towards me: “When did she come?” She grabbed the box from me and ran towards the entrance door. I yelled: “she left already!”

My mom asked with concern: “did she say anything else? Was this all of it?” I added: “Just this. She said to keep it safe in your luggage”. My mother moved the box in her hand and noticed the sounds it made as the objects inside started sliding from one side to the other. As my mother was about to put the box aside to go back to the dining table, I again yelled: “she made me promise her that you are going to put it in your suitcase right away.” My mother’s hand, which was about to place the box on a side table, froze for a second, then redirected back. She said: “fine, I’ll put it in now, so I don’t forget... she is an old friend” and she started walking to our living room where our luggage was waiting for us to leave for the airport.

Me and Leili supervised how my mother opened one of the suitcases and moved stuff around to find a place for the box. She said: “I thought it was going to be a light little box- that’s what I agreed to”.

Leili and I followed her hands moving inside the suitcase as she struggled to fit the box inside. She moved things around and again placed them back. The box did not fit. Finally, she announced: “It’s not going to fit, I have to put it in my carry-on”. Leili looked at me with worry- I knew what she was worried about. Leili wasn’t worried about what would happen when we get to Canada, and someone realizes the box is going to be empty because by then I would have taken what’s inside into another secure place that I would hide it in. We were both worried that if the box was in the carry-on, it would be easier to be found and more apparent to the eyes. But we had no choice. Finally, my mother placed the box in her carry-on and zipped up the suitcase, telling us to get back to the dinner table. All through the dinner, Leili and I held each other’s hands and exchanged happy looks as we both felt our bursting commitment to the secret box, and to our shared memories of our times together. This cherished box would accompany me to Canada, and this was a hint that the future too was going to be ours, just like the past had always been.

After dinner was done, it was time to leave for the airport. When I was closing my room’s door for the last time, I forgot to say goodbye to the four walls that had endured my solitude for so long. I forgot to sneak into my mother’s bedroom for the last time to see whether there were still new chocolate boxes left where she used to hide the excess chocolates from me. I forgot to smell the roses in our garden for the last time, and I indeed forgot to say goodbye to the little swing we had at the end of our garden where Leili and I had shared so many memories.

A caravan of three cars filled with family and loved ones followed our ride to the airport. We said goodbyes to each one of them at the airport more than ten times. Each time, we hugged each other, said nice things, kissed, and walked a little further. Then again, we repeated, hugged, taking in as much as we could from those warm embraces, some crying, some not, and again, found another reason to do the same as we moved just a few steps ahead. On my last glance at Leili, as we joined the line of passengers waiting to show their passports in order to get through security, I saw her holding my grandmother's hand. We didn't blink, she didn't cry and neither did I. Leili leaned on my grandmother with no words and all we did, at the very last second, was share a shallow painful wave. It seemed like a poorly curated last scene to a 14 year long movie.

Sitting in the transit hallway, with my mother and father anxiously staring at the screen above, my brothers each sitting in quiet surprise, just like me. I can't stop thinking about the last look I had at my grandmother and shared with Leili- I want to engrave that into my memory so well so that I could re-live that moment a thousand more times. I want to save the dirt that was still stuck under my fingernails from digging our garden the last time. A voice on the speakers announced something and my mother pulled the handle of her red carry-on, waving her hand at me telling me it was time to get on the plane. I look at my mother's carry-on and feel a rush of something warm inside my heart- hope and love - for dear Leili. Our friendship was special, and it had blossomed through the little secrets we had shared with each other. As I say goodbye to Tehran, I carry with me across international borders, our biggest secret so far. This thought was exciting and strangely calming that everything will be just fine.

My family and I got out of the plane at our destination 14 hours later- so far, the only thing different about the Canadian airport from the one we had departed from in Tehran, is the language, which is foreign and American. The waiting times, too, are at least three times more than those we experienced at the previous airports. This is *the Canada*- I repeat to myself in my head. This is it- Tehran was gone, Leili was far, and I was lost.

We had landed in Toronto and as first-time entrants to the country, my father tells us that we need to pass through extra customs- "just this very first time". The line-up seems endless. We had already passed through a number of security cameras and customs and by this time, I was no longer worried about my secret box. It was safe, inside the carry-on, and no one had even taken notice of its existence so far.

Our family finally gets close to the little replicating booths that seem to be the last stop, when an officer from behind us calls our family into a room that is to the right of the area we had been waiting in for the past few hours. My father is surprised, and my mother is concerned. The officer asks our family to step aside and follow them inside the room. Inside that room, there is a small baggage screening area, no seats, a white wide desk, and two other officers. I don't understand what they said with so much seriousness to my parents, but I deeply regret all the playfulness I had exerted in my English classes that my parents had signed me up for in Tehran. I left those classes as bare-naked with English as I went in and now, I am

already in the country of that language and I know zero ways of communicating with anyone.

After a short conversation, the officer points towards my mother's carry-on. I can only understand their gestures which imply they want to screen the carry-on again. My heart drops and I taste its misery in my mouth as my mother picks up the little red suitcase and puts it on the rail for the security screening in that little room. With the press of a button, the officer slides the suitcase on the rail and into a small tunnel, then suddenly stops when the suitcase reaches the middle of the little tunnel. No one says a word except for the officer who shows something to his colleague on the screen, and they both shake their heads with what seems like disapproval. Within a few moments, they pull the carry-on out and unzip it wide open on the white table at the end of the screening rail. My mother keeps asking my dad if he can understand what the problem is. My dad has his eyes fixed on the suitcase, as do I, and remains silent. One after the other, the officer's masculine hands in white gloves, goes through, below, and aside from the things my mother had so neatly packed. My mother is unhappy that he is transferring the germs from his hands onto her personal belongings, but I, on the other hand, am about to have a heart attack as I see his hands in that particular piece of luggage. His hands picking out the items from the suitcase and then putting them aside feels like a level of invasion of privacy that no security measures could justify.

Finally, the officer's hands pull the newspaper box out. The officer asks my parents something, my dad follows his question to my mom: "what's inside that box?"

My mother shakes her head in confusion, and then explains that she doesn't know and she is doing a friend a favor: "it should just be a few little souvenirs from Iran," she says with confidence. The officer is out of patience; he shows my parents something on a piece of paper and then he peels off the newspaper wrap from the box and opens its cardboard lid. As soon as his hand pulls out the lid, a cloud of dust, with chunks of dirt, along with rocks, letters, a condom, and a few other mixed objects are let loose on the security desk. There it is, my failure to protect my past with Leili, my childhood exposed, my secrets outed, Leili's memories poured on to the table without a thought. The officer looks at the desk with estrangement, shifting his judging eyes towards my mother who slaps her own face and bites her lips as soon as she sees the condom- a gesture that Iranian women had been using for decades to express a mix of shock, embarrassment, anger, and maternal concern. A cold sweat starts to break into my face as I slowly turn my eyes to see my parents' reaction before I am caught by my mother's sharp stare, which tells me that she has very well figured out what has happened. My mother is furious, and her enlarged pupils are the harbinger of the storm that was to come as soon as we leave that room. She says nothing meanwhile to protect my dignity and that of her own. My dad is still confused and is trying to respond to the many questions the officer is asking one after the other (or at least that is what I thought- he might have very well been repeating the same question over and over again). I watched the officer's white-gloved hands dive through the dust from the garden hole Leili and I had dug in our garden in Tehran. The officer picks up the condom, the card, and the letters one by one and then places them back again on the desk in the midst of the settling dust

storm of the garden soil. He runs the empty box through the screening tunnel again, and then another time. When the box has reached the end of the rail for the third time, I assume that the purity of the box is defended and that the officer is done with confiscating the belongings of Leili's and my secrets. I take a step towards the desk where everything is lying on top of each other so that I can gather what I can and try to protect them from further being exposed by my parents' naked eyes. Suddenly, as soon as my feet get an inch closer to the desk, the officer exerts something in English, in a voice that is not just very loud but commanding- he is not yelling, but his voice makes me hold my breath as I freeze in my place to comply. It gets worse as my dad's voice reaches me right after, making my ice sculpture of a body melt: "get back, they are not done." I feel so small that I could very easily fit into the little confiscated secret box. My mother picks this moment to tell my dad, that those things aimlessly and carelessly lying on the desk, are actually mine. My dad screams in surprise: "a condom?" as his eyebrows jump to the roof making his eyes pop as he looks at me with flames of inquiry that captures the confiscation energy of all the security screenings we had gone through in that trip all at once. His web of shocked expressions is only cut short as he soon realizes that three pairs of Canadian officers' eyes are fixated on our interaction. In a way, the exchange of attention in that room, from me to the desk, from my mother to my dad and him to me, and from the officers to the newly entering family seemed like a poorly orchestrated musical scene. My older brother laughing, my younger one-half aware of what is going on, my and Leili's truth has become the exposed story to all.

The officer finally gives up. He and his team are now convinced that whatever they thought was going on was a false alarm. The officer then points to my mother, implying that she can put back the things of her carry-on into their place. I also step forward- this time with caution. I reach my hands to pick the things, the little words that appear from mixed sides of letter papers, the little card, and the bits of memories lying around on the surface of the desk. My mother, as angry as she is, hands me the empty card box and the newspaper wrap letting me know that I can put everything back while disciplining me with a low voice in Farsi in that Canadian security room: "you are going to be the one to look into my friend's daughter's eyes and tell her why the things her mother sent her are not here. You know, they have been apart for five years? Her mother couldn't get a visa to visit her girl and she can't go back to Iran because she is a political refugee." The guilt was bolder than the turquoise blue embedded into all the gifts that the girl was supposed to receive from her mother and now laid underground in our garden in Tehran. I wish I had at least read the letter so that I could tell her what the shape of her mother's handwriting now looked like. Nevertheless, I certainly did not ever suspect that I would have to get disciplined by my parents that early on in our new life- we hadn't even entered Canada and here I am, being myself, getting caught because of the things I held inside and the things that had sprung out of that cardboard box.

My mother nudged me: "Hurry up, the officers are waiting, put everything back into the box so we can leave this room." But how could I put everything back into the box? The "everything" was the essence of my secrets with Leili. The things we had saved for so long with so much effort, the little mysteries that attached me to

Leili, and her to me, and us both together to Tehran. All this was now swirling in the air of that security room like the little drops of dust.

I pick up the letters, the card, the rocks, everything I could grab, and as I am deliberating if I should pick the condom up that was so rigidly displaying itself with the shiny blue sealing on the white desk, I decide to leave it to protect my dad's pride. That condom was my pact with Leili to never be scared to raise our voices, especially against rude and unruly men; but at this moment, it seems that the best decision is to be scared one last time. Plus, if I left it here, maybe my parents would forget about it out of embarrassment and shame, which oddly enough, guided many of the Iranian parent-child interactions. As I am about to close the lid of the box to be done with the task and, as soon as I turn to my mother to hand her the box, I hear the officer's unavoidable voice, saying something in English. I turned towards him, not understanding the language, but thankfully his human body language conveys what he was trying to say as his hand in white gloves pointed to the condom: "don't forget that."

It feels like the volcano of Mount Damavand- the most famous and highest peak in Iran- had erupted over me after more than seven thousand years of silence- I am sure I turned as red as a tulip. There is now no way of hiding from that shiny blue thing anymore as the officer's voice had filled the room. I admire his alertedness and portrayal of control which resemble the crime fighting characters my brothers and I had seen in Hollywood movies. However, for a little piece of blue plastic wrapped condom, his attention was an overreaction. If this was Iran, the officer would have gotten the hint and would have thrown the condom inside a trash can after we had left the room given that as a young girl I was not supposed to know what a condom is, let alone owning one. I am not sure which reaction I hate more. All I can understand is that if I don't pick the condom from that white desk, my family would not be entering our new home- Canada.

At all costs, I avoided any eye contact with my parents as I reached for the condom. My mother, trying to fill the void of that silenced-static air, says again in a rush: "hurry up, put everything back into the box and let's leave." Behind that sentence, I could hear that she felt ashamed, that my actions had put her and my dad at a cultural crossroad so early on. I could hear my parents' pride and honour had been tarnished.

I put the condom with the rest of the things back into the box as my tears drop one by one on the soil of Tehran which now lay in chunks and bits of dust on top of that white desk in the security room. My Tehran is so thinly dispersed on that security desk that I can not pick her up as my hands could only catch the bigger objects. I take the box with me, and I leave behind about half a million feelings and memories in the particles of my childhood garden's dust that remain on top of the white security desk and are destined to be wiped off. This is the last time I cry, as a teenage woman, on the soil of Tehran.

Negin Saheb Javaher I am a Sociology instructor at the department of Sociology at Langara College in Vancouver, BC. I also work in various capacities with Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies (AMSSA), of BC. With a master's in Sociology from the University of Calgary, I did a qualitative research project on the resettlement of Yazidi refugees in Calgary, Alberta. I am passionate about gender equality and experiences of displacement, family conflict, and domestic violence in refugee and immigrant families as well as educational experiences of newcomers to Canada. As an immigrant myself, I am invested in exploring identity related issues, and the meaning of "home" through the immigration/settlement journey.

I write because writing is home. I left the habit when I migrated to Canada 22 years ago as a teenager- I used to write frequently and my teachers and family members were involved in my progress. In Canada, there were too many new things to adjust to, and I was caught in between not knowing English well enough to write; and in this `foreign` environment, somehow writing in my native language was sidelined. It was more recently that I started to gain the confidence, gradually and gingerly, to start writing again, and in English. I write because I want to share my story, and because I think what captures my attention will also resonate with others who have gone through similar challenges in life in terms of migration and starting a new life.

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Part VII
Histories, Stories, and Complicated Lives

Chapter 19

Family Histories and Stories That Made Me



Brianna Jennings

We sat, desks clustered together in fours, in a metal container temporarily erected years ago to accommodate the growing number of students. Although the weather was warm enough to have the portable door propped open, remnants of past snow castles and snowmen were still melting on the grass. Anxiously, I kept glancing at the clock mounted on the far wall, as I waited for the recess bell to ring, eager for a few more moments with the snow before its limited time came to an end.

My teacher, a young woman just out of teachers' college but with an old-school authoritarian style, walked to the front of the room and cleared her throat. This signalled the end of our independent work time. Dutifully, we quietly put away our books, colouring pages, and pencil crayons before turning our attention to her. Miss Watt, in her signature monotone drawl, began to explain our new social study lesson: *The Founding of Canada*. Canada, we were informed, was founded by brave European explorers. Once they discovered this land, many people from Europe came over to live here. All people in Canada have ancestors from different countries. As Miss Watt began talking about her own Scottish grandparents, I sat in shocked silence. My family coming from another country was news to me. I mulled this new information over as I thought of my parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins that all lived in Canada. I hadn't even been to another country; how could my family be something other than Canadian?

When I snapped back from my internal monologue, Miss Watt was in the middle of describing our first project for this lesson. We were to make a poster about the country our family is from, and then present it in front of the class under a collage of world flags. A ripple of excitement vibrated through the class as students began whispering to each other; as young primary students, we were still at the age where homework invoked wonder and curiosity. My classmates started talking about their Nonnas from Italy, the perogies they ate at home, and their visits to see family in the

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UK. They talked with great importance of these other countries that they claimed as their own. When the bell rang, my classmates hurriedly put on their outdoor shoes still talking excitedly about the project, and having nothing to contribute, I stayed quiet. As soon as the door opened, the project was quickly forgotten by my classmates as we scattered to claim various piles of snow. Excited yells quickly drowned out Miss Watt's pleas to not play in the mud. While my friends clamoured together in an attempt to organise a game of *King of the Hill*, I stood back, still preoccupied with the earlier discussion in class.

That evening, between mouthfuls of pasta, I asked my mom, "What are we?" My question was met by blank stares. I tried again "Where are we from?"

"Well, I was born in Toronto and your dad was born in Sarnia," my mom offered.

"No, what country?" I asked.

"Canada. We're Canadians."

"No, like before that." I whined, in the frustrated complaining tone children use so well. Anxiety about the project began to creep in. How was I to complete this project if I was only Canadian?

"Well, Grandma is from the States, from Port Huron," My dad offered. I immediately perked up when I heard this. I hadn't connected that this city I knew well, so close to my grandparents' home was somehow in a different country. Relief flooded through me; I did belong to another country! I wouldn't fail this project!

Later that night, I called my grandmother to ask her about her home country. She told me that there wasn't much difference between the States and Canada. Other than the money, all she could think about was the large high school marching band that would travel all over the country, something that she doesn't see in Canada. She talked about how Grandpa would walk all the way to the States, walking across a big bridge just so that he could take my grandmother out on a date. Back in the day, crossing the border was much easier. When she married, she moved 10 minutes away from her parents' home to a completely different country. Grandma told me how her sister soon moved to Canada as well, for the same reason. In Canada, my grandmother worked before eventually raising four children and becoming a stereotypical Canadian hockey mom.

The next day at school, I went to the library to borrow a book on The United States of America. I selected a picture book before settling down onto one of the coveted bean bag chairs. I read about Washington, the presidents, Hollywood, apple pies, and cowboys. Balancing the book on my knees, I traced the outline of the country and coloured in the star-spangled, striped flag. On a piece of red cardboard paper, I carefully glued my pictures down before slowly printing sentences about The States below them. Despite my initial misgivings, I viewed my final project with pride.

After a particularly riveting presentation about Italy, complete with homemade snacks, it was my turn to present my posters. I got up in front of my class, awkwardly sticking my poster to the blackboard. I took a deep breath before telling my classmates about The United States of America. I listed off some important cities, sports teams, and Disneyland. I shared that they also had explorers and pioneers. Then, out of nowhere, with complete confidence, I told the class that my

grandmother came from the US and that we were probably related to a president. I took the book, dog-eared a picture of a random former president, and held it to my face so that my classmates could see the familial resemblance.

With this newfound identity and connection to my ancestral roots in The United States of America, I began to piece together my family history. I read incessantly about pioneers. Enthralled by stories of brave men and women who tamed this vast wilderness of what is now called Canada; I got lost in books of early European Canadian life. *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Little House on the Prairie* were my favourites; I read each series multiple times. Through these stories, I began to build my own stories of how my family arrived here. Stories of their lives on farms, filled with fun and mischievous adventures like those Laura and Anne got up to. I played pioneers in the schoolyard, collecting twigs for fires, and harvesting leaves for food – just like the real pioneers did to survive. My made-up stories were reinforced with what we were taught in school. How people came to Canada for a better life. Leaving their old countries, journeying to Canada, settling down on farms or in the big city. They worked hard but were safe and fulfilled. They were able to ensure that they and their children could live happily ever after in this great country. This beautiful, sanitised, and inaccurate story is what I internalised and believed in.

It was in my second year of university, in an introduction to Canadian literature class held in the basement of an 80 s industrial-style building, that I first read Michael Ondaatje's novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*. It was a striking, vivid description of the immigrant experience, one completely at odds with previous stories I knew. Home for Thanksgiving, I mentioned the book to my mother. Nonchalantly, she told me that Nicholas Temelcoff, the steelworker who saves the nun from a perilous death, was a relative of ours by marriage. My mom's maternal uncle married his daughter. I clung to this sudden, tangible connection to a past, a history, and an explanation. I asked my mom again, where is our family from? "Oh, you know, probably Germany, England, Scotland, those kinds of countries. I think they mostly came over as orphans, decades ago," she said dismissively before changing the topic. I've noticed this is a tactic she usually deploys when the topic of her family is brought up. For some, perhaps, forgetting the past seems to be the only way to a future. It seemed to be so for my mother.

I grew up on stories from my dad. Fun anecdotes of his small southern Ontario town, a middle-class childhood with my aunt, uncle, and grandparents, all of whom are often the main characters in my own stories. In quiet moments, while we stood elbow to elbow doing the dishes, my grandma corroborated these stories, along with sharing her own from childhood. These stories, as meaningless as they sometimes seemed, deepened my connection to the adults around me. When I remember my grandma, I don't just remember the woman who would cheer for me at the side of the pool, but also the 17-year-old girl who drank too much at her best friend's wedding. My dad is not only the person I call when I have car trouble, but the little boy who would only eat bread if it had been dunked in blue Kool-Aid.

Stories from my mom, however, were rare. Dropped sparsely throughout infinite conversations, the short tidbits acted as vague insubstantial clues to a larger picture I wasn't privy to. As most children do, I learned quickly which topics were unapproachable with my mom, what unspoken rules that we lived by. Childhood and her family were two of them. So, the few times she did share those stories, I greedily gobbled them up. Hungry for a link to my mom and that secret part of her-our history that she guarded so well. Throughout the years, I haphazardly gathered that her childhood was punctuated by moves, revolving family members, and alcoholic parents. Although her sister, my aunt, loved to tell stories, they did little to help piece together my family history. As the old adage goes, my aunt never ruined a good story with the truth. My aunt's stories were entertaining but even as a child, I could tell they were filled with exaggerations and steeped in idealizations. Towards the end of her life, they became fantastical in nature.

I often wondered why so much was missing, why so much was left unsaid when it came to my mother. It is possible that some people, like my father, grandmother, and aunt, are natural storytellers, inclined to share bits of themselves with others. Whereas others, like my mom, do not come by these skills easily. Or, perhaps she does, but chooses instead to focus on the present and the future as a way to bury the past. My aunt, ever the unreliable narrator, reinvented her history instead of pretending it did not exist. I wondered too, of the equally important aspect of storytelling: the audience. If there is no audience, who carries these stories onward? Estrangements, complicated relationships, inattentive audiences, and death—all these life events can spark the loss of important stories.

To make sense of my own family history, I turned to others. I read other people's stories so I could learn my own. I got lost in the worlds of Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Genevieve Graham, David Chariandy, Souvankham Thammavongsa, M.G. Vassanji, Kim Thuy, Hanna Spencer, Lawrence Hill, and Madeleine Thien. Although their stories were completely different from my own, they offered cherished insights. I learned about the traumatic ocean crossings made by early Canadian immigrants, of Home Children, the places of war and famine that people came from, the pain experienced in leaving, of would-be immigrants who got turned away, of the racism, of the xenophobia, of the hard labour of immigrants on whose backs Canadian cities were built. Old, worn stories that are still repeated today. Sadly, many of these are stories that are still not listened to.

The life I live, one of white privilege, safety, freedom and enjoyment, I now know I owe to the sacrifices made by family members whose names are long forgotten. I thought often of what it took for my ancestors to leave a place, leave everything they have ever known, to embark on a dangerous journey to a cold land they have never seen. Did they understand that they would probably never return, I wondered? Did they come alone? Was it worth it? Were their lives really that much better? Although I will never know the exact answers to these questions, I am able to fill in some of the gaps through the borrowed feelings and knowledge I pick up from the words of others.

My ancestors, for their unknown reasons, felt compelled to leave their homes, risk their lives on a voyage to an unknown land where they were allowed to settle.

They were allowed to settle in an attempt to occupy and push out the original dwellers. My ancestors most likely came here for a better life, for new adventures, more opportunities, a fresh start maybe? Most immigrants do. Quick assimilation to Canada and cleaving from their own origins was, perhaps, a necessity of survival for my first ancestors. Maybe the stories of my family's countries of origin stopped being told after a few decades, no longer relevant to people's daily lives. After generations, to claim another country as my own seems awkward and insincere. Not knowing my history means my history is what I'm told. The sanitised version I learned in school, the version that allows me to remain ignorant of what my existence as a Canadian means, what harms it has caused, and the harms that it continues to enact.

My unknown history, the lost stories of my family members is a direct product of colonization. What a shiny proof that it works! Not having any other countries to identify with, I cling desperately to the (white) Canadian identity and culture. The concept of Canada and Canadian identity was built on the forced assimilation and genocide of Indigenous peoples whose names and stories are long forgotten, or stories that are devalued in the larger Canadian context. The very act of my family's arrival to Canada was a way to further colonize the Indigenous peoples who had lived on this land since time immemorial. My identity exists only because of the attempted erasure of Indigenous identity. How do I understand my own successes through the oppression of others? How do I reconcile home, identity, and history when those concepts continue to cause harm to others.

When the bodies of Indigenous children were recovered in unmarked graves across the country, (white, settler) Canada vibrated with the news. On top of the daily COVID-19 death count, a daily Indigenous body count was added. It was sensational. Images of residential schools bombarded across screens. Governments, organisations, businesses, and individuals posted and shared sentiments of their sorrow, disbelief, and willingness to learn. This was all done with the goal to show their voters, customers, and social circle that they would never again allow such atrocities to occur – and shouldn't they be praised for that? Everyone was shocked this happened in Canada, it was a sad, sordid, part of our history (although the last residential school only closed in the 90s, around the same time that I was sitting in a portable dreaming of recess). How could these children go unaccounted for so long? How did their graves remain hidden? How were these poor children, taken from their homes and never to return? Why did it take so long for their stories to be unearthed?

But the stories of residential schools are not new, they were not recently unearthed or uncovered. They have been there, told and shared by Indigenous peoples and communities for decades. Parents missed their children, residential school survivors remembered their friends, protests were had, reports were written, it was taught in some schools, books were written, museums were erected, lawsuits were filed - the stories and knowledge was there, yet it continued to be met with callous and purposeful indifference. These atrocities and genocides committed by settlers, governments, and churches were not stories that were valued. We, my fellow settler Canadians and I, ignored Indigenous peoples because what they were telling us did not fit our narratives. It did not align with the stories we were taught and believed

about ourselves, our families, and our country. The stories that positioned us, at best, as neutral actors in the colonization of Indigenous peoples. The realisation that our existence on this land, of what is now known as Canada, is a continued act of harm and cultural genocide was too unpleasant for most of us, settlers to accept. Our systems that we put in place and continue to uphold are the same ones that led to the deaths of Indigenous children at residential schools. Only when we were faced with physical proof, could we no longer turn away from what we did. We could no longer deny the stories of Indigenous peoples, just as we could no longer deny the harm that we caused. The knowledge and stories were only valued when (settler) Canada was ready to hear them. We took their languages, communities, and culture away from generations of Indigenous peoples to prevent them from sharing their stories. When that didn't work, and the stories survived, we ignored them and deemed them unworthy, unimportant.

At the passing of the second national Truth and Reconciliation Day, the stories and voices of Indigenous peoples are still muted. Appearing to be regulated to only one day and one topic. Their stories are only being listened to when and where it is deemed appropriate by (settler) Canadians. After all, the recent discoveries were really hard on settler Canadians, it would be unfair to ask us to reckon with our continued privilege built on oppression of Indigenous people more than once a year! We are to ready condemn residential schools of the past, but what about current justice system and foster care of the present that continue to remove Indigenous people from their communities and alienate them from their culture? We are happy to wear orange shirts, but continue to avoid Land Back conversations. We'll demand a holiday (nice, another long weekend!) but won't demand culturally safe and accessible healthcare for Indigenous communities (they get enough as it is). We listen to stories and reflections about "past" cultural genocide, mistreatment, and intergenerational trauma - especially when presented by a white settler woman (like myself and this story) but rarely seek out stories of joy, resilience, and everyday life or oppressions that are written or produced by Indigenous peoples. Despite the fact that young, Indigenous people are the fastest growing demographic in Canada, I have heard more stories of dead Indigenous children (told by white TV anchors or columnists) than stories of Indigenous children that are alive. Are we, settlers on this land that is now known as Canada, simply more comfortable with stories of Indigenous suffering?

Again, I turned to other people's stories. To face those darker chapters, to understand the pain that was caused and the pain that is still being caused, I read the stories of Indigenous peoples. I read about resilience, ways of life, and of alternative ways of knowing, through works like: *Seven Fallen Feathers*, *From the Ashes*, *Son of a Trickster*, *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, *The Strangers*, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, *Permanent Astonishment*, and *Medicine River*. Moving past dominant ways of storytelling, I am working on looking at music, art, instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. To Indigenous storytellers that reach their audience in creative ways, multidimensional ways. Through these Indigenous storytellers, I learnt that there were stories, multiple ones, entangled in, yet completely different from the white-washed versions that permeate Canadian society. These stories are funny, sad, meaningful,

and worthy. I read the histories that were kept out of school curricula. I learned the stories of those whose voices were barred from speaking. For the Indigenous communities, their stories were suppressed through sinister and calculated acts. The act of telling their stories becomes an act of resistance against colonization.

