Storying: a monument of resilience and decolonial healing

Culture is ultimately lost when we stop telling the stories of who we are, where we have been, how we arrived here, what we once knew, what we wish we knew; when we stop our retelling of the past, the imagining of our future, and the long, long task of inventing an identity every single second of our lives.

Deborah A. Miranda

The story of birth; the story of death

Long ago, before we were put into European hospitals, women of my lineage gave birth at home. The tradition follows: when women became pregnant, as the months passed and they created and nourished human life in their wombs, these were the months when they collected the ash of wood after cooking in the fire. They began to collect more and more every day, keeping a mountain pile of dry grey ash. Meanwhile, women and men tended to the soil, planted trees, grew their food, and cared for their animals. When the time came, they were ready to bring their children into the world, the women lay in the pile of ash covered by a clean blanket. I imagine that this is when all women of the family joined in, even the neighboring women, helping to assist this important event. And during the birth, the ash would absorb all the blood and other liquids that came with the infant's cries- her first breath. The ash acted as an antibacterial agent to protect the mother and the child, leaving almost no mess behind. This ash: from a young tree, giving fruit, shade, wind, and fire, in its final stage of life, helped assist the birth of a new life. I understand this story as of life and death, both connected, working in relation to each other; the human gives care for the tree from its seed to its felling, and in return, it gives the same type of care from nourishment to creation of a new life of the human.

This story is precious and joyous to my heart, it is one of few native traditions that I know of. My grandmother told my mom, and she told me. With that joy, comes the layers of pain. The pain of the loss in these traditions, the ways the women of my lineage experienced the pain of having to conform to the isolated rooms, metal beds, and cold sharp equipment in the hospital beds during birth- what must it have looked like to give up these intentional traditions of birth? And I don't ask what it must have felt like, because the presence of deep pain in my chest as I think of this story is a glimpse of that pain of loss and assimilation that women who created me have gone through. I have inherited them too.

But what does it mean to give birth and experience death? How am I to restore this reciprocity after 200 years of coloniality? Can I tend to the soil and help the growth of trees too? Can I give birth to a new generation through such reciprocity once more? Can I do that in the community of my family? My neighbors? With the ashes of trees.

Yes, it is my inheritance.

My mother gave birth to her pain.

I still remember my mother's crying chants amongst the bathroom walls,
As if the sound of the shower must hide them.
The pain in my chest never left
Me
The painful giggles of those sobs still keep me choked up.

How hard must it have been for you, oyijon?
We don't talk about it, but I feel it
Still Alive
The pain of your separation: home, family, familiar people, your language
Or is the pain of your single parenthood, longing for the loving partner that was never yours?

All compiled in your pain of alienation, abuse,
and the over-working of your body for $7.25 /hour
just to keep a roof over our heads in this brand-new hateful world.
The American Dream.

I still feel it in my stomach, the guilt and shame,
that I felt in swallowing on what had seemed to be the
only palpable reason for your pain: me
the root of your suffering

Over the years I've come to forgive you
For being so wrong and hateful
I've come to love you more, even in the absence of my own self-love.
Yet I still feel it.

I still feel the pain you carry each and every day
Feeling so lost
Missing your own loving mother. Home.

And yet the guilt never left, I battle with it often.
I feel so bad for the pain you feel that I must carry it with me
Compiled with the pain of seeing the absence of your acceptance of me. yourself.

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallenged, unchangeable, are transmitted to us through the culture...Males make the rules and laws and women transmit them. How many times have I heard Mothers and Mother-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being hociconas (big mouths), for being callejeras (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives?

Borderlands La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa p. 38

Madina (Aborova) Ibragimova age 19 Circa 1991-2 Toshkent, Ōbekiston.

Image description:

She was 19 here, right before her arranged marriage to my father. With her long-white dress (probably sewed it herself) holding flowers the way she will hold us, her children, for the next decade of her life. And her voluminous dark hair. Her eyebrows stand out in the contrast of the black and white photo- the dark thick, beautiful eyebrows, and if you were there, you would see her unibrow (a beauty standard that I valued at first and later hated myself for having in an effort to fit in with my American peers). I believe this is the graduation day of her seamstressing program. That is her craft, she is an artisan, even though she believes she is not smart. I now understand her intelligence lives beyond the disciplines of what the soviet schools standardized it to be. Behind her, you can see an image of Gorbachev, the last general secretary of the USSR. This is the year Uzbekistan and all of the other Turkmen nations "gained" their independence from the Soviet Union. This is the first time since the mid-1800s Central Asia was established as a "sovereign" nation. The final taste of freedom, yet even more poverty. I have overheard stories of how this year, the kitchen drawers in my grandparent's "commie block" contain nothing but a box of matches. This was the foreseen economic decline after the fall of the settler-colonial Soviet Union. Once Russia closed ties to its imperial possession that it named, divided, and ultimately nationalized, social and economic decline grew following the years of the contemporary "sovereign" nationhood. Ironically enough, less than a year later, my family celebrated what is one of the most expensive, yet important moments in the life of all family units: tōy (wedding/ celebration); the beginning of my mother's womanhood, identity—her life's worth.

19, taller, more beautiful, more mannered, just better!

By the age of 19 she had completed her duties as an exemplary daughter: being the first daughter of 4 others in her family, taking care of the house, well mannered, and having a great reputation in the neighborhood. She even raised her little sisters since the age of 10, while her parents' busy working-class jobs took over their life. Father as mechanic and mother an elementary school teacher - both common soviet occupations in the city. Since her teenage years, Madina was well prepared for her new marriage, and thus fulfilled her duties as a daughter. Come fall 1992 (harvest season, a common time for tōy), with the influence of her parents, Madina agreed to marry a man she had met two to three times in her life. After all, it wasn't her decision to make but had to trust her family: parents, aunts, uncles, the neighbors that she was going into a marriage with the right man. He was 6 years older than her, which in theory indicated maturity and therefore wealth. The wealth that guarantees the survival of the children she was expected to bring forth. After her firstborn, a son, she yet again proved her worthiness as a woman, by something not even her mother could have achieved. Birthing a son, never mind as a firstborn is a complete honor and worthy of a huge celebration. You can only imagine how abundantly the child's beshik tōy (celebration of birth) went.

Yet, six years went by, and Madina had no interest in having more children with her husband. Why would she? She had no interest in a poor, uncharismatic, and weak man. He wasn't particularly manly either, if you don't count the times he had the opportunity to beat her during their many arguments. However, her mother, her aunties, and her neighbors all said " Madina, sani yoshingdigilar hammasida uchta-torta bolari bor, sanham tug'ishing kerak!" (your peers already have three-four children, you have to give birth too). And just like the countless amount of time she returned to her abusive husband every time he beat her; she listened and gave birth to twin girls. She was always well-mannered and met her family's honor, after all, what a shameful thing it would be if she got a divorce?

Fifteen years into her marriage, by luck and chance, her husband gained the opportunity to move his family to the United States in search of economic stability. Once more, valuing the needs of her family, she moved even if she strongly opposed the idea. That year, harvest season of 2008, Madina, her 15-year-old son, 9-year-old twin daughters, and her husband sold all that they had and immigrated to the states. With that move, for the first time in her 35 years of life, she had power over her choices, only with the added pain of leaving her community, her home. Without the added pressure of her family units, she was finally able to divorce her husband, even if it meant that she brought shame to her family miles away. Even if it meant to be a single mother in a new country, without money or the language to acquire the "American Dream." A dream dreamt by everyone but her.

" Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe with the inner life of her Self. Petrified she can't respond, her face caught between los intersticios, the space between the different worlds she inhabits"

Borderlands La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa, p.45

Journal entry from summer of 2020:

[redacted] I feel lost. I remember at the age of 9 thinking about my ten-year expiration date in this country, marked in my green card. Thinking to myself, imagining myself as **19, taller, more beautiful, more mannered, just better.** Ready to show my family honor, to be a loyal daughter, a well "trained" wife- a commodity all will want one day. Maybe I will go to university, and maybe not, but I never seemed to imagine my status as a citizen here in the United States nor my own homeland of Uzbekistan (Turkman land). Maybe all my value was not for me to think of but is made up by my family around me since the day I was born. It seemed so clear, I followed the traditions: I honored my parents, traditions, values, upbringing, even if they didn't honor me. **Yet, the challenges of two worlds, being a citizen to a different world while living as a guest in another, challenged the way of life that has been written by the culture I came from.** Maybe it does matter. It is all so chaotic, I feel hurt. I am in so much pain. When I feel it coming, I don't want to get up and be confronted, yet feel it so often. **I am sorry, I have failed my**

family and my family has failed me. I am haunted by pain and guilt, but I know I am not at fault. **I am simply trying my best to keep both my feet into the two worlds, and undoubtedly feel like I am losing my balance-** Failing at both. Not true. **The truth lies in the fact that I have so much compassion and love to give, and so why is it so easy to starve myself from i**t? Once again words are so foreign, the evil in this world is scary and I feel I am losing. My physical body and mind are against me at times. Yet I am here. So, I ask for my guidance, my ancestors, this land who has seen so much pain, to show me how they stayed resilient and overflowing with love despite the conditions they endured. Please guide me and show me hope in the darkest of times. **Show me breath when I feel I am suffocating. Show me light when I want to stay in the darkness. Show me the truth when the lies feel more like home. Show me belonging when I feel so disconnected, show me strength when I rather stay fragile.**

On Silence and Erasure

"I wonder why there are women born with silver spoons in their mouths
Women who have never known a day of hunger

Women who have never changed their own bed linen
And I wonder why there are women who must work
Women who must clean other women's houses
Women who must shell shrimps for pennies a day
Women who must sew other women's clothes
Who must cook
Who must die
In childbirth
In dreams "

Genny Lim's Wonder Woman

During the handful of times when she would visit her mother's apartment, which was less than an hour of a bus ride away from her, she would build up the courage to ask her questions over the kitchen table, where her mother would be rolling out the dough for the Uzbek fried noodles.

“Mom,” she said, “can you tell me about the times when you were younger? What had happened during the Soviet times?”

Her mother replied with frustration “nothing, we were all good, I have nothing bad to tell you. You always want to know about bad things, well I have nothing to give you.”

With even more frustration, she questioned “But why did we move here then? Why were we so poor that we had to leave Toshkent? Why do some have to struggle like you and me, like we did, and others benefit from these struggles?”

Her mother didn’t say anything back and then continued with her dough, while the noise of the Uzbek television filled up the emptiness of the room with distractions. A sense of confusion and anger filled the daughter’s stomach. Her source of anger was deep, and it went back in time to her formative years of growing up in the United States. She was both devastated and angry about the mundane normalcy of the overworking of her mother’s body. The ways she saw her own mother’s labor overused and abused as she worked tirelessly six-seven days a week, over 12 hours a day at the Russian Dry cleaning and the Russian senior citizens caretaking company.

During those years her family had intentionally moved to Brooklyn NY as it was the only place her linguistically incapable parents could get a job using the language they learned during the Soviet Union. By default, this meant that her parents’ employees were predominantly of Russian descent. Thinking back now, she was angry that her mother had to continue serving Russians even far away from the home that once was owned by the Russian empire. Wasn’t this the re-creation of colonial exploitation their people once experienced? These were the questions she searched to answer when building up the courage to ask about her Mother’s life during the USSR.

Through the years, seeing her mother’s eyesight deteriorated and her body overworked, it was hard to enjoy the American dream her mother had worked to gift her. How her immigrant single-parenthood had transformed into complete poverty, neglect, depression and emotional abuse. Leaving her daughter to question: Why must some women and families suffer to get the opportunity to survive in this world? Why must her family along with others be the subject of cheap and exploitative labor so that their children might have a shot at “making it” at the promised utopia of social mobility? When she brought these questions up, no clear answers were given, not at home, not at school. It was as if the direction and destiny of her and her family’s precious life were not up to her discretion. One thing was clear: the erasure of her identity and history was interwoven into her pain, which was embedded into the answers she sought.

She remembered the ways American schools taught about the Soviet Union: dystopian yet a constant lack of information regarding Central Asia. It was as if Central Asia never existed, let alone be “part” of the USSR. While in Toshkent, she didn’t recall learning about the same

violence talked about in American schools during the Stalin-Lenin era. History classes were left to the pre-1800s, predominantly about Islamic empires. In fact, her grandparents remembered the USSR fondly. At home or school, one constant thing about her history was opposing narratives full of confusion. For the sake of time and mental space: her history was erased.

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"I have survived - and there is pride in that fact- but is my survival of any value? ... Is my survival the final proof I have need that I belong here after all? "

Neon Scars, Wendy Rose p.154

You, why did your family come to the US?

When I was in the fifth grade, a history teacher came into our classroom and she began her lesson. At that time, the whole classroom would join each other in the colorful carpet for lessons. I don't quite remember what exactly we were learning but at one point I think the question of migration came up. I believe the question was why do people immigrate to the United States? At that moment, I distinctly remember the teacher's vexed tone in her voice and the judgment in her eyes as she looked at the group of immigrant fifth graders (who almost always found themselves sitting together) and asked them with an aggravated and slightly aggressive tone of voice "You, why did your family come to the US?" As the other students' heads turned towards us, I felt deep embarrassment and shame in my body. The group of us, confused, filled the room in silence because we could not answer our teacher's question. At that time, I could not give her the answer she was looking for. I could not prove to her that we came "in search of a better life" because my life was always better when I was home with my family, aunties, and neighbors. I was accepted, loved, and deemed important (as a young child anyways). This moment solidified my difference. Compared to the others, we were inferior: stupid, couldn't even speak English, we were poor, and our only friends were the other immigrant kids. And by the tone of my teacher's voice, we were unwelcomed.

Years later, my inability to answer this angry teacher's question poses even more complex and important questions. Yes, we moved here for a better life, but what about other structures that go beyond economic inequities that inform our migration? What about the history of Central Asia? Why is it that the global majority of countries struