

Between Then and Now: My Coming, Being, and Staying in Urban/Rural Canada

Bharati Sethi

Abstract: This article uses narrative and poetry to describe the author's experiences of coming, being and staying in an urban-rural region in Ontario, Canada. Such rare reflective insider narratives are vital to understand newcomer integration in the milieu of immigrant dispersion from large urban centres (such as Toronto) to smaller communities. Immigrant integration requires genuine collaboration between academics, service providers and policy makers. It is only when we stop Othering those we consider 'strangers' that we can then create safe spaces where white, brown, black, and not-so-white bodies can live together in harmony, creating vibrant and inclusive communities.

Keywords: rural, immigration, visible minority, community-based participatory research, poetry

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I hugged my oversized 'made in Nepal' coat tighter as I made my way to a local restaurant in a mid-sized urban-rural region of Southwestern Ontario. My feet were so cold that I could barely feel them through the 'made in Nepal' shoes, seeped in icy wet slush. My body still remembers the warmth of my first winter jacket and winter shoes bought from a local thrift store. I slept in them for the first night of purchase, sweating in my heated bachelor apartment. As I made my way to the restaurant, the shopkeeper looked at my young thin brown body with distrust. I clung tightly to dollar bills; my shoes torn and dirty and my oversized jacket covering my petite frame. Oh! Those harsh and lonely seven years as a foreign worker. My precarious immigration status marginalized me repeatedly. I was trapped. I could not quit my job. The employer's words/actions could have me deported. I could not offend him. I was a slave in multicultural Canada. I could not change jobs as no one wanted to take upon them the burden of foreign worker sponsorship. Someday, I promised myself.... Someday, I would attain my freedom from the shackles of immigration. I could smell my freedom in the wet earth. I could see my freedom in the raindrops. I could hear my freedom in the thunder. For now, I had to accept the unacceptable.

From the moment I stepped into this whites-only-town, I was exposed to the white stare. "What was it this time?" "What was it about me that consumed all their attention?" I wondered. Was it my brown body? Was it my dress? Was it my accent? Was it my black hair? "Did they know about my precarious immigration status?" I wondered. Perhaps it was merely the curiosity and/or fascination with the Other. At first, I could not pin down the reason. But always I sensed its hostility. Or was it abhorrence? Every time my gaze met the white stare my body stiffened. My nails would pierce deep into my skin drawing blood. One day in the mall a mother grabbed her wandering child, eyeing me with suspicion. I knew then, from the fear in that mother's eyes, that I was a stranger in this town.

Danger lurked at every corner. They wanted to get rid of me. I, the stranger was not welcomed in this town. I did not belong here. I was the outsider. My brown skin posed danger to the “purified space of the community, the purified life of the good citizen, and the purified body of “the child” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 33). Walking home from work, I was always afraid of my own shadow. The complex intersections of multiple racialized identities (such as my youth, gender, class, ethnicity, and foreignness) made me an easy target of white men waiting to shame me. I still tremble when I hear the words “Paki” or “Indian Slut” or “GO HOME.”

Even though I am now a citizen of Canada I wake up with flashbacks, tremble with fever and reach out for my pills to save me whenever I recall that black night. It was 2 a.m. I was walking home from work. Cabs were expensive. I needed every penny to secure my freedom. I stuck to the main roads, avoiding the park that would have reduced my travel time by at least 15 minutes. My aching feet yearned to go home. I noticed a car following me. I tried to walk fast. Faster. Run. Run. I wished I had my rescued Newfoundland dog with me. The car moved faster. Suddenly its wheels were crawling by my side. Large arms reached out to touch me. Their breath made me sick. Beer and cheap cigar smell spread like rotten weed in the air. I looked around for help. Back then, the downtown was a ghost town, with the streets lined with abandoned businesses. If I screamed, no one would hear me. Even if they did hear me, no one would come to rescue a minority brown woman. People do not feel safe around strangers. Barely breathing, I sprinted as fast as I could. The adrenaline carried my legs faster than the wheels of the car. I ran across the railway tracks screaming as the freight train driver blew the horn so loudly that it woke up the city. I almost died. But my trembling youth was safe. Physically, there were only a few scratches on my body. Emotionally and mentally I was forever scarred.