The stark cold February wind whipped my face and I fumbled with frozen fingers to unlock the door. Careful, so as not to wake the rest of the house, I slipped my boots off and hung my snow-covered coat on the hallway hook. A voice called out, startling me. I walked to the living room and saw grandma sitting on the couch, watching a repeat of *Blue Bloods* on mute. She never passed up an opportunity to see Tom Selleck. In mock anger, I scolded her for being up so late, but she insisted she was just making sure I got home safe.

I joined her on the couch and laid my head on her lap, allowing her to trace my face with her fingers as she did when I was younger, as she did with all her grandkids and kids. The T.V. flickered through episodes as we sat chatting late into the night. We spoke of my job, my hobbies, and my friends, all of whose names she made it a point to remember even in her sunset years. She told me about the hockey games she'd been to, and all the neighbours' baby showers she had attended. She began speaking of her nieces, women I have never met.

"You know they're related to that actress, Reese Witherspoon," she confided. "And just as beautiful."

And eventually, as it often did, her stories turned to her beloved older brother, Tom. I've heard this story before; a young man who joined the war, tasked with picking up the dead bodies on Juno beach, returned home, and then died in a house fire. One of the many unaccounted-for war casualties that occurred long after the fighting ended. Whether it was the late hour, the calming presence of Tom Selleck, or the swirling snow enveloping us in our own little universe of two, or maybe she already knew the time left for her was meagre, but she spoke more than usual that night. She went on to share with me things that I didn't know. My grandma loved to tell stories, but to my surprise, there were some stories that she kept to herself up until now.

She spoke of how her brother married a girl in San Francisco when he returned from overseas. Once he found out that his new wife didn't want to leave the Golden City, grandma's parents sent him money so that he could divorce her before returning to Port Huron, Michigan. Tom then married a single mom and raised her daughter as his own before they had two more. Grandma spoke about all the time they spent at her parent's home; how happy she was to spend time with her nieces. The reason why the girls were so often at her house growing up was unclear. Grandma then spoke of the fire, as I knew she would. I knew about her brother's death-and I knew she thought of it often, as she would mention it each time that I would fight with my brother growing up. But this time, her voice caught when she spoke of him. Startled, I looked up. Her eyes were red. Rimmed with tears. She talked about visiting Tom in the hospital, a shock for me, as I always thought he had died in the fire. She described in detail his skin clinging to his body. The cries of pain. Waiting for him to die.

“The smell... the smell. I can still...,” and her voice faltered. I reached out for her hand, letting the rest of the story pass between us unspoken. So desperately I wanted to take away her sadness, that I squeezed her hand in a desperate attempt to wring out the decades of pain that she carried. It suddenly made sense, sometimes stories remain unspoken because they’re too hard to tell.

Shortly after, my grandmother passed away suddenly. In grieving her life, I also grieve the stories that she took with her. Not only stories of her, but of her parents, grandparents, and siblings. I wish I could ask her one more time to recount the time when she almost drowned in the St. Claire River, only to be rescued by a handsome stranger. Or of her time working for a medium-sized company as a receptionist in London in the 1950s, of her amicably divorced grandparents, or how her dad always forgot his lunch, or how her mom never used measuring cups. I wish I could hear her one more time and commit the little details to memory. Like a game of telephone, her stories are already getting distorted with time and distance.

No longer can she correct a mistake or fill in forgotten gaps. Her stories are now the responsibility of those she told them to. Their fate lies not only in our ability to remember, but our choices to pass them forward and share them with others. I feel a sense of duty to share them, a responsibility to make sure they aren’t lost to time like all the other stories, to make sure my grandma is remembered with each retelling.

Brianna Jennings (she/her). Born and raised in Burlington to a multi-generational settler Canadian family, I now live and study in Ottawa. As an avid reader, I have always been fascinated by stories.

Writing is a way for me to explore interests, feelings, and experiences in a reflective, healing manner. I believe that the personal act of writing allows for a more intimate exploration of these concepts.

My story explores the impact of familial and societal stories on one’s identity. Untold stories, either through deliberate omission or lost through the passage of time, are a central focus here. Through personal reflections, I contemplate the reasons for these omissions, as well as their implications. Told in the voice of a white, multi-generational Canadian living on colonised, Indigenous land, I explore how multifaceted power dynamics shaped these narratives. The work combines the silent personal stories in my own family, as well as the missing historical and societal stories received through a Canadian upbringing.

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Chapter 20

Immigrant Stories



Thabata da Costa

quem é só de um lugar é pobre porque nenhum lugar é inteiro.

Valter Hugo Mãe

20.1 Going Home (Twice)

20.1.1 *I'm Going Home, Home Is Rio de Janeiro, Brasil*

One of the things I miss the most, and that I rarely think about, are the layers of greens from different species of plants. A visual effect that only tropical countries allow, the lushness of multiple shades of the same color surrounding you like it would eat you alive if it could. I miss the heat, the mix of humid heat and the slow breeze from the sea, laying down under an umbrella on the sand, just with my feet out of the shade, the perfect balance between warmth and coolness – the perfect weather if such a thing existed in a sensation. My husband misses the rain, the blinding curtain of water that comes down over these tropical lands. He misses the continuous wind that comes from the sea when we drive with the window down. This is home for us.

But what is home when you haven't been there in years? When your children don't speak your language and when they pronounce their names in a manner completely different from you, like the parents we see now at the airport, struggling to teach their kids who is who from their own blood. The children don't recognize who you are in this land, and the people who made you, they see nothing of you in these strangers.

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It breaks my heart when my old friends explain their lives to me. I realize I have been left out of so much, the basic stuff. The kind of thing you only share with someone when you run into them by chance on the street. Little life snapshots, like – *oh! I sold my car*, or *I started exercising*. Since I left, everything changed; I must tell them though that I still understand very well, because half a decade can change nothing.

I miss home because home is who I am, but when I'm there, I know exactly why I left. Do we all walk away trying to bring peace to our souls? And if we don't find what we are looking for, would we be able to recognize it or do we stay away out of spite?

The amount of energy necessary to live at home was what pushed me away, and now life here seems to be even more demanding. People are scared, they feel unsafe. A wave of guilt inundates me – perhaps this is the price I must pay for leaving it all behind. Politics is a mess, that's why people are so angry, and this angst and anxiety comes through in the decibel levels and tone when they speak with each other. It's displayed when they can't wait for other people to jump in the elevator, everyone needs to try to get inside at the same time, as if not moving fast would make them lose the contest. You take what you can, and don't allow others to take what is yours, there is not enough for everyone. I missed the elevator, the crowd swamped me, they shot me dirty looks.

Do I still belong? Especially when I feel myself cringe because people seem too warm, and they touch me when they speak, even though we just met, even in this insane pandemic during which I was so glad I was not here.

What does it mean when I have to reach out to my new language to fill the gaps when I'm home, because I began to forget my mother tongue? When my brain insists on automatically saying hi and thank you when what I really mean is *oi* and *obrigada*. I speak broken English and broken Portuguese, unable to claim any language as fully my own.

But it doesn't take long for me to go back to the flow of my old life, things come back to me naturally, I don't even realize it's happening. It begins to feel like I never left, like I went away for a short vacation. In the pictures, it seems this scenery favors me, I look prettier - people comment. Is this because I am happier within my old life?

People believe that the hardest thing to leave behind is family and friends - the people you love the most. But if you are from Rio, you need to add the city to this equation too, this untamed, misbehaved, incomprehensible, gorgeous place. The busyness of the city, the many scents and smells that invade my nostrils, the dirty sand on the beach, the never-ending noise, the uncurbed smiles and sonorous laughs – samba - this is me; this is what I miss.

I even walk differently here, people from Rio have their own way of walking, we do it like we are dancing, there is a very famous song about it. The Girl from Ipanema never plays in my head, it's for gringos when they come here, flip-flops on the ground, things are different. The buzz of the vendors on the beach, I love this, bodies uncovered, all sizes and shapes.

I see a boy who doesn't seem to be over five years of age, selling candy on the beach. It's such a hot day. This place - you can never be at peace. At what age do we learn to look away? We avoid glancing for too long, not that we don't care, but we also need to survive in this city. Someone asks how old the boy is, says he shouldn't be working, he already knows how to dodge this type of questions, there is no 'shouldn't' in his life, or in the lives of others like him, there is not much choice. I look away and go into the water.

The thing I miss the most is to open my eyes under water, when it's green is lighter and you can see far, when the tide is high and there is at least a metre of water above and below you, it feels like the sea is yours and you are his. Everything is perfect as is.

20.1.2 Neither Here or There

In my early twenties I called home crying. It was my first time flying away, first time not in a hotel, but in my own space, with a routine. I truly believe that it is a structure to your day, such as cleaning your house or going to work, that determines if you are actually capable of building a new life. That you are truly settled in a new place. This was still a time when we could stop at phone booths in the middle of the street. Manhattan buzzed around me while I cried. No one saw, no one cared.

My mother picked up the phone and understood right away. She pointed out that I had made choices, and that I would have to live with them. I chose to move away, there were consequences to that. She hung up. She dried my tears, and I walked the dirty streets of Midtown. New York is the place one can feel most alone in a crowd and that's exactly what I was looking for. We all have our own reasons to walk away from the worlds we know best.

Although we never spoke of this again, when the story came back years later, my mother told me how hard it was for her to cut me off, to let me go. But she had to, I was fine, and the most generous thing she could have done was to set me free to be who I wanted to be. This is why I leave, it's because I know I have roots. My freedom comes from the understanding that I have a place to go back to, always.

My mother is my port of permanence, and that's the place I always return to. But when I have news, I call my father first. He was the one who sent me away. He said the world is limitless, and mine to take and keep. He said it was ok to be an explorer, to always want more. I think he regrets this; he cried the last time I left; it was the first time he did so. Now, it's too late anyway, I've already expanded.

To distance oneself from one's birthplace may encompass the understanding that one's comfort zone lies in a distant home. To believe this is to give yourself the chance to constantly redefine who you are. There is often a wrong perception that the resilience we carry inside ourselves as migrants is due to some negative experiences we had where we came from, and this justifies the hardships we endure in the new places we choose to call home. That a propelling force sent us away, and this needing to be away makes us endure. But the truth could also simply be that we

moved away from what we knew, just for the sake of the search. Full of hopes and dreams, trusting what was to come.

The unexpected part of this journey is that it's a cyclical one. I leave, but I remain. I move forward while part of me stays behind. There is a need to divide oneself in multiple realities and exist in all of them at the same time. I thought that away was a place, but my place is now neither here nor there. I live in suspension. Is it even possible to do this? To try to land in a new life while not letting go of the old one? To remain in one place while choosing to be at another?

Language is the most in-between space that I inhabit in my new life. If you hear me speaking on the street, you'll probably be able to guess what I'm talking about. I insert English words into my Portuguese to give meaning to things that I only experience in my new life. I bend the rules of grammar creating verbs in Portuguese from English expressions. Couch is in Portuguese, throw is in English. *Tomilho* and rosemary. *Pratos* na dishwasher.

I am of the opinion that language, as a nonphysical thing, is what better carries the feeling of either belonging too much, because you have more than one place to call home, or not belonging anywhere as this amalgam of different languages intertwined amounts to no certain idiom. How much of one place can I be when the first thing I start to lose, as soon as the background changes, is the ability to use languages that I gained, to lose this form of expressing myself I worked so hard to tame.

At first, I learned different languages to make my world bigger. But now, when I'm home, my first home, I only read books in Portuguese, I crave books about *Brasil*. I want to read about people with burned skins that believe in African gods and celebrate Christmas during summer. I want to hear the sound of my mother tongue, imposed on us by people from a place I have never been to. At home, I know English will never be enough. But when I return to Canada, it's hard to keep up with all the pages I bring with me. Truth is, I lose interest, or my interest moves somewhere else together with my body. Now my appetite goes towards the realities that I witness in these northwestern lands. Now, I seem to be looking for grounding wherever I am, to use language to look inward. To understand and hold on tightly to the place I am at, instead of looking outside like I did before.

I could have stayed; I chose the unknown and it didn't have a fixed address before I landed here. I could not anticipate that the fog and the rain, the dark green forest, the smell of firewood in fall would make this place home. We are here for now, we choose to stay, we may choose to move away again, now leaving two homes behind.

Once you have uprooted yourself, it is much easier to do it over and over again. You're no longer bound to the ground that made you. You're now from many places, and the richness and multiplicity you collected on the way gives you freedom. It gives you the lived understanding that borders and nations are a social and historical construct and that humans transcend that.

20.1.3 I'm Going Home, Home Is Vancouver, Canada

I cried when I left but felt relieved when I arrived. Flying over Vancouver, the clouds look like they have been knitted together, showing uneven stitches similar to the ones only I am capable of making. Knitting is one of the habits I picked up in my new life, and it's one I adore, but it only belongs in this North American version of my life.

I need to make space inside me for my new life, like the dishes I now like and cook, the books that I surround myself with, that make me feel at home. This home I created is filled with colours from my old life, to show I have roots, the walls of my home are covered with art that tells the world who I am. My husband is my country and my friends my mother tongue, they talk just like me. More than ever it's important that I talk like this, exchanging the s for x, singing while speaking our Portuguese from Rio. There is also my other language, the language I adopted, that is now better fitted to express these new experiences than my native one. Because now I live in English too, in-between. My world is larger, and it is reasonable for me to need more language to be able to take care of this growth.

My old language is inserted everywhere in my new life, it gets mixed, just like the rest of me. I bring my beach habits to the lake. I incorporate Canadian ways of doing things that now make a lot of sense to me. I bend my language; I mix things enriching my surroundings with more meaning. Every now and then I change the way I pronounce my name, it's not ideal, I actually hate it, but life is just easier this way. Sometimes you just need to let it go.

I'm back home in Vancouver now, and I enjoy this new slow life, the politeness of people who give me good morning on the seawall and the level of trust (although sometimes I wish people were more caring), and Thanksgiving food. My world grew, the number of things I love too.

I look forward to my morning run at the park. I miss my trees, that's how I refer to the conifers at Stanley Park. I miss their scent, and I miss their silent company. I miss the change of the seasons, and the smile I have on my face when I see the leaves turn. If I can give one reason why I live in North America, of all things, it's the fall, the foliage is what makes me happier. The change of colors, the yellows, oranges and reds that light up the forest.

One of the things I deem most important for one's sense of belonging is to understand the nature that surrounds you. I'm no expert, but I feel that I belong when I know I can try to survive if left alone in nature. I would probably not survive in the Amazon back home, but I know a few tricks I could try. And I've learned them here too. What you can eat, which tree is which and how they operate. The animals I may find and their behavior with humans. Feeling comfortable in nature goes beyond survival as it is one of the gates locals try to keep tightly closed. We're animals after all, and we trust and protect our own habitats. I see the kids up on the trails at such an early age, I know I'll never be like them. There are not enough books in the world that will teach me the experiences you pick up during childhood explorations. Like the ones I have had on the beach waves. But you can recognize

the land you're in, acknowledge it and try to be a respectful guest here. This will empower you. Nature is welcoming. Maybe that's all an outsider needs every now and then. Just to feel like another being, no different from others.

Nature allows you freedom of movement but with constraints beyond human control, beyond borders and governmental oversight. Just like it does with other species, although birds, like humans, like to defy that. They might even show you that it's ok to live in this in-between life, just like they do. To belong to two places at the same time. Just like me, they love summer and travel to find it. Do they feel like they are going back home when they fly south?

The little bird I fell in love with during one of my explorations of the islands that surround Vancouver, with his tall legs and long beak, happened to be the same creature I found in the northeast of Brazil six months later. Did we cross paths in the air? How lucky are we, to have two places to run away to, and to run away from.

I want to be everywhere and experience everything at the same time. Now that I made home here, the feeling that it's time to move on is arising in me again. Unlike birds, I can change the direction of my migratory flights. The sound of the wind is pointing to a new direction, new possibilities to follow and new ways of life to pursue. I'm divided in two, each half separated by 111225.83 km. I never want to become whole again.

This is for Edna who showed me that you can be from two places, even if you don't know where they are, and that's ok.

Thábata da Costa (she/her/ela) My name is Thábata da Costa, I'm from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I came to Canada as an international student. I hold a Master's in International Studies, a MBA, and a Bachelor's degree in Journalism; and I hope to become a doctor in the years to come. I am a forever student of the world, curious about all that surrounds me – often in wonder.

I write because I read. Reading is my way of understanding the world and making sense of the life around me. The writing comes from the familiarity that books, paper and words bring to me. In full honesty, I avoid and fear writing. This is a sacred realm that I'm still trying to welcome myself into. To start to put pen to paper is excruciating, once started it becomes a trance. I'm yet to figure out what writing means in my life, in which language it needs to be done and for what reason.

Writing about myself, as I did for this anthology diving into my migration story, came from a much deeper need to understand who I am in this new world I inhabit and what is left of me in the one I left behind. This personal account goes beyond form, grammar and language, it is rather a visceral need for belonging and finding myself. I wrote about my experiences to look at what my mind tries to hide from me, all the pains my brain will transform into back aches. I write to let go of things and to dive into my humanity. My piece for the StOries Project is about living in-between, this feeling that we have when trying to live at a new place while holding on tight to an old one. It's also about being a human out in the world.

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Chapter 21

My PhD Life, and Connecting the Dots Between Here and There...



Alka Kumar

21.1 An Intro and a Disclaimer...

The following personal essay is about boundary-crossing of a kind- for instance, the crossing of borders that exist between a past life and a current one; and the blending of stories about homes from another time, alive in memory, into new ones bursting with possibility. Significantly, it is also about the interdisciplinary borders I crossed, from literary studies to interdisciplinary social sciences- specifically, to peacebuilding and migration.

Part One of this essay is a long-ish preamble that provides some context to my research study and the rationale for situating here the extracted parts you will read in Part Two. Situating this story within a timeline: I completed my doctoral journey just before the pandemic began in 2020, and this mentioned excerpt (in Part Two) is extracted from the postscript chapter of my dissertation. In my doctoral dissertation, I use qualitative research methods-primarily interviews and focus groups- to understand the labor market experiences of racialised skilled immigrants in Canada, the specific case study geographically located in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The study also employs an autoethnographic approach where I mine my personal experiences of economic integration that were quite similar to those of my research participants. In addition to this last chapter written in a personal narrative style (the excerpted piece below), my thesis also included five brief autoethnographic vignettes, each in snapshot mode; they are all written in a creative writing style, and they serve as prologues to key chapters. Part Three is a brief summary that articulates how this intertwining of the past with the present in the context of my migration experience helps to connect the dots between who I was back then and who I believe I am today.

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21.2 Part One: Preamble

It made sense to me to make space in this edited collection for the small but significant sliver from my doctoral study that you will read in Part Two below, for the following reasons. One, having so far been included in my dissertation only, the readership for this personal story has been limited to academic readers, i.e., graduate students and researchers with specific interest in the topic of my research study. Being situated in a hybrid collection like this one will make it accessible to a wider and more diverse readership, (including to interdisciplinary graduate students, many of whom may find it resonant). Two, written more in the style of creative nonfiction-blending the experiential with the analytic, while also bridging the autobiographical with the broader social and educational (political) contexts as it does- it could serve as an example of an autoethnographic approach that could be used to tell migration stories. Finally, as one of the objectives of this collection is to blur the boundaries between academic and non-academic writing-both in terms of the contexts that produce these texts as well as the writing style itself- it made sense to house this piece of writing within the pages of this collection.

The excerpted essay is titled “A Tribute to John Paul Lederach’s *The Moral Imagination*.” it is an ode to serendipity; and it expresses gratitude for the surprise appearance of happenstance (another way to describe serendipity) in our lives. To situate this discussion in a migration context, I might add that anybody who has ‘lived’ the migration experience knows only too well that what we ‘find’ along the way in our transition journeys is based as much on chance as what we might ‘miss.’ These hit and miss trajectories within the migration experience are so far less studied in the research; and these experiences could come in the form of key individuals-supporters from among networks of family, friends, community members, and mentors, employers, and others. They often appear also in the form of opportunities that pave our pathways into the future. Importantly, continuums between past, present and future often get disrupted when the unpredictable- or the serendipitous- enters our (migrant) lives, and we help or hinder its entrance too, based on who we are and how open we are to embracing new experiences.

To return to the original essay, a part of my doctoral dissertation, and titled, “A Tribute to John Paul Lederach’s *The Moral Imagination*”: “not only does it give voice to the wonder this author-I- experience at the splicing and blurring of time a phenomenon like serendipity can achieve; it is also a shout-out to my PhD journey as an international student at the time. This personal essay-autoethnographic actually- highlights the significance, and the specific opportunities as well as challenges, of this pursuit at a particular point of intellectual maturity and readiness in my life. It goes beyond the expression of purely autobiographical experience though, being as it is not only the story of my personal stressors and fears, but in it also highlighting many systemic travails and challenges implicit in the PhD journey generally faced by graduate students in Canada, as well as internationally, given the commonalities shared among academic environments globally.

Broadly, the experiences I went through, and that huge cohorts of international graduate students encounter, if they find themselves at a difficult juncture in their educational and professional journeys, are often overwhelming at multiple levels, and they could be experiences that stem from factors that are economic or social, emotional or psychological. More often than not, they are a complex concoction produced at the intersection of all these sites. As the pursuit of graduate studies at the PhD level can often remain evolving over the long haul—such is the nature of this beast—these pressures can be ongoing and impactful on several life stages for an individual, including causing identity disruptions in a fundamental sense. Any number of student networks and online platforms exist where graduate students share personal stories of their anxieties and their angst, relating not only to oppressive academic processes and rigid educational structures but also highlighting the absence of support systems; especially the lack of viable employment options after incurring huge financial loans and investing long years of their precious life in the PhD project; all this often leading to heavy psychological costs. Given the competition and the lack of economic and other infrastructural resources, most of these challenges are integral to graduate studies programs globally, and although these experiences are heterogenous, their systemic nature has the potential to impact graduate students irrespective of their ethnicity or specific visa status.

In the case of international students though, many of these stressors are exacerbated, experienced more intensely by this cohort due to the added pressures caused by migration; for instance, dealing with the unfamiliar study and work environment and with social isolation, as well as the long-term challenges of integration into the job market and also more holistically into the host country. The essay also points to interlocking and intersectional barriers that may appear in the shape of pressures in relation to deadlines and bureaucratic red tape, rigid hierarchies and a lack of inclusion within systems of higher education. All these factors can end up leading to individuals feeling trapped in systems that are oppressive, non-supportive, and punitive instead of being flexible, responsive and caring. Further, as I read this essay today, written nearly a decade ago, this storied version of those times I lived back then becomes starkly present to me, the trauma that had then emanated from the fear of a likely All But Dissertation (ABD) status suddenly becoming real once again, and in an embodied sense. My reflections are a vivid reminder of how I experienced those emotions and dilemmas when I feared that I might forever remain in that ABD limbo.

On the upside though, what stands out even more powerfully when I read this last chapter of my dissertation today is the rationale that kept me going, keeping me determined to complete the study and obtain my degree despite all odds. I am well aware that it was the same motivation that got me started on this journey in the first place that continued to fuel my passion all along. The reason that made me want to deeply understand the unique (and shared) lived experiences of economic integration that racialised skilled immigrants and newcomers were facing in Canada while digging deep into my own lived experience, using self-narrative and an autoethnographic approach, was that I wanted to employ my learnings— as a researcher and as a practitioner in the migration field— to work towards holistic transformative change.

And this is exactly where John Paul Lederach enters this story too. Have patience, dear reader, you will soon learn more about the pivotal role this pioneer scholar and practitioner from the interdisciplinary Peace and Conflict Studies has played in my life.

Other important reasons for sharing this post-script chapter here relate to the alignment I note with the methodological underpinnings that guided the directions and the process of 'workshopping' the StOries Project, and for developing this edited collection, that I have discussed in Chapter Two. This last chapter of my dissertation came out of field notes, journal entries and sundry jottings, and it paints a picture of both difficult and exciting times during my doctoral journey when I suffered from writing blocks, as I often did; and although writing would come to me easily, it would not appear in the academic form I ordered it in. On one of those occasions when I agreed to succumb to my inner creative cravings, allowing the writing to choose its own favourite ways to be, the piece that follows below (in italics) is what appeared. I decided to simply learn to be grateful for the gift. This piece of writing then is, for me, an integral part of the messiness of the process that as a researcher I have learnt to respect and honor. Particularly as a part of ethnographic research methods, including in autoethnography, I believe a researcher's field-notes can tell an important back story, although they too are a construction shaped by so many factors, like memory (which is often both selective and seductive), and hindsight too. The other reason for situating the italicised piece here is to acknowledge and give form to my intention-of giving back to my research participants, in a kind of quid pro quo gesture-in line with storywork methodologies that often guide collaborative and dialogical community-based methods in the context of indigenous research methods and practices (discussed in Chapter Two), as also other qualitative research approaches like Participatory Action Research (PAR). Similar ideologies and methodological imperatives, grounded in co-creation and reflexivity, helped create the theoretical framework that led to practices we used in workshopping and developing the chapters in the StOries collection.

So, returning to the excerpt below, in a similar spirit of reciprocity, now I share with the participants of my research study, and with all the valued readers of this collection, a small piece of my story. It is this circle of trust in which story sharing happens in indigenous traditions too, with courage that can amplify personal voice while sitting together in story sharing circles, listening with respect while waiting for your turn. When I moved to Canada from India nearly fifteen years ago, I created my first Canadian home in Winnipeg, and I experienced resonances between the cultural practices that were familiar to me and that I embodied as an immigrant; blending them as I did with cultures and practices that surrounded me in my new home.

21.3 Part Two: Backstory: A Tribute to John Paul Lederach's *The Moral Imagination*

*John Paul Lederach, for those not so familiar with the field of Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding, is a pioneer and trailblazer in Peace Studies, and among his many books, **The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace** (2005), is a resonant discussion about the coming together of story, serendipity, and the moral imagination as necessary pieces in the complex jigsaw world of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. As readers we are aware that we must see ourselves as truly blessed when a certain piece of writing seeks us out at that exact moment in our lives when we feel most ready to receive it. I do believe in fate, and this makes me certain that my serendipitous encounter with *The Moral Imagination* was meant to happen exactly when it did. I remember vividly that as part of a casual conversation, a friend mentioned she was reading this book for a course, and the topic of that particular seminar class interested me. In the middle of an already crazy schedule, I decided to do the extra reading so that auditing this class would be a meaningful experience for me. Well, long story short, I was hooked. The book triggered an epiphany, and it urged me to explore some of the confusions and dilemmas that I was experiencing at the time.*

*Allow me to digress, dear reader, so I may briefly share a couple of key ideas from Lederach's seminal text, *The Moral Imagination*, that resonated so powerfully with me on the very first encounter. In the early phase of searching for a research method for my doctoral research study, I saw some of my struggles relating to foregrounding a personal lens in my research reflected in Lederach's discussion in the preface of this book. He referred to the 'the appearance of the personal:' greater legitimacy, he said, was associated with the objectivity of 'conclusion' and 'proposal' in formal academic writing. Lederach's argument validated some of the dilemmas I was experiencing but it also resolved them when he said, "When we attempt to eliminate the personal, we lose sight of ourselves, our deeper intuition, and the source of our understandings- who we are and how we are in the world. In so doing we arrive at a paradoxical destination: We believe in the knowledge we generate but not in the inherently messy and personal process by which we acquired it." In giving voice to his own professional journey of finding a 'vocational' home in peace engineering, navigating the world of stories he lived and ideas that happened serendipitously while he experimented with innovative ways of building social change, he speaks to his own evolution as a peacebuilder, both as an academic and a practitioner.*

Further, speaking of a 'worldview shift,' when referring to the conflict resolution and peacebuilding field, Lederach highlights two points. One, that the work we do in the field must be imagined in equal part being a "creative act, more akin to artistic endeavour than the technical process... while also never negating skill and technique." Two, he goes on to explain as follows: the "the wellspring lies in our moral imagination, which I will define as the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not exist."

