We Do Not Let History Shroud Us: The Body as Curriculum and Its Refractive Possibilities

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Abstract:
As two South Asians in the diaspora, we situate the significance of the body as a curriculum, where our lived experiences and stories supported us in navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. We engage in the method of life writing to attend to specific narratives that have framed our diasporic identities. Through that engagement, we seek to demonstrate how we struggle with questions about belonging and dislocation, while also finding ways to overcome those challenges and realities in our everyday lives. Gripped by memories formed through phone calls and visits, with miles between us and the place we know as South Asia, we posit that the diasporic body forms a curriculum by way of a Brown(ing) body. We make the case that such a body has always had to *refract* in all its complexities and nuances—pandemic or not. Accordingly, we then consider how our lived experiences and subjective bodies informed the pedagogical possibilities of navigating the morbid pandemic as it touched the lives of the students we worked with. Our collaborative writing is therefore an offering of hope and sustenance that emerged during a pandemical time of grave uncertainty and profound loss.

Keywords: contested space; diaspora; lived curriculum; relational pedagogy; South Asian; pandemic

Nous ne laissons pas l'histoire nous masquer : Le corps en tant que programme d'études et ses possibilités de réfraction

Résumé :

En tant que deux personnes de la diaspora Sud-Asiatique, nous situons l'importance du corps en tant que programme d'études, où nos expériences vécues et nos récits nous ont aidés à faire face à la pandémie liée à COVID-19. Nous adoptons la méthodologie de l'écriture de vie pour nous concentrer sur les récits spécifiques qui ont façonné nos identités diasporiques. Grâce à cet engagement, nous cherchons à montrer comment nous nous débattons avec les questions d'appartenance et de dislocation, tout en trouvant des moyens de surmonter ces défis et ces réalités dans notre vie quotidienne. Saisis par des souvenirs formés au fil d'appels téléphoniques et de visites, avec des kilomètres qui nous séparent de l'endroit que nous connaissons comme l'Asie du Sud, nous soutenons que le corps diasporique forme un programme d'études par le biais d'un corps brun(i). Nous soutenons qu'un tel corps a toujours dû se réfracter dans toutes ses complexités et nuances, qu'elles soient pandémiques ou non. En conséquence, nous examinons ensuite comment nos expériences vécues et nos corps subjectifs ont éclairé les possibilités pédagogiques de naviguer dans la pandémie morbide telle qu'elle a touché la vie des étudiants avec lesquels nous avons travaillé. Notre écriture collaborative est donc une offrande d'espoir et de réconfort qui a émergé pendant une période pandémique d'incertitude grave et de perte profonde.

Mots clés : espace contesté; diaspora; curriculum vécu; pédagogie relationnelle; Asie du Sud; pandémie

Brown Bodies in the Diaspora and the Curriculum-as-Lived

At the end of 2019 and towards the start of 2020, we, Saba and Shyam, like the rest of the world, were gripped by COVID-19—its upheaval set upon us all. Indeed, its presence brought even the mighty to kneel and the rest of us to a staggering halt (Roy, 2020). We were jolted into a frenzied world, with the voraciousness of the pandemic leaving no part of the world untouched, stripping away fragments of everyday life. As those edges—the ordinary gatherings, interactions and ways of life—started to seemingly disappear, the rising deaths clutched us even more hauntingly. Soon, as the bodies mounted and the coronavirus continued to spread, it became clear that we would all have to attune our lives to the grim realities of an ongoing and uncertain pandemic.

When we started to discuss how to respond to and overcome the precarity of the pandemic, we both discerned that diasporic South Asian bodies like our own have always grappled with harsh situations and terrible human history, especially in terms of migration, race and racism. We began this conversation long before the pandemic, when we met at a site of teacher education, as a teacher educator (Saba) and a teacher candidate (Shyam), where the absence of Brownness brought us together leading to an unwavering collegial rapport and friendship over the years. Through that continued camaraderie, we have spoken, both in whispers and more openly, about the representation of Brownness in the curriculum and elsewhere. In our conversational exchanges, we have also wrestled with what it means to hold several similar identities that have defined both of our lives: being Brown; belonging to the diaspora; and living in the world as South Asians.

In this work, we examined those identities more closely and situated how our diasporic bodies supported us in navigating the curriculum during the pandemic. By interrogating our diasporic experiences before the pandemic, we recognized that our bodies have always been a curriculum of sorts—of a curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 1993), the body as significant to lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Our subjective bodies, affected by and juxtaposed with belonging, dislocation and racialization, emerged as central and immediate to our experience and situatedness of the pandemic. Said differently, our bodies were not merely objects but carried meaning (Springgay & Freedman, 2007), and that meaning became a way for us to think about how we could potentially navigate a time of doubt and unpredictability.

