Wounds: Commemorative Tattoos, Collective Trauma, and the Afghan-Canadian Identity

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Abstract

The painting *Wounds* reimagines how non-white and “vulnerable” bodies are expected to exist in society. Inspired by *The Tattoo Project* and how commemorative tattoos meaningfully integrate love and loss into “good grief” (Davidson, 2016), the painting re-imagines commemorative tattoos as wounds that result from collective and intergenerational trauma. The painting *Wounds* uses a social justice lens to depict how traumatic histories can be embodied in the cultural identities of future generations of the Afghan diaspora and how tattoos materialize these memories. I demonstrate this by critically analyzing my lived experience of my cultural identity. This collective trauma is so strongly embedded into my ancestors’ collective identities as Afghans, that I also see the traumatic history to be part of who I am. This autobiographical artwork and accompanying critical analysis allow for the reclamation of my Afghan cultural identity by resisting Western pressures to conform. In being vulnerable about my past, I redefine vulnerability. I remember and honour the courage, sacrifice, and resilience of my Afghan ancestors who have endured violence and wars; which has contributed to the formation of my hyphenated, Afghan-Canadian identity. I recognize that the Afghan-Canadian identity is multi-dimensional, multi-faceted, and incredibly nuanced. My own experiences of my Afghan-Canadian identity deeply inform and enrich this critical analysis. In this critical analysis, I am by no means generalizing the experiences of Afghan-Canadians, as every individual’s experience is valid and distinct.

The three commemorative tattoos depict the Canadian maple leaf, my name “Mehdia” written in Persian, and the geographical shape of Afghanistan. The painting reimagines and redefines what it means to collectively heal, both literally and figuratively. It questions whether healing is still necessary because it implies that wounds disappear, and with them, the

disappearance of deep social histories that construct my Afghan-Canadian identity. Using my original painting as an arts-integrated method of inquiry, I offer a multidisciplinary portrayal of how memory is materialized on the body. This written analysis and painting creatively and critically articulate the strength and beauty that comes with vulnerability when historical and cultural wounds are resurfaced. This work further provokes deeper discussion and dialogue about the need to make meaning of the collective trauma that is ingrained within one's cultural identity.

Resurfacing Wounds

Traumatic histories can be inherited. According to Najibullah, in order for social healing to occur, individuals and communities must acknowledge and be willing to explore their traumas (2017). This is part of the reason why it is important for me to explore, in this autobiographical narrative and painting, what it means for the Afghan diaspora and the Afghan-Canadian person to “heal” and be resilient. This healing looks different for each person, since our traumas are also not the same. I am reminded of the great poet Mawlana Jalaladdin Balkhi, or Rumi’s commonly referenced line of Persian poetry, roughly translated to: “the wound is where the light enters you.” Of course, these are not the exact words of Rumi, as this sentence is one of the common English translations floating around the internet of his original line of Persian poetry. The light can be interpreted as the self-knowledge, learning, and social healing that cannot always be done easily when there is compounding trauma involved from past generations. The painting *Wounds* aims to spark and open such spaces of learning.

According to the results of the 2016 Canadian Census, approximately 84,000 Afghans live in Canada,

with almost half of this population living in the Greater Toronto Area (Statistics Canada, 2019). Many Afghan-Canadians experience high levels of social inequity, which is perpetuated by intergenerational trauma. These inequities and unresolved stressors, not limited to poverty, different forms of racism, and gender-based violence, are transmitted from previous historical generations and identified as intergenerational trauma (Khanlou, 2008). Afghan immigrants and refugees arrived in Canada as early as the 1970s, after having their lives violently transformed by the Soviet War in 1979 (Nader & Rastagar, 2018). Following the end of the Soviet War in 1989, the civil war between different political and Islamic groups worsened, resulting in the victory of Mujahideen in 1992, and later, the rise of the Taliban in 1996 (Nader & Rastagar, 2018). War, violence, and political instability continued to deteriorate the country during the Taliban control. After the 9/11 attacks, American forces invaded to topple the Taliban regime. The violence and political instability continues to today, as the Taliban still occupies and controls many areas of the country (Nader & Rastagar, 2018).