I will return to Lederach later, but I seek now the permission of my patient reader to indulge me through this last ramble... As this dissertation has already stated, and demonstrated, one of the intersectional identity frames within which my life's journey has been locked in the last few years is that of a graduate student pursuing an interdisciplinary PhD program. It is my second doctoral journey, no less, the first being in Literary Studies, I confess under my breath, almost ashamed and guilty. Further, my identity was additionally defined by my ABD (All But Dissertation) status for more years than considered reasonable by decision-making bodies like the Faculty of Graduate Studies; and this meant that I had to go through bureaucratic procedures time and again to request for additional time for completion. To be honest, for me too, this additional time-to-completion that this prolonged PhD journey was taking was no cake walk! I felt the weight continuously as I lugged this heavy burden for what seemed like a timeless forever; on unproductive (writing) days the challenges outweighed the joys of achievement.

"To be or not to be," agonised the bard of Avon, and speaking through his Hamlet a few centuries ago, he spoke for all of us who live the human condition bit by bit every day. For me, more specifically I recall, I asked often, to do or not to do: do I bring this ever so relentless PhD journey to its logical completion, arriving at destination degree, or shall I quit before finish line? I asked this key question over and over, in the true spirit of 'she loves me, she loves me not!' (Repeating the refrain as I plucked out each petal off the stem). Do I love it, do I hate it? I know not! On difficult days, self-doubt assailed me. Do I have all it takes to rein in this monster so much bigger than myself? Indeed, the dilemma was alive and well, and these dark clouds traveled with me some distance. There was some clearing though and the following rumination came during those quiet moments of reflection, the kaleidoscope revealing another piece of my story.

I came to Canada as a 'trailing spouse.' Although I was the principal applicant for permanent residency, the process took so many years that eventually my partner got a job offer before our family application for permanent residence was approved; and we moved to Canada on his work permit. As it turned out, I switched categories, transitioning from trailing spouse to international student when I decided to go back to school, enrolling in a PhD program in Peace and Conflict Studies at University of Manitoba. Although immigration policies are structured pathways through which to streamline cross border ebbs and flows, they impact lives of individuals and families in different configurations. They play out in unique and specific ways in the lives of immigrants and are not always straightforward, just as integration is a non-linear process that does not follow the path of a straight line.

It seems now an impetuous and not-so-well-considered an act, when moving to Canada as part of a family move after working- and fully enjoying the gratifying experience as an educator and an academic with tenure in another part of the world- I made this bold career move as a way to define my second professional innings. I enrolled in an interdisciplinary PhD program with social justice and potential-for-real-action-oriented engagement at its core. Friends aggressively forbade such an unlikely choice, well-wishers shook their heads with dismay, professional colleagues said, oh just write a book instead, family members refused to bless

the move, but free-spirit-me was defiant. Who was anybody to discourage me, I reiterated to myself as I dismissed all advice. I was sure I wanted nothing to do with nay-sayers; so convinced was I at the time that this was for me, that this indeed was the integral “me” I was born to pursue, that I threw all caution to the winds. I felt liberated by the heavy student backpack, perfectly satisfied with my life as a grad student the second time around, sitting on the other side of the room again, soaking in new pedagogies, pursuing my dreams, and fully enjoying this gift of new experiences my fortunate life had brought me. Life couldn’t get better, I thought to myself. Truth be told, it’s been an amazing and variegated roller coaster ride, one that helped me find not just new ways of thinking, new tools and methodologies to learn about life, but also different ways of being me through finding new work-related directions, and countless intellectual and emotional friendships.

It is the aspiration to go back to school with the gift of experiential maturity that can sometimes be the lure, and it may be the luxury of finally finding time in one’s life-odyssey to take stock of oneself in mid-life that may further urge an individual to push the bounds of self-discovery. I also thought I was taking a break from teaching, so, instead of educating others, I was circling back towards learning for myself the many things that I had no clue about. And all this at a stage in my adulthood when I knew I had more of the ingredients in me that would help me value and appreciate such a rare gift. Looking back, it may also have been the seductive power of pursuing intellectual challenges, seeking book-adventures and new ideas that made this such an attractive option. By the way, I also thought I was taking a wonderful break, pursuing guilty reading pleasures that so-far in my busy work life there was little in-built room for. Now, with better understanding I say, PhD a break? Hell, no! What was I thinking??

So, I ask myself, what’s the worst part of pursuing doctoral studies, for me at any rate, at this stage of my life? Perhaps others in a similar situation struggle with their own issues, and nurse their own grouses, which translate into reasons for procrastination for them. Without really getting into the specifics for a moment, I think it’s fair to point towards the time factor inherent in such a pursuit. How long a haul can this be? The problem is that for some, the bookends of this wonderful rites de passage, in other words, the time you start and when you finish, may have nothing to do with each other in terms of where you’re at in the trajectory of your bigger life! And the fact too is that the place where you ‘actually’ are at, in your life, is the real story! And this might include the family in which you are perhaps the primary care-giver and the provider; the cook and the cleaner; and this, and that; and all those multiple and multilayered roles you have no choice but to play while also researching for and writing what seems at this time like your magnum opus!

And there’s the aspect of life-stages too. As I mentioned earlier, since this study-and this doctoral journey- came for me at a somewhat later stage of my life, following a previous full career as an academic in another country, most friends and colleagues who were/still are a part of my previous-life are now relaxing, enjoying travels to exotic destinations as they have retirement pensions saved up. Many seem to have found new vocations in their grandchildren, living (seemingly) simple and stress-free lives reading them bedtime stories, or they may be busy just checking off

long-left-undone items off their bucket list. As for me, I'm secretly hatching (also exploring and pursuing) plans for my next gig, thinking of what new (work) adventures I can have till one day I cannot...

Certainly, while I wander in these dreamy pastures I do also worry about real-life obstacles like ageism, another barrier to employment in addition to racism, sexism, both for me and many of my research participants. Other challenges to economic integration, part of the findings in my dissertation, for instance, are the usual suspects like underemployment and unemployment, slow credential recognition and licensing processes, as well as systemic barriers like the lack of Canadian experience, and other forms of discrimination in the job market.

Grad school aspirants, I have no advice for you as your life story I'm sure is different from mine, and you must indeed live and learn life lessons on your own terms. But if you're considering embarking on such a journey, remember the difficulties that overlapping lives might cause. The PhD will live with you, hogging extra space amidst your everyday joys and sorrows as you live and work, among your families, communities, and the world at large. Besides, oftentimes I find it is the work we do outside PhD parameters that fuels fires that keeps the breath warm, adrenaline rushing, and the heart pulsating. And then, as life wears on, uncertainties of timelines; the aggressive nature of commitment this endeavour can demand with complete disregard for the passing on of seasons outside your window year after year; and all this at the exclusion of everything else called life may be only some factors that make it seem like an arduous journey. A rigid and pre-arranged finished tome in a certain pre-designed format, called a dissertation, that we as grad students sign up to produce by way of finished product can seem stifling. Oftentimes we may not consider how we may change and evolve as human beings and need different forms of self-expression.

*Lederach is playing his part in my inward tussle, and so he must re-enter the conversation at this point. With kind clarity, honesty and openness, he asked me a question in *The Moral Imagination*, one of my favourite books ever. I must admit it was a question I had lost sight of, a question nearly buried under piles of data, the weight of deadlines, and the gravitas of having to string together, and coherently, hundreds of pages of academic writing. Lederach caught me unawares, as he asked, almost in a gentle whisper: 'why is it we do this work and what sustains us' (x)? His question helped another raise its ugly head inside of me: in dealing with the need to produce a well-researched finished product that must pass the rigour test, is the clock ticking away too fast for me, thereby pushing towards rigor mortis new ideas and transformative action plans that may inspire social change if implemented right away? Needless to add, if I continue to put my life on hold, and myself in abeyance, am I not missing out on meaningful opportunities that walk past me every day? If I don't permit myself to take a walk on this beautiful summer day, life will indeed pass me by. It will forget me as I sit at my desk trying to make it to the final point on the finish line. Worse, that point may not be the endgame at all but just another turning point in the winding road or worse still, yet another mirage.*

Lederach reasonably argues for the need to 'hold (myself) close to the actual messiness of ideas, and processes, and then from such a vantage point, speculate

about the nature of our work and the lessons learned'(x). Now that makes sense as such a view is respectful of authenticity, growth, and change. Such a statement rings true as it affirms the dynamism and dialectics inherent in life, and elementally during the pursuit of this research project too. It also acknowledges that our potential for self-actualization and our needs, both personal and professional, are contingent on other life-factors because these criss-cross in their intersectionality. In being so, they are subject to change not only because we cannot always decide who we will become when we "grow up," but also because we have little control on the forces around us that impact this direction in which we grow. And so the forms in which our aspirations and goals may truly be realised and made authentic are bound to take new shapes. In fact, Lederach's words in the above statement resonate simply because they acknowledge and legitimate everyday "messiness" at the heart of living as the only way to be; and dealing with this is perhaps about reflecting with absolute honesty on the logic of having fractured, provisional, and dynamic lives. We may then be more willing to think about really legitimate and good reasons for deciding to stop the PhD journey before arriving at the finish line if that's what we want to do. Maybe the ABD milestone is a really important destination in and of itself, or if we re-calibrate the PhD journey, plotting it as on a continuum, at least it's a valid point of arrival with no compromises that need be made to self-esteem. And then, if, as graduate students, some of us strugglers, though certainly not stragglers, are able to speak to this loud and clear, with good examples of what we do even as we end up not finding that holy grail, we may help move the ABD-point from a conversation tainted by deficit to one about strength, and then live it proudly as a badge of honour. Maybe that may help take away some of the structural shame, stigma and inadequacy associated with ABD status.

In other words, if living with a PhD seems akin to being in a long relationship that has outlived its place in your life, maybe it's time to move on. If the relationship no longer provides you with the sustenance you deserve, at the least find the courage to ask yourself why you're in it. I'm doing just that! Of late I have begun to tell myself: maybe the possibilities of finding that joy of nurture are endless, but they may not come to me while I chain myself to my desk. Besides, it is a sticky problem and indeed a real challenge to straddle contrary spaces, to be both thinkers and doers simultaneously and at once, as many today in academia, and indeed outside of it, may wish to be. We are aware that the ranks of scholar-practitioners and academics are growing every day, and the feedback loop between the two is becoming more fluid, seamless, and meaningful, at least in some fields of study. The rise of interdisciplinary studies in the last few years has much to do with this. This dialectical space is also being more valued and evidenced to be life-affirming for those who find their work and life's purpose in that dual space. Policy makers are also proactively seeking out engaged research, and academics and others who believe in it; as they need good data to write policies that may be more likely to affect systemic change. Where does data and empirical evidence live if not in people's lives, and so stories of grassroots work and of community networks and practices are of great interest to scholar-practitioners, as they are to academics and governments. However, in practical terms, given the pressures of a twenty-four-hour clock and

other constraints, it is not always easy to multitask efficiently and be that trapeze-artist who doesn't fall off the wire. And aren't there dangers of something being lost in this everyday tug of war? In other words, what change do we need to see in the halls of academia so they may be nimble and more responsive to work being done by pracademics? But that perhaps is stuff that belongs in another conversation.

It is certainly true that Lederach has caught me in my tracks. He has insisted that while I write this dissertation, and especially on days when I struggle with it, I pause and I ask myself what it is that moves me forward, and what pulls me back. Also, he urges that I pay attention to the story, to the presence of serendipity, and of happenstance with which an idea can suddenly spring a surprise, and the need always for critical reflection in the work I do. His words nudge me on, albeit in a subtle manner, while they remind me too that as practitioners of conflict resolution, we are also social theorists and philosophers who continuously must ask "root" questions. My musings reiterate to me that many roads can take me to the destination I want to get to but that above all I must believe in the work I do, and know what drives me onwards. Most significantly, it is less about the avatar I take on in my life's journey and more about being clear about the rationale I have for the work I do.

Well, thank you dear John Paul Lederach, for this opportunity for rumination, reflection, and rejuvenation. It is important to renew your vows, I figure, if they continue to mean something. And so, I return to my PhD project, reiterating once more my avowal of our love-hate relationship. But I also come back to a new page in my life, refreshed and centred once more, hoping the writing will come easier this time round!

21.4 Part Three: Revealing an Epilogue of Sorts

This section will be short, dear reader, as you have had enough, no doubt. Sharing the above reflections with you, though, especially through situating them simultaneously in the context of the past and of the present, helps me acknowledge and affirm John Paul Lederach's critical message because it resonates with the peacebuilder that lives inside me. Perhaps the best way to conclude this personal essay is in Lederach's own words. Writing *The Moral Imagination* in the shadow of 9/11, he talks of turning points as "moments pregnant with new life, which rise from what appear to be the barren grounds of destructive violence and relationships. This unexpected new life makes possible processes of constructive change in human affairs and constitutes the moral imagination without which peacebuilding cannot be understood or practiced. However, such pregnant moments do not emerge through the application of a technique or a recipe (but) must be explored and understood in the context of something that approximates the artistic process, imbued as it is with creativity, skill, serendipity, and craftsmanship." (p. 29).

As a migration practitioner and researcher, this message fuels my imagination with energy and it makes me courageous. It also gives me permission to go beyond the known, the accepted and the established, and definitely against the grain of that

which is assumed and entrenched. I aspire and I dream; I am curious- to explore and to innovate though always with respect, with heart and with humanity. Also, I see Lederach's moral imagination as reflected in his book, as being integral, not just to the world of peacebuilding but to the everyday world which we inhabit-both personal and professional- and his message could illuminate a pathway towards the goal of continuously trying to be our authentic whole selves wherever we travel, for work or for play.

Finally, this vignette is a story of migration and of identity making. As a newcomer to Canada, I too made decisions without really knowing how they might define me and shape my destiny years later. As previously mentioned, I have told little autobiographical tales throughout my doctoral study, planting and interspersing them as snapshots in between stories of my participants, to create the narrative arc that holds together my research. I have done this to make "real," both my unique migration trajectory, and the idea of autoethnography. The theme of my story is doubly relevant in this hybrid collection as it also aligns well with the content, focus, and contribution it aims to make, especially as it relates to the role and the potential of self-narrative, creative writing and other expressive modes like storytelling and autoethnography for exploring migration related themes.

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Alka Kumar I work both as a researcher and a practitioner in migration studies, and for my doctoral study, I used a practitioner lens and an autoethnographic approach to understand the labour market experiences of skilled and racialised individuals in Winnipeg, Canada. In addition to my role as a MITACS Elevate Postdoctoral Fellow at CERC in Migration and Integration at Toronto Metropolitan University, as an independant consultant, I also contribute to the not-for-profit newcomer settlement sector: as an instructor in Business Writing and Communication Skills in Bridging Programs for skilled immigrants; facilitating capacity building through workshops in upskilling training and career development; writing blogs and op-eds; mentoring, as well as doing equity-focused work with organizations.

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Chapter 22

The Research Memoir of an Intra-EU Migrant Who Has Become a Guest in a Settler Colonial State



Anna Triandafyllidou

22.1 A Short Introduction

I usually start my courses on migration by telling the students three things: First, migration is not a crisis but an inherent feature of human life (Livi Bacci, 2012). Second, as we understand it today, migration is the product of the nation-state, notably a form of political organization that has become dominant globally in the last 250 years but is not perennial. Rather, it is historically contingent, and so is our understanding of borders. As Abdelmalek Sayad (2014) put it 30 years ago, the paradox of migration—the presence/absence of the migrant—presence in a foreign country where they do not belong and absence from their own country where they should be—is a fabrication of the national state order. But things were different at the time of empires and are already different in regionally enhanced mobility regimes like the European Union. Third, I remind my students that studying migration is intrinsically political. Of course, all research is political, but that of migration even more since it touches upon fundamental issues about identity and diversity, community and belonging, about who we are and who we want to be. Migration tests our civic and political values and challenges our understanding of social justice and solidarity. The quest to decolonize the structures of academic knowledge production was voiced in the late 1970s and 1980s by prominent cultural studies theorists like Edward Said (1979) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), even though we are still struggling to achieve such de-centering and a plurality of voices (Triandafyllidou, 2017). In recent years the political dimension (in the broader sense) of studying migration has become more visible in the academic debates as there is a higher awareness that we need to ponder over the experiences of countries

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(and communities) of origin and transit and not just of destination (Triandafyllidou, 2020a). Being a migration scholar that is also a migrant brings several of these issues home when it comes both to personal life and research work.

22.2 Why Did I Study Migration?

Migration has been part of my maternal grandparents' story albeit not directly. The older brothers of my maternal grandfather had migrated to the United States in the 1920s and so did some of my uncles in the 1960s. But most of them returned to Greece after several years abroad. At the time (in the 1980s), I did not conceptualize these stories as migration stories. Instead, they were stories of the diaspora in a country that took pride in its being ethnically, religiously, and culturally homogeneous. I grew up learning that Greece is 98% Christian Orthodox and that we could trace our genealogical origins to Pericles and Socrates. Indeed, what formidable cultural luggage we carried as the cradle of (the European) civilization, no less. At school, we also learned that the Greeks of the diaspora were even more Greek than we were because they kept the culture and the language alive in faraway places, remaining faithful to the nation and its Christian Orthodox faith.

Only when I went to the university to study sociology did I discover some of the cracks in this national story. It was in the late 1980s that I found out that Greece was home to several ethnic and religious minorities, that returning Greek migrants were not always welcome, that the cultural and linguistic capital that their children brought to Greek schools was utterly neglected, and that actually Greece was and unfortunately still is a deeply racist even if (at the time) xenophile society (Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2011). Nonetheless, my sociology studies focused more on ideological issues. I was intrigued by minority parties and their strategies for achieving influence and gaining votes; not ethnic minority parties but ideological minorities like the Greens or extreme leftist parties. I left Greece in 1990 to pursue my doctoral studies on political party behaviour, at the department of social and political sciences, at the European University Institute (EUI), in Florence, Italy. That was my first migration experience, but I was still unaware of being what we call an "international student" today, as I was cushioned by a generous scholarship and a special status that the EUI offered as technically an international organization. It also happened that I had studied Italian, so I could easily integrate both at the EUI (where the working languages were English and French) but also the local Florentine environment.

The start of my migration experience coincided with the first anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the landslide of changes that swept through Europe in the early 1990s. The Communist regimes imploded, and thousands of people 'voted with their feet,' moving west and south to other European countries. Almost overnight, Greece was transformed from an emigration to an immigration country. And so did the Greek public opinion: it turned almost as quickly from xenophile to xenophobic. After dinner discussions with fellow Ph.D. students, friend and colleague

Andonis Mikrakis and myself wrote our very first academic paper: 'Greece: The Others Within' published in *Social Science Information* in 1994 (Mikrakis & Triandafyllidou, 1994). Studying minority parties suddenly lost its meaning for me: the puzzle of nationalism and migration, of Self and Other, became, in a short time, the focus of my research and my academic career immediately after my Ph.D. I was both surprised and intrigued by such a sudden change of direction in Greek public opinion (Triandafyllidou, 2001).

Nest, I went to Belgium for a brief stint as a stagiaire at the European Commission and then to the London School of Economics (LSE) for a postdoctoral fellowship. It suddenly became clear to me that my identity was perhaps why I was interested in diversity, migration, xenophobia, and exclusion. Greek national identity is heavy; one cannot shed it lightly. You were raised to believe, and I am afraid this is still the case, that you are the heir of a formidable and unique people that 2500 years ago brought the world some of the most critical concepts in politics, philosophy, and the arts. It may be true that classical Greece was a great civilization, like several others, of course. But what is 'heavy' about the Hellenic heritage is that each young Greek is convinced that they have an intrinsic worth in this world because they are biologically the heirs of these great philosophers. At the same time, this wonderful classical heritage is coupled with Christian Orthodoxy and the greatness of the Byzantine empire. In a unique amalgamation of rather antithetical 'western' and 'eastern' traditions, the modern Greek nation emerges as unique, as 'brotherless' (Roudometof, 1996; Triandafyllidou et al., 1997).

The modern Greek identity is a difficult one: there are few margins of diversity within. You are a 'traitor' if you do not fully subscribe to the dominant ethnocultural nationalist discourse. I tend to think that Greekness resembles Jewishness – Greeks are a chosen people whose ethnicity can hardly be separated from religion and who believe they can trace their genealogical origins to time immemorial. I contend that 'heavy' identities often lead people to become researchers, to study their own predicament. And by way of observation, some of the foremost theorists of nationalism, Anthony D. Smith, Ernest Gellner, and Elie Kedourie, were all of Jewish descent. In choosing to pursue research on the impact of immigration on nationalism, soon after my Ph.D., in a field that was entirely new for me then, there was something clearly about me and my country. I needed to understand why and how so many of my fellow Greeks could be so xenophobic and racist.

22.3 From Xenophobia to Irregular Migration

After an intense two years in London at the LSE, I was looking for my next job. While my parents would have preferred that I try my chances at the Greek University, I was more inclined to stay in Britain—I wanted to pursue an international career, and British Universities seemed like the right place to start. Albeit, life shows the way. Before getting a job offer in the U.K., I won a Marie Curie Fellowship to spend two years developing my research on nationalism, at the Consiglio Nazionale per le

Ricerche in Rome. That was perhaps my first authentic migration experience. Even though I was fluent in Italian, Rome was the first place where I was irrefutably made to feel like a foreigner. I remember speaking with a real estate agent while looking for a flat to rent. While I was telling her proudly about my cosmopolitan travels, she turned to me and said: “Quindi, Lei e’ una nomade” (“So, you are a nomad”). That was not a compliment in Italian. It alluded to being a Roma, a ‘Gypsy.’ The friend accompanying me got angry, but I tugged at her sleeve. There was no reason to ruin a good deal over a racist comment. I wanted that flat; the deal was great. And who cared about the real estate agent? Nonetheless, I still remember that comment and regret not retorting to the agent that migrating is a good thing that opens up your mind.

A comment is in order here: My migratory experiences for most of the 1990s took place in a cosmopolitan framework. I lived in Italy but worked in English and French languages. The same was true for my brief internship at the European Commission in Brussels and my fellowship at the London School of Economics. I lived in Brussels or London but had little contact with the local society. My colleagues and friends were from elsewhere, there was little sense of who ‘belonged’ and who did not, and as a European citizen, I was protected. Even though intra-European mobility at the time was not as smooth as it is today, you still needed no visa and did not need to worry about being expelled if your stay permit had expired. I only knew what ‘real’ migration was about from the stories of some of my colleagues from the ‘Balkans’ (e.g., Serbia), Argentina, or Japan. For me, migration controls or irregular migration were research questions, not lived experiences.

After spending about five years studying the impact of immigration on national identity in southern Europe and comparing ‘new’ with ‘old’ host countries in Europe (e.g., Italy, Greece, and Spain with Germany or Britain), my research shifted quite drastically to immigration policy. The reasons were again both biographical and scholarly. From a research and policy perspective, I was particularly concerned with the plight of people with uncertain or outright irregular status in southern Europe, particularly migrant domestic workers or people working in construction, those doing the famous three ‘d’ jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demanding). I was interested in deciphering what was wrong with migration policy in southern Europe – why couldn’t things be simpler? Why were ‘third country nationals’ (or colloquially called: *extracomunitari*, meaning not from the EU) lost in bureaucracy when renewing their permit and receiving the actual document when it had already expired? Just getting permits issued took a long time. Often, the only way to solve their paperwork problems was to bribe someone or have a local contact that would help ‘push’ their case forward. Thus, my work shifted to policy implementation, regime, and migration control.

While a Marie Curie Fellow in Rome, I was looking for my next career step and was inclined to pursue research rather than a teaching path. I had already worked on EU-funded research projects during my Ph.D. studies, and I was ambitious enough to try and write my first project. At the same time, I realized that a research project must have a clear societal or policy relevance to receive funding. It is difficult to obtain financing for a purely conceptual project that will only tell us something

about identity and diversity, modes of belonging, and nationalism conceptions. A project that seeks to answer a specific question, such as how the same immigration policies are implemented in different national and organizational contexts, has a much better chance of succeeding.

This started a career that has evolved into the interaction between what interests me and what is likely to attract funds. I did not perceive this as a contradiction or a compromise. It has been a process of cross-fertilization. For every project, I had to match available funding to particular thematic areas that fit my scholarly interests.

The positive experience of putting together international research projects on migration-related themes has sometimes created a sense of fatigue: projects have their own pace, and by the time you finish one, you already have to start the next. This pace does not respect the inner rhythm of scholarly work that requires pause and reflection. Such contemplation gives space for cultivating your intellectual curiosity and seeking your own research questions rather than answering the research inquiries of policymakers. At the same time, international projects further gave me the freedom to move. After seven years in Italy, I decided to move back to Greece. In the meantime, I met my husband, Evgenios, a Hellenic Air Force pilot. We had had two kids in a transnational family setting, and we wanted to build a bit more of a stable life together. Working with research project funding allowed me to continue my career in Greece, as a return migrant, after 15 years abroad, despite the closed character of the Greek University landscape, where nepotism and networks had a much stronger influence than academic merit. Thus once again, almost by coincidence, my own migratory experience matched my research on migration, as I explain below.

22.4 A Return Migrant

During my first year back to Greece (in 2004), I believe I did not stop complaining about everything: the banks, the postal service, the lack of public parks, and the awkward timetables of other Greek families. Suddenly my country was no longer my own. I was different. My colleagues would comment behind my back that I was ‘strange’, wanted to impose the ‘foreign’ ways and thought I knew better. They were partly right and partly wrong. Clearly, I was a return migrant. I did not start studying return migration, but I did realize that once a migrant, you are always a migrant. You are never entirely at home anymore because you suddenly see everything from a certain distance; you can take a step back and observe how different people or communities deal with similar issues. You can be more sensitive or critical towards your own country of origin. Still, you also become more aware of your positionality towards fellow nationals or migrants and your own subject of inquiry.

As a return migrant, you know that things can be done differently; you have partly absorbed new values, new modes of doing things, and new perspectives. You are perhaps less passionate – your own identity develops in hybrid ways (Bhabha, 1990) – but you are also less innocent. I think most fellow researchers who are

migrants and study migration will recognize this short-circuiting of life and work. It facilitates a self-reflexive approach and being conscious of your positionality towards the subject of your research and authorities, whether they are authorities of your own country of origin or another country.

This realization prompts the researcher to feel privileged and transmit this sense of richness to their study subjects. With my colleague Ursula H. Meinhof (Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006), we theorized this richness as transcultural capital that migrants develop by living in-between two countries and by bringing their networks, their experiences and their traditions from two or more nations together. The work with Ursula focused on migrant artists, but this transcultural connection has been a trope in my research, whether that focused on highly skilled professionals (Bartolini et al., 2017) or irregular migrants (Triandafyllidou, 2019).

22.5 A Migrant Mother or a Mother of Migrant Children?

One of the topics I have studied extensively in my work is the socio-economic and political integration of migrants in different European countries. Education had been one of the topics on which I had worked, from a comparative perspective. I spent hours and days at research workshops discussing why children of migrant families have lower educational attainment than native children, whether the mother tongue of migrant children should be taught at schools, and arguing about the place of religion in school life. In 2012, my husband's career took us to Naples; I had to start living as a migrant mother. My then three boys had been born in Italy during my previous employment in Florence, but we had moved to Greece while they were very young, so they had no memory of it. They had studied some French and some English, but their mother tongue was Greek. After a month at the local international school on the northern outskirts of Naples, my elder son said: "Ok, this is interesting, but when are we going home?" We had to explain that our home was now in Naples.