I, Saba, came to this collaborative writing as a South Asian Muslim woman whose identity has been constantly in question. Exacerbated further by my diasporic body, I struggled with quest/ions of "a here, a there, and an elsewhere" (Trinh, 2011, p. 27). As such, I have never been certain if I was from Canada or from Pakistan, as I was perpetually confronted by events and situations that have rendered me from "neither here nor there". In speaking about this with Shyam, I know that I was not alone. Coming to the call for papers for this issue, we were both aware of how we have traversed in between Canada and South Asia (Alvi, 2020; Patel, 2022), and we were guided by those reflections. Furthermore, both of us realized that many of the students of colour we taught during the pandemic grappled with similar questions about belonging and home in relation to their diasporic identities. Thus, I began to ask myself the following in response to how I navigated the pandemic as a teacher-

scholar: how might my understanding(s) and negotiation(s) of where I was "from" inform my teaching pedagogy during a moment of grave uncertainty?

I, Shyam, came to the call thinking about how my body was intricately connected to the pulse of the South Asian diaspora, as I was always "haunted by some sense of loss" (Rushdie, 1992, p. 10). This loss included a displacement of my culture, my history and my language, but it also included the grief and sorrow as a result of distance—of being far away from my ancestral land and my relations. Yet, it was this very experience of being a part of the diaspora that supported me in maintaining a bond with former students, whom I taught as an elementary school teacher in India and who, at the time of pandemic, in 2020, were in the seventh and eighth grades. Through my conversations with Saba, it became clear to me that the South Asian diasporic body, including its experiences and stories, served as a curriculum, and it is with great fervour that I engaged in reflecting and writing about moving forward during a complex and sometimes ineffable pandemic arc.

Together, we have written this article to take part in a project of refraction—an act that we have described as "making it through" precarious and uncertain times as a result of our diasporic lived experiences and stories. Moreover, we have framed refracting the pandemic in the way Low and Palulis (2004) write about a living pedagogy as "running with and against lines of separation" (p. 13). Like the literal meaning of the word "refraction", the pandemic passed through our bodies, and we were running with and against its consuming and unyielding presence. We had to "bend through" and "steer" its affectivity on our lives, especially in our teaching lives as the pandemic seeped into the curricular and pedagogical choices we had to make.

For me (Saba), this refraction was articulated through stories of living in a liminal and "third" space (Bhabha, 1994), and the valences that emerged from having to navigate a space neither from here nor there. In that contemplation, I thought about the tensions I felt from always having my identity questioned and the strategies that have emerged, as a result, to counter those questions, which, inevitably, percolated into my curricular and pedagogical choices. For me (Shyam), my refraction centred on the story of growing up in Montréal and finding ways to remain connected to my (home)land, despite the immense distance. More specifically, I attended to my relationship with my grandmother, and how memories with her shaped my interactions with those students, whom I taught for three years, from 2014-2017, when I was living in India and situated four hours away from my ancestral village. I worked with them again for a few months in 2020 when the pandemic hit, and we stumbled into the (im)possibilities of remote learning. In tandem, we, as teacher-scholars, were like Morawski and Palulis (2009) in the sense that our "two teaching lives collide[d]" (p. 7), finding solace in our convergence as we interrogated our different yet shared experiences through life writing as métissage, in a time of unexpected challenges and pedagogical possibilities.

Coming to Life Writing and Invoking Literary Métissage

The Method of Life Writing

We arrived at the call of refracting the pandemic by positing the curriculum through our bodies. We did so through the method of life writing (Leggo, 2000; 2010), where stories were used as

research to attend to complex experiences, which we did here by drawing on narratives framed by our diasporic travelogs to unsettle how we evoked our bodies as curriculum/a to survive the pandemic. Thus, we drew on life writing in the way Jordan and Bickel (2021) do—to consider "the life-stories that matter to us in this time" (p. 42). By exhuming specific moments in our diasporic lives, our narrative research was concerned with lifting said stories to make sense of the complex and that which is ineffable (Leggo, 2010). It was, as Hasebe-Ludt and Jordan (2010) contend, a way to attend to our live(d) experiences. By doing so, it became a space for us that was contoured in the personal, shaded by the topography of our reflections coming together to make for an intertextual convergence, as we traced the hyphenated and often contested space of ho[me].

Literary Métissage as a Way of Writing

Like Morawski and Palulis (2009), we were two at work: exhuming, remembering, unearthing life writing. We pieced together fragments of our lives, where a literary métissage (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009) surfaced, as we attended to the past and its ramifications during an uncertain pandemic, moving forward by locating the body as a curriculum to open pedagogical possibilities. Inspired and roused by what potential existed in the project of curricular refraction, we reflected on how our pasts shaped our work with students, as we "brought to life" our life writing. As the morbid virus pushed its way into the corridors and halls of educational spaces, our diasporic bodies acted as the curriculum that informed our pedagogical choices during a time of precariousness and turmoil. At times, it was wanting to put our life writing into words. Therefore, the language of our reflection mirrored that of Morawski and Palulis (2009): "Remnants of experiences, encouragements, inspirations, diffractions, and reactions we have pieced together, sometimes with careful stitches of gossamer threads, other times with a rough hand splicing unraveling twine, to (re)form our teaching lives" (p. 9).

