Self Portraits of South Asian Womxn: The Affective Geographies of Belonging During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A visual report

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The question of stories and storytelling illuminate the method of collaboration... Sharing stories engenders creative rigorous radical theory. The act of sharing stories *is* the theory and the methodology” (McKittrick 2021, 73)

These are the “dense and complex political alternatives and radical ways of being and living that are intensely personal and collective” (McKittrick 2021, 69)
Introductory Note

- This presentation has been developed as part of my engagement with the School of Cities Student Academy from January-June 2021. The project that I am reflecting on here is a much larger initiative that has received support from the Asian Institute, the Department of Geography and Planning, and most recently the Ontario Arts Council. Additionally, the reflections I am presenting here are part of larger creative experiments and explorations I am currently engaged in personally; they also are connected to my PhD work in the Department of Geography and Planning, which pays specific attention to creative storytelling as a methodological intervention on the topic of reproductive in/justice in what I call ‘Punjabi Canada’.

- As part of my engagement with the School of Cities over the past six months, as part of the project stream, ‘Cities of Inequality, Urban Solidarity, and Community Activism’, I have been intentionally observing the varied impacts of an online creative storytelling workshop I developed and facilitated – and the resulting community network that was born from this - in July/August 2020. What follows are some conceptual reflections from engaging in this observation as a community curator, creative educator, and doctoral researcher who also identifies as a South Asian womxn and storyteller.

- The work of feminist geographers Katharine McKittrick and Richa Nagar continues to shape my own thinking about the so-called ‘affective geographies of belonging’ that I explore here, and even more importantly, about creative storytelling as liberation work and about the entanglements of “identities-places-embodiments-infrastructures-narratives-feeling” that make up the liberatory struggle (see McKittrick 2021, 30).
Terminology

- **South Asian**: anyone self-identifying with the geographical region (past or present) of South Asia (currently comprised of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Maldives) and its many historical and contemporary diasporas.

- **Womxn**: anyone identifying with the female sex and/or gender. Most participants I refer to here self-identify as cis-gendered women.

- **Aesthetic Labour**: music, groove, text, poem, photo (see McKittrick 2021)

- **Affective Geographies**: sensory embodiments, experiences, spaces, places, expressions of belonging; “feelings of being in place” (Mee and Wright 2009)
Some Notes on South Asian Communities, Womxn, and Belonging in Canada

- Geographically specific understandings of South Asian-ness, of community, of femininity (e.g., Punjabi, Tamil, Bangladeshi, Indo-Caribbean) sometimes create bounded understandings of identity
  - Due to im/migration and settlement histories and patterns (e.g., Brampton and Surrey, Canada are densely populated by Punjabi communities; Scarborough and East-end of the GTA is home to many Tamil communities), important historical contexts (e.g., the Sri Lankan civil war; histories of Indo-Caribbean indenture)
- Borders continue to be ‘marked’ on South Asian womxn’s bodies (e.g., divisive politics surrounding the wearing of the hijab and niqab; sensationalized narratives around forced marriages, honour-based violence, gender-biased sex selection) further isolating many womxn from placemaking opportunities and community activist spaces
- There hasn’t always been so much ‘coming together’ and building networks of solidarity, friendship, and care; this is slowly changing

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Reflections on the Shades of Brown Girl
Online Creative Storytelling Workshop: A Creative Experiment in Creative Placemaking & Community Transformation

• Shades of Brown Girl was created as an online community in January 2020

• In Summer 2020 I conducted an 8-week online creative storytelling workshop that was initially planned to take place in very locally specific geographies in Ontario – Markham and Brampton; instead it happened online, with a total of 32 diverse South Asian womxn
  • Participants identified with places like the Caribbean Islands, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia
  • Participants were physically located across Canada – Ontario, British Columbia, Manitoba, Alberta, Nova Scotia, Northwest Territories, Quebec – and beyond – the UK, the Netherlands
  • Participants were 16-60 years of age

• Workshop signaled possibilities of a more expansive affective geography of belonging for South Asian womxn, that was not tied to a particular physical location or (sub)urban space, but rather that was taking place in the ‘third space’ of virtual platforms and social media

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Collectively Re-Imagining & Re-Creating Spaces of Belonging

- Summer 2020 online creative storytelling workshop - my own intentional act of creative care labour
- The multiple collaborations and solidarities fostered virtually since then are beautiful illustrations of “the ongoing work of aesthetically critiquing unfreedom...the work of recognition and expanse” happening in third spaces (McKittrick 2021, drawing upon Dionne Brand, 62).
- These online communities – these spaces of solidarity through creative storytelling – at once have their own unbounded geographies and fuel important locally specific as well as transnational space- and place-making.
Community Building Examples – September 2020-June 2021

- A Whatsapp group for all 30+ workshop participants was created by participants themselves – stories have been shared, opportunities have been put forth, collaboration has been sparked, projects have been amplified, feelings have been felt, photos and music have been exchanged
- One participant created a short film based on the monologue she created, titled ‘I AM’, which was then featured by CBC in Winnipeg
- One participant used her experience in the workshop to create an audio-play based on Indo-Caribbean mythology
- Two participants collaborated to create an information dissemination platform around COVID-19, in effort to create open access resources for members of the South Asian community across Canada
- One participant curated an anthology for unheard stories of Indo-Caribbean womxn
- Two participants on two opposite ends of Canada came together to work on a mural making project that will be taking place in a major Canadian city in summer
- One participant is working on a book manuscript and will be dedicating summer 2021 to writing short stories for young womxn on belonging as a South Asian diasporic womxn
- Events have been created, friendship have been formed, stories have continued to be shared through social media
- I continue to receive emails, messages, phonecalls from community members expressing how grateful they are to have found this community, how it’s the first place they have felt any kind of authentic connection and belonging with other South Asian womxn within the diaspora

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“friendship is hard freedom...friendships effectuate consciousness and liberation and possibility”

- Katherine McKittrick, 2021

Thank You!

Contact me!

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More information about Shades of Brown Girl:
www.shadesofbrowngirl.com
Facebook & Instagram: @shadesofbrowngirl
YouTube: Shades of Brown Girl

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