Many Afghans have had their lives impacted by this seemingly never-ending war and violence, but in different ways. This is why we must consider notions of collective suffering and collective healing, in relation to identity-formation. In addition to being subjects of U.S. imperialism, ethnic and religious minority groups in Afghanistan and in the Afghan diaspora continue to face systemic discrimination and marginalization, since many centuries ago (Nader & Rastagar, 2018). For example, the trauma that the Hazara and Shia communities from Afghanistan already experience from their identities is exacerbated by the state violence and war; the Taliban continue to persecute and commit genocide against the Shia Hazara community (Nader & Rastagar, 2018). I acknowledge that as ethnic Tajiks, my ancestors and I hold certain privileges and experience collective trauma in different ways from ethnic and religious

minority groups in the Afghan-Canadian diaspora. The diaspora's wounds and trauma are painfully deep, distinctively nuanced, and span across generations. Do these wounds, or perhaps, *should* these wounds, define who we really are and how we collectively identify ourselves to be, as Afghans living in Canada? Identity is more complex than that. By addressing collective trauma, I do not intend to minimize the ongoing systemic oppression and distinct trauma of Afghan-Canadians who belong to ethnic and religious minority groups.

Inspired by Deborah Davidson's book, *The Tattoo Project*, on commemorative tattoos, visual culture, and the digital archive, my painting titled *Wounds* challenges how non-white and "vulnerable" bodies are expected to exist in society. My painting depicts the effectiveness of conceptualizing commemorative tattoos on the body as wounds to honour and publicize these notions of collective trauma, in connection to my identity. I do not have any tattoos myself and do not have the lived experience of getting a tattoo, which influences my perspective on understanding commemorative tattoos. My painting allows me to *reimagine* wounds to be commemorative tattoos that result from collective and intergenerational trauma—as a kind of metaphor. The painting challenges white hegemonic ideals of the body, specifically the face and certain non-Western physical features. It also depicts my choice to unapologetically resist these pressures of conformity by reclaiming my Afghan-Canadian identity and existence.

Reimagining Trauma with Commemorative Tattoos

Wounds explores the interplay between physical and emotional aspects of trauma, along with this externalization of trauma and loss (Kitzmann, 2016). Emotional pain, suffering, and trauma can be physically conveyed and publicized through commemorative tattoos on the body (Kitzmann, 2016). The construction of traumatic memories is an active and ongoing process much like the ever-changing nature of cultural identity (Kitzmann, 2016; Aydin, 2017). Therefore, what makes commemorative tattoos so effective in materializing these traumatic, yet significant, memories and histories is that they reflect the complexity of how the internal and individual dimensions of the body are intertwined with the external, public, and social dimensions of the body (Kitzmann, 2016). There can be so much more to a tattoo than meets the eye. Although this is not always the case, what we choose to express on our bodies can be deeply reflective in nature (Kitzmann, 2016).

The word “trauma” itself originates from the Ancient Greek term meaning “wound” (Aydin, 2017). It was initially used in surgery to describe a physical injury resulting from an external cause, but it is now also used to describe an extreme confusion and uncertainty that is psychological in nature (Aydin, 2017). Conceptualizing tattoos as wounds interestingly plays with the literal and figurative meanings of what trauma is. Tattoos render the wound as something that is restorative, more controlled, and aesthetic (Davidson, 2016). As a result, the phrase that served as the primary inspiration for my painting was by Davidson, who mentions: “tattoos are in a sense wounds” (2016). Davidson highlights tattoos as “powerful markers of the violence of life” (2016).

The use of arts-integrated methods and inquiry, such as painting, offers a multidisciplinary portrayal

of the theoretical notions around the materialization of memories on the body. Viewers are able to meaningfully engage with theoretical concepts in a creative and critical way that encourages deeper dialogue and discussion about these issues. This kind of work in visual sociology pushes boundaries between traditional and non-traditional modes of making, presenting, and transmission to audiences (Jungickel & Hjorth, 2014). My use of visual arts-integrated inquiry also allows for the dissemination of these ideas to reach wider and more diverse audiences, transcending the boundaries of academia. Through various aesthetic and visual elements, *Wounds* attempts to reverse the dominant narrative of non-white bodies being vulnerable and powerless.

The painting critically engages with important theoretical ideas from the book *The Tattoo Project*, such as those of cultural reclamation by Pangowish (2016), the externalization of trauma by Kitzmann (2016), the conceptualization of commemorative tattoos by Davidson (2016), and the “social skin” by Turner (2012). This is evident through the wound-like portrayal of three different commemorative tattoos on the skin, the smaller white and golden figures along the border of the artwork, and certain physical features of the face.

On the woman’s cheek, there is a tattoo of the geographical shape of Afghanistan. This symbolizes the collective trauma of my ancestors, who have suffered through the destructive wars and have overcome tremendous levels of adversity. It emphasizes how deeply ingrained the psychological wounds of trauma and loss are within the Afghan national identity; these wounds are intergenerational, inherited from previous generations within the diaspora.

The tattoo meaningfully integrates love and loss, as it is translated into “good grief” (Davidson, 2016). “Good grief” is achieved through grief-work that is shared and negotiated between a group or

collective; it is in this way in which grief is woven and integrated into daily life (Davidson, 2014). The embodiment of memories in connection to the motherland is also depicted by the geographical shape of Afghanistan. It represents the collective suffering of Afghans, which has become part of my cultural identity. This commemorative tattoo of the geographical shape of Afghanistan alludes to “good grief” (Davidson, 2016) by honouring the losses that Afghans have experienced, in connection to their forced physical displacement, due to war and violence. Inckle describes how body marks and tattoos are able to effectively embody these types of intense emotions, which may not be easily articulated through language (2014). This commemorative tattoo represents both the physical and emotional grief of missing Afghanistan. For the generations of young Afghans who have grown up knowing mostly of war and violence, it is an embodiment of the collective pain and suffering that their ancestors have overcome. It is a beautiful intertwinement of love for their motherland and loss of their ancestors.

Reclaiming and Critically Reframing my Afghan-Canadian Identity

Furthermore, there is a commemorative tattoo along the young woman's jawline that spells my name, Mehdiya, in the Persian alphabet. Not only is this my signature as the visual artist, but it is a reminder of my Afghan traditions and how my identity is rooted in this reclamation of traditional knowledge. This notion is inspired by Pangowish's reclamation of her Indigenous heritage; she has three roses tattooed on her foot to refer to her family history and culture (2016). Pangowish honours her ancestors' traditional ways of knowing through the symbolism of the black and blue roses on her foot; it is a reminder that Pangowish carries her ancestors' goodness with her (2016). The commemorative tattoo of my name

written in Persian depicts how this reclamation allows me to exercise my agency and pride for my heritage. I use the tattoo here to honour traditional ways my given name is meant to be inscribed, articulated, and understood by my Afghan ancestors and family, rather than by Westernized inscriptions. In this visibly different way of inscribing my name, and throughout this whole critical analysis, I am actively making my past vulnerable. I am allowing for my past to reappear, instead of disappear. It is a reminder of the deep cultural significance of my name and my ancestors' lasting legacies on me.

The wound-like maple leaf tattoo symbolizes the Canadian aspect of my identity. It is located on the side of the neck, near the vein that is connected to the heart, in order to commemorate my Canadian upbringing. I acknowledge the Canadian values that have shaped my identity. These values, such as freedom, equality, justice, and democracy are important to me, but sit with the dissonance that inequalities in race, gender, and class are increasing in Canada (Thobani, 2000). As a second-generation Afghan-Canadian, I remember and honour the courage, sacrifice, and resilience of my Afghan ancestors that have contributed to the formation of my hyphenated identity. In a country where structural immigration policies have historically worked against racialized people, the label of "immigrant" may be synonymous to being seen as an outsider, who has opposing values to those of Canadians (Thobani, 2000). I recognize that there is privilege to not being labelled by the government as an immigrant, which I benefit from, as someone who was born in Canada. However, I also sit with the dissonance that as a racialized woman, my body makes me visibly labelled or viewed as an outsider-immigrant.

The maple leaf tattoo also stands for a symbol of settler-colonialism. As a woman of colour, I recognize that I will continue to be hyper-visibly labelled and viewed as an immigrant or an outsider

to the settler-colonial nation (Thobani, 2000). The ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada Turtle Island, by the settler-colonial nation, contributes to racialization (Thobani, 2000). I am reminded that I, along with the previous generation of my Afghan immigrant ancestors, are racialized bodies on colonized land; in many ways, we directly benefit from settler-colonialism. In sitting with the dissonance-producing reality that Canada is not a safe haven for every community, I remind myself of the responsibilities that my community has—as Afghan-Canadians and as a “community of colour”—to help dismantle colonial systems of oppression (Thobani, 2000). Building dialogue and forming strong allyship with Indigenous communities is needed to help dismantle colonial systems of oppression, rather than communities of colour being pitted against Indigenous communities (Thobani, 2000). With the maple leaf tattoo, I am reminded that Canada has a dark history of inflicting pain and trauma to Indigenous communities, through previous and ongoing colonization.

I chose to represent Canada with a maple leaf, instead of the geographical shape of its land, because I want to emphasize the significance that the geographical shape of Afghanistan holds to the Afghan diaspora. This highlights the mourning and the feelings of “good grief” that I experience. When physically disconnected from our motherland of Afghanistan, Afghan-Canadians can simultaneously experience feelings of “love and loss,” while searching for ways they can integrate the grief into their daily lives (Davidson, 2014).

Redefining Collective Healing and Vulnerability

All three of the commemorative tattoos in the painting challenge the healing properties of wounds. If tattoos are wounds (Davidson, 2016), then they would be expected to heal over time. I demonstrate that these wounds may not heal because they are deeply intergenerational. They can develop a degree of figurative immunity to infection and build greater resiliency, but for these wounds to heal, it means that the aesthetics of the commemorative tattoos would disappear, and with them, this part of my Afghan-Canadian identity would also disappear. The wounds also reflect my acceptance that healing is much more complex than it may seem. The Afghan community, as a collective, requires time to properly make sense of the psychological and physical trauma that has come with enduring many decades of war and violence in Afghanistan. The open wounds that are depicted here point to the ongoing pain, and perhaps, the ongoing healing that is required. The painting creates an opportunity for deeper discussion and dialogue about what this healing process means to Afghans in the diaspora, in terms of fostering greater resilience and strength from these histories and memories. The metaphor and symbolism of wounds as tattoos allows me to think more deeply about the significance of scarification and materialization of these memories. They will always be open wounds.

Wounds also explores “social skin” by portraying the social boundary between the individual and other actors (Turner, 2012). The term “social skin” refers to how the surface of the body is seen as the “common frontier of society”; in this painting, this is evident in the externalization of psychological trauma portrayed by the three wound-like commemorative tattoos (Turner, 2012). There is a deep connection between the internal, psychological trauma and the external physical trauma on the skin required to form tattoos. The surface of the body, the skin, can be a space to

communicate and share one's feelings with others (Turner, 2012). The five golden figures lined along the lower neck, near the bottom of the painting, depict the collective nature of comprehending trauma. There is a crucial need for safe learning spaces and supportive allies, in order for these productive discussions to happen. This painting can be a catalyst for those discussions. It depicts the importance of unity and strength inherited from ancestors, in order to be able to resist white hegemonic ideals of how the non-white body should exist.

I am also reclaiming my cultural identity by redefining what a "vulnerable" body is understood to be in society. It is not weak and oppressed, but rather it possesses power from its shining resilience and resurgence. There is power in being authentic, genuine, and fearless in sharing my creative joys with the world; by critically exploring the wounds, trauma, and resilience involved with the Afghan-Canadian identity (Lorde, 1984). This is the erotic power that Lorde describes to be the most self-responsible source of women's power (1984). By sharing this erotic power of my openness to sharing my creative energy and my knowledge of the world, I am letting this vulnerability empower me and transform into resilience; this is a source of power and information, rather than a weakness (Lorde, 1984). The painting *Wounds* is a critical catalyst for social change, as it is informed by intense, internal, and creative knowledge (Lorde, 1984). It conveys that this resurgent body is not willing to accept powerlessness and oppression from the external; it is boldly existing and taking up the space that it is meant to have (Lorde, 1984).

Resisting Eurocentric Beauty Ideals

The small white figures around the edges of the artwork represent the pressures from society to conform and erase my Afghan cultural identity. This painting challenges the notion of domination over non-white bodies through its clever application of the visual element of proportion. By making the portrait of the young woman much larger than the white figures along the border, I am depicting how vulnerable bodies of colour are able to regain control and ultimately, reclaim their cultural identities on their own terms. The red glitter, which is spread along the edges of the painting and connects the figures together, portrays how these traumas and society's pressures have the potential to be seen in a positive light, through this kind of unapologetic resistance.

As the artist and researcher, it is important for me to acknowledge how my lived experiences and positionality strengthen and enrich my work (Taber, 2010). The painting portrays my own resistance to white hegemonic ideals of the body by proudly displaying tan skin, thicker eyebrows, imperfect hairline, and a larger nose, with its noticeable bump. Despite the many pressures that are placed to conform to more Eurocentric preferences of what the body should look like, such as a smaller and straighter nose, the work continues to resist and to embrace these features. For example, the nose and its shape reflect the social histories of my Afghan ancestors. It is an important reminder of my roots and heritage. Embracing these physical features allows me to embrace my Afghan cultural heritage. It is important to note the painting, *Wounds*, does not attempt to generalize the physical characteristics portrayed as universal to every Afghan-Canadian woman. I acknowledge that Afghan-Canadian women are an incredibly diverse demographic, who have diverse physical features, which may largely vary from my physical features and my painting. The unique nuances in my identity inform my knowledge of how

women's bodies are judged by Eurocentric beauty standards (Taber, 2010).

In my daily life as an Afghan-Canadian woman, I do notice myself unconsciously and consciously conforming to Eurocentric beauty ideals. While, in the painting *Wounds*, I address the thicker and bushier eyebrows as resisting white hegemonic beauty, I also recognize that thicker eyebrows are now on-trend and widely celebrated as attractive by Eurocentric beauty standards. The eyebrows in the painting are still very well-groomed, the eyes are shaped to be larger and almond-like, facial hair is limited, and the lips are slightly flushed and plumper. I recognize that by creating this painting with the intention to address my body's resistance to Eurocentric beauty standards, I have also unconsciously conformed to making the painting Eurocentrically "attractive" and "beautiful." I have been so deeply socialized to believe that a beautiful female body or a beautiful female face is one that is light-skinned, hairless, with almond eyes and plump lips. It is salient the toxic ways in which anti-Black racism is so deeply perpetuated through Eurocentric body ideals and also existent in the Afghan diaspora; I recognize that I have the responsibility to continue to unlearn the anti-Black racism embedded within our society.

Therefore, my Afghan female body is one that holds different degrees of power. First, it is a younger and youthful body that is ultimately favoured over older bodies. I have the privilege to have certain physical features that are deemed to be Eurocentrically "beautiful," such as larger eyes, on-trend thick eyebrows, and relatively lighter skin; this is not the case for every Afghan woman or woman of colour. In contrast, the noticeable bump on my larger nose, my thinner lips, and my imperfect hairline are some of the aspects of my physical appearance that are deemed to be less "beautiful" by Eurocentric beauty standards. I proudly resist some of these characteristics in my painting, while unconsciously conforming to certain beauty standards. Upon

reflection, I notice that my lips are depicted larger and plumper than they actually are. As the artist and researcher, it is critical that I learn to narrate and visualize my identity in the way that I choose to, rather than Western society's problematic attempts to do this for me.

Reflections of Resilience

In conclusion, the painting *Wounds* boldly puts pressure on how non-white and “vulnerable” bodies are supposed to exist in society. It reverses power dynamics and gives me back the control to reclaim my cultural identity, allowing me to define my Afghan heritage and physical characteristics on my own terms. The painting applies notions of traditional and ancestral knowledge (Pangowish, 2016), the integration of love and loss (Davidson, 2016), the externalization of trauma (Kitzmann, 2016), and seeing skin as a way of socially communicating with the world (Turner, 2012). In these ways, *Wounds* depicts the rich complexities and effectiveness of using tattoos to commemorate intergenerational trauma embedded within one's cultural identity. It does this through a critical analysis of my own lived experiences as an Afghan-Canadian. Using an arts-integrated method allows for deep critical engagement with theoretical notions in a multidisciplinary way by provoking meaningful conversations and dialogues about ideas around identity and collective trauma. The painting allows me to publicize this internal-external dimension of the body. It is an effective example of how identities are produced through this kind of autobiographical work (Letherby & Davidson, 2016) and how commemorative tattoos can preserve personal memories on the physical body (Quan-Haase, 2016). The red glitter from the tattoos in my painting occasionally glistens in the light, reminding me of the possibility that trauma, as a site of knowledge, holds the potential to be enlightening.

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