Accordingly, our writing took the form of a literary métissage as our words were braided and weaved to capture our life writing from a fractured vantage point. We listened to Low and Palulis (2000) in that we considered the language of our writing as a site "where fragments of innocent alterity [were] invoked—in ambiguity and metonymy—a place within the borderlands of the old and the new—where language [was] not conceptually and terminologically set but live[d] in-between" (p. 75). Some of our sentences, at times, are fragmented, speaking to the uneasy articulation and spillage of our lives. For, being committed to a project of refraction, also meant that our life writing ultimately was shaped by writing in a language complicated by a long history of power and privilege, which we wanted to disrupt and unsettle—a sometimes enervating task but one we had contemplated for a long time. So, in that manner, our way of writing has reverberated the ways in which our Brown bodies have been broken and shrouded by our entanglements with the English language, and the splintered sentences and words we have written speak to a longing for piecing everything back while knowing that such a project was always a longer journey—one we have continued to traverse through in our collaborative and individual scholarship. With that, we engaged our individual stories to delineate how two teacher-scholars as a part of the South Asian diaspora refracted the pandemic, sometimes from one end of the world to another.

From Pakistan to Canada: Saba's Story

Going Back to Where I Came From

An integral part of my childhood was my family's frequent visits to Pakistan to see my relatives. I marvelled at how my parents were able to afford the plane tickets. They spent their lives living on a modest single income, but my parents sought to foster a connection to Pakistan and our identity as South Asians. They did so to show us the place where they—we—came from. For that reason, I have spent many glorious summers in the sizzling heat of our ancestral homeland. Over time, these trips became my haven and escape from the small towns I grew up in. I was often the only Brown girl in my classes. I was bullied and excluded for much of my primary years. Every day I was reminded that my Brownness made me different, unwanted and unworthy. I was Canadian by birth but villainized as being "Paki". Longing to escape the isolation, the journeys to Pakistan were welcomed ones. Embarking on the aircraft was a welcome sight. There were rows and rows of aunties and uncles, all with overpacked carry-ons, just like our own. It felt as though I had arrived at my destination before even taking off. It felt as though I had come home while simultaneously having just left my home. When we arrived in Pakistan, I felt the exhilarating rush of arriving at the airport to see dozens of other Brown children, who, just like me, had been anxiously waiting to spend the summer sleeping on makeshift beds and flying kites on rooftops. As I stood amongst them, I would often wonder if they also experienced what I encountered. Were they also bullied for being Brown? Was this a welcome escape for them too? Probably.

For these journeys, I would wear a traditional *shalwar kameez* because I wanted to fit in as soon as I arrived. I did not want to wait another moment to blend in. I wanted to be painstakingly, *boringly,* normal amongst the sea of Brown faces that waited for me in *my* country. However, as much as I longed to fit in, there were stark reminders that my relatives in Pakistan did not see me as one of them. I was a mere visitor to them. Even though I shared the same strong nose and pronounced eyebrows as them, they were quick to remind me that I was not a *real* Pakistani because I could not relate to the hardships they faced on a day-to-day basis. I, a privileged Canadian girl, was not able to fathom the lingering effects of a country born out of war and that suffered from a corrupt political system. My aunt put it aptly when she remarked, "Enjoy your vacation here but be thankful this is not your home." As much as I wanted to be considered Pakistani while I was there, I was suddenly a Canadian in the eyes of all who met me. This would lead me to these perplexing questions: Where did I belong? Where was home? Where did I fit in?

Not [Canadian] Enough

The most compelling memory of unbelonging was when my cousin in Pakistan excitedly brought her friend home from school one day to meet me. Me—her cousin from Canada. It became clear to me early on in life that for middle-class families in Pakistan, living in the West meant my family had "made it". We were considered rich and powerful, imagined to be leading lavish lives abroad. The reality was different: we only ended up in Canada because my father had some luck on his side. As a student in Pakistan with no parental support, he secured scholarship after scholarship

for higher education opportunities, which led to him gaining admission into an American university, where he eventually applied to Canada for immigration. He struggled financially for years, and despite what was believed, we were far from leading lavish lives.

As I walked into the lounge to meet my cousin's friend, she greeted me with disappointment and bewilderment. "*This* is your cousin from Canada?", she said with a look of disgust. She started to laugh and then said, "She doesn't even *look* like she's from Canada". Initially, I took this as a compliment, thinking it meant I fit in so well as a Pakistani. It took me a painstakingly long time to realize she did not mean this as a compliment at all. She had perhaps expected a teen fashionista, straight out of a *Vogue* magazine. Perhaps she expected someone with cool hair and stylish clothes. Instead, I stood in front of her wearing a *shalwar kameez* with my *dupatta* draped over my head, looking nothing like her imagination of what a Canadian looked like. At the same time, I was also the girl in Pakistan who was not considered Pakistani. As a teenager, I still wore a shalwar kameez when I went to Pakistan, but I was a little more cognizant about how my body was read and perceived. In the Canadian context, and in my role as an educator, I dressed based on what was deemed as "professional". In both contexts, I dressed to fit in, being aware that I was considered as neither from here nor there. In other words, I belonged to and was unclaimed in both places.

While my body betrayed me in my quest to belong, both in the homeland and the diaspora, I was able to manipulate my speech and how I engaged socially. I was cognizant of the way I spoke—the accents I used and hid, and how I conveyed my words. I was careful not to sound like I was from another place, particularly in educational settings. In my teaching life at an elementary school, these performances were pointed out to me in ways that alarmed me at first, but they also provoked reflection on how students who are Black, Indigenous and/or People of Colour (BIPOC) saw me and how they were impacted by my identity politics.

One day, for example, after teaching a lesson, a student of colour raised her hand and asked me why I spoke like a White woman. At first, I was taken aback by this question, but it was a genuine one to ask. As I stumbled to respond, she noted puzzledly, "You *look* like us, but you sound like you're White." She was right. The decisions I made to code-switch and adjust, in order to fit in, were a form of performing Whiteness. Without even realizing it, in fact, my subconsciously curated voice mimicked a dominant demographic. The student's question suddenly made me aware that even in a classroom amongst young learners, where I felt most comfortable, I was entangled in yet another performance in order to fit in. I assured the student that I *was* like her. I related to her struggles and lived experiences as a racialized person. Nonetheless, I felt I betrayed the young students in the class who were largely BIPOC and who looked up to me as someone who challenged Whiteness. My performativity of Whiteness distanced me from being someone who was relatable for them. At the same time, I also felt betrayed. The student's initial question provoked my insecurity of who I was and if I belonged. Once again, my identity was being questioned.

As an academic who was also a professor in a university, I knew all too well that adapting to Whiteness or code-switching was a way to survive the institution because, like Ahmed (2007), I knew first-hand that the space of academia was oriented by Whiteness. In that reality, amongst my mostly

White colleagues in Teacher Education, I dressed, spoke and socialized in ways that did not come easily to me. Yet, I took on those behaviours, and those same decisions followed me when I taught BIPOC students at both the elementary and post-secondary level. It became evident to me that I did not authentically serve the students I taught when I participated in this performance. In that uneasiness, my body was always being pulled in gestures, language and other movements in relation to Whiteness. As Johnson (2020) explains, I navigated the plight of existing "against the 'sharp white background' of academia" (p. 89), and it followed me everywhere I went.

Seeking To Belong

There were many questions that arose in juxtaposition to the reality of performing my identity in relation to markers of Whiteness. Who was I? Who was I allowed to be? Who was I *expected* to be? These perplexing questions fractured me in two ways. First, I did not fit into a homeland I grew up visiting, and I did not fully reflect the South Asian culture my parents were familiar with. Second, my upbringing in Canada further diluted my connection to this culture because I hid from my South Asian identity in order to fit in. These two different but joint experiences have been further exacerbated in the halls of academia, where I have performed Whiteness in order to "fit in" amongst my predominantly White colleagues (Alvi, 2020). I was keenly aware that my career as an academic seemed to have flourished only when I curated an identity that was palatable to my colleagues, including those in positions of power. In the past, this included publishing on topics that did not confront racial issues in my most authentic voice so to not make colleagues uncomfortable.

It also included more subtle actions like dressing so to not appear "too" Muslim, avoiding asking for time off for religious holidays, even maternity leave; after all, I had heard too many times the trope of Muslim women and "all their kids". I sometimes wondered, would I still have my job if I decided to wear a burka or requested time off every time I was expecting? After years of shifting and adapting, or what Cheryan and Monin (2005) have referred to as wanting to fit in, I was still overlooked and passed over for opportunities. I have had to follow up with administration on more than one occasion to be granted the same privileges White colleagues were offered. Moreover, I was left in a state that seemed irreversible. I had nowhere to go back to because I was unsure where I belonged altogether.

I found pockets of acceptance amongst other South Asians who were also second-generation Canadians like me. My conversations with Shyam, which began as discussions about what it meant to be Brown in Teacher Education, gave me hope and sustenance. I was not alone in this feeling of dislocation, and I met others who were just as introspective and who were sometimes overcome by their diasporic bodies. Shyam and I were aware that these experiences were contextual to students as well, including South Asian students. They, too, navigated a double identity of not belonging anywhere, shifting and refracting in order to fit into where they were and becoming who their immediate society wanted them to be.