As I half-walked and half-ran to my apartment, I saw police lights flashing. The officer was approaching a red Toyota. My legs were aching. My heart was beating so fast that I thought the policeman would know I was so close by. I took a longer route home. I needed to stay in Canada. NO! I could not go back home even though it was clear that I was not welcome here. The patriarchal Canadian immigration policies made me vulnerable to employer exploitation. I was an easy target of immigrant officials who did not want to burn the midnight lamp at work. I worked 80 hours a week for seven days for food and shelter. I never saw a pay cheque for seven and a half years.

For a young single brown woman alone in the world there seemed to be no safe place. Canadian streets were as frightening as Mumbai streets. In Mumbai, at least I knew my way around. There, at least I had a legal status. Every time I served a customer at the restaurant I worked at I wondered if he was an immigration official. I get chills every time I recall the faces of my two Mexican colleagues being dragged by undercover federal officials from the restaurant. I had run away from Mumbai. I was not safe at home. In Canada, I was still running. I worked like a slave. I was at my employer’s beck and call. My payment was his powerful signature on my immigration visa. I endured it all: the employer abuse, the racialization, and my marginalization at the unique intersections of gender, race, immigrant status, and nationality. Being homeless I longed for HOME. I longed for the taste of curried vegetables and lentils, the sweet fragrance of incense, and samosas and spicy chutney. I ached to belong. I wanted to be free. Bloodied and bruised, I dreamed of flying to safety.

I still remember the dawn of my freedom. The sun shone brightly, melting the frost that had settled on the window of my bachelor apartment. I arrived in Buffalo, New York, United States of America, to a room full of nervous bodies—brown, black, and white—some, not so brown, not so black and not so white. Regardless of our country of origin we were here for one reason alone. We wanted to prove to the Canadian government that we were a worthy investment. We hoped to walk out of Buffalo with a permanent immigration status. I had dreamed of this day for so long. In my dreams, I had held the immigration document close to my bosom. Finally, that day that promised my freedom had arrived. I had found a Jones New York blue suit at a local thrift store. It fitted me like a glove. I wasn't used to the high heels, the lipstick or the hair spray. I needed to look my best. I needed to prove that I was good enough to be here, in Canada where I had spent the long seven years in employer slavery.

I yearned to be free from the bonds of slavery. After four hours of painful waiting a Chinese woman with whom I had been conversing tapped me on my shoulder, "I think they are calling you." My trembling legs carried me to the interview room. "Gazing outside I wondered how difficult it would be to hurl my body through the glass window and end my misery" (Sethi, 2012, p. 88). I worried that my heavy breathing would annoy the officer, a white middle-aged woman with an English accent. Leaving me alone with my agony and fears, she paraded in and out of the room in great urgency. Outside the door, I could hear whispering. I think they were talking about me. As I had not applied for residency through the normal immigration channels, such as Family Class Sponsorship Policy, Skilled Migration or Refugee Status, it made me a unique case (Sethi, 2012). The local Member of Parliament had recommended my case to the Canadian government.

After what seemed an eternity, she heaved a large sigh and lowering her glasses she asked me, "Miss, are you ready to land today?" (Sethi, 2012, p.88). I walked to the waiting room clinging to my immigration documents and barely noticing the apprehensive face of the Chinese woman. Shock had frozen my tears. Nonchalantly, I picked up the public phone and informed my lawyer, "I am here to stay in the land of Oh Canada. Thank you!" His congratulatory screams seemed so far away. I was finally free of employment slavery.