Children learn fast; before we knew it, they were no longer crying, understood the situation, and gradually started speaking and writing in Italian and English at their bilingual school. What I was not prepared for was for them to lose their Greek. Deep down inside, I had always been convinced that migrant children do not adequately learn the language of the country of origin because migrant parents are (a) not highly educated; and (b) have little time to spend with their children because they work double shifts to make ends meet. None of these two conditions were true in our case – we were both highly educated and were working single shifts – so how could such issues arise? Yet it became clear soon that children acquire their vocabulary and grammar primarily through school and not at home. Migration theory met migration practice. It was a fascinating time re-reading the literature on second and 1.5 generation children while living the experience at home (Alba et al., 2002; Rumbaut, 2004; Portes & Rivas, 2011).

22.6 Too Much Mobility?

Questions over identity have resurfaced time and again in our family. My children are convinced that you are born of a particular nationality—you do not become a national of a given country. They are not satisfied by my ‘grey’ answers—it all depends—they prefer my husband’s clearer answers. We have moved a lot; we made room for a double-career family, which has not been easy. The three older children were born in Italy while we lived between Florence, Ferrara, Patras, and Athens. They grew up in Patras and Athens as toddlers. Before they knew it, we were in Naples, almost a ‘different country’ compared to Florence, socializing with local Italians, Greeks, and US military officers and their families. Then, a fourth brother was born. By the time Italian had become their mother tongue, we had moved from Naples to Florence. My husband became a flying father, commuting between Greece and Italy every other weekend. In Florence, the boys introduced themselves in their new school as Greeks from Naples. A few mothers would come to me asking: ‘What’s the story?’

My son, Kimonas, was seven years old at the time. His schoolteacher—a great teacher in a very welcoming public school—spent the year explaining to me that I should not talk to the boy in Greek at home because this risked confusing him. She also referred him for a dyslexia assessment, along with two more boys I would later discover were both from migrant families. Being a high-skilled, secure, and seasoned migrant, I smiled and thanked her for her interest even though I was annoyed and felt hurt that my child was, in my view, suffering discrimination. But it just hit home why teachers have an essential role to play in education systems and why the ‘ethnic penalty’ (Heath & Cheung, 2007) persists in Germany, the Netherlands, or the U.K., despite all education reforms and scientific evidence (Helot & Young, 2002; Hoff, 2018). In the Accept Pluralism project, one of the best practices we identified was a framework for peer-to-peer dialogue between teachers and parents promoted in Danish schools in Copenhagen (Olsen & Ahlgren, 2011; Triandafyllidou, 2012). The city of Copenhagen pioneered that practice to support the involvement of Muslim migrant mothers in their children’s education and engagement in schools. It also occurred to me that such hurdles were genuine for the Peruvian and Romanian mothers that were my neighbours in Florence.

Another afternoon we were talking politics with the children, and one of my boys expressed negative opinions about immigrants and immigration. He was repeating well-known tropes about immigration being out of control, migrants taking jobs, and not adapting to their local values. When I asked him if he realized we were migrants, too, he was puzzled. While he identified as Greek and not Italian, our socio-economic position and even our phenotype had prevented him from realizing that we were also technically migrants. He had got it right in one sense: we were migrants but not part of ‘those migrants’ about which the newspapers in Italy often reported. We were the ‘good’ migrants that European countries wanted: white, highly skilled, and Christian.

For my children, it is entirely natural to switch from speaking Italian among themselves, to Greek with us parents, or English and French at school. However, their identity is not as fluid. Their exposure to diversity and mobility has led them to identify strongly as Greeks. They have not had the luxury of a stable childhood like my husband and me. For them, Greekness is a solid anchor in a liquid world (paraphrasing Zygmunt Bauman, 2000). This experience has greatly informed my thinking and writing about identity and citizenship. After all, identity is more about diversity and interaction with the Other than the Self. And yet when I thought I had probably gone full circle in my migratory experience and academic career, Canada came to challenge our existence further.

22.7 A ‘White’ European Migrant in a Settler Colonial State?

Responding to a fantastic career opportunity and feeling that this was a new phase for our whole family, a choice my husband also supported, we moved to Toronto in August 2019. Canada has been part of my academic work in my studies of high-skilled labor migration management, refugee resettlement, and of course, multiculturalism. I remember giving a seminar to European Commission officers in Helsinki, Finland, a few years back, comparing the EU Blue Card scheme with the Australian and Canadian systems for attracting highly skilled migrants. To me, Canada was a migrant nation, a place free from the heavy history of European countries, with their wars of independence, civil wars, and religious struggles. I had listened to Justin Trudeau arguing that Canada was the first post-national nation. I was enthusiastic not only about the professional opportunity to create a whole research program at Toronto Metropolitan University (then Ryerson University) but also about the life experience for all of us, particularly our teenage boys. They would live in a truly diverse environment, further develop their English and French, study at a Canadian university, and be genuine global citizens. I knew about Truth and Reconciliation but had not heard the expression “settler colonialism.”

Working and living in Canada, particularly during a pandemic, has been a welcome but steep learning curve. I have had to learn that I am a temporary migrant; my rights and my children’s rights are limited until we become permanent residents. For someone who has spent their life moving within the EU as an EU citizen, that realization came as a cold shower. I thought my high-skilled migrant status would protect me from this experience, as had happened previously. But the Canadian Express Entry system is very egalitarian; you have to jump through the same hoops as everyone else.

A second thing that I have had to learn is that I live in a settler colonial state, and I have to take sides: I have to choose whether I am a settler or a guest, and I have to reflect on the moral and political obligations that arise from my position. This choice is not easy for someone who, although European, comes from an ‘underdog’

country like Greece, whose narrative has been that of being the ‘poor relative’ of Europe while, at the same time, being the ‘cradle of civilization.’ Confrontation with my white privilege requires me to dig ever deeper into my national and racial identity. White is also a color and I do not identify as ‘White’ but people see me as ‘white’.

I have been hiding for a while behind my technical temporariness – I only recently became a ‘permanent resident’ after all. And that does not mean that I intend to stay in Canada for the longer term. I am still grappling with my role in changing settler colonialism in ways that make it more inclusive and equitable. While decolonization is not a metaphor (Tuck & Wayne Young, 2012), history is not going back either and the more I live in Canada the more I become convinced that we need to remake the future together, in ways that undo exploitation and abuse against indigenous peoples but also include the many, very different types of settlers that came to this land rather than reify ‘natives’ and ‘migrants’ (Sharma, 2020). This is a new area of research for me that has pushed my recent writings on nationalism (Triandafyllidou, 2020b) towards new directions engaging with race and history in ways different than what I envisaged before. The project from which this book has arisen is part of this exploration. It has made it even clearer that in research you need to work with the subjects of your research, and learn from them as much as you try to create new knowledge about them.

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Part VIII
Reflections, Conclusions, and New
Beginnings

Chapter 23

Pandemic Thoughts: Life in the Times of COVID-19



Esra Ari and Ozlem Atar

The StOries Project has sought to ‘contaminate’ the academic discourse with personal stories. Any dictionary will tell you that when a substance or place is contaminated, it is suffused with dirty or otherwise harmful chemicals. We invoke the verb contaminate for two purposes. First, we want readers to keep in mind that the stories in this anthology emerged in a period in which hygiene is paramount, and viral contamination has proved to be difficult to contain despite border closures globally, bans on social gatherings, and stringent rules about isolation. Secondly, we would like to point at a divergence from the hygienic language of social scientific research. Rather, the contributions to this volume come through and share the lived experiences of immigrants to Canada. Inspired by evocative narratives such as *The Wounded Storyteller* (2013) by Arthur W. Frank and *Narrative Power* (2019) by Ken Plummer, the COVID-19 experience section of the anthology foregrounds the StOries Project participants’ reflections on the early days of global pandemic. The authentic voice of the “I” claims the central stage in many of these contributions. The authors, our colleagues from the StOries Project, regard creative writing as a mode of inquiry into the lived experience.

As previously clarified in this edited collection, the StOries Project invited a group of graduate students and recent alumni of different disciplinary backgrounds, and with interest in exploring their personal and family stories of migration, to share their experiences through storytelling and creative writing. Furthermore, ten of us also shared their pandemic stories. Each of these pandemic stories will appear after this introduction.

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While there is no dearth of literature on migration and immigration, this project proposes a unique contribution to the migration literature because it foregrounds the voices of immigrants and their lived experiences in Canada. Some of us arrived in Canada as adults; a few others came as children or in teenage years. In this sense, some of us are 1.5 generation (Rumbaut, 2004). We intertwine memories of lived experience in the home country with those accumulated in Canada. The rest of us are second-generation immigrants who were born to immigrant parents in Canada. Our identities are shaped by both our respective home countries. We pick some aspects of each culture we associate ourselves with depending on the social context and our emotional needs to continuously (re)construct our identities, in a manner reminiscent of Nagel's (1994) "shopping cart metaphor."

The StOries Project has enabled us to write our own stories from our own perspectives contrary to the mainstream top to down approach in academic discourse. In other words, we have had the opportunity to "recover our own stories" instead of looking for traces of our lives and stories in discourses written for us by populist researchers, demographers, and academics (Smith, 2021, p. 43). Agreeing with Said (1979) that knowledge is power, we stand against representations and discourses about us which are constructed by mainstream society, the media, and other institutions.

In the StOries Project, our voices are a tool of resistance against mainstream representations of us through *talking back*, *writing back* and *storying back* (hooks, 1989; Smith, 2021). We deconstructed dominant narratives about us in our weekly discussions and in our writings. Nevertheless, this is not a total rejection of all scholarly research. Rather, as Smith (2021) notes in her ground-breaking *Decolonizing Methodologies*, "it is about centering our concerns and world views" (p. 43). The process of writing our stories is a part of the decolonization process, which has empowered us and freed our stories from the dominant narratives. Manipulation of knowledge is one of the central sites of colonisation as well as the appropriation of lands and resources (Mayblin & Tuner, 2021, p. 3). Hence, decolonization in this context refers to a renewed process of knowledge production by the owners of stories in this book.

Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson also illuminate our methodological path by their collaborative storytelling and moving away from the sanitised language of academic writing in *Rehearsals for Living* (Maynard & Simpson, 2022). Through the intimate voice in letter writing, Black activist, writer, and scholar Maynard and Indigenous activist, artist, and writer Simpson confront the most pressing topics ranging from climate change to colonialism and its global aftermaths to the pandemic. They blur the generic line of epistolary writing with intensive sociological inquiry to not only register, but also offer a staunch critique of, ongoing inequities; their accounts of the lived experience and cogent argumentation are backed up with extensive research.

Speaking as two non-Black and non-Indigenous scholars, as allies, we are taking the responsibility of reading, listening to, and learning (from) their stories and standing against oppressive systems. We admit that we may not perceive anti-Black

and anti-Indigenous power structures as clearly as they do. We can only aspire to remain critical thinkers and benefit from their insights in our everyday lives. We are grateful to live as two uninvited guests upon the traditional territories of the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Îyârhe Nakoda, Tsuut'ina and Métis Nations (Esra) and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinabek Nation (Ozlem). However, we are writing with deep gratitude, interlaced with a certain degree of trepidation, to those who enabled our being here and writing ourselves into existence on these pages. We also sit uncomfortably at the border of the Black/White binary for we are considered neither entirely white nor 'proper' Black or Brown persons according to Canada's stratified racial identity system. Therefore, the insights we glean from *Rehearsals for Living* bear traces of hesitation. We aim to progress with care.

The StOries Project was very timely. During the peak of the global pandemic, we built a virtual community. We were invited to break our silence and share our stories in a safe space. Although each story in this compilation is an individual entry, they cannot be defined solely as individual pieces. These stories were written during our weekly discussions, and they contain ideas and comments from our ongoing conversations. These stories would be different had we written them without our collaborative storytelling. In an environment like that, not only did we write about our immigration stories but also our pandemic experiences.

Participants in the StOries Project are cognizant that the COVID-19 pandemic has had differential impacts on different groups, both highlighting and exacerbating deep pre-existing social inequities. Two groups which have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic are racialized persons and recent immigrants. Acknowledging the fact that we are among the privileged in a sense that we were able to isolate during the first phases of the pandemic, we feel part of the immigrant and racialized communities.

Statistical data show that racialized groups from lower income backgrounds have been hit harder by the pandemic (Ahmed et al., 2021; Cheung, 2020; Choi et al., 2021; Government of Canada, 2021; Hawthorn, 2021). They are more prone to infection because they are heavily concentrated in low-income and precarious jobs, where they are likely to encounter others (Government of Canada, 2021). For instance, whereas people of colour comprise half of Toronto's population, they made up 83% of the total COVID-19 cases as of July 30, 2020 (Cheung, 2020). Similar to the United States and United Kingdom, Black people in urban settings are more likely to be infected by COVID-19 (Choi et al., 2021). To illustrate, while they make up only 9% of Toronto's population, 21% of the total reported COVID-19 cases constituted Black Torontians (Cheung, 2020). Black women are one of the most affected groups because they are heavily concentrated in the care industry as personal support workers (Ahmed et al., 2021). The early data make clear that the slogan "We are in this together" does not encompass the racially and socioeconomically underprivileged segments of society.

Furthermore, reports have shown that recent immigrants are under a relatively high risk of COVID-19 related mortality because they predominantly work in essential industries and live in overcrowded dwellings (Neusteatler, 2021). To illustrate,

Yasin Dabeh, a Syrian refugee working as a cleaner in a long-term care centre, died soon after he was diagnosed with COVID-19 (Lamberink, 2021). Obviously, some groups do not have the luxury to *work from home* and *isolate* themselves during the pandemic.

Some, including politicians, explain higher viral infection levels among immigrants with reference to their culture. When London mayor, Ed Holder, argued that elevated viral spread in immigrant communities are a result of large social gatherings in certain ethnic communities, his culturalist explanations overlooked systemic barriers; as a result, he got caught into a simplistic, superficial explanation instead of highlighting systemic problems (Dubinski, 2020). Evidence suggests that vulnerabilities particular groups face under the pandemic are indeed grounded in systemic issues, which have to be addressed by public policies. For instance, if some structural problems including the ongoing affordable housing crisis were addressed and the working conditions of precarious workers were improved, these kinds of disasters would harm these groups significantly less. Obviously, this global crisis is not the first and will not be the last. These disasters are predicted to repeat more often under intensifying climate change and increased enmeshment in the global capital economy.

Another group that is particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic, largely neglected in discussions which prioritise protecting Canadians, is the seasonal agricultural workers. Migrant farmworkers have faced increased risks of susceptibility to the virus not because they are frailer as a group but because they live in overcrowded living conditions with limited access to proper sanitation, healthcare services, and vaccines when they became available to the other segments of society (Haley et al., 2020). We have to be aware that seasonal agricultural workers are essential for sustainable food production in Canada. The Canadian agricultural industry heavily relies on migrant workers. Their lives are put under risk to put food on our tables when we have a luxury to isolate. Caxaj et al. (2022) reported that nine migrant workers lost their lives after contracting with the COVID-19 in Ontario between January 2020 and June 2021. The same study found that there was no standard oversight in health monitoring, quarantine, and case isolation processes on Canadian farms. In addition, the researchers noted that there was no training for migrant workers who did not know how to access health services. Therefore, the COVID-19 outbreaks at on-farm worksites were hardly surprising: these outbreaks, along with the general health and safety risks among migrant farm labourers, were an indication of their tenuous links to Canada through temporary foreign worker status (Vosko & Spring, 2021). Their deportability, that is, the actual and threatened removal from the territory, has always disempowered migrant farmworkers (Basok et al., 2014; De Genova, 2019; Nyers, 2018). However, the recent pandemic has further exacerbated their situation.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed aggravated threats to persons in poorly ventilated carceral spaces including immigration detention centres. While managing to maintain its more benevolent image in contrast to its southern neighbour, Canada is dotted with immigration detention centres and carceral environments used as detention centres, sometimes confronting migrants with indeterminate

incarceration periods due to Canada's failure to adopt maximum time limit (Chak, 2014; Silverman & Molnar, 2016). Since early 2020, the policies aiming to curb the spread of the virus within carceral institutions resulted in considerable distress and harm for the incarcerated and their loved ones. Migrant detainees in a Montreal detention centre went on hunger strike for fear of the COVID-19 (Serebrin, 2021). Likewise, detainee women at the Leclerc detention centre in Laval, Quebec, complained that being in isolation for the COVID-19 meant that they were "in lockdown 24/7, deprived of showers, medication and changes of clothing for days on end, despite assurances from the Public Security Ministry that inmates' needs are being met" (MacLellan, 2022). All these data confirm that the early perception that the COVID-19 would have a uniform impact on everyone, as echoed in "We are in this together," has proved itself wrong. Racialized low-income essential workers, recent immigrants, migrant workers, and persons in detention knew all along that we most certainly are not in the same boat.

What about our colleagues in the StOries Project? This section introduces some of our friends' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The texts they share with readers here respond to a set of questions: "How did we take the global pandemic?" "How did it affect our everyday lives?" "How did we cope with the restrictions?" The submissions demonstrate a generic variety ranging from poems to short stories, to journal entries and critical reflections.

The narratives spotlight the strategies for reflexivity on both the experience of being in enclosed spaces with virtual windows to the exterior of our immediate familial social bubble and the compromised productivity under these circumstances. Overall, these snippets are personal accounts of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected us; they are also bold conversations about our personal desires to continue amid fears for our own health and that of the loved ones. These stories emerged in our weekly virtual gatherings, where we revealed pieces of our lives, fears, and hopes for the future. The section below may best be approached as documents of life in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. We embrace storied lives and lived experience *as* research (Adams et al., 2015). We invite you, readers, to immerse yourselves in the ecology of personal narratives that both experiment with various literary genres and are of sociological importance.

Many of the texts are autoethnographic. Such narratives consider the speaking subject's life experience in relation to and within the context of sociocultural institutions and networks. As Green (Flemons & Green, 2002, p. 166) notes, writing autoethnography is, in essence, "an outing process" where the teller outs themselves knowingly and unwittingly. Paraphrasing Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013), Denzin (2014, n.p.) defines the genre as follows:

Autoethnography is the use of personal experience and personal writing to (1) purposefully comment on/critique cultural practices; (2) make contributions to existing research; (3) embrace vulnerability with purpose; and (4) create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response.

The narrative self in autoethnography boasts, hesitates, stutters. Writing out oneself can be interpreted as a heroic activity or a therapeutic/healing practice. Nevertheless,

this performative research enquiry/method asks one—the observer and the observed at the same time—to embrace vulnerability because it requires weaving in and out of one’s real life more than one does in traditional research writing, which might be very uncomfortable (Custer, 2014). Public airing of life events may also have implications for professional identity and personal relationships as demonstrated in Jago’s (2002) account of her depression as a junior academic. The teller needs to decide not only what stories to tell and how to represent the self in those narratives but also what to withhold from the reader.

Telling intimate personal, and often emotional, tales of lived experience can be wounding (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Ellis, 1999). The “systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall” entails “enter[ing] and document[ing] the moment-to-moment, concrete details of life” (Ellis, 1999, p. 671). Such self-examination is bound to reveal emotional pain, personal fears, and self-doubts, thereby making the researcher/storyteller vulnerable on at least two levels. The vulnerability of consciously dealing with a painful experience while one is probing it deeper accompanies the dangers of opening the self to readers’ scrutiny and criticism (Ellis, 2007, 2020; Jago, 2002). Behar (1997) warns against unnecessary exposure of the self when she writes, “Vulnerability doesn’t mean that anything personal goes” (p. 13). The decision to expose the self (and the significant others) “has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative exposure for its own sake” (pp. 13–14). Allen-Collinson (2013) agrees that self-disclosure must accompany “some degree of self-discipline or self-monitoring, and ... careful premeditation” in order to circumvent potential tangible costs of revealing too much of oneself (p. 284).

Physical and social distancing during the multiple COVID-19 pandemic-related stay-at-home orders exacerbated the feelings of loneliness and heightened the need for a listener. On the one hand, we felt the urge to share, or else reckon with the experience. The participants of the StOries Project knew the “hunger for human affection” (Jago, 2002, p. 737). On the other hand, the fear of being dismissed or judged was overwhelming because stories have the power to define and constrain the storied self. The “I” on the paper becomes “the one who...” in listeners’ and readers’ regard. The contributors had to reconcile the questions such as “Who would be interested in hearing about the fearful self?” “To what end am I telling this story?” “Am I too self-indulgent to take the pen and recount how I feel?” and “Am I exposing my listeners—fellow participants in the StOries Project and now readers—to too much of my life?” The accounts below are intimate tales by junior or emerging researchers, so they carry a degree of hesitance that Kennedy (2020) shares in their article as a doctoral candidate and emerging scholar. There were moments when some of us were at a loss as to what stories to share and how, worrying that the stories we yearn to part with may not be worthwhile or that they may tap into our inner selves and reveal too much about us, rendering the speaking “I” vulnerable not only while telling the story but also when the shared story becomes public.

Personal narratives may also be the stories of others who figure in the stories we tell about ourselves. In autoethnography, ‘my’ story becomes also the story of family members and friends, thus bringing about ethical concerns. The narratives about

'my' COVID-19 experience are interwoven with others' stories. Ellis (2007) introduces the notion of "relational ethics" to capture the importance of due diligence when representing others in one's own story. Therefore, during our weekly meetings and the drafting stages of these entries for the anthology, we needed to consider how we may represent others within our personal narratives without causing harm to these represented others. The central question has never been how to use others' stories to be able to tell our own (Wall, 2008); it has been a narrative construction of interpersonal relationships within less sociable times (Bochner & Ellis, 1995). Allen-Collinson (2013) recommends two strategies to better address ethical concerns stemming from relationality in autoethnographic writing: to not finalise the stories of others and to converse with the others, including the audience, instead of saying the last word. Bearing this astute advice in mind, we also want to adopt a relational language by addressing the reader, you, in the second person and hope to create an ongoing author-reader dialogue. Hence, we insist that each entry represents a perspective not the definitive word. We hope that our collaborative pool of autoethnographic voices illustrates ways of ethical storytelling that overcomes some of the limitations inherent in placing the relational self at the centre stage (Lapadat, 2017).

At the beginning of the pandemic, the confinement imposed by the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders pushed everyone to be more creative. Inventive social projects ranged from physically distanced communal dance sessions (Murray, 2020) to collaborative creative projects such as "the Pandemic Journaling Project" co-founded by Willen and Mason (2020) and research writing over WhatsApp and Google docs (Bolander & Smith, 2021), turning the distressing time of uncertainty into "boom times" for qualitative inquiry (Rosenwald, 2020). Bolander and Smith (2021) praised the indirect benefits of virtual collaboration. The gains Willen and Mason (2020) listed included insights into how different people experienced the pandemic and the positive impact of weekly journaling on the participants' mental health. It seemed that each of us was developing their own versions of coping mechanisms in the face of the pandemic. These endeavours were expressions of our craving for the social and physical presence of others. In addition, many researchers explored the potentials of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) in these methodologically challenging times (e.g., Godber & Atkins, 2021; Guy & Brittany, 2020; Lupu, 2021; Roy & Uekusa, 2020). Whereas autoethnography entails the inquiry of the self and reflective interpretations of the self's feelings and thoughts within the context of family, work, and other societal institutions, CAE focuses on shared experiences, prioritises learning from one another (Blalock & Akehi, 2018), and entails engaging in collective research and writing in pairs or teams (Chang, 2008, 2013; Chang et al., 2016; Ellis, 2007; Hernandez et al., 2017; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Whether written individually or collectively, autoethnography intimately connects life to research.

The StOries Project was one of those innovative endeavours that aimed to reverse the adverse impacts of the pandemic on research through collective thinking and producing. The participants responded to a set of questions provided by the facilitator group during each meeting. Once the weekly sessions came to an end, we (Esra

and Ozlem) invited our colleagues to share their COVID-19 entries with us, ten of whom responded to our calls with enthusiasm. We made the writing process of this introduction very transparent through sharing drafts in a folder open to everyone's comments, empowering each other by sharing thoughts and sources, posing questions, and offering suggestions. In addition, in perfect alignment with the central tenet of CAE, our introduction is the product of collaboration and openness that pivoted towards community building, power-sharing, and the enrichment of the research (Chang et al., 2016).

The personal contributions in the following pages also show that autoethnography most definitely allows one to move beyond personal accounts of one's immediate familial circle. They are proof that this method builds a bridge between the personal accounts and the socio-political context (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). In his groundbreaking book, *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (2000) says, "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (p. x). Hence, in each personal story of this collection, there are some public issues of concern. The themes emerge in these stories are motherhood, transnationalism, globalisation, immigration, belonging, the Covid-19 and academic lives, crisis management and reckoning with deep inequalities during the pandemic.

Motherhood emerges as a central theme in various works. Some of the stories in this section can be read through the *intensive mothering* ideology which was developed by feminist theory in North America. As Arendell (2000, p. 1194) observes, the *intensive mothering* ideology dictates mothering to be exclusively child-centred, emotionally involving and time-consuming" and to build their identities around their children. In this view, "The mother is devoted to the care of others; she is self-sacrificing and "not a subject with her own needs and interests" (Bassin et al., 1994, p. 2). Mothers are called upon to be the first in meeting their children's needs, including comforting them emotionally. Furthermore, the pandemic has certainly exacerbated the expectations put on mothers' shoulders. Working mothers have juggled work and family during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although their workload has not been reduced, their care activities have intensified at home. Children's staying at home has brought about additional responsibilities. Some mothers have felt the burden even more because of their intersecting identities. It was first Crenshaw (1991) who highlighted the intersections of race and gender to grasp the unique experiences of Black women. Neither race nor gender has explanatory power on its own to account for the marginalisation of racialized women (Andersen & Hill-Collins, 2010). In this vein, multiple aspects of identities interlock and inform the everyday experiences of most women.

Esra Ari, addresses the challenges that came with becoming a new mother under lockdown circumstances. "**My 2020 Pandemic Summer: Long Days of Mothering**" features an immigrant mother who is also a junior academic. Ari feels that the pandemic compounded the insurmountable task of caring for the youngest member of her immigrant household under lockdown conditions. She expresses her helplessness and frustration by pointing at the absence of institutional support mechanisms in place due to the closure of daycares as well as the lack of familial support through grandparents' visits, which came to a halt for her due to border

closures for non-urgent international travel. Ari confesses: “I could not soothe my son. I could not put him to sleep, and I was agitated all the time. I felt like I was a failure at mothering.” Ari’s reflection also holds a mirror to being a junior academic with a temporary job contract. Research has shown that having children has a negative impact on women’s academic careers (Minello et al., 2021; Parlak et al., 2021). Ari undercores that the pandemic has compounded the difficulties for women academics, especially the ones who hold a precarious position in a competitive job market. The reflection conveys its author’s existential terror about losing one’s job (Blustein & Paige, 2020). Spending a day with your baby is considered “unproductive” in the academic world. This has created a constant anxiety for Ari about her future career trajectories, similar to other female scholars during the pandemic (Blithe et al., 2022; Minello et al., 2021; Buckinx et al., 2022). Intersectional approach, thus, becomes fundamental to have a deeper grasp of the pandemic on women academics, whose social class, gender, immigration, and race intersect to exacerbate the impact of the global pandemic. Similar to Guy and Brittany (2020), who reflect on their dual roles as mothers to newborns and academics at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine, Ari writes that the much-sought-after time to do research was elusive with the arrival of her son. Ari’s reflection reminds us that even boredom was a luxury for some of us when the pandemic quarantine forced everyone to shelter home with babies and teaching duties.

Natasha Damiano’s poem “**Believe Me, I had Covid**” touches on being sick as a single mother. The speaking subject in the poem is with her sick daughter. While she is expected to care for and soothe her daughter, there is no one around to reassure the mother. The woman is standing with “limbs as heavy as death” in the corridors of a COVID-19 emergency clinic. A paramedic’s “make sure you sleep in separate bedrooms” advice meets with the woman’s class-conscious retort: “that is, if you have them.” Damiano points at a bald fact: many single mothers cannot afford sufficient accommodation; some are forced to ‘choose’ cohabitation with other mothers to share childcare duties and accommodation costs (Edin & Lein, 1997; Canadian Women’s Association, n.d.). The mother in Damiano’s poem feels abandoned by the system. She addresses our need for reassurance in times of sickness and uncertainty. The doctor is dismissive of her pain. “It sounds like you want reassurance” insists she, unmoved by the patient’s recount of pain. Damiano’s question “who cares for the caregiver?” reminds that perennial puzzle: who looks after the caregiver? Who reassures the single mother, who is indispensable for the material and psychological wellbeing of the child when the mother herself is sick? Being called on to provide primary care to their sick children brings individuals high emotional burdens. By foregrounding a single mother’s voice, Damiano insists that a comprehensive response to the COVID-19 pandemic must encompass the basic social needs of caregivers.

Another theme explored in the COVID-19 stories section is **transnationalism**. Basch et al. (1994) define transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (p. 7). Some argue that transnationalism can be liberatory for immigrants (Faist & Bilecen, 2019; Portes, 2003; Vertovec, 2009; Viruell-Fuentes,

2006). Immigrants marginalised by the rest of the society because of the physical and cultural differences turn to their collective memories of home, which creates a refuge to soothe their insecurities in a new land (Allahar, 2001). Transmigrants thus never break their ties with their home, whether real or imagined, through their transnational activities such as regular contact with their friends and relatives and visits to their origin country (Kemppainen et al., 2020). In this sense, these transnational activities are strategic tools to adapt to their new homes (Viruell-Fuentes, 2006).

Sadaf Khajeh tells how the pandemic has hit her in **“Putting My Longing into Perspective.”** Khajeh is an immigrant in Canada and she longs for her country. This longing for Iran was already there before the COVID-19, but the global disease made it worse, bringing borders closures and ban on international travel except for emergencies. Khajeh is one of millions who cannot go back home and spend time with the beloved. She puts her thoughts eloquently when she writes, “Before the pandemic, acknowledging my longing for Iran meant saving and planning for a trip back home; during the pandemic acknowledging my longing meant dwelling with the thought of possibly not seeing my beloved for another month, year, or even years.” Khajeh’s story reveals how the pandemic has disrupted some of immigrants’ coping strategies.

Also indexing transnational existence, **Ozlem Atar’s “One Cup at a Time”** focuses on familial bonding and responsibilities across national borders during the pandemic. Atar’s obsessive scanning of Turkish media outlets for the COVID-19 news in the early days of the pandemic and her critical appraisal of the Turkish state’s harsh response to whistleblowers can be explained by the term “migrant transnationalism” (Vertovec, 2009). Her academic calendar urges Atar to fulfil the requirements of her responsibilities as a graduate student in Canada, yet Atar’s thoughts and feelings anchor her firmly in her transcontinental country. The personal, the familial, and the societal are interlocked with the global in her chronicle of 2020.

Atar is a female member of what is termed transnational family. While transnational families are not a new formation, the term is proposed to capture kinship relations among family members who are separated by national borders (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002/2020; Baldassar et al., 2007a, b). Contemporary transnational families continue to be virtually present in each other’s lives and retain a sense of belonging and familyhood through audiovisual technology (Baldassar, 2008; Baldassar et al., 2014, 2016). In Atar’s contribution, the fear of losing her mother emerges as a central theme. She mentions emotionally challenging conversations with her mother in the first few months of the pandemic. Each day during the daughter’s lunch hour, the two women sit at the opposite ends of the line. Atar’s mother is not in the best of health. Her daughter wishes to improve the mother’s emotional well-being, yet she finds the familial obligations of caregiving taxing on her psychological health. The pandemic claims the sick woman’s friends and leads to a fear of not being able to see her daughter again. This fear, however, opens up some unexplored opportunities for them to reconnect and converse about intimate familial topics.

Caregiving for elderly and frail parents is often investigated in national contexts. In rural Türkiye, daughters and daughters-in-law are expected to take on a stereotypically feminine caregiving role for ageing parents and physical proximity is assumed to be a precondition for effective caregiving (Bora, 2021; Özateş, 2015). Atar's desire to address her mother's increasing care needs from an insurmountable physical and emotional distance urges us to carefully consider transnational caregiving practices during the pandemic (Baldassar et al., 2016). Atar's efforts, through contacting a journalist and a hotline, to confront subpar caregiving services in a medical institution despite the distance between Canada and Türkiye reminds us that physical borders are increasingly irrelevant when it comes to reciprocity and familial obligations. Lastly, Atar implies that one way to overcome personal mental distress during the first year of the pandemic was possible for her by nourishing her body and soul with the familiar: Turkish folk music and tea seem like Atar's chosen remedies.

Arun's Rajavel's **"My COVID Diary"** provides readers with sharp criticism of capitalism and global inequality in relation to the pandemic. The global capitalist system offers limited opportunities to wage earning masses across the world (Sklair, 2003). The COVID-19 exacerbated existing class inequities alongside its gendered and racialized characteristics. Working class people who do not have the luxury to isolate themselves are hit hardest by the pandemic. Frontline workers such as personal support workers and cashiers at the groceries have been more likely to contract the virus. There have been efforts to disguise the unequal system when many happily marched under the banner of "We are all in this together" during the first days of the pandemic (Harvey, 2020). As a response to this rhetoric, Arun says:

We quickly realised how naïve we were and how poorly informed our thinking was, fed on a plethora of cheesy Hollywood movies, where, during alien invasions, the entire world comes together, and love, the one element that aliens supposedly lack, ultimately triumphs. We came to an understanding that those were just movies. Fiction. In real life, however, we are a species who thrive by othering our neighbours.

Rajavel's disillusionment is met with deliberate optimism in Alka Kumar's **"When a Hug Could be a Death Sentence: Living in the Age of COVID-19."** Kumar opens her memory with a 'sidenote' to her earlier observations of the 2020 pandemic days. "Unprecedented times" was one expression deployed to define those early moments. Unprecedented in the sense that we had never gone into all-in lockdowns globally, making our streets look like post-apocalyptic empty spaces, the likes of which one sees in post-apocalyptic Hollywood movies. Kumar conveys this sense of the unprecedented when she writes "as though a completely new template were in use" and "We are much less grounded in certainties." Kumar's synchronous account (in the sense writing is happening when the pandemic is taking place rather than recollections of the early pandemic days we read in Atar's piece) can be read with reference to Beck's notion of "risk society." Beck (1992) argues that modernity and the new technologies embedded in the production processes have backfired on societies and produced uncertainties and uncontrollable consequences. Communities in different parts of the world are now united by "an increasing vulnerability to risk"

(Ekberg, 2007, p. 343). We are much more exposed to human made, and sadly uncontrollable, catastrophes such as health risks and environmental disasters than ever. While it is dubious how the COVID-19 emerged, it has traversed the globe so quickly. No country could prevent its spread among their populations and according to the World Health Organisation, COVID-19 related death tolls exceeded six and a half million as of 30 September 2022. Our lives have transformed incredibly under the lockdowns although this does not change the fact that certain groups are more privileged: they can afford to stay and work from home, thus evading the risks associated with crowded public transport and workspaces where essential workers find themselves on a daily basis. Kumar does not communicate a disillusionment with the system; she communicates the perplexity of the early days. However, she does not lose her hope in humanity. On the contrary, she sees the positive:

while we're socially apart from our family and friends, terrified of human contact for fear of contracting this deadly virus, we have never felt closer to each other in the acute awareness we now have of our shared humanity, and the vulnerabilities that come with that. Neighbours who lived on the same street for years but barely knew each other; and complete strangers too, are taking initiative, shopping for groceries and delivering cooked food to the elderly and those less able to take care of themselves.

Kumar embraces the newfound comradery among neighbours nourishing on our “shared humanity” and common vulnerability to the virus. She underlines that solidarity emerges in moments of crisis to sustain us.

Chelsea Nyomi Richards’s **“In a Way, We’re All Connected”** showcases the global aspect of pandemics. Earlier experiences have already shown how pandemics spread fast across the globe, which is one of the results of globalisation (Harvey, 2020; Carmona-Gonzales & Sanchez-Martin, 2021). Despite the different genres through which they chose to express their thoughts about the pandemic, Rajavel, Kumar, and Richards converse eloquently with each other. While Arun and Alka deconstruct the slogan “We are all in this together” and indeed reveal how the pandemic has unveiled and exacerbated inequalities between the haves and have nots as well as the disparities among wealthy and poor nations, Richards’s perspective of “us” and “them” gradually becomes the collective “we” as the pandemic became a global problem. At first, the pandemic seems so far away from Chelsea looking out the world from a window. She observes the destruction from a sheltered place. Later on, the realisation that there is nowhere to run away seeps in. This is a global problem. The singular “I” gradually becomes the collective “we” in the poem. The “us” versus “them” divide fades. The poet urges a reckoning with our global entanglements and interconnectedness even with the persons in remote corners of the world. Richards embraces the inescapable we-ness of human beings. In a similar tone, maintaining her critical approach, Kumar still keeps her optimism, investing in the idea of “our common humanity.” Conversely, Arun ends his reflection in a pessimist tone and engages in a self-critique for not taking action for change. The speaking ‘I’ in Rajavel’s self-reflection chooses to stay in their comfort zone.

We could not help but feel the sense of urgency in the reflective I’s voice upon reading Bibi Baksh’s memory of the COVID-19 pandemic moment: **“2020: The Year of Stormy Stillness.”** Baksh reflects on grief over the loss of her elderly

family members but also over decreased contact with the younger generations in her immediate circle. Moreover, Baksh writes herself into the temporal space of the COVID-19 as an emerging scholar who lost meaningful contact with colleagues at her university due to hasty decisions regarding immediate and long-term campus closures. Baksh's description of the yellow tape circling the playground and the danger sign reminded us of a post-apocalyptic action film in which the male hero is charged with saving the world. But in the apocalyptic months Baksh vividly reconstructs, there is no such self-driven hero to save the world. The female protagonist looks at her immediate circle to interpret what the pandemic brought about. Baksh recounts the experience of contracting the COVID-19. What remains is "the grey fog" that covered her vision for 2 weeks. Isolation, a notorious term associated with the pandemic and precautions, takes the central stage in Baksh's reflection. She and her partner spend time in isolation. Baksh underlies that social isolation or the involuntary loss of social contact with family and friends over an extended period has had repercussions for her productivity in a similar manner predicted by Mortazavi and colleagues (Mortazavi et al., 2020). Her account aligns well with research that links mental health, sleep disruption due to stress to concerns about the future, being away from family, and reduced social support (Agha, 2021). The remedy, Baksh suggests, was to make conscious efforts to seek contact. The StOries Project with its over 20 participants and flexible structure provided just that.

Owen Guo's "The COVID-19 Sidebar" balances the despair we observe in Baksh's reflection. Guo zooms in on a specific night during the early days of the pandemic. The former journalist takes us to a 'blurry' day in Toronto. The analogy between the breaking of his glasses and the fracture in the ordinary running of our lives is obvious. Guo, however, underlines our interdependence and optimism in the face of adversities. His humorous impressions of the day without glasses chimes well with social scientific research on the contributions of optimism to the overall well-being during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Reizer et al., 2022; Saricali et al., 2020; Umucu & Lee, 2020). Guo's humorous account waves at research findings on stress reducing behaviour in the face of adverse incidents. Subtle in its manifestations, humour in Guo's voice is both self-enhancing and affiliative (Martin et al., 2003). He eases his stress by turning to friends, his favourite radio show, and music; through affiliative humour, he builds rapport with the reader by detailing an incident anyone may have. He amuses his readers by consciously holding a humorous perspective on life after a momentary panic. His story presents us with two strategies to cope with adverse life events: seeking friends' support and having an optimistic outlook on life. His story of fractured glasses is both a "sidebar" and a window to understand the overall picture of the global pandemic moment.

Jenny Osorio's short story "Five Words, or the Story of How We Lived Through 2020" maintains the upbeat tone we observe in Guo's 'sidebar' musings. Osorio highlights the role of play and playfulness in crisis management. Following Proyer (2017), we understand play to be an observable behaviour which entails creativity and fun. Playfulness is understood to be a personality trait and associated with creativity (Lieberman, 1977). Play and playfulness are linked with social connectedness, which contributes to overall well-being by reducing the detrimental

impact of stressful life events on physical and mental health. Strict physical distancing rules enforced globally during COVID-19 lockdown have challenged our primal instinct to socialise (Clifford et al., 2022). Play and playfulness are not only important touchstones of child development; adult play and playfulness are also recognized as a coping strategy (Tonkin & Whitaker, 2021). Humans require an intense degree of social interaction. By underlining the importance of doing activities as part of family, Osorio taps into our innate ability. She invites us to join her playful household. “The story of how we lived through 2020” is an account of the early days of the pandemic from the perspective of a toddler. “Once upon a time, when I was two years old, there was a virus,” chants our minor storyteller. Still bewildered, Juju does not seem to regret that “When the virus came to Canada and started to make people ill, they closed [his] daycare.” Instead, he rejoices at the quality time he gets to spend with his parents. Juju is generous in sharing their/his family photos. Osorio’s creative account gives voice to her son. Children’s voices are often omitted as they are not seen as mature enough to make sense of their lives (Crump & Phipps, 2013; Drummond et al., 2009). Very few studies capture children’s views on matters of importance (Alter, 2022; Lundy et al., 2021). This is even more valid when it comes to discussing serious issues such as migration and health emergencies. Juju’s perception of the pandemic shows the resilience of children in the face of the destructive effects of the pandemic. Even though it is a narrative play the author deploys to capture the first year of the pandemic, the medium Osorio has chosen reminds us that youngsters are powerful. Also, it demonstrates that Juju is too young to express an awareness of the coronavirus, its threats, and consequences. Juju, the protagonist, invites us to notice the positivity even when a disastrous wind is blowing outside his house. Osorio’s contribution also foregrounds proactive parenting during the lockdowns.

As we are bringing this introduction to an end, we desire to initiate a dialogue. We want to reiterate that our collaboration through the StOries Project and collective storying made the COVID-19 pandemic days breathable. It is our hope that the individual voices will resonate with many readers. Ellis (1999) articulates well what narratives are about, and what they are capable of doing, when she explains that:

The truth is that we can never capture experience. Narrative is a story about the past, and that’s really all fiend notes are: one story about what happened written from a particular point of view at a particular point in time for a particular purpose. ...[E]very story is partial and situated. (Ellis, 1999, p. 674)

In conveying the meanings, we have attached to our COVID-19 experience, our goal was to tell a plurivocal story that readers could feel part of. In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank (2013) recommends thinking with a story instead of thinking about one. Thinking with a story. This is what we tried to achieve. The stories we tell through poetry, fiction, personal essays, and fragmented writing constructed scenes, some recalled weeks and months after the described incidents took place, emotions evoked retrospectively; others record moments as those incidents were taking place. Some deploy repetitions and fragmented narration. The authors`

reliance on repetition reflects the intensity of feeling and experience and helps build that intensity textually.

Our narratives do not form a unified or coherent whole. They do not have to. They record the moment when the COVID-19 ceased to be the latest CNN news report we barely glanced at. They report when and how the pandemic entered our personal lives. They detail how we continued conducting research while physically and socially distancing from research participants, colleagues, and supervisors. They attest to an academically and methodologically challenging time. In this sense, they function like literary ethnographies. Appreciated together, they form a “a composite portrait of social and historical phenomena” (Van de Poel-Knottnerus & Knottnerus, 1994, p. 67). They reveal that days flowed into weeks; months stretched to become more than two taxing years at the time of writing this chapter introduction. We insisted that storytelling even in the time of COVID-19 must be collaborative. We would like you to think about your stories in relation to ours. We will know these personal interpretations are valid and valuable when parts of our narratives speak to and cohere with yours. We will enjoy a sense of achievement when they inspire you to converse with others about your experience.

23.1 My 2020 Pandemic Summer: Long Days of Mothering

By Esra Ari

When my mum came to Canada in February 2020 to help me look after my son, he was six months old. He never liked sleeping, so I felt fatigued all the time. I was back to work part-time when he was one and a half months old, and the days I was out for work were keeping me alive. I always liked to be connected with the world, which became harder after my son was born.

My mum managed to go back to Türkiye in April 2020 amidst the pandemic on a flight sent by the Turkish government. After her return, I became a full-time mother. Things got out of control. Daycares were shut down. I could not soothe my son. I could not put him to sleep. I was sleep deprived, and I was agitated all the time. I felt like I was a failure in mothering.

I was listening to comments about how people spent their time during the pandemic. Some were bored or did not know what to do. Some were happy because the pandemic slowed down their life. Some were back to nature. The bicycles were out of stock! And others were so productive without all the distractions in normal life. Whenever I listened to these comments, I felt frustrated because they had the luxury of being bored or relaxing during the pandemic. I constantly felt nervous because I was not sure when I would get back to work. My partner both worked and studied almost fifteen hours in a day, so I felt lonely and imprisoned at home. I had this constant feeling of disappointment and frustration. Not being able to work, not being able to read, not being able even to sleep...

I decided to give my son sleep training because I was so close to losing my sanity, especially after my mum returned home. It worked. There was too much crying,

but it worked. My son started sleeping on his own from 7:30 pm to 6 am. It was the first time I felt like I was not that bad at mothering. Later on, at some point, I started going for long walks with my son (in his stroller). That helped us a lot. I also remember that summer 2020 was hot. Sweltering hot. And I still have sunspots on my face from those long walks under the heat.

Finally, the daycares reopened, and my son was in daycare in September 2020. I went back to work. I remember my son's tears in his first two weeks at the daycare. Whenever I remember those moments, I feel the *pain* in my heart. The feeling of *guilt*...

23.2 Believe Me, I Had Covid

By Natasha Damiano

the doctor does her best
to convince me it's normal
exhausted and breathless
limbs as heavy as death
"you tested negative, is that correct?"
sick but not sick enough I guess
"maybe you had a panic attack"
yah, that happens to women
panic attacks and being told it's just a panic attack

nurses assure me it's all "perfectly normal"
as though that's a good thing
still, I cannot shake it
nor the god-awful memory
of the cold sting
the swab protruding up my nasal passage
piercing my thoughts
and any hope of an answer
"you should have the negative results within two days"
they don't believe me

I leave with my disappointment
and a pamphlet, like a sacred bible
with instructions for close contacts
the voice of Public Health reminding me
we have all the tools
but none of the power

at home I separate
masking my face and the pain of not knowing
from the sick child I must protect
both silenced by fear and discomfort
and the paramedic's forewarning
"make sure you sleep in separate bedrooms"

that is, if you have them
and if your child will sleep alone

while you're at it
make sure you haul that sack of virulated bedsheets
back to the laundry again
if you breathe fiercely enough
you might just make it back to bed
before the dinner you still have to make out of a can
when you parent alone and sick
there are no protocols

only the haunting realization
that you are in this alone
without witness to your grief
the ear of one who might relieve your anxiety
does anyone even care
who cares for the caregiver?
no-one, if you're not dying
you can take care of yourself

until you cannot and you find yourself waiting again
for the doctor whose voice betrays their mounting impatience
your questions irritating the 'one problem per visit' mantra
as you wait for something more than
diagnostic assessments can provide
confirming only what you already know
"you did test negative, so we can cross that off the list"
they still don't believe me

I feel the nameless germ roving within
like a shapeshifting creature
migrating through blood-swelled veins to find its new home
a place to reproduce its sickly self
from throat to guts to head
until at last it rests in silence
squeezing the world tight before my eyes
with fear that this may never end
or that perhaps it will, only badly
unspeakable words demanding that someone else
be with the suffering that I alone must bear
"It sounds like you like you want reassurance"
yah, you don't say

23.3 Putting My Longing Into Perspective

By Sadaf Khajeh

I wonder if anyone else has felt this; I'm sure some have. Being an immigrant means having loved ones halfway across the world. I shouldn't just say "loved ones;" they

are more than that. They are of my flesh and bones, the reason for my beating heart ... my parents, cousins and best friends. I wake up every morning expecting to see a text message from my best friend, and not a single day starts for me without talking on the phone with my parents. Though the distance is hard to bear, there has always been the subtle reassurance that at any given time I can book a flight back home if I feel the distance is becoming too much to bear. This has always been the case, or I should say this was always the case until the pandemic took over the world.

With COVID-19, came limitations: airports closed and almost all countries restricted entry, and that subtle reassurance in the back of my mind disappeared altogether. Oh, how different it feels hearing your mother's voice but not knowing when you'll be able to see her face in person. Or planning your next visit back home but not having a single clue when it could take place or if it could ever take place. For as long as I remember, being in Canada meant longing for Iran, but the "longing" I had known all throughout my life was nothing like the one I experienced through the pandemic. Before the pandemic, acknowledging my longing for Iran meant saving and planning for a trip back home; during the pandemic acknowledging my longing meant dwelling with the thought of possibly not seeing my beloved for another month, year, or even years.

We forget what a privilege it is to know or be able to plan for the future. To go online and check ticket prices. To open our calendars and pick the perfect dates to travel back home. To talk to our loved ones about the weather and what it will be like when we come to visit, so that we can plan road trips while we're back home. It truly is a privilege to know your family, your home and your roots are just a flight away. The pandemic, however, took that privilege away and, for a while, I felt really helpless being an immigrant with half my heart on the other side of the world, out of my reach.

23.4 One Cup at a Time

By Ozlem Atar

My 2020 was a long, lonely blink. When I noticed a few Asian students wearing masks late February, I thought the maskers must be exceptionally anxious folks. A new virus was bothering strangers in remote places. It hardly made any sense to be sporting a face covering when strolling downtown Kingston.

On March 13, Queen's University suspended undergraduate classes for the week of March 16–20. I welcomed this break as a gift. The kind they call a blessing in disguise: I wanted to continue polishing my annotated bibliography. I was going to have my field exam in April, which got postponed quite a few times in the following weeks. As my supervisor put it in one of her many emails those days, "Everyone [was] figuring out what [was] happening."

On March 19, watching the footage of a military fleet carrying coffins out of an overwhelmed Italian town froze me for a brief while. The scene was reminiscent of

a war. Still not enough to make me realise that life would be in hiatus for over 2 years.

An amateur video from Türkiye was a turning point in my comprehension of the situation. Dr. Güle Çınar, an infectious disease expert, referred to cases across the country, telling those present that they were underprepared to meet the new demand the crisis posed, with over a thousand patients filling their clinic. In her view, the COVID-19 cases exceeded thousands, and the twenty-one thousand pilgrims who had recently returned from Saudi Arabia had “ruined” the situation—an explanation for which she was forced to apologise although she was sharing the facts with medical students as part of an internal training session and the video was shot and posted on social media unbeknownst to her. At that stage, the Turkish government was denying that there were any cases in the country, and those who claimed the opposite were deemed ‘traitors’ to the nation.

The video hit me hard, blurring the rest of the year. Sick with worry, I began to obsessively search for news about the spread of cases in my home country. With the state’s expansive power to censure the media and its harsh criminal defamation and antiterrorism laws that bully journalists and citizen journalists alike, there were no reports for weeks. I was safe in my one-bedroom apartment in a small Canadian city; were my parents in Türkiye?

One question bothered me most throughout the year: what if my mother contracts the virus? She spends most days in hospital for this or that medical condition. A brush with the virus when you live with poorly managed diabetes and severe kidney disease cannot be something you shrug off.

Sometime in April or May 2020, mom and I got into the habit of video conferencing around noon every day. We went over mundane events of the day. I asked about her health, my father’s work on the farm, and silently hoped she would ask how I was coping with feelings of loneliness. After all, I lived in a foreign country and the pandemic quickly eroded my quite fragile social networks. It is hard to acknowledge the desire to connect with someone when you have been physically and emotionally distanced for years.

As I heard more about my parents’ concerns, my yearning for reciprocity must have faded. First, the dialysis centre called off the shuttle service that picked mom from their house in the countryside three times a week. The dialysis centre demanded that the patients arrive at the centre in their own vehicles to avoid contact with other patients. As a senior citizen, my father was ordered to shelter at home and could not risk a heavy fine for driving mom to the town centre. Then, mom was denied food and drinks during the dialysis sessions, which left her very weak.

I recall exchanging emails with a *Deutsche Welle* journalist based in Istanbul, hoping she might publish an editorial about my own and other kidney disease patients’ grievances. Someone had to expose how private medical institutions were abusing the COVID-19 measures to rationalise budget cuts and poor service, risking patients’ health. I also remember making a complaint about the dialysis centre’s approach through the Presidency’s Communication Centre (CIMER)—unusual for a sceptic of such citizen-spying channels.

As time passed and the ‘novelty’ of the pandemic subsided, mom and I began to talk about other topics that mattered to me. I asked mom about her own mother, carefully avoiding her painful death in her mid-fifties. Her husband called my grandmother Deliş, the crazy one—not a term of endearment. It was my nickname, too, when I was a kid. Feigning a casual tone, I also asked mom why she stopped coming to pick me up on Fridays when I was in boarding school just a couple of hours’ bus ride away. Our chats would reveal bits mom kept from us kids then. A hesitant, newfound intimacy developed between the two of us—two steps forward, one step back.

Losing several of her friends, all kidney patients like herself, and her sister-in-law sapped mom’s morale. She repeatedly asked, “Will I ever see you before...?” Certain words need not be said out loud. “She moved to Germany” is mom’s preferred expression when she means another friend of hers has passed away.

Our conversations often left me feeling miserable. I had to put on a cheerful face and remind myself that these conversations were never about me; they were about her. My goal was to keep mom busy. Thus passed 2020 in a long, lonely blink. Days, weeks, months ...

25 October 2021 is the day of an epiphany. Life is what Aşık Veysel, the Turkish bard and saz player, called “long winding road.” You arrive. You journey. You pass. All you need to do is to face life with one cup of tea at a time, like my parents and I do when we are on hour-long video calls.

23.5 My COVID Diary

By Arun Rajavel

Isn’t it crazy how, during the very onset of COVID-19 pandemic, we thought that this would bring us all together? Newspapers ran opinion pieces with titles like “The Great Equaliser.” There was a rhetoric in the air that the virus affects everyone equally-- the rich and the poor alike, the haves and have-nots alike, citizens and non-citizens alike. It was indeed a time of great disillusionment. Despite the horrifying news of piling deaths and people gasping for their last breath, desperately hoping for a cure, and governments seizing the opportunity to enforce effective control of their borders and their residents’ lives, we all – or, at least, I did – had hope in our eyes: we dreamt of a fair and equal world. We imagined an equalising calamity would bring us all together; that we are in this fight together; that the virus does not discriminate and would affect us all equally; that the suffering is not just for us but the same the world over. We sought refuge in this comforting thought. But then within the first few weeks, we saw how physical distancing and access to clean water for sanitisation is impossible for a very large majority, and that these are privileges that we took for granted. Soon, we saw how the rich and the upper-middle class stocked up supplies and wiped clean supermarket shelves, depriving others of basic amenities. We saw how the world’s millionaires and billionaires made record profits, while multitudes of employees got fired and small businesses went

bankrupt. We quickly realised how naïve we were and how poorly informed our thinking was, fed on a plethora of cheesy Hollywood movies, where, during alien invasions, the entire world comes together, and love, the one element that aliens supposedly lack, ultimately triumphs. We came to an understanding that those were just movies. Fiction. In real life, however, we are a species who thrive by othering our neighbours.

While this was before the invention of the vaccine, we—or, at least, I—saw scientists from the world over collaborate in pursuit of this single goal. Knowledge sharing between scientists from different countries, many of them striving to make all the information open source, government and private bodies approving huge funding, and so on, made us hopeful again. We thought that the case of glaring inequalities may be so for hospitalisations and privileged work-from-home situations, but the vaccines would once more bring everyone to safety. Humanity, as a whole, would be cured. Alas! How misguided and idealistic were we! We once again saw wealthy countries hoarding up vaccines and even wasting many of the doses as their citizens wouldn't turn up to receive their free doses, whereas their greed, in many cases, blocked access to vaccine in/by poor countries, where people were desperate to get vaccines and were even paying for something that should have been free. It is the same “great equaliser” thinking that was thrown out the window once more.

Left with a yawning gap between the rich and the poor, aggravated even more by the onset of the pandemic, we do nothing but nurse derision for the privileged. We can do nothing but mourn collectively our failure as a society. We, as a species, don't deserve to survive, do we? All that we can do, given all this awareness and resources, is just to lament, not commit ourselves to any tangible action, isn't it so? This author sits in their cosy room, in front of their expensive MacBook, having enjoyed working from home throughout the pandemic, not having seen any major changes in their lifestyle and comfort—if not an increase of comfort—and laments about the state of the world. Taking a sip from their expensive white wine, they think of all this and decide to write a journal entry. What a hypocrite! And, thus, they start, “Isn't it crazy how....”

23.6 When a Hug Could Be a Death Sentence: Living in the Age of COVID-19

By Alka Kumar

A Sidenote: Now, more than two years later, and currently experiencing the sixth wave of COVID-19 in Canada, the musings below—written on March 27, 2020—are a kind of time capsule from when it all began. They feel both resonant and timeless. For one, they carry me back to the experience of that early first phase of the pandemic, and they remind me of the many twists and turns that have shaped this long journey. It also feels remarkable that we have spent two years sinking and

swimming inside the ebbs and flows of this historic time. History is usually about the past, but this current time seems to have become both our past and our present.

Sadly, we have lost many near and dear ones, but there is much to be grateful for....

With international borders mostly closed due to COVID-19, few planes fly in our air space now. Let's imagine us for a moment though—you, my fellow traveller, sitting beside me in this airplane—as our plane is taking off. I'm sure that in an aerial view our new world would show up with its streets sparse and empty, not even one lost soul in sight. Chances are the world we look upon from that airplane window will seem like it's straight out of a dystopian novel; all inhabitants socially distanced, washing their hands on loop (twenty seconds each time), and a threatening voice on the Public Address system instructing everyone on this galaxy to not touch their face. When strange things happen in life, to express the sense of incredulity we feel, we often say "truth is stranger than fiction." Nothing could be truer or more apt when it comes to the task of describing the surreal world we're living in today.

Think back, for example, about the familiar shape of your day when you lived in that other era prior to March 11, 2020, before the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic (World Health Organization, [n.d.](#)). Although the strange and the unscripted is our new reality, I'm sure you remember that your morning normal back then was to wake up, shower, and head to work. On your way, you would stop to grab a coffee, maybe a bagel, too. What a simple concept, so routine, so every-day, and so comforting. Although technically you can still get your coffee at a drive-through in most jurisdictions in Canada, this seems like a fine luxury now. It is also one of the few exceptions still permissible in a world that's barely recognizable. To be honest, in these times of lockdowns in most parts of the world, COVID-19 having impacted 199 countries and one territory globally, and many countries sit on the precipice of a surge. We are much less grounded in certainties, and simple pleasures seem to belong in the realm of the unimaginable.

I don't know about you, but the way I'm experiencing the passage of time these last few days seems to have shifted radically, too. The days seem neither shorter nor longer but just differently drawn up, as though a completely new template were in use. The pace of time, too, has somehow re-configured itself, and maybe it's the effect of social distancing, self-isolating, what do you think? For me, I must say, as each of the old and familiar props that held us up so far fall like a house of cards, it feels like all the lights are going out one by one, and the world will soon be a dark dark place. Perhaps it is this that makes the passing of time appear at once both slow and fast? We flounder as we seem to have no matrix by which to understand this new reality.

Everything seems contradictory, too, in these COVID-19 times, a new normal being invented every day. For instance, while we're socially apart from our family and friends, terrified of human contact for fear of contracting this deadly virus, we have never felt closer to each other in the acute awareness we now have of our shared humanity, and the vulnerabilities that come with that. Neighbours who lived on the same street for years but barely knew each other; and complete strangers too,

are taking initiative, shopping for groceries and delivering cooked food to the elderly and those less able to take care of themselves.

Take the communicative act, for instance, the protocols around which have also undergone a radical shift, thanks to social distancing. I live in Toronto. With warmer weather upon us and spring in the air, one of the reprieves during this time of self-isolation has been the walks I take in the Mount Pleasant cemetery in midtown. Having been a lifelong learner and educator, I have lived and worked in two continents. Moreover, being a researcher too, I'm always interested in understanding cultures, peoples, and social behaviours. As we walk, separately and socially distantly together (two metres apart), our nods and half-smiles to our fellow walkers speak volumes. "We're all in this together; I hope you stay safe," we say to each other silently when our paths cross. We also hastily cross over and move to the opposite side when we see another person walking towards us. This is another new normal that everyone buys into.

I'm grateful, though, for the use of the outdoors as this provides some physical and emotional nurture. We have no idea though how long this oasis will be open for recreational purposes though, given all parks in Ontario shut down today.

Uncertainty is the word of the day. How can it not be? How can certainty survive in such marshy lands? Maybe one of the reasons for this acute sense of loss we're experiencing is that we are in a time of heightened and mixed emotions. My days are over-run with a range of feelings that move rapidly between disbelief and sadness, confusion and anxiety, a nostalgia already for bygone times conflating with a fear of extinction. What about you? How do you feel today?

The gift of technology is another new normal that's been embraced almost overnight by people of all ages and from every walk of life—a good reason to be optimistic. I still find it hard to believe that a few weeks ago, we were chiding our children (and ourselves) for our excessive screen time usage and social media consumption, and now suddenly we're living in a world that's gone fully virtual. Way beyond being about WFH—yes, of course that's work from home, one of the key acronyms in our COVID-inspired terminology—the internet has become our go-to for social get-togethers, gym classes, music concerts, reading clubs and care-mongering groups. In fact, I wonder if a quick transition on such a massive scale may have been witnessed during any other moment in human history. Isn't that evidence that old habits can change overnight?

Both the data and the grapevine concur on the trajectory of this pandemic. It will stay with us awhile, they say, and will most certainly leave a trail of devastation in its wake, and on all conceivable fronts. That said, I feel compelled to end on a note of hope, or else what will save us? And then why write this, or write at all?

For one, I see glimmers of optimism in some of the paradoxes of this time that I have highlighted above: our common humanity, as well as the sense of interconnectedness we share with each other. The ability to be inventive and find alternatives will push us to do things differently. Keeping sustainability front and centre of our values and our actions might help us address the climate crisis, and leave behind a healthier planet for future generations. Hopefully.

Further, in my conversations with friends and family members distributed generously across the globe, I have found us describing this global crisis as that great leveller that does not discriminate on the basis of race, colour, gender, privilege, and other such markers that usually differentiate between `us' and `them. That said, let us not fool ourselves, or forget, that in taking from those already marginalised, like the homeless and the poor, the elderly and all cohorts that are already among those more vulnerable, it strips them of all protections and with little recourse to rise again. This is not true for those with privilege. As long as they survive it, chances are they will thrive again.

Maybe one of the teachable moments here comes from our enhanced understanding of our shared humanity? Once we have this, the guiding principle of `being kind to each other' may help us imagine how we can begin to build better together. And what about empathy? We need that too, and urgently, as it will help us enlarge our circle of care. What do you think?

23.7 In A Way, We're All Connected

By Chelsea Nyomi Richards

I never expected the pandemic to be this long.
Two years, but it felt like more.

When I first learned about the outbreaks in Asia,
I had doubts that it would reach over here,
in North America.

December 2019, January 2020, February 2020.
The months went on, the outbreaks got worse.
My stance stayed the same,
as I gazed through a mirror made from two-way glass.
I could see them, but they couldn't see me.

I watched their struggles on the news,
and I thought 'poor them'.
I recognized they were in danger,
but I felt safe because I thought
there was enough distance between
"us" and "them".

I thought that what they were going through
had nothing to do with what I was going through,
or what I had to deal with,
or how I was living my life.
It didn't apply to me.

Until it did.
Until it applied to everyone,
everywhere.

And it wasn't long before I started saying,
 'We're all in this together'.
 I learned that we are all connected,
 in some way, somehow.

The actions we perform,
 the decisions we make,
 will affect someone,
 which will affect someone,
 which will affect someone...

I learned that our actions travel,
 and that someone will feel the result of your action,
 somewhere, sometime.

So now, I am more conscious of what I do,
 and what I say,
 because the changes I make and the energy I emit,
 will move around the world from object to organism,
 and I have no control over it,
 once it's been released.

We really are all in this world together
 and we go through experiences together,
 we feel the impact of previous
 and current generations,

even if we are distanced,
 isolated, or
 far apart.

23.8 2020: The Year of Stormy Stillness

By Bibi S. Baksh

2020 started with a bang. An unexpected, once-in-a-lifetime bang, that causes one to stop and evaluate one's life to gain fresh perspectives. I was excited to be at the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) conference. On March second I was inspired by scholars like Kimberly Crenshaw and Rosa Clemente, but then apprehension set in. The tornado that hit Nashville on that night will forever be etched in my memory. Continuously eerie sounds of the emergency alert system followed by incessant sirens, constant banging, and unexplained noises, made for a sleepless night that I was happy to see over until I stepped outside. The streets looked like a war zone: toppled trees, smashed cars, and crushed buildings littered the way to the convention centre, at which we arrived by some miracle and thanks to a skilled and determined Uber driver. That night foreshadowed the unprecedented apprehension that emerged throughout the year. The trip home was uneventful except for some innocuous yet puzzling questions by security at the Nashville

airport, questions that probed travelling outside of North America, in the past 6 weeks.

A similar path of unanticipated destruction upturned lives in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which appeared with a raging, unstoppable force that sent the world into a tailspin. By March 16th I had to cancel travel plans to celebrate a milestone birthday. A state of emergency with a complete stay-at-home order, including restrictions on gatherings and businesses came into effect in Ontario. Shopping was limited to essential items with drastically minimized hours of operation. Safety measures such as the wearing of masks, being screened for symptoms, and clearly marked distancing protocols were in place at the grocery stores. The world as we knew it, had come to a complete halt. By September confirmed worldwide cases of the virus surpassed 34 million with more than one million deaths. Children could no longer attend school or play with each other. Theme parks and museums were shut down and all major events around the globe were cancelled or postponed indefinitely.

As the weather began to change, being outside seemed natural and was one of the few recreational activities still available, albeit in regulated ways. The outdoors felt different; quiet and almost unnatural. The abnormal sight of playgrounds bordered with the yellow emergency tape and warning notices everywhere seem to create an atmosphere of lifelessness. The usual laughter and noise of children playing was replaced with an uncanny desolation. The few people out on the streets seemed tense and an unfamiliar strangeness prevailed. What was once a friendly neighbourhood had become a few masked people trying to avoid each other. I remember going for a walk and observing people crossing the street to avoid each other.

With an endlessly proliferating web of rules and regulations around every aspect of life, the world stood still. Aside from the anxiety of the unknown about how and when the pandemic will end, the social isolation imposed has significant personal challenges. I could no longer have the much-cherished time with my children and grandchildren: we had to remain physically distant to keep each other safe. This new and strange restriction impacted us in family and community. The usual overflowing at the local mosques in Ramadan, which started around April 23rd could not occur. Religious gatherings were prohibited, weddings deferred and funerals unattended. I was no longer able to go to my favourite place, Coffee Culture, to procrastinate over a cup of coffee as I contemplate, or maybe even pretend to work on my thesis.

Like all universities and schools, Wilfrid Laurier made the hectic switch to remote learning. We quickly learned the new reality of Zoom rooms instead of classrooms, but challenges emerged as the university moved online. In teaching, synchronous and asynchronous replaced words like classroom and computer lab. We were not a community in the classroom. Zoom became our master tool and internet problems were problematic, especially for the technology-resistant folks like myself. Plus, I no longer had the office space assigned to graduate students at the faculty. That space had been a retreat for me over the years. I had many discussions with fellow students; we shared perspectives and offered opinions on each other's work in ways that were no longer possible. My research was at a standstill

too, until new ethics processes were developed. No in-person interviews were allowed and all access to the university facilities was closed. The reality sunk in that I would not manage to complete my PhD program within the time I had anticipated.

Scrambling to adjust to new norms while maintaining some semblance of normalcy grew fatiguing. The fatigue turned into exhaustion; but what I attributed to tiredness evolved into something different. In December of 2020 and by what remains a mystery, my partner and I contracted COVID-19. This brought on an additional level of isolation. The housebound morphed into being bedbound. I could barely move for two weeks. My memory of those two weeks remains spotty, and recovery was slow. But I do recall friends and family dropping off food and groceries. In the grey fog of my illness, I felt the isolation not because I was unable to go out but because I had lost hope of being able to see my children and grandchildren. My son later told me that he was about to purchase a hazmat suit to come in the house to check on us but did not because of all the rules on isolation.

After my illness, I could not return to my research with any focus. By March 2021 after a short brush with Covid, my uncle died. His wife, unaware of his death due to her battle with the virus, followed five days later. This uncle and aunt were the last remaining of my parents' generation on my maternal side of the family. Although I was able to attend both funerals, there was no closure. A funeral in the situation was not the usual sharing of grief and support instead, it was a quick completion of the rights while observing social distancing from the few family members that were allowed to attend. Not being able to hug my cousin was difficult. The grief and the aftereffects of my brush with the covid virus, along with isolation and grief of the loss of my aunt and uncle left me with little energy or motivation.

In April 2021, I applied to the CERC Migration StOries Project that was being offered by Ryerson (now Metropolitan) University, knowing that it would take time away from my core project, but I felt that I needed something different to cope with the situation. The program evolved over the summer and fall; the structure of the workshop allowed for intellectual engagement with other folks, something I had missed since the start of isolation protocols. Despite the new reality of Zoom, the space was in many ways therapeutic and healing for me. Listening to other students' migration stories and experiences triggered renewed interest in my ancestral and personal immigration in many ways.

The course is over. I completed my short reflection essay on a trip back home, home to Guyana – to Zeeburg – the village where I grew up. Through the writing, I was able to connect with my past at a time when I had lost all sense of normalcy. This connection was essential to my well-being as it brought the story of my life to the forefront of my present. I felt that sharing my ancestral story with the group allowed me to experience new wisdom from my past. I wonder at the resilience and courage to thrive even in situations of tragedy, of courage to keep faith and to overcome surfaced from my grandfather and my parents' stories. From this, I drew renewed energy and a focus that went into my dissertation which I have since defended. But we are still in this strange world; it is not quite post-COVID-19. Life is not back to normal—I am not sure what the “new normal” a term that emerged during the pandemic—means. More importantly, I can view life differently and

realize that the small things matter. I have a new appreciation for being able to go to my favourite coffee shop, to teach in person, I cherish visits with my grandchildren, and I treasure the opportunity to go out for dinner with friends.

23.9 The COVID-19 Sidebar

By Owen Guo

The fracture was silent, and I let out a loud expletive. In the middle of a muted Zoom meeting in April 2020, a leg broke off my eyeglasses. This being the coronavirus age, how was I supposed to get them replaced during lockdown? What would become of my quarantined life without being able to read or watch Netflix? I cast a glance at my paper calendar, pinned to the wall. The dates blurred. Suddenly, the world was a puddle of fuzzy objects.

I tried tape and glue to no avail. Panicked, I called the optical stores in the Annex, where I lived. No luck. Then, I messaged a friend, before firing off a Facebook post screaming for help. Within an hour, that friend forwarded a link to a place that remained open.

Hallelujah!

I breathed a sigh of relief. With my blurred vision, I hopped onto an almost empty subway train. Toronto felt like a ghost town. At the store, I had my prescription read off my current broken glasses. A new pair would be ready in 24 h.

That night, without glasses, I listened to *This American Life*, engrossed in a story about a family tragedy.

Later, I dimmed the lights, as Chinese pop music started to flow in my room. For the first time in a long time, I basked in the intricacies of the guitar and flute. I found the breathing of the singers entralling. My eyes closed, I was able to focus better.

We take stock of our environment through what we see, in a world brimming with sensory overloads vying for our attention. Not seeing, however, doesn't always dim clarity or perspective. Sometimes, not seeing frees you to see more.

23.10 Five Words, or the Story of How We Lived Through 2020

By Jenny Osorio

Once upon a time, when I was two years old, there was a virus. A virus is something very little. It is so little that our eyes cannot see, but it causes so much illness and sorrow. I don't remember anything about that virus but my Mami told me that people felt ill, and we had to take them to hospital, like her cousin Julian, who was asleep for 15 days, waiting for the virus to go away.

When I ask Mami about the year 2020, she says: *There are five words, Juju, that summarise that year: guilt, resourcefulness, cooking, zooming, and change.* And she tells me about the stories behind those words while she shows me the pictures that captured these moments.

23.10.1 Guilt

When the virus came to Canada and started to make people ill, they closed my day-care and Mami’s university. Papi was sent home, too. Permanently. *Everyone was afraid of the virus, and we didn’t know what to do,* Mami tells me, *I felt guilty for taking precautions, like not letting your tias or la Nona come home for almost 3 months.* We stopped going to the park; only Mami would go grocery shopping, and when she had to teach, she would hide in the basement, like when we play hide and seek, only that I wasn’t allowed to go find her, so I would scream calling her Maaaaamiiiiii! Where are you? Vengaaaa! (Fig. 23.1)

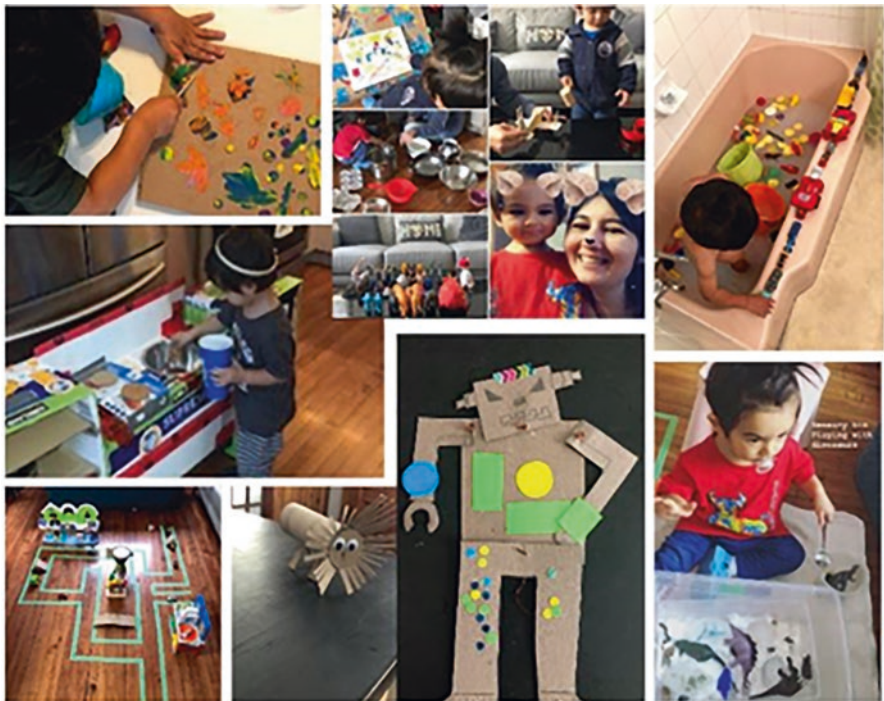


Fig. 23.1 Multiple images. Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio

23.10.2 *Resourcefulness*

Luckily for me, Mami joined Papi and I on vacation when her school closed. Mami would come up with ideas from her phone, show them to Papi and he would make them happen. I think that is how magic works! We saved dinosaurs from the ice age; we built a whole little town in our living room. With roads and cars. With animals and people. I even had a whole kitchen made from diaper boxes. I'm a big boy now, I do not need diapers anymore. Mami tells me that I learned to go to the potty during that time, too!

23.10.3 *Cooking*

Papi cooks all the time. Mami only sometimes. Mami shows me pictures of the dishes and recipes we tried in 2020. Papi did experiments. His creations were always yummy. Mami asked our family back home to share recipes from her childhood. I was their assistant in the kitchen Papi had built for me. We baked lots of bread and cakes.

23.10.4 *Zooming*

This is a new word for me. It is a program in Mami's computer. With it, we can see everyone: la Nona, las tias, los primos. We used it to meet with our family in Colombia to exercise together everyday. I loved it because Mami was lying on the floor and I climbed on her back and played superman! There was music and happy faces, too.

23.10.5 *Change*

Mami tells me *Juju, change is always a good thing. It shakes things up; it wakes them up; it lets energy flow. It is like dancing.* That is why she is always dancing, cleaning and changing the layout of a room. Papi does not like when she does that. *Where is the spatula? You changed everything again? Esa mami ome!*

Change was important in 2020. We changed many things in our family. We sold our house, the one I had lived in since I was in Mami's belly. We also changed my daycare because we moved to a different city. We changed the language, too. Where we are now I learned a song called "Bon appetit." And we cannot start eating until I sing it. I am happy we did not change la Nona: she came with us to the new city, and la tia Camila too, and Merlin, la Nona's dog.



Fig. 23.2 Multiple images. Photo Credit: Jenny Osorio

Mami is right, change is a good thing. Here I can play with mis niños, and Papi's brothers are here; and Lela, Papi's mother came all the way from Colombia to be with us, too. I have changed, too. I am almost four now. I can colour between the lines, and I can count to 20 in three languages (Fig. 23.2).

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Esra Ari (PhD) My name is Esra. I came to Canada from Türkiye as a PhD student in 2011. Currently, I am an assistant professor of sociology at Mount Royal University. Before joining the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Mount Royal University, I was an SSHRC postdoc fellow at the Toronto Metropolitan Centre for Immigration and Settlement (TMCIS).

I decided not to go back to my country after completing my PhD in Canada because of the social and political turmoil there. With a tendency to view everyday experiences with a sociological lens, I'm critical of oppressive systems, including capitalism, racism, and patriarchy.

I have realized that writing is an empowering process. In a similar tradition of *counter-storying*, *talking back* or *writing back* (hooks, 1989; Smith, 2021). I respond to representations of Muslimhood and Muslim women through storytelling as part of my anti-racism stance and work.

My story is about the process through which I have become an Alevi Muslim woman. This story focuses on how identity construction is never simply a personal choice for racialized groups. Instead, it is formed by an interaction between how a person sees themselves (asserted identity) and how others perceive this person (assigned identity).

Ozlem Atar (PhD) I moved to Canada from the Republic of Türkiye on 1 September 2018. I hold a master's degree in English Language Teaching (ELT) and a doctoral degree in Communication Sciences, with a project that sits at the intersection of women's post-9/11 literary fiction and Intercultural Communication inquiry. I am halfway through another PhD at Queen's University.

I write because I have something to say. If you find that my reflection resonates with you, we will be companions through words. Ideas for my writing come from my lived experience. I often scribble memories of single incidents from my early life because I fear that I may lose these memories. I hardly share these personal notes with anyone. One day, I will. Other times, I write academic essays and my dissertation. To me, writing is a messy process. I tend to do a lot of research before I put a word on paper. I use pencils and paper to give shape to my thoughts.

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Chapter 24

Becoming Through Story: The Relational Processes of Writing and Creating the StOries Project



Natasha Damiano

To write is also to become something other than a writer.

(Deleuze, 1993/1997, p. 6)

This anthology set out to amplify the lived experiences of graduate students in a Canadian multicultural context in order to highlight the complex and often invisible intersectional dimensions of those experiences. These students included both international students and domestic students from immigrant family backgrounds. In the process of doing so, the stories showcased in this anthology have exemplified how the relations entangled in migration experiences transcend the false boundaries of subject, object, time and space and even the living and non-living, human and non-human. As immigrant writers have shown time and again, the search for home and belonging is part of this entanglement. Likewise, any attempt at separating the individual lived experience from the social, political, and economic forces that shape our collective consciousness is at best inadequate. Yet, the stories of this anthology also showcase the healing aspects of sharing stories at a personal level, raising questions about what new has been learned about the benefits of story (–writing, –telling) with respect to migration, multicultural experience, and even the self.

The purpose of this chapter is to, therefore, pick up the threads woven throughout this anthology to ask *what has been learned in the process of writing these stories and where do we go now? What might we create with these threads going forward?* In Chap. 2, Alka Kumar explains that the approach of the StOries project was experimental, bringing novice graduate student writers together in a series of academically-engaged creative writing workshops. This approach was largely informed by critical pedagogy as a way to support the participants (including myself) to develop our own critiques of the power structures in which we find ourselves entangled (e.g.,

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within migration experience, the field and practice of migration professions, higher education). Although the workshop series was not designed as a formal research study, the philosophical orientation and the open-ended, peer-led model of the project is commensurate with approaches to research that view theory and method as inextricable and anchored in philosophical concepts (Murriss, 2021a).

This orientation and centring of story as method, and experience as relational knowledge, also reinforces and reiterates the imperative role of decolonization efforts the transformation of higher education by Indigenizing pedagogy and the ‘research’ that is generated through teaching and learning (Dwayne, 2012). It is from this perspective that I take up the threads of this anthology, to ponder how the focus on belonging and intersectionality that we began with at the start of this project may not reflect this project’s dynamic relationships and current scholarly (and community) commitments. This includes our alignment with efforts to question the ways in which ongoing colonization continues to shape the very foundational ways we conceptualize migration and migration scholarship (Ellerman & O’Heran, 2021). It goes without saying that the predominant language in the field of migration (i.e., English including its variations) also underpins the knowledge paradigm, and associated logic, that most migration scholarship operates within. As discussed periodically throughout this project, working in English for many of us both imposed constraints on, and afforded certain opportunities for, developing our understanding(s). I hope in this chapter to spark some questions about knowledge and narrative, and the language and logics by which they are constructed, to consider how this may be relevant to the field of migration.

In order to do so, I have organized this chapter in the following way. First, I describe the processes and challenges involved in constructing this chapter. This includes some of my own reflections about my contribution as a co-author/editor, and what I found difficult about how the chapter was initially conceptualized, i.e. as a collection of ‘fieldnotes’ about the writing process. Second, I discuss excerpts of reflections of StOries project contributors (i.e., the submitted fieldnotes) in relation to the literature on migration stories, to show how their relevant themes converge or in some cases diverge from what is often discussed. Importantly, not every contributor had the time or energy to submit a fieldnote as originally intended. However, those who were able, to each submitted short passages – sometimes a paragraph, sometimes one to two pages. Excerpts from these passages help the reader understand the writing processes behind the final stories, and also provide additional layers of meaning to the stories, poems, and images of migration experiences that have been shared. They may also testify to how we understand fieldnotes themselves, culturally speaking, i.e., how the idea of ‘fieldnotes’ has infiltrated our common-sense research and writing vernaculars.

Finally, I share examples from two of the peer-led activities that speak to the interrelatedness of participants’ sense of self that was not revealed in the fieldnote reflections. The first was an activity that aimed to generate discussion not only about translation but about the role of language in making sense of sensory experience. The other was an activity that had participants share, write, and speak about objects that hold deep meaning in our lives, as a way of also generating discussion about our

embodied memories and experiences. In actuality these activities occurred in reverse order during the six-month period that we actively met bi-weekly (on-line). The meaningful objects activity was particularly significant because it helped to generate a sense of camaraderie among most participants early on in the project. In concluding this chapter, I share the images and captions of these meaningful objects, much as we did during the original sessions and in later presentations, as a way to disrupt traditional academic introductions that identify us by our expertise, institutions affiliations, and outputs. The reader may also recognize in these images and captions how they served to catalyze the development of our final stories, or provided insights that would help shape those stories, insights that many participants had yet to articulate. The sensory words activity built on the meaningful objects activity because it helped us to tap further into some of the intangible relationships we have in the world, for example to the sounds that shape our very development and existence as emplaced humans. Discussing these aspects of the project together, I hope to show that what began as an enquiry into contemporary Canadian multiculturalism and sense of *belonging* transformed into an ongoing work-in-progress – both collectively and personally – and a testimony to our interrelatedness. By highlighting this continuous *becoming*, I hope this chapter contributes to the future mapping of *relational* (i.e., more than individual and collective) migration experiences.

24.1 The ‘Becoming’ of This Chapter: A Reflexive (Diffractive?) Background

The original conception of this chapter was that it would be a way to document the processes and methods used in the project and especially in writing this anthology, both by individual participants as well as the group. We did this by deliberately inviting the authors to think and write about their processes of writing in a format that was originally conceptualised as a collection of fieldnotes. The chapter’s editorial team initially included a graduate student with a degree in fine arts and media studies (Chelsea Richards, M.A.) and a recent graduate in communications currently working in the area of immigrant settlement (Sarah Ostapchuck, M.A.). Given their backgrounds a more creative or literary approach was envisioned, and I was invited to join them because of my training in anthropology and my experience with ethnography and fieldwork methods. Together we were to describe the writing process and showcase the multisensory engagements that helped develop the final stories. The ‘fieldnotes’ would be reflections about the writing process generated by prompts that the first two original authors (Ostapchuck and Richards) had together developed in conversation with the primary editor and project lead (Alka Kumar). Our intention was to curate the reflections so they would be accessible to readers who may be deeply entrenched in the migration-oriented professions but not

necessarily in direct conversation with the academic discourses and disciplines that may be influencing or impacting their work.

In addition to thematically analysing the submitted reflections, my contribution was to include a short introduction about ethnography and fieldnote writing. The purpose was to explain how certain threads of the methodology (e.g., the inclusion of images as well as words as part of the documentations) were present in the development of the StOries Project, as evidenced by the vignettes of the writing processes that authors submitted and that were to be the focus of this chapter. However, we questioned whether the chapter should be more theoretically oriented or presented in a literary or even thematic fashion. After several initial drafts reviewed by the book's editors, two things became clear: (1) we were having difficulty getting on the same page about our writing approach; and (2) this final chapter would need to speak to a research-oriented audience. In the end, due partly to additional pressures (academic, professional, and familial), the other two contributors were unable to see out the completion of this chapter in the way they had initially intended, rendering the first challenge a moot point. I think it's important to state that certain circumstances allowed me to persist in the writing of this chapter, including the financial support I receive from a fellowship. This is something to be aware of when asking people with migration backgrounds to share their stories, as the work of sharing stories takes a good deal of unpaid emotional labour. In other words, this chapter might have looked quite different if one of the other interested contributors' circumstances had allowed them to see it through. As it stands, it is my own attempt at making sense of this process, although I have consulted with both to check that this portrayal resonates with their experience.

I point this out because this process of trying to get on the same page about this chapter – i.e., of moving back and forth between a 'storytelling' format and one that was more heavily framed by 'research' – made me think deeply about the tensions between these two ways of thinking about knowledge. This in turn led me to the current conceptualization of this chapter: a discussion about the relationship between story and knowledge and its relevance to migration experience and the field of migration research in particular. I hope to show that consideration of the ontological underpinnings of both story and knowledge may also help us to shift our understandings of 'migrants' as individuals (i.e., immigrants, refugees, international students, transnationals etc.) to beings-in-relation. In the context of this anthology, this also serves to highlight the position of the authors as 'in between' the institutions (government, university, publisher) that require this project to resemble 'research' as proof of its authenticity and legitimacy (a notion that the project resisted from the beginning). As I propose below, this *chapter* has come into being through a constant revisioning of our understanding of this project as it unfolded over a period of shifting terrain of personal and collective knowledge and experience. Furthermore, while the authors became writers through the process of writing the stories of the preceding chapters, they may also become 'narrativised' (Askin, 2016) as beings-in-relation, a process entangled through writing with the multiple and inseparable relations it describes. In suggesting this, I recognise also that this term may seem antithetical to the value of stories (rather than narratives) as

“theory, as process, as data, as text on the ethical grounds of accessibility and foregrounding the marginalized (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). What is important is that the storying of these processes, and the way I came to this understanding, are the focus of this chapter.

24.2 Why (Not) ‘Fieldnotes’?

Though it’s not always the most intuitive way to tell a story, I will begin at the beginning, which for me was contemplating my own understanding of fieldnotes as a former student of anthropology who has also been involved in a number of qualitative health research projects over the years. Within the broad field of cultural anthropology, fieldnotes developed as a way to reflexively document a researcher’s experiences in ‘the field’ in order to account for the subjectivity of the ethnographer, their ‘participant observation’ of cultural group or phenomena, and the intersubjective relations between ethnographer and informant(s). The artful intermingling (triangulation) of notes from the field with the perspectives of ‘key informants’ and theoretical texts was a way the cultural anthropologist could conduct ethnography – a practice dually constructed as the process of engaging in field research and the product of that process, i.e., ethnographies. A good ethnography, it came to be thought, could help the reader better understand a cultural group or phenomena by providing detailed and nuanced description of the particularities or local context based on detailed participant observations.

Outside of anthropology, these central components of ethnography, fieldwork and participant observation were associated with the Polish born British social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. What is less known among non-anthropologists is the history of this association. By tracing the roots of fieldwork to the shift from ‘data collection’ by missionaries to trained academics, anthropology historian George Stocking (1983) argued that Malinowski’s image as the quintessential ethnographer is somewhat circumstantial, but also shrouded in myth. Within more recent history ethnography beyond anthropology is perhaps most often associated with American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s proposition that “ethnography is thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 314), though importantly, ethnography for Geertz included much more than notetaking. Geertz was trying to argue for an interpretivist anthropology for which written ethnography was its method of *reading* culture by interpreting the symbolic meanings of social life (action). This was in the context of ongoing debates within anthropology about the definition of ‘culture’, and attempts to define anthropology itself as either science or art. The history and development of fieldwork methods within anthropology is an important topic, however, the legacy of that history on academic research more broadly is what I wish to draw attention to here.

The role of ethnography as a tool for critically and reflexively documenting and describing the wider contexts of cultural phenomena is what has made ethnography and related methods, especially participant observation and the practice of

fieldnotes, appealing to a wide range of fields and disciplines. Qualitative health research was one such field, and this has resulted in a deeper understanding of the cultural dimensions of health and illness, along with reduced attention to the interpretation of culture in the broad sense (and over time) was the point of ethnography (Rashid et al., 2015). Qualitative health research can help contextualize or counter positivist accounts of health and illness and the development of autoethnography in particular has allowed researchers to attend self-reflexively to 'lived experience' (Rashid et al., 2015). Within the last few decades, Indigenous scholars have critiqued these methods in order to make rightful space for Indigenous knowledge within western academic institutions (e.g., Smith, 2021[1999]; Archibald, 2008). This critical scholarship has also contributed to the development of methodologies that centre the experience of the researcher. For example, there are many examples of writing about the lived experiences of migration that use an autoethnographic methodology (e.g., Wright, 2009; see Burge, 2020, p.5). Narrative inquiry is another approach grounded in story and self-reflection that is becoming more widely used in migration studies (e.g., Kubota et al., 2022; Kovinthan, 2016). In comparison with traditional ethnography, one value of narrative inquiry is its construction of the 'field' as place, time and relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) rather than a circumscribed community or environment. To be clear, ethnography including (but not limited to) the practice of fieldnote taking continues to have an important place in research, for example in providing more nuanced understandings of the cultural embodiment and enactment of suicide (Kirmeyer, 2022). The point here is not so much a critique of ethnography but to point out its legacy within wider scholarship practices and its relevance to this chapter, and the field of migration studies.

As explained in Chap. 1, our StOries project was not framed as a traditional research study, and more specifically not as ethnography, although it was informed by autoethnographic rationale and methodology. In addition to engaging critically with the provided materials, participants were encouraged to journal as much as possible about our writing processes. These documentations included individual journal reflections and responses to writing prompts and activities, along with our memories and other imaginings, as well as journaling (individually) in a shared document where we could respond to one another. Given our different life circumstances and responsibilities, each author did this in their own way and in their own time, and so, at best, were partial reflections of what occurred. For this reason, many of the submissions were not themselves 'raw fieldnotes', but rather curations of self-reflections of the processes documented in our journals, generated by responses to the specific writing prompts we used to develop this chapter. These prompts included questions such as: *How did you arrive at your final story submission? What kind of challenges did you face in the process? How did your story/submission change over time? How has your perspective changed in this process?* We also encouraged the contributors to review their journaling, including and doodles and images that were part their process, to answer these questions. The goal was to help the reader experience the evolving journey by reading not only the story contributions themselves, but also stories about the processes that produced these writings.

Part of my hesitancy for calling these ‘fieldnotes’ was concern they might be interpreted, not only as process and context, but as ‘truth’ in a fixed, categorical sort of way. This apprehension stems from my observation of how fieldnotes are sometimes used or taught to students, for example in some ‘mixed methods’ research that gives primacy to not only quantitative outcomes but positivist views of knowledge for interpreting them. Qualitative methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, may come to be seen as providing ‘context’ (perspectives, experiences) that numbers alone do not account for, diminishing what they might tell us beyond the specificity of the original line of inquiry – which is where ethnography can often be most helpful. The interpretive anthropology that Geertz promoted was not concerned with the “ontological status” of cultural or observed phenomena; rather he was interested in asking questions about “what their import is” (p. 315), i.e., their cultural significance. However, because of the way ethnography has evolved beyond the discipline of anthropology – and because ethnography is *not* merely method, nor to be equated with anthropology (Nader, 2011; Ingold, 2017) – how we understand what we document through fieldnotes ontologically is essential. More importantly, the history of this theory-writing method includes harms to Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2021[1999]), and therefore (as with any method) its use must be critically and carefully considered. Finally, the way we understand fieldnotes can have an impact on how we approach them, including what we take note of and how we characterise our observations in writing.

To expand this argument a bit further, I was also concerned that by framing our chapter as fieldnotes focused on ‘truth-telling’ (nonetheless an important goal), we might unintentionally obscure elements of the process that were perhaps more important than would be otherwise apparent. These include changes in thinking that we experienced through the sharing of our stories and the concomitant (re)constructions of identity, as well as what may have been for some a movement in the locus of self we experienced as part of the process. My hope was to settle on a vision of this chapter that would both capture what we did while also accounting for the culturally constructed worlds we inhabit and therefore inhabited our writing, including our academic and professional worlds. It is therefore our place as authors within such wider conversations that this chapter seeks to untangle. By thinking carefully about the significance of storytelling in the StOries project, I ask what can be learned from it in the wider field of migration studies. For instance, although general interest in migration and the stories of immigrants and refugees might be driven by humanistic values, those values might both undermine a deeper valuing and understanding of the wisdom of stories themselves, and underestimate the harmful power that stories may also wield (King, 2003). This raises questions about the ways we engage in storytelling within the field of migration and how we ensure we are attending to relational commitments when sharing those stories (knowledge) with others.

Settler scholar and educator Erin Goheen Glanville has critiques what she calls “imaginative humanitarian ethnography” in pedagogical approaches that use stories to teach about refugee culture in the classroom. Notably, Glanville’s work takes inspiration and wisdom from the teachings of Jo-ann Archibald (Q’um Q’um

Xiiem), Indigenous scholar, educator and member of of the Stól:lō Nation. To help situate Indigenous knowledges within the academy as knowledge in its own right, Archibald (2008) outlined a framework of seven “storywork” principles she learned through committed relationships with elders in her community. She used the metaphor of a basket to symbolize how the principles are woven together as well as how she “gives back” to community through storywork. Our attempts to understand the power of story from the view that story is knowledge in its own right can also give us pause to think about what we are doing when we engage in the act of sharing stories, particularly when we share them in written form, as in this anthology. As Archibald emphasized: “An interrelationship between the story, storytelling, and listener is another critical principle of storywork” (2008, p.32). Following Archibald, Glanville links her critique and critical pedagogical approach to Indigenous storytelling principles, proposing we think of stories as gifts to be shared and listened to. As Glanville argues, this entails changes to our reading practices and our understanding of the story process. Rather than thinking instrumentally (and methodologically) about what stories can *do*, she argues that we begin thinking critically about *what happens to stories* once they are told. It is this care-full/heart-full approach that I encourage readers to adopt in reading through the remainder of this chapter, and indeed when considering what can be learned or shared from the stories of this anthology.

Finally, the responses to the writing prompts illuminated the complex meanings of many of the writings and discussions generated in the peer-led sessions, however, to focus solely on these might miss almost entirely the deeper reason why the StOries project had such a deep impact on so many of us who participated: because in some way or other it had changed us in relation to each other but also in relation to the world. In other words, I began to wonder if interweaving of ‘fieldnotes’ might not be sufficient for understanding the possibilities for our selves that were both imagined and generated through the StOries project. In the following section, I consider a few themes from the submissions that resonate with issues of concern within the migration stories literature. I then discuss how critical and Indigenous perspectives related to story as relational knowledge might serve as foundation for appreciating the interrelated complexities and *becomings* of the StOries project that contributors of this project have shared – as gifts to the reader. Though issues of identity and belonging will always remain important aspects of the migration experience, it is the *becoming* of the StOries project, the stories themselves, and the storytellers that I wish to shed light on.

24.3 From ‘Belonging’ to ‘Becoming’

We began this StOries project with a general query about our sense of belonging as graduate students within and between various structures and boundaries of multicultural Canada and higher education. In the domain of migration stories, many

authors, both literary and academic, have articulated in some way the experience of living life ‘in between’, its impact on self and identity, and the role of writing as a way to express experiences of hybridity, and even ambivalence: “Whatever may be the geographical location of the migrant writer, in the mental landscape the writer is forever entangled among the strings attached to poles that pull in opposite directions” (Pourjafari & Vahidipour, 2014, p. 685). This feeling of life in the margins resonated through not only the stories of this anthology, but also the reflections submitted for this chapter. Though we might associate such entanglements as a struggle to feel ‘at home’ with one’s circumstances, one StOries participant framed this as an (unintended) positive outcome of her experience:

It took the passing of my grandmother for me to quite understand that I never fully arrived in this country. It took going back home for me to finally grasp that I do live in-between, and it’s hard, but it’s also beautiful. (**Thàbata Da Costa**, April 10, 2022).

Many StOries participants felt an urgency to share their stories, as noted by the following two contributors:

The creative writing aspect of the StOries project connected me with thoughts and ideas that had not surfaced for years. I migrated in 1982 and over time had not thought much about home. Being in a group of younger people, newer immigrants to Canada, some of the dormant inner stories started to surface. Something emerged in discussions that caused those quietened narratives of home to surface (**Bibi Babksh**, March 7, 2022).

When I first saw the call for proposals, I felt this urgent need to write the proposal and send it right away, as I felt this project was tailored to my need to speak up. I opened the door to memories and went down the rabbit hole (**Jenny Osorio**, February 25, 2022).

Other participants similarly described a synergy (Archibald, 2008) that had a lot to do with the timing of the project in participants’ personal and academic lives, but also the circumstances brought on by the pandemic (see Chap. 22). While many saw this is a positive opportunity to engage in writing, others focused on the challenging and humbling nature of that process:

I started writing by letting my emotions guide me. There were times when words came easily and flowed, whereas other times I would not have much luck putting words to my thoughts or feelings. (**Christian Hui**, April 20, 2022)

The most difficult thing for me was tapping into my emotions and repressed memories so that I could be vulnerable on paper. My initial drafts were quite distant, and more on the academic side of writing. The early drafts had an ‘outsider looking in’ type of feel, almost as if I was tip-toeing around real feelings. It took many revisions for me to write a more personal story and I mentally fought with myself on multiple occasions because I wanted to have a deeper story but I didn’t want to open up to the point where I would regret what I wrote, especially for others to read. I eventually let my guard down and poured out the experiences I felt were important for me to share (**Cheslea Richards**, April 22, 2022).

What I’ll never forget is how emotional many of us became when sharing about our COVID-19 experiences in five words. Several peers cried as they shared their stories and I cried with them (**Sarah Ostapchuck**, June 1, 2022).

Together these submission excerpts speak to the role of writing in emotional expression, and the reciprocity that can occur when stories are shared in community, perhaps especially when these are shared orally. The power of those moments is even more poignant, however, when their voicing comes as a determination to share stories after years of silence/being silenced, or living in the inherited shadow of silence.

As articulated in the following fieldnote contribution, the interconnectedness we can feel through sharing and receiving stories is also a mark of good storytelling:

One of the best compliments a storyteller can receive is that readers were able to relate to the story or the peculiarity of the characters. I personally strive to represent as many types of people as possible. But to do that is to have all those lived experiences. Otherwise, it will become the cliched male writer writing two-dimensional female characters. I cannot write on behalf of a female person, or a black person, or a disabled person, or, for that matter, even a white cis-male. One way to circumvent this is to write what you know, write from your own standpoint. However, this would deprive others from being able to relate to what you write. What is of particular note is why I chose to tell this grand narrative rather than to write abstractly an imagined story, or write my own story as if an abstract entity went through those experiences. But that, again, would still represent a very small portion of the readers who can put themselves in my shoes, despite it being abstract. And, so, as I usually do, I went for a larger-than-life theme with abstract entities. A spirit of the form I conceived could easily be imagined as an impersonation of a reader, no matter their class, gender, socioeconomic standing, etc. Moreover, this theme is something that should reach as many people as possible. Given these reasons and my training as a philosopher made me arrive at this as my final story submission. **This, thus, becomes your story, my story, all of our story (Arunkumar Javel, June 1, 2022).**

Early childhood educator Louise Phillips and Ngugi/Wakka Wakka educator Tracey Bunda (2018, p. 43) have outlined five principles of storying that resonate in different ways with experiences shared by StOries project participants:

1. storying nourishes thought, body and soul
2. storying claims voice in the silenced margins
3. storying is embodied, relational, meaning making
4. storying intersects the past and present as living oral archives
5. storying enacts collective ownership and authorship

Together these principles raise questions about distinctions between the individual and collective experience in story (and the care needed when sharing stories which I discuss further on). Likewise, during the StOries project workshop in Toronto, a student asked our guest speaker, acclaimed Canadian author MG Vassanji, where he finds sources of inspiration for his writing. This was a moment in the project that stood out to me as it was pivotal in propelling me forward with my own writing in its simple wisdom. Vassanji replied very plainly that at a certain point he had simply started listening to the elders around him who wanted to share their stories. He only said a few words about this, but they spoke deeply to the understanding that a writer is not simply expressing themselves as one might suppose. Writers are as much a part of the world as the world is a part of them – and through this process of deeply listening to the stories of others, new stories emerge albeit expressed in new form. In

a way the interconnected stories that flow from one to the next are there all along, waiting to be connected, a puzzle waiting to be pieced together.

Comer (2015), drawing on James Clifford's work (1997) for her analysis of the "roots and routes" of the migrant personal essay, wrote in her doctoral dissertation that "[m]igrants can tell their stories from different vantage points, depending on the age they migrated and the age at which they write about their experience" (p. 38). She also contends that: "The story of migration begins long before we do, even as our own narrative begins long before we do. The journey and narrative precede [sic] us. We are en route years before we migrate or write" (p. 72). In this anthology, StOries project contributors who are first or second generation Canadian show in their writings how migration narratives can also be transgenerational, the narrative beginning long before and rooted perhaps in the migration of those from whom the writer descended. This speaks not only to the relational aspects of story and narrative but the interrelatedness at the heart of the migration experience.

The stories in this anthology, as well as some of the reflections presented below, grapple with these questions and entanglements, often in relation to sense of belonging and sense of home, a common trope in migration literature. Schwind and Kwok (2021) analyzed creative writing based on self-reflections of their own immigrant experiences. They contend that: "A sense of belonging is entwined closely with voice, of being able to communicate clearly, to be heard, seen, and included" (2021, p. 23). Similarly, Claudia Chibici-Revneanu (2016) argued that expressive writing may be a strategy for increasing the wellbeing and integration of migrants, particularly those who are women. The self-development of migrant women was shared as a unique result of Chibici-Revneanu's research. These authors show through excerpts of creative writing how the in-betweenness of the migrant experience can silence lived experiences in multiple contexts, making it difficult to connect authentically in the contexts we arrive in as well as those we leave behind. For example, the intersectional experiences of migrants who may be vulnerable due to discrimination based on race, sex, gender identity/sexuality etc., may face more barriers to finding a sense of belonging that makes space for the voicing of their particular experiences.

As one StOries project participant reflected, language can play a role in this too by providing the *means* to reclaim that which has been silenced in the past (including language itself) – or the *choice* to keep silent the deepest pains and losses that may be unspeakable (or unwitnessable) in the present:

I did not know what my final submission would look like. In the process, I answered to writing prompts, picking up memories and arranging small unique bouquets. While writing, I realized I could only incorporate a few words in Spanish. No matter how hard I tried, I would always get a knot in my throat and words stopped flowing. It was too close to home. I was standing too close to the fire. English allows me to remember while maintaining a safe distance. (**Jenny Osorio**, February 25, 2022)

Several submissions also show that the intersectional and interconnected identities of migrants can be revealed through writing in ways that not only challenge tired stereotypes, but that demonstrate how their identities must not be reduced to their migration experiences. The following submission exemplifies this:

Somehow, my experience as a child protection worker seeped into this piece – it is not about being an immigrant but about how my profession seeps into my thoughts at odd times and takes command of the internal narrative. (**Bibi Babksh**, March 7, 2022)

The journal excerpts shared by Babksh, are particularly poignant, amplified by the passing and blurring of time and space in her memories:

I am unaware of a time that I was on the other side of the road. **The side that was filled with a sense of belonging**. I know I was there, but I can't remember when. I vaguely recall a song about being in a place "where everybody knows your name" and realized that I had been in a different place for a very long time. But I was there at some point. I knew my name and everyone else did too. **They called me by my name; I belonged**. Then I crossed the road. Or was it a river? Maybe an ocean? I am here on the other side. I have been here for a long time and nobody knows my name. They can't pronounce it and I wonder if maybe I should change it and if doing so would help me to belong. **But a name is not the only thing that one needs for belonging**. If I start changing my name, then what next? My beliefs? My skin colour? (**Bibi Babksh**, March 7, 2022)

Babksh's musings remind us of Swind and Kwok's observation that: "As immigrants, we are expected to put our cultural roots and identities aside to acculturate to the new social context. We are expected to learn a new language, norms, and culture, and establish experiences and skills, to adjust to our new home" (2021, p.23). By centring our understanding of migrants in terms of individual identity we reduce real people to the realm of categories, rather than recognizing them as the interrelational life forces they, interconnected to not only humans, but also animals, plants and objects, spirits. Interrelated not only in place but across time that is itself interrelated and difficult to disentangle. This is the wisdom of Indigenous and Eastern worldviews that continue to be oppressed in academic settings that overvalue objectivity and falsely separate it from subjective experience reinforced by the continued dominance English (and other colonial languages) in academic settings, including teaching and learning spaces viewed as multilingual (see Smith, 2021 [1999], p. 40; Phipps, 2019).

Yet, we need to be explicit and conscientious about what we mean when we talk about relationality, a term that can imply different paradigmatic assumptions and orientations, beginning with worldview. Writing about the power and paradoxes of history in decolonization work, Linda Tuhiwai Smith wrote (2021[1999]) that: "To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things" (Smith, 2021[1999], p. 38). Western academia has learned much about relationality through processes intertwined with colonization *and* efforts to decolonize and Indigenize those same processes (e.g., within academic research and education). In a time when many speak and write of 'paradigm shifts' within and beyond academic circles, knowledge keeper Shawn Wilson's (2001) explanation of 'paradigm' is instructive:

[...] a paradigm is simply a label for a set of beliefs that go together that guide my actions. So a research paradigm is a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that go together to guide your actions as to how you're going to go about doing your research. When I was thinking about this, I focused on four aspects that combine in the make-up of

different paradigms. One is ontology or a belief in the nature of reality. Your way of being, what you believe is real in the world: that's your ontology. Second is epistemology, which is how you think about reality. Next, when we talk about research methodology, we are talking about how you are going to use your ways of thinking (your epistemology) to gain more knowledge about your reality. Finally, a paradigm includes axiology, which is a set of morals or a set of ethics (p. 175, italics added).

Unfortunately, these aspects of our beliefs – ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology – are not always carefully teased out in the ways we propose, conduct, and report on research in academia, but they each make a difference in how we approach the work we do and why. What underlies such omissions is often how we understand this English term 'knowledge', which culturally we treat as something we can possess, in our minds. In practice, we teach and learn from (and with) one another through experience, and though most graduate students love a great lecture, some of the greatest learning we do is arguably informal (e.g., when an instructor shares a story of their own experience in academia).

As Wilson observed, from a western, eurocentric (christian, capitalist) world-view, "knowledge may be owned by an individual" whereas in an Indigenous world-view, "[k]nowledge is shared with all creation" including the cosmos (Wilson, 2001, p. 176–177). He adds that those "relationships [with all creation] are more important than reality" (Wilson, 2001, p. 177). Although Wilson's focus here is on conceptions of (relational) knowledge, it often seems that non-Indigenous conceptions of relationality focus more on human social relationships, and particularly the individualism of 'modern', 'western' societies. Concerned about the individualism embedded in humanistic counselling practices, for example, social psychologist Kenneth Gergen (2015) observed that the primacy of the individual promotes social isolation, self-obsession, relationship deterioration, and a tendency to blame individuals for the ills they experience due to society. Arguing that western humanism was conceived as an alternative to the reductive tendencies of materialism and positivism, Gergen proposed *relational* humanism as an alternative, as a way to de-centre the individual and emphasize plural constructions of meaning. Yet, there is an inherent imperialist paradox to this view. As Smith (2021[1999]) explained:

The struggle to assert and claim humanity has been a consistent thread of anti-colonial discourses on colonialism and oppression. This struggle for humanity has generally been framed within the wider discourse of humanism, the appeal to human 'rights', the notion of a universal human subject, and the connections between being human and being capable of creating history, knowledge and society. The focus on asserting humanity has to be seen within the anti-colonial analysis of imperialism and what were seen as imperialism's dehumanizing imperatives, which were structured into the language, economy, social relations and cultural life of colonial societies (Smith, 2021[1999], p. 29)

Although humanistic appeals might elevate the value of traditional and embodied knowledges often excluded in educational and professional contexts, humanism itself is a eurocentric way of viewing the world (Gergen, 2015). Furthermore, the way we understand and construct knowledge itself is a deeper part of what is at stake.

In 2022 it seems impossible to ignore the role that language and its noun-based structure, particularly English, plays in shaping the hegemonic forces we seek to resist, for example the dominant biomedical categorizations that may pathologize human experience, or the neoliberal focus on productivity and outcomes (see Phipps, 2019). As articulated in a collaboratively written article by Chiblow & Meighan (2022), the loss of language diversity in knowing the world has real environmental consequences:

Indigenous languages are important for many reasons. One major reason that I think about frequently is a unique, relational way of naming, seeing, and relating to the world, which is particular to a specific area, land, and ecosystem. Indigenous languages are like ecological encyclopedias and ancestral guides with profound knowledge cultivated over centuries. If these languages are not passed on, then this wisdom is lost to humanity and the generations to come. [...] On the other hand, dominant, non-endangered languages, such as English, carry legacies of imperialism, assimilation, and colonialism, and can be easily decontextualized or disembodied from historical context, land, and place (p. 207).

As I contemplated in my story contribution to this anthology, the value of property and ownership (in general, but of land in particular) is deeply intertwined in the immigrant imagination in multicultural Canada. As Gregory Younging of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation summarised in *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*:

Indigenous Peoples think of Creation as something that includes and sustains all living things. People are part of it and responsible for caring for it. The question of “who owns it” has no context. By contrast, “who owns it” preoccupies European notions of the world. Consider, for example, that every bit of land in what is now Canada has some sort of ownership designation. Individuals own it, or corporations own it, or towns, or the Crown, and so on (2018, p. 25).

Though today’s newcomers to Canada seem more eager than previous generations to understand Indigenous histories and relationships to the land, when it comes to land as property, more could be done so ordinary inhabitants of this country – as well as the real estate industry – better understand the inseparability of land and language for Indigenous peoples and it’s relationship to pressing social issues that touch all of us. Fundamentally, we need to ask ourselves where our commitments lay – with the commodification of ‘knowledge’ for knowledge (or our own) sake or with the relationships through which we come to know and come to be in the world (by learning through our actions/doing in environments including but not limited to people). Wilson argued that viewing knowledge as relational necessitates “relational accountability or being accountable to *all my relations*” (original italics) (p. 177). Yet, in many research accounts claiming relational approaches or ontologies, human interpersonal relationships remain the focus – often seen from a harmonious starting point. I was struck by this point during one of the first StOries sessions, when we took turns sharing one word that could encapsulate the meaning of “home” to each of us. As we went around the circle, I grew increasingly aware that the word I selected – ‘conflict’ – stood in stark contrast to the other words that were being shared, words like ‘relationship’, ‘connectedness’, ‘belonging’.

Later as I struggled through writing my story this anthology, an issue that troubled me was how my father's pursuit of property ownership had little to do with what (I believe) my father had truly wanted – a sense of connectedness with something greater than himself – with *life* or creation itself, in the sense of something greater than ourselves, as well as his role in world-making. Re-thinking my own sense of self with this in mind, who and *what* I feel a part of (*belong* to) suddenly becomes clearer. It includes my relatives, alive and deceased, but also my childhood playhouse; the plants and garden I tend; the oceans and rolling hills of my parents' of my grandparents' homelands; and the clay pot my cousin was determined to give me; not to mention, the sounds of my family's languages – more than just ways of communicating – since the structure of these languages also limits expression of some of my critiques and protestations – but the sounds of healing and music. My sense of home. And a sense of my interrelatedness, my relational self, that grew deeper through the process of writing and sharing our stories.

New approaches to inquiry in academic contexts are attempting to grapple with these tensions and paradoxes, for example the theoretical approaches of new materialism, posthumanism, and postqualitative research. Feminist critiques of humanism are not new (see Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016) but are now making their way into the consciousness of health and allied health professionals (e.g., Shaw, 2022). Given the way definitions of 'human' dominate our interpretations of human behaviour, such critiques have important relevance to the field of migration studies.

Feminist and physicist Karen Barad is a key name in the posthuman literature for drawing on quantum physics to develop what she called agential realism, which shifted attention from interactional approaches to relationship to seeing how differences emerge from what she calls intra-actions (Barad, 2007). What is important about Barad's work is the way it undermines taken for ways of thinking that rest on presumed binaries. As Carol Taylor explains, these approaches:

begin with a different view – that of the human-in-relation as co-constituted by non-human materialities (brick, glass, stone, wood, paper, plastics, flour, sand, trash, for example) and earthly others (animals, plants, the sea, sky, wind, rain, trees, soil, insects, viruses, bacteria, for example) which materialise in assemblages which are continually shifting, mutating and changing. These non-human assemblages presume different understandings of what matters. By replacing the singular figure of humanism ('Man') by a more plural understanding centred on human-nonhuman relationality, FNMPHPQ approaches enact and make possible research and pedagogy endeavors which produce knowledge differently (Taylor, 2021, p. 23).

It is not my intention to claim that the StOries project was led by such an approach. Nor do I argue that such approaches hold all answers – and indeed the voices of Indigenous People and children have typically been left out of this literature (Murriss, 2021b). What is at stake at a deeper level is our understanding of the human self. Gergen understood this, arguing that “the very idea of a private mind is a cultural construction. In effect, it is out of the relational process that all meaning emerges” (2015, p. 155). However, Gergen was speaking primarily about interpersonal relationships, which begs the question of what it is meant by 'relational paradigm'. Moreover, in the aftermath of COVID-19 which has included many human-made

catastrophes (like climate crisis, war, food and housing insecurity), relational humanism seems an insufficient response to what is truly needed in the world.

Indeed, what began in the StOries project as a concern about intersectional (individual) identities and lived experiences – of belonging or un-belonging as it were – transformed through writing into (for many of us) a collective sense of community and responsibility and, in some cases, a new sense of freedom (including, perhaps, from the individualised self). Regardless, this possibility raises potentially new or revised questions about the value of storytelling as well as the ontology of migrants within migration literature and scholarship. For as Karin Murris contends: “A relational ontology is more than just acknowledging that things are always in relation. The ontological *re*-turn is also literally about *movement*. Critical posthumanism changes the meaning of ontology from the philosophical study of ‘being’ (onto) to ‘becoming’” (p. 70). In terms of the StOries project this could on one level mean that we read the stories shared not in terms of who the authors are but who they become through the process, as well as the stories themselves as a kind of becoming:

Stories, we are told, have a start, a middle and an end. But I have come to believe that they are not necessarily in that order. As I was penning down my immigration story, it became my COVID story. That seemed like the most natural thing for me to write about since attempting to move and finally moving to Canada was the biggest thing that happened to me during the pandemic. I am aware that **having an immigration story as my pandemic story is, in the least, a privilege**. Here I am not undermining the difficulty of my experiences but reflecting on them **in relation to other stories** I have encountered. However, as I attempted to frame my experiences through language and narratives, some aspects of my story were blurred and needed to be re-examined and others gained new meanings and perspectives. **My story did not change over time but the events in it started to mean different things** than they did at the time of their occurrence (Nabila Kazmi, April 20, 2022).

Nabila’s description about her story’s becoming raises some important points, both about the interrelatedness of stories (and storytellers) but also about the nature of meaning as a becoming process – of her migration story becoming her COVID story (and her related positionality). This could of course go both ways: for a made up but plausible example, one’s ‘coming out’ story could become their migration story or vice versa. The meaning of stories can also take on different lines of trajectory – so a COVID story could become a migration story could become a ‘coming out’ story. In the final segment of this chapter, I circle back to the quote by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze at the beginning of this chapter, and his claim that: “To write is also to become something other than a writer, “(Deleuze, 1993/1997, p. 6). In the last section of this chapter, I draw examples from what we might call sensory or arts-based activities that we engaged in during this project, as a way to illustrate the ways we became as beings-in-relation through this process of sharing stories.

24.4 Becoming Authors, Becoming Vocal: Reflections from the StOries Project

The reading and writing activities employed during the StOries project aimed to elicit evocative memory and personal narratives in response to critical readings on topics such as intersectionality, racism, and Canadian multiculturalism. A key way we did so, and how the StOries methodology developed over the course of the project, was through participants' spontaneous and intentional engagement with multi-sensory and creative (visual, aural) methods as a way to stimulate memory and generate or centre their writing. Some of these activities were peer-led, whereby a smaller group of participants collaborated to present certain concepts or content to the larger group. There is not room here to summarise all the activities we engaged in, so I wish to share two very specific peer-led sessions.

In the first activity StOries participants were invited to become curious about the relationships between words, sounds, and the material world. The peer group leading this created a short presentation about 'sensory words'. To get participants thinking about words that might describe or invoke the senses, we provided three of our own: petrichor (a smell), gossamer (which invokes a feathery texture), and phosphene (a spot of light). These words and their full definitions were presented along with evocative images to represent their meaning. We asked in advance for participants to share words on a google doc from whatever language they could think of, words that either represented sounds that liked and that were not easy to replicate, or words whose sounds invoked a pleasant sensory experience. Participants could include links to images that represent the word, or to audio of the sound(s) that the word describes. This generated rich discussion about the role of language in telling their stories about migration and multiculturalism, and included words like: warahoon (Caribbean slang for a wild person who is spontaneous or a person with a wild hairdo); ihsaan (an Arabic word that cannot be easily translated which indicates generosity, excellence, and beautification in interactions with others); arrebol (Spanish for the red color reflected on the clouds when illuminated by the sun); and chipak (hugging, clinging, to stick to someone/or something). What came out of this discussion was more than simply a sense of being lost in translation; it was the sense that words matter in more ways than just human-centred communicative meaning—they translate meaning, too, between objects and organisms, and so mean something quite literally to our bodies as well.

In the second activity, we asked participants to submit an image of a meaningful object in advance of regular on-line group session, something that spoke directly or indirectly to their migration story, such as their sense of home or belonging/unbelonging. Co-facilitated by myself and Alka Kumar, we called this our 'meaningful objects activity' and so the focus was more on the object than the photograph. In addition to asking participants to submit an image of a meaningful object, StOries participants were asked to title the object and to write one to two hundred words explaining why this object is meaningful. Prior to class we collated images, titles, and captions into a powerpoint presentation (one image and caption per slide) and

then during the session we went through a kind of sharing circle where each person was invited to speak to their individual slide/image and either read their caption or say a few words about it, adding opportunities for multiple layers of meaning making.

The meaningful objects activity took inspiration from a research paper by Cox and Guillemin (2018) who discussed the methodological potential of for eliciting memory and emotion through the senses by including object engagement in qualitative research. This activity ended up being quite pivotal in the development of relationships between many members of the StOries project, and served also to generate meaningful micro-narratives that for some would become part of their final story contributions. My hope is that by presenting these below we might start to view people who migrate not merely in terms of individual identity – but cosmologically and ethically as beings-in-relation.

24.4.1 Our Meaningful Objects

First and foremost, a great number of participants chose artefacts that were gifts from family or friends, sometimes passed down through generations. Gifts such as a wall decoration with an Arabic inscription and an engraved spatula signified relationships with God and other faith communities (**Bibi Babksh**), friendship (**Brianna Jennings**), and our own personal becoming (**Jenny Osorio, Chelsea Richards James**). Everyday objects such as a small toy or an ashtray can act as ‘home’ in another place, a landscape one no longer connects with physically (**Nabila Kasmi, Negin Javaher**). Connecting people with place, the objects activate emotional states (**Karen Young**) and carry stories of the past (**Alka Kumar**). Some objects may convey a sense of uprootedness and urgency, blurring the objects’ stories with our own (**Ozlem Atar**). At the same time we are reminded by the act of photographing that the object only captures fragments of what these objects mean, and what they do, in our lives (**Chelsea Richards James**).

These connections between people (living and non-living), place, and objects are dynamic. Perhaps ironically, though in English we think of these artefacts as our “possessions”, the contemplations below indicate that in many ways these objects and artefacts, through our entangled relationships, become as much a part of us as we become part of them – thus serving as reminders of who we are (**Tháбата de Azevedo Xavier da Costa**). Yet they elicit not only memory of individual people and places – as when a telephone desk or a clay bowl become a proxy for both a deceased relative and one’s ties to the past (**Sadaf Rezakhan Khajeh, Natasha Damiano**) – but also historical memory – such as the paradoxical image of the Two China’s (**Owen Guo**) and the tea cups signifying camaraderie during oppression (**Esra Ari**). They may personify all that we wish we were or imagine we could become (**Arunkumar Javel**), or give us direction in our daily practices (**Galina Liou**). As physical representations of our embodied memories, they help us honour those we have lost (**Christian Hui**), though we may also feel at once haunted and

comforted by the memories they elicit (**Melanie Zuzarte**). As storied through the objects presented below, matter that means something (Barad, 2007) can become extensions of ourselves, not only symbolizing strength stemming from emotional solidarity as well as a sense of resistance and resiliency.

Below are the titles, images, and captions that participants generated, arranged to tell a story about the ways objects and artefacts might mediate our relational entanglements. My purpose in sharing the descriptions is to demonstrate the way objects and artefacts (including photographs) can mediate the relationships central to our migration stories – with people, place, spirit (and imagination), and across place and time. It is also a way to disrupt the standard conventions of academic biographies comprising an alphabet soup of titles, letters, and institutional affiliations. Through these objects, we share with the readers a deeper sense of who the writers of this anthology are and a more relational sense of their deeper motivations for engaging in such a project.

Reflecting Roots (photo and caption by Bibi Baksh)



My object... is a wall decoration made from the finest Indian teak, **gifted to me** from an Indian Christian colleague in 2005 after he came back **from a trip to India**. He said that it is a common piece in the doorway/entrance area in Muslim homes in India. The Arabic words on it is loosely translated as: “This is from the bounty of my Lord”. It is significant for three reasons: **it reflects my relationship with God**; it speaks to my relationship **with peoples of other faiths**; and it came from **the country that my grandfather grew up in** – I imagine he could have planted that tree as a boy!

“Thank you, Brianna” (photo and caption by Brianna Jennings)



This object is **a gift given to me by one of my former students and now friend**. It is a spatula used to make okonomiyaki – the regional dish of Hiroshima. Inscribed on the spatula is “Thank you Brianna”. She gave this to me **when I was about to leave Japan** after living and working there for 2 years. It’s one of the most kind and thoughtful gifts I have ever received. It **connects me back to a place and time** that I cherish. I feel very lucky to have met this student and to have stayed in touch all these years.

A Winter Scene (photo and caption by Jenny Osorio)



I started this cross-stitch piece **when I was thirteen years old** as part of the Arts and Crafts class at school. A winter scene in which mama bear and baby bear contemplate a supermoon. **I remember my mother telling me that the project was too big** and that I should choose something smaller to submit. I didn't complete the piece and left it abandoned. Last year, I received my mother's collection of cross-stitch fabrics, threads and projects. **She had kept my unfinished embroidery all these years.** Curious enough, I had kept the pattern in an old book. I looked at the piece thinking *little did I know then that I would be living in Winterland one day.*

I got myself to work and finished the winter scene 20 years later. It now adorns the gallery wall of my son's bedroom.

35 mm Film Camera (photo and caption by Chelsea Nyomi Richards)



This is a film camera from the 1980s that captures images in 35 mm format. The camera was **gifted to me from my mother** in 2016 after I expressed interest in learning photography. I began making images with it during the summer of 2017, after learning how to use a DLSR through volunteering with an on-campus media company during the third year of my undergrad. This camera is **symbolic of the first steps that I took** when deciding to pursue **a career in the arts**, as opposed to my previous plans of becoming a medical doctor upon completion of my bachelor's degree in Life Sciences. I was fascinated by the camera and **its ability to capture fragments of the peaceful moments** that I was dwelling in. I continued to explore photography for a few months, using this film camera, a DSLR, and a mini polaroid before I decided to study the world of television and videography.

Casa Carioca (image and caption by Thábata de Azevedo Xavier da Costa)



I came to Canada with two suitcases. Mostly clothes, nothing else. The idea was to build a new life, and **a new life needed new stuff**. To some extent, at the beginning, stuff was not important. Little by little I began to feel the need **to remind myself of who I was** by filling my place with things that represented Brazil or that we found on vacation whenever we left Canada to continue to explore the world. The item in the picture is a piece of art and possibly the item in my apartment that **brings me the most joy**. It represents my identity in a way that is hard to explain, especially considering that this is not a piece that culturally represents the part of Brazil that I'm from – and yet, it's so Brazil. When I was a child, my mom brought to our home similar pieces of art. I never liked them, maybe because they were not perfect enough. **Now, not being perfect, is what makes them so special**. To messy lives and weird little people – all full of color.

Playing With Memories (photo and caption by Nabila Kazmi)



I chose this object [a miniature toy horse made of green fabric and wrapped in gold ribbon] because it belongs to my 5 year old nephew and reminds me of the time I spent with him last year which helped me keep my sanity during COVID times. Also **it is representative of the land I come from.**

Cigarette Ashtray (photo and caption by Negin Saheb Javaher)



Something from “my home” for **the “home” that I now live in and is mine** [picture of carved wooden ashtray on stand].

Figa Amethyst Charm (photo and caption by Karen Young)



This figa is made of amethyst and gold. As someone who is not really into jewelry or would go out of my way to buy jewelry and further support extractive industries, I find that I gravitate towards this charm when I'm feeling less at ease that day. It is significant to me because **I feel calmness whenever I wear it**. At a birthday party, where the memo was to wear anything but purple and gold, the birthday person shared with us how **amethyst and gold offer soothing powers**. Somehow, even after dedicating to their wish to avoid wearing purple and gold clothing. I found myself wearing this necklace to the birthday party after I saw that one of the daughters of the birthday person had seen me wearing it.

'For whom the bell tolls' (photo and caption by Alka Kumar, quoting Ernest Hemingway)



I got these antique brass bells nearly twenty-five years ago **at an open-air market in India**, in my home city, Delhi. **They lived in my parental home** when my mother was breathing her last, and they have **travelled with me across oceans**, occupying pride of place in the many homes I created with my own little family. Back in the spring, during our twisted pandemic times, I would see this scene from my office window each time I looked up from my work. These bells **carrying stories from my past**, now hung in my balcony while my backyard crab apple blossomed in all its beauty. The bells connect the dots **between 'me then' and 'me now,' signifying continuity, calm, and a sense of grounding**. Somehow, they remind me to be grateful, and to always do my best.

Pebble Tumbings/Ramblings (photo and caption by Ozlem Atar)

The object I chose is a family of three pebbles: **my creative muses**. They had been sitting silently in my suitcase for years when I found them in the winter of 2019 while looking for another precious object I had lost. **I had uprooted the rocks** from a coast in Western Turkey long ago, and unknowingly, smuggled them into Canada in August 2018. The rocks have their special corner on my desk, from where **they cast me hurt glances** for years of negligence. **They urge me to tell their story**: a tale about occupying the precarious edge of visibility and invisibility as well as that of inertness and mobility. I fantasize writing an epistolatory short story or novella about a pebble in deep time.

Telephone Desk (photo and caption by Sadaf Rezakhan Khajeh)



The telephone desk was in our household since **before I was born**. When I was ten we moved, and **the desk found a new home** in my grandmother's apartment. I remember watching home videos of my two year old self, standing on the telephone desk, dialing the phone and calling out every family member's name. After we moved, whenever we went to my grandmother's place, I would sit by the desk and play with the orange rotary dial phone that actually still worked. I would dial every number I knew which was our own home number and my grandmother's number. One of my most vivid memories is of **my grandmother sitting on that desk** and using that rotary dial phone. The details of how her fingers moved so quickly to dial the phone and the sound the dialing wheel made every time she released it at the finger stop are still with me. **After my grandmother passed away**, I begged my mom to keep the desk and **I kept the phone** myself. I can't really take the desk back to Canada with me and now that I am here in Tehran, as I sit on it, it feels so much smaller compared to my body.

Willful Connections (photo and caption by Natasha Damiano)



This clay bowl may be around one hundred years old or more. I have had it since 2001 when I took **a trip to my father's hometown**. The bowl was one among many still remaining in the tiny house my grandfather grew up in. It was **given to me by the son of my father's first cousin**, who I have a close bond with. He hid it under a jacket and gave it to me as a keepsake, concerned that older relatives would refuse to share it if we had asked. **This act of defiance** signified our relationship and **his understanding of my deep connection to that place and the memory of my grandfather**. Now it houses the stones I have collected from other memorable places and moments in my life.

Keychain from my papa (photo and caption by Sarah Ostapchuck)



This keychain was given to me by my grandfather (whom I've always called papa) years before I was able to drive a car. I want to say maybe when I was about twelve. I honestly don't remember when or where or even why he gave it to me. **I just remember him giving it** to me and saying specifically that it was meant for my car key ring when I had my own car one day. My papa was a driving instructor (among many other things). He taught my mom, her older sister, me, my older sister, and my younger cousin how to drive. **I always knew him as a kind and soft papa**, but when I got behind the wheel and he in the passenger seat, he turned into a drill sergeant. **There may have been tears**, but there were also many successful driving tests. The keychain is made of glass, I think, with a foam-like fish inside to symbolize Christianity. **He was a major patriarchal figure** in my family and led us

all in our faith. Though he is gone now, I still look to his example of how to live a Christ-like, selfless life, and I can't bring myself to put the keychain on my car key ring now for fear of it breaking. Instead, it hangs on a hook in my bathroom.



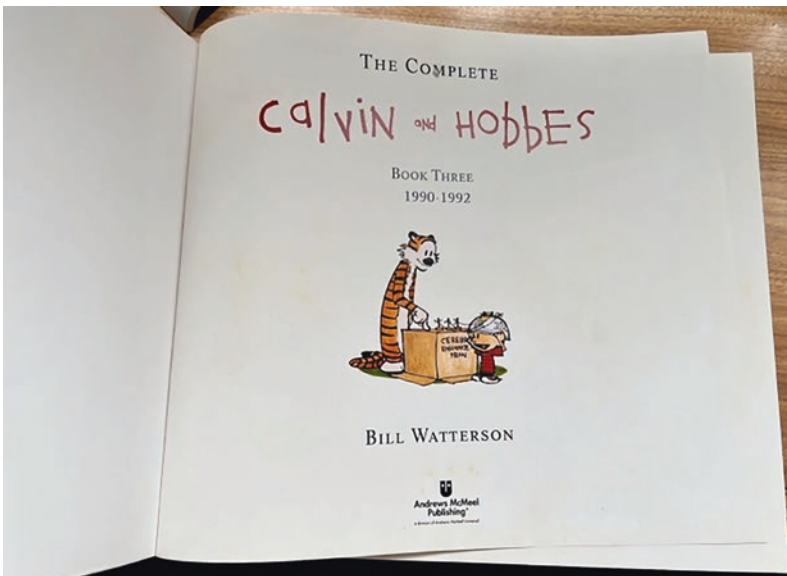
Granby Zoo, 1979 (photo and caption by Melanie Zuzarte)

The attached photograph was taken in Montreal, Quebec in 1979. I was with my sisters and my Mom at Granby Zoo. I was 5 years old in this picture and wearing an 'Enfant Terrible' tee. I remember it being one of my favourite t-shirts to wear. We would move from Montreal to Toronto the following year. My Dad took this photo as he did most photos. I wonder why **it was important for him to document our lives in Canada as a new immigrant**. I was half smiling in this photograph, which means that I was worried. I was often worried as a little one. I would often think about what my parents were thinking, feeling, and how they engaged with one another. Yes, even at 5. Even though my Dad was documenting our family's journey, he also was documenting my inner child's reflexivity.

If I were to visit Granby Zoo today with a Cracker Jack box in hand, **would the ghosts from the past keep me company?**

Turkish Tea Glasses (photo and caption by Esra Ari)

The first picture on the left is one of the Turkish teacups I have. This reminds me **warmth, my family, my friends, and food back home**. Waking up in the morning, the first thing you do is brewing the tea for breakfast. This is how a day starts in most of the houses in Turkey. After the long classes at the university, we were not immediately walking out of the class as if we had a very important meeting to attend. Our classes were not fun. Indeed, the content of the classes was disturbing. We were just taking the time to relax or to digest... **The end of the classes was time for tea and long chats with friends**, sometimes with tears in the eyes and sometimes with laughter on our faces.

The Book of Life (photo and caption by Arunkumar Rajavel)

The Complete Calvin and Hobbes book collection is the most meaningful object in my life. Calvin symbolises everything I have lost: **the childhood that I never had**, the fun I didn't know existed, the approach to life that I wish I took. Calvin is a **personification of everything I longed to be, everything I wish I were**. If I could time travel and become my younger self again, I'd try to be as bratty and as innocent; and if given a chance at childhood again, I'd try to be as free and as daring. **This book changed my outlook on life**. If I'm sad, happy, excited, nervous, anxious, etc., this is **the first place I'd go to find solace, strength, and comfort**. Naturally, this is the one thing that I chose to take with me when I moved abroad."

Medicine Buddha (photo and caption by Galina Liou)



My meaningful object is the Medicine Buddha statue **gifted by the Monk** as a birthday present in 2019, the first year when I moved to Prince Edward Island from Taiwan. The Monk knew that I have been reciting The Sutra of The Medicine Buddha weekly. I suppose he wanted **to encourage me to keep on reciting and learning dharma**, therefore he regifted me the statue, as the monks do not keep personal possessions besides those obligatory and authorized things. I felt so blessed and blissful when I was handed the statue. **I will keep reciting** the Sutra of The Medicine Buddha, **praying** for true happiness and peace for all beings.

The Black Suede Shoes from Derek (photo and caption by Christian Hui)



As I reflected on the black suede shoes my mentor Derek had gifted me, I felt a **sense of love, joy and camaraderie evoked by the memory of a dear friend**. The black suede shoes were not new, but slightly worn bargain finds that had been kept in almost pristine conditions. The patterns lightly etched on the suede leather exuded a refined elegance, while the small silver buttons gave the footwear a flashy call for attention. **When I learned Derek had passed, I immediately searched for the shoes and placed them on my altar**. To honour Derek’s legacy, I dressed up on the day of the community memorial, and **made sure my feet were wrapped** around by the precious black suede shoes he left me.

24.5 An Ending That’s Still Becoming...

It’s difficult to end a story whose ending is not yet clear. My purpose for showing the examples from the activities, and for being reflexive about how the chapter came into being, was also to highlight this anthology as a work in progress. As anthropologist Laura Nader (2011) commented in her essay about the relationship between theory and method in ethnography, we are all “caught in [our] culture much as the people [we] study”. Because of our embeddedness in the very culture we attempted to critique through our written (and non-written) reflections and discussions, we co-created in the StOries project new understandings of ourselves, individually, and

in relation to each other and that which matters to us. This does not mean we have overcome what we have attempted here to critique, but we have edged our way forward together, our strengths becoming clearest perhaps at the points at which we have diverged (from one another or our stories). For example, as I wrote this chapter, I kept thinking of the ending of my own story and how maybe already, even before publication, I would write it slightly differently. My own shift of focus from belonging to becoming also raised questions for me about how our cultural notions of belonging translate into 'common sense' assumptions that show up in mental health policies, systems and structures intended to support people who are marginalized (by normative sexist, racist, transphobic, ableist, and humancentric bias) and who also experience significant or severe distress.

Our engagement with the material and sensory world as a way to remember that which we already and always have embodied became increasingly important to both our collective understandings ('relational knowledge') and our ongoing relations. In this process, some of us have become authors for the first time; others have become more vocal about their identities and lived experiences; and others still have healed longstanding wounds, often rooted in family or migration or both. In the months that have followed the writing of these stories, some of us have continued to work with one another, developing workshops and presentations, and collaborating on the writing and editing of the additional chapters of this anthology. Others have moved on to new projects, academic programs, jobs and houses, or new stages of life however ordinary or extraordinary. Some participants have been touched and exhausted by politics from their homeland as they struggle to continue working or studying while also supporting loved ones and political actions. Others have dealt with their own personal health, or the health and even loss of relatives, child and/or elder care, and travels 'home' and back again. In other words, life has unfolded, as it does, and not in ways that are linear, predictable, bringing both joy and suffering.

I began this chapter with my ponderings of why 'fieldnotes' were not the appropriate metaphor for a critical discussion of the processes behind the stories generated, shared, and finally written down and collated into this anthology. Many questions motivated my reconceptualization of the chapter. *Why did we write the 'fieldnotes' as we did? What does it say about the common sense ways that we understand ethnography (outside of anthropology)? What do these reflections actually reveal, and what is elided when framing them in this way?* By showing and telling about the activities we engaged in throughout the StOries process, the goal of this chapter – and indeed this project – was also to bring these migrations stories into conversation with Indigenous scholarship that has long held the value of stories as relational knowledge. This is only a tiny first step of what we might continue to create in future. The purpose of this chapter is to caution readers as well to the need to be attentive to the ethics of engaging responsibly in storywork (Archibald, 2008), especially if we do so in the name of decolonization and Indigenization of research and related practices. What we do with stories matters if we are to heed their wisdom for the greater good of *all* of our relations. Will we listen? *And then?*

Appendix

Writing prompts for 'Fieldnotes' chapter

- Who was your inspiration?
- Did you already know what you wanted to write about, or did you change your mind later? Did you discover what you wanted to write about at the last minute?
- Were there any specific writing prompts, topics/themes discussed in workshops, or reading material covered that gave you ideas for your last piece or inspired you?
- Was there a life event or a lifelong experience that led up to the writing of this piece for you?
- Was there a pivotal moment that influenced your writing?
- What have you learned about yourself and about your interactions with others?

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