At the same time, we could not be who our parents wanted us to be. They desired for us to be wholly belonging to our countries of origin while being raised in a country that still demanded we

explain where we were really from. Indeed, we were always caught in the crossfire as children of South Asian immigrants, having to adapt to new norms in order to survive while maintaining our cultural identities and languages. Confronted by these challenges, other South Asians living in the diaspora became the community that anchored my voyage. They were people who, like Shyam and me, understood what it meant to be Brown in a White world. A world where my name always met the edges of a rusted blade. In my diasporic community, I was Saba; no stumble or stutter as they said and repeated my name, without altering it or mispronouncing it, without having to offer a "it rhymes with" version of my name.

Accordingly, my survival in Canada depended on finding spaces where I could exist, "making space", like Venzant Chambers and McCready (2011), as a marginalized body. As a teacher, having heeded those words, I consciously sought a job in a school that predominantly consisted of Black and Brown staff and students. It was important to me that the students looked like me and related to my history of marginalization as a South Asian Muslim woman. Concurrently, I worked on presenting myself in an unapologetic manner, as I engaged in emotional conversations with students about our shared histories of exclusion. I made it a part of the curriculum to develop agency around those histories and to script out an affinity of one's marginalized identity as a strength. In that way, not only have I discussed strategies on how to navigate Whiteness, but I have also conceptualized what it means to embrace our identities through the rolling consonants of our names, the fragrances of our foods, and everything else that speaks to our cultural and ethnic identities. Standing in front of the classroom, on this stage, I have started to feel like I truly belong. I was learning to find the joy in our stories.

Making Space Through This Life Writing

Through reflections such as the ones above, it was clear that not fitting in was the theme of my subjectivity—something perhaps applicable to the broader South Asian diaspora. Whether in Canada or visiting "back home", I often left having to prove my right to belong to one space or another, never fully being accepted, nor fully being a part of either one. I was neither the Pakistani girl in Canada nor the Canadian girl in Pakistan (who was not Pakistani nor looked Canadian). In both contexts, I remained unclaimed, yet distinctly marked at once. When I started to make connections between the pandemic and my body as a curriculum, I immediately recognized the exclusion and isolation as being a part of my identity long before the pandemic. Exclusion and unbelonging in Canada were a part of life for racialized people like me. For that reason, self-isolation became a method of survival as I sought to piece together my identity. Social distancing and isolating were "home" to me. I adjusted, absorbed and refracted in order to survive, and I was doing so before COVID-19.

I passed on these strategies, sometimes unknowingly, to the students I interacted with. At times, I even categorized it as a strategy for maintaining optimum mental health. Through my own teaching experiences, I have heard stories of loss and suffering—of grief and trauma. I have worked with some students who came from migrant backgrounds who perpetually had to make sense of their identities in relation to distance and loss. Some were welcomed, although their presence often

depended on their proximity to Whiteness. And the effect of the pandemic on marginalized peoples was no different, reminding us about the necessity to find a pocket of safety in our constructed spaces.

The impact of COVID-19 on BIPOC was devastating. The blame for COVID-19 was immediately placed on People of Colour, specifically Asians, which led to consistent, ongoing attacks, both verbal and physical. The pandemic highlighted for many of us what we had already been dealing with: racism and the ramifications of Whiteness. We were distanced before its arrival, forced to isolate prior to COVID-19 for our safety and well-being. This ongoing trauma was a pattern of unbelonging, which supported me in making the decision to teach from an authentic place. To have unpacked and unlearned who I was in order to enter the classroom and "be" with students. To speak in ways that were accepting of the nuances and complexities of living fragmented and multiple identities. To teach what welcoming felt like—to experience what inclusion felt like beyond the guise of tokenism.

Two Ends of a Phone Call: Shyam's Story

A Conversation with My Grandmother

In 2019, my paternal grandmother passed away, and since then I (Shyam) have struggled to put words together to capture the grandeur of her life. For most of my childhood and adolescence, pieces of her only reached me through phone calls on the weekend, where the account of her profoundness transcended the static noise. There, the dull sound of seismic shocks was always in the background, followed by the repetition of "Can you hear me?" that sought to cut past the commotion. This affair, of course, only came after retrieving the long-distance calling card, and then presumably having listened to the voice of a stranger for instructions on what code to dial, who also noted the amount of time granted for the call before it would be disconnected. Unfortunately, the allocated duration was always a lie because it was usually shorter than what was promised, but its announcement was a part of the custom by a certain point. In fact, its intrusion was some sort of ritual encountered that led to something else, something for which I was longing—the "Yes, I can hear you" in the first few seconds of the call when my grandmother picked up the phone. It was, in other words, that precise moment wherein the encounter of dialing the code on the calling card and listening to an unknown entity was all made worthwhile.

My Gujarati, however broken, was with me when I spoke with my grandmother, and I was able to converse with her without feeling inadequate. There were many conversations that were repeated over the years, but there was a certain familiarity to some of the exchanges such that I yearned to hear them over and over again. When she recounted the details of her afternoon, my sister and I would listen to her over the phone with intent, attached to my grandmother's every sentence—the marrow of her words clinging to our bones. We were captured by her words even as she spoke about the ordinary, rudimentary parts of her day. Laboured in the viscerality of my grandmother's everyday life, I was also drawn to the smaller details. I was enamored by how she described the way she started her morning—the way she tended to the fields and how she plucked mangoes from a tree near her house, for example. As I listened, everything she knew about the tenderness of the fruit was

conveyed over a phone call, the way she knew when a mango was ripe while also being able to tell its sweetness from the colour of its flesh. As we continued to exchange words over the phone, I held every detail as she spoke about turning those sweet mangoes into *aamras* (mango puree), which was bottled tightly to maintain its freshness.

From Phone Calls to Visits

At the end of each call, my grandmother reminded me to visit soon and to come back to the (home)land to be by her side. It was a call that I did not attend to for almost twelve years, not visiting her between 2000 to 2012. I finally travelled to India with my mother and sister in July of 2012. After having unpacked our luggage, I spent most of the trip by my grandmother's side, spending the days/afternoons basking in the sun with her. Her body was no longer the earlier version of itself, which I remembered from when I saw her when I was in the fifth grade, but her voice carried the same vigour.

During this trip, my grandmother and I became accomplices, working with each other as we requested our favourite meals and snacks, which my mother could not say no to because I had my grandmother's backing. As we enjoyed the *khaman* and *patra* that were made by my mother, our partnership proved to be an effective one. The only time we did not agree was when I teased my sister about the possibility of lizards and snakes crawling indoors. My grandmother laughed at my suggestion when I made the comment out loud, but she simultaneously scolded me for making my sister feel alarmed. Otherwise, we were always in agreement as we bonded over food and stories, losing track of time such that dusk arrived and the sun started to set so we retired inside, only to meet again in the morning and start over.

In December 2012, six months after my last visit, I returned to India on my own. I was compelled to go again because I wanted to spend more time with my grandmother, and I felt the need to prove that I could make the trip alone. At the time, I had no spoken knowledge of Hindi, so I made it through customs using broken words and gestures. As I left the airport and reached my village, I noticed that the weather was slightly different. The morning breeze of December was cooler compared to the monsoon of July. Despite the change in weather, my grandmother was the same. During the day, as we did in July, we mostly sat outside and only returned indoors when the heat was too intense for the both of us. In the evening, we had dinner and then watched an episode of *Diya Aur Baati Hum* and *Saath Nibhaana Saathiya*. While neither of us really understood Hindi, we followed along anyway, putting the pieces together from what we could pick up. Once, I teasingly asked her if she would consider being a mother-in-law similar to the ones we saw on those shows, and she was quick to tell me that she stayed in India because she wanted to avoid that kind of drama. Immediately, we started to laugh, welcoming it as a reprise that found itself in the middle of our fragmented translation of the soap operas.

However, what struck me the most from this one-month trip was the way we spoke over the phone with my parents and sister back in Canada: two ends of the phone meeting, but differently than before. This time, we could see each other because we were connected through a video call.

Yet, while there was no static noise between one end to the other, there was still something amiss. My grandmother came to tears as she saw my father, her son, on the other side of the screen. Despite years of never letting herself slip over the phone calls, she finally surrendered over a video call, revealing the heartache she carried from living so far from her children and grandchildren. Although the distance still remained between one land and another, her tears transcended the screen, and so, my father also broke down. His container of welled-up emotions burst, streaming in a way that possessed the body and made everyone still for a moment. We were all quiet, unable to offer words of solace. As I watched this emotional event unfold, I understood it as a release of the pent-up and repressed feelings that were held and shouldered for too long, as a result of leaving the (home)land and being so far away. It was bound to rupture, and in that moment there was no "Can you hear me?" that was said out loud, but the unsaid "I miss you", which was expressed through a single expression—of tears that said it all, more than any words could.

Life Writing to Curricular Refractions

In coming to this life writing, I have realized that the grammar of a South Asian living in the diaspora is connected to a vernacular of neither here nor there and the challenges that emerge from a hyphenated space (Patel, 2022), framed as Canadian-Indian. A diasporic body like mine has ached to make the hyphen less expansive. Indeed, my diasporic body has been "two ends of a phone call, coiled and stretched thousands of miles, longing to be close enough to whisper" (Sylvester, 2020, p. 198). In that longing, as I desired to bridge the divide between the (home)land and the diaspora, my body became a curriculum. What Cruz (2001) has written about Brown bodies has resonated with me: "It is a place scarred by history and struggle, yet engaged in building new cultures and new ways of being" (p. 660). I learned how to tether an invisible cord sprawled across longitudes and to bend through the histories and realities of migration that have shaped me.

Like Saba, I too felt like I did not belong because I lived in the location of the in-between, worried that I was only connected to each place by a phone line that could break at any moment. In April 2019, I was in shock as the two ends of a phone call finally splintered. I received the news that my grandmother had passed away, and all I could hear on the other side of the phone call were the muffled tears of relatives offering their condolences. I barely heard their words as my own body collapsed, unable to imagine a world without my grandmother. I was not prepared to never hear her voice on the other side of phone nor listen to her stories, and I began to cry, confronting both an emotional and physical convulsion. I experienced a deluge of "affects", to borrow from Belcourt (2017), "where 'affect' describes psychic and physiological responses to moments of profound instability" (para. 2). The sharpness of the word *diaspora* had never stabbed in this way before, and I was at a standstill, unable to move past the grief of losing my grandmother, and, even worse, imagining a world without her.

Along with this initial traumatic shock, the circulation of my diasporic pulse was also connected to what Cho (2007) calls a *condition of subjectivity*. That is, those of us in the diaspora cannot be "divorced from the histories of colonialism and imperialism, nor is it unmarked by race and the processes of racialization" (p. 14). So, many months later, my breathing became tense from the

thought of my grandmother passing away without me fully knowing how colonialism had affected her life. She never spoke about the British Raj, and I never asked. What I learned about her was from the stories she shared with me, which made me realize that she never let a colonial regime define her, or at least this was what I discerned based on what I knew about her. Instead, she gifted me a language to seek pleasure in the small things—like tending to fields and being able to tell the ripeness of a mango, like watching the morning sun and witnessing the heavy rainfall during the monsoon.

As I grieved and mourned my grandmother's departure from this world, I listened to the words of Chowdhury (2007): "When the beloved leave you, whatever the circumstances may be, the only thing that matters are memories of time spent with them" (p. 121). As I was welled up in emotions, in what Thich Nhat Hanh (2010) has called an emotional release, spending day after day crying over my grandmother, I was able to find sustenance in the memory of her stories. Indeed, I learned to heal through remembrance (Chowdhury, 2007). Even when grief and mourning consumed me later on, months after, I remembered that she was walking with me (Hanh, 2010). My grandmother was a handprint on my heart, and I was able to keep myself going, knowing that the memory of her would live on.

(Re)framing Relations with Students

And, so, when the pandemic arrived, my body was already prepared. It was unbreakable, as I was immersed in a curriculum that operated from a fractured self in which my body was a map that arranged itself from several broken vantages: death, grief, loss, and the toll of mourning, as the story of my grandmother has revealed. Therefore, my body's travelog—one affected by distance and loss—was already set to a survival mode and to steering dislocation, longing and separation. For van der Kolk (2015), "If an organism is stuck in survival mode, its energies are focused on fighting off unseen enemies, which leaves no room for nurture, care, and love" (p. 77). However, with a body that has been shaped by immigration and racialization (Patel, 2022), I have learned to work through grief while also being caring, loving and nurturing. Specifically, it was the teachings of my grandmother that prepared me to work with students in India, as the pandemic brought the whole world to a halt. While I was transitioning from being a teacher candidate to becoming a graduate student at the University of Ottawa, where graduate studies had moved online, the students I had taught in India, were stuck at home without the means to access and secure an alternative mode of learning. As they sought out ways to work against the exorbitant loss of pandemic school closures, I stumbled, struggling to reassure them. I had difficulty finding the words to make them feel at ease in a world that was being torn by so much: the pandemic and the precarity that exacerbated it further.

However, I found myself thinking about my grandmother, as well as the times I spent in my ancestral village, as I held classes with these students online. I began telling the students stories as my grandmother did. As I did so, the students shared stories of their own, and the pandemic started to feel less overbearing. We knew it was there, penetrating into our homes and our lives, but we found ways to shroud its presence, as we have always done. I resonated with Saba's offering that we have always had the volition to construct our own spaces. This, too, has been an enactment of the

body as a curriculum, wherein Brown bodies mapped out new articulations that shifted toward pedagogical action. I know from our conversations that Saba and I both were aware of how our curricular refractions worked against the gradients and iterations of a colonial and racist curriculum, but I think we have also started to dream of something beyond this curriculum, at least in terms of a starting point. We have been, in that way, always engaged in framing another world, as our stories have demonstrated.

Therefore, I was also purposeful about how I created a space that wrestled with the realities of the pandemic while ensuring that the students and I were more than the circumstances that have compressed and destabilized us. Like my grandmother, I have been interested in the simple things, sharing stories that are bountiful and resonant in the ordinary. The students, following my lead, located stories of their own to talk about in relation to the mundane and the ordinary. They, too, developed joy in the mangos and monsoon weather. In other words, we were able to demonstrate that we were more than the precarious and traumatic histories that we confronted.

So, as Saba also did with the students she taught, I contemplated the grief and trauma that we were bound by, but I also desired to build a classroom, this time virtually, where we overcame our struggles through the relations we built. It was actually Saba, two years before the pandemic hit, when I was commencing Teacher Education, who introduced me to the term *relational pedagogy* to connect the curriculum to the lives of the students I was working with. She taught me the language of "putting different perspectives and realities into conversation" and "putting curricular expectations in conversation with local and global phenomena" (Zapata et al., 2019, p. 180). And it was the grammar of enacting a live(d) curriculum (Aoki, 1993) in relation to the pandemic that rescued me when I was thinking about how to support a group of students while being far away from them, often feeling helpless and uncertain.

Though the calls with students from India were often interrupted by connection issues and static noise, we learned to develop a community that centred and valued our complex and multifaceted stories as we navigated the pandemic. They spoke about the challenges they faced, particularly the worry of having little to no support. So, as the pandemic required us to adapt and evolve against the backdrop of our already precarious and uneven lives, we demonstrated the possibilities of refracting the pandemic. Those possibilities emerged from our lived experiences and stories of dislocation, migration and unbelonging. Like me, the students had to navigate their own histories of what Shailja Patel (2010) has referred to as *migritude* (deriving from migrant and attitude).

Our narratives were disparate, of course, for I was born and raised in Montréal, but we all had stories to tell about the grief we experienced of being away from loved ones, which was made worse during the pandemic. As we grieved the loss of family members during the pandemic, we were only able to offer condolences over a phone call. As I listened to and witnessed the students struggle to make sense of the imposition of the pandemic, especially on their academic lives, I became like Morawski and Palulis (2009), working against a moribund curriculum. No formal curriculum was

adequate to navigate the pandemic and its upheaval, and it was my body and identity as a South Asian living in the diaspora that steered me through the uncertainty of it all.

We Do Not Let History Shroud Us

As we went through the pandemic, we were reminded that our bodies—ones connected to the South Asian diaspora—were always engaged in a project of refraction. For me (Saba), it came across in the way my life was entangled in the notion of being neither Canadian nor Pakistani enough. I was confronted by exclusion, isolation and unbelonging in relation to my Brown body and identity, such that I have learned to survive long before the COVID-19 pandemic seeped into everyday life. Informed by the negotiations I made around my culture and identity, I learned the importance of making space for myself and for students who grapple with similar realities, developing a curriculum that reflected our complex and varied histories.

For me (Shyam), my life has been sown into the fabric of the word *distance*, where I made sense of what it meant to maintain relations in the (home)land while living in the diaspora. Through an introspection of the in-between space, I was drawn to the phone calls and visits to India, and how those encounters framed the body as curriculum for me, similarly to how Saba had made attunements from her life. While we had different approaches to refracting the curriculum, there was a poetic relationship in our life writing: we both established a way to bend through the morbid pandemic. Though it was not without its challenges, we both made clear that our bodies would not be defined by its ghastly infiltration and presence. Even when the edges of displacement and immigration came with several negotiations and tensions, as our stories demonstrated, we were ultimately able to persevere, so the pandemic became another hurdle for us to overcome. For, we have lived our entire lives having to refract the horrors and sorrows that have passed through our diasporic bodies. As such, we have developed an ability to (re)arrange what has perforated through those very same bodies.

For both of us, the value of reflecting about our bodies as a curriculum resounded in how we interacted with the students we worked with during the pandemic. Like us, the students in our classrooms have grappled with similar questions about their identities and relationships to dislocation, migration and the (home)land. Though what they encountered might not have been identical to our stories, they were also asked to refract the morbidity of the pandemic. When we were unsure of how to respond to the marginalization that COVID-19 made worse, we relied on our bodies and lived experiences to endure the pandemic and not let it overtake our pedagogical engagements. Instead, we dreamt of something else: another world—one rooted in the personal, in our existing lived experiences that revealed generative ways to move onward. Our life writing was about forming a silhouette of a past "not so much about looking as looking forward" (Leggo, 2000, p. 3). We needed to remind ourselves that Brown bodies like ours embodied a project of refraction before the pandemic, and we would not be measured by the circumstances that required us to rethink our pedagogical choices, at least not without a struggle to overcome it, or without another way. As South Asians living in the diaspora, we have found ways, despite the distance, to visit an

entire homeland, making a trip to its centre, its corner and everything else in between—pandemic or not. So, it was clear to us, we would not let history shroud us during a pandemical time.

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