I came to Canada. I stayed in Canada. My tragedies prepared me for a deeper intimacy with life. It made me emotionally resilient. I found the process of beingness and becoming continual and fragile. It's required compassion for self and for other sentient beings. Love that does not discriminate: "she is black," "she is white," "she is Canadian," "she is an immigrant," etcetera, et cetera, etcetera, and considers human bodies of all colours as human beings. As a newcomer to Canada, I often experienced in the white stare a loathing directed towards me as if I was not even human. Theoretically, all pervading love sounds beautiful. Experientially, I have found that even after obtaining my landed immigrant status my brown body continued to be subjected to discrimination. For example, when I was looking for work I was advised by the guidance counsellor to make an appointment with several human resource specialists and get critical feedback on my resume. My first interview with the human resource specialist seemed very much like the immigration interview. I wore the same suit I had worn at the interview. I was nervous but confident of the skills I was bringing to the interview. I was excited to hear about the range of possibilities awaiting me now that I had Canadian education. A woman with a

plastered smile and a cold handshake invited me to her luxurious office. Politely she advised, “You must change your name. Your name is too difficult to pronounce. You will never find a job with a name such as yours.”

What has my name got to do with my education, experience and skills? Change my name? Did she know about the holy naming ceremony in India when babies are given their name? This was my identity. B-h-a-r-a-t-i was named after Mother India, B-h-a-r-a-t. I was a landed immigrant. I sang *Oh Canada*. Yet I did not belong here. Now to survive, I needed to rip my beingness apart. All over again I was thrown violently in the stranger box. I changed my name to Jessica. The next four years I spent as Jessica. I needed to eat. I needed to pay my bills. I hated Jessica infringing upon my skin. My skin was broken. I was not J-e-s-s-i-c-a. I was B-h-a-r-a-t-i. Jessica was like an ulcer on my skin reminding me that I still did not belong here. My authentic beingness that connects my humanness with another was not honored. I was still a foreigner. I was a stranger.

Yet, I stayed. I was free of the bureaucratic nightmare of immigration. I needed to reclaim my name. The wind was slowly changing direction. Amidst white stares peeked a frightened brown face. Over time these faces grew. I saw myself in their shadows. I felt their pain of nothingness. Being nothing. Being invisible. Their voiceless voices wept for beingness. They wept for belonging. I had been through it all. I needed to stay. For them. For me. After all, with freedom comes responsibility: responsibility towards self, towards the community and towards the nation. There was no time for rest. My new immigration status gave me power. I was determined to use this power for advocacy of brown bodies and racialized skins. I could use my lived experiences to help newcomers from non-European nations to re-settle here. To do that, I had to break into white circles. Making positive change in a dangerous world, I had to learn to stare back. And I did stare back. First with defiance and anger. Then with compassion. The journey to reclaiming my name was filled with a purpose. I envisioned this region transformed to a place where the voiceless voices would be heard, a place where the invisible bodies become visible, and a place where white, brown, black, and not so black bodies lived in wholeness—human wholeness.

As days turned into nights and months into years, the heavy suffocating air gave way to a gentle wind. It was a great time to make change. The sustainability of large metropolitan areas was being threatened due to most newcomers wanting to settle in urban areas. Canadian rural regions were losing young people to out migration for employment purposes. Federal governments’ geographical dispersion policies were expected to solve both these problems by moving immigrants and refugees from large centres to smaller towns and rural regions. To foster newcomer integration this region received large funding from the government. I joined hands with local stakeholders—social workers, health care providers, policy makers, employers, and immigrants. We were united in our convictions to make this community inclusive for newcomers of all colours, ability and orientation. It did not matter that we were from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Bodies of all colours, including white, yearned to identify with and humanize those recognized as ‘strangers.’ We shattered the doors behind which the white supremacist ideologies flourished. We risked our lives for the future of this community and this nation by exposing ourselves to the press. We organized peace marches, peace rallies and community gatherings for all.

At last, the powerful and not so powerful took notice of my (our) ruptured skin(s). White stares diminished. The voiceless could speak. Their voices were heard at every corner of the city. The invisible bodies were not lost any more. They found their path under the dazzling sun. The seeds of change flourished in determination, collaboration and patience. Beyond the love for international cuisine, the exotic ethnic dresses, and the provocative dances, there is now appreciation of human beingness and belongingness. Today, this is a place where black, brown, gay, straight, and other bodies can blossom into wholeness.

And finally, I shouted aloud. I am B-h-a-r-a-t-I. I reclaimed me. I belong. Period. There is a dignified space for my brown body in this community. I am at home when I walk downtown—as an activist, scholar, teacher, and a citizen of Canada. I am valued. With belonging came being and becoming who I am today. My words have the power to foster change. J-e-s-s-i-c-a belonged to my past. Every now and then I notice her in a newcomer, a lesbian, a visible minority, a person with a disability, a refugee... trying to belong. I loathed J-e-s-s-i-c-a. I am now aware that without Jessica I may not have persevered for my freedom, our freedom. In my work as an educator I draw upon the experiences of Jessica and Bharati. I look through both their lenses. Each provided me with new insights into life's meaning. Students that I engage with have entered social work to make a positive change in the world. They have lofty goals. Their youth is restless. The older students are also in a hurry. They have been through the dark side. They want to see the light in their work. Somewhere in the journey the young and the old get tired of the problems in the world. When they are feeling hopeless, I tell them that the night will not last forever. They have the power to light a candle and help someone get through the night. Until that moment it never dawned on them that in helping ONE person, they can help change the course of the community.

My personal narrative is both ontological and public (see Somers, 1993, 1994) at the same time. Ontological, as this narrative helped me locate my place in my new world, Canada. Public, because my narrative is “attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions, however local or grand” (Somers, 1994, p. 619). I hope that my narrative inspires others to write their narrative. In our individual and collective narratives, there is potential for creating a new world here in Canada and globally—a world that is inclusive and celebrates diversity.

Below, through poetry, I express my coming, being, and staying in this urban-rural region...

(I)

Intense nervous tension
Is all around me

My home

My work

My neighbourhood.

People are walking
Running
Trying to get somewhere

All the while staring at me
My brown skin.

They are not really talking to me
They are not really listening to me
I am tired of their repeated questions
‘Where is this accent from?’
“Where are you really from?”

I do not belong in this small whites-only-town.
I do not see another brown or black body.
I feel alone
I am homeless
Uprooted from my beingness.
I am placeless
I am voiceless

I do not belong.... here.
I am an immigrant visible minority woman
Living in an urban/rural white Canada.
With all my courage
I pause
I smile
I stretch out my brown hand
To white bodies
At work

In my neighbourhood.
Some touch me
from a distance
Others ignore my friendly gestures.
Very few come close enough to start a conversation,
“Where is that accent from?”
“Where are you really from?”

I feel alone.
Oh! So alone
Uprooted
Homeless
Placeless
Voiceless

In an urban/rural white Canada
Unused to black and brown bodies
Immigrants and refugees.
There are...
No Hindu temples
No ethnic stores

No Asian restaurants
No Settlement Services.
I want to run away
 To Toronto, Vancouver...
Somewhere I can be home.
That was then,
My experiences in an urban/rural community in Canada
In the 1990's.

(II)

Now, decades later
This urban-rural community is my home
 MY home.
No longer a newcomer.
I have joined hands
With settlement workers, service providers, social workers, and policy makers
To bring forth empowering change...
We are dedicated
To newcomer resettlement in this urban-rural region in Canada.
Japanese, Mexican, Chinese, Thai, and Mediterranean cuisine
Have flooded the market.
To meet the demands of
Black
 Brown
 and not-so white bodies.
Even white bodies
Are expanding their palate
By trying something new.

There is a mosque
A Gurudwara
And a non-denominational church.
Fierce efforts are being made
To help new immigrants make this region their home
They do not want them to make a life here
In this once whites-only-town.

(III)

Nervous tension is still around me
But it's less intense
People still ask me,
 "Where is that accent from?"
 "Where are you really from?"
Alas!
The tension has shifted

From me

To other newcomers...

Post-911

Islamophobia has spread in some corners of this region

White and non-white heterosexual gaze is on Gays and Lesbians

Marching proudly on gay pride day.

I strain my eyes and cannot find

Many black, brown, and not so white bodies

In the march

In the crowd.

Race

Sexual Orientation

Gender

Immigration status

Geography

Ethnicity, Class, and/or Ability intersect

To marginalize the marginalized

In a white urban/rural heterosexual town.

For sure! More work is needed to foster newcomer resettlement

...accessible healthcare

...improved transportation infrastructure

...professional jobs

...culturally and affordable childcare.

Together

WE need to address the white stare

The gaze

That Others

That dehumanizes visible minority bodies.

(IV)

I have hope.

I see promise.

The sun is shining brightly in this not-so-white urban-rural community.

Between 'then' and 'now' I have come to realise that

'Place'-urban or rural-- is not just a geographic setting

How I experience place is closely connected to my identity.

My beingness.

My sense of belonging.

This white urban/rural community is now my 'home'

In a land where I arrived as a stranger

A foreign worker with no voice.

A stranger.

I have found my voice.

I have found belonging here.

I am no longer homeless.

I am no longer placeless.
I am home
I have a voice
I have a place
In this non-so white urban/rural community in Canada.
Nervous tension will always be around me
There will always be someone who will ask,
 “Where is that accent from?”
 “Where are you really from?”

Conclusions

It has been 20 years since I came to Canada. I have lived here longer than in India. Oh! I was so excited when I was successful in my Canadian citizenship exam. I had worked all night and received a perfect score. Tearfully, I swore allegiance to the Queen. Proudly I walked out into the streets as Bharati. I could finally leave Jessica behind. Oh! No. That white stare again. I was shocked. I was still a stranger. I thought when I would successfully obtain my Canadian citizenship I would then inhabit the Canadian body. At the very least not be so visible to remain a stranger. I have lost count of how many times I have been asked, “Where are you really from?” I am Ahmed’s (2000) unassimilable stranger. My continuous defiance of “multicultural hospitality” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 113) by challenging the politics of integration has permanently branded my body with the word “stranger.”

Looking back on my life, I realise that often I had allowed myself to be seduced by the mirage of multiculturalism and integration. However, I have no regrets. After all, it is in Canada that I found solace from abuse. In becoming and being the other in a foreign country, I made friends with the multiple and fluid narratives of my identity. Today, I am comfortable in my discomfort to inhabit a vulnerable space somewhere between being recognized as a stranger again (Ahmed, 2000) and my care for the well-being of Canadian lives. The promise of my social, economic, cultural, and political integration is individually and collectively linked to other voices and identities, each trying to find a space in multicultural societies. In my efforts to nurture my ontological centre, I extend my hand to white, not-so white, brown, and black bodies. As I delve deeper into Bharati passing as Jessica, I realise that I/we need to know more about Jessica and her struggles if I/we want to make Canada and other multicultural societies a welcome space for newcomers. In sum, without honoring the experiences of the stranger within I cannot engage in an open and honest dialogue about Us (natives of Canada) versus Them (strangers to Canada).

Then, my racialized body in a white-only-town was perceived as a stranger. Fear and danger and race and space were stuck together like glue to make me the Other, the Outsider. Now, as I look outside the window of my small cottage home I wave to my neighbour, a white old man. He smiles and waves back. I look at the sky and see a rainbow. My world is transformed. I am glad that I came, I became, and I stayed. Not so far away, a young refugee enters the city gates wearing an oversized coat, dreams in his pocket, and eyes glittering with hope. An old woman with trembling hands and suspicious eyes taps his shoulders “Young man, where are you from?” I shut my window. Oh! To be a stranger in multicultural Canada.

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About the Author(s): Bharati Sethi, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Social Work, King's School of Social Work, Western University Canada (519-433-3491; bsethi3@uwo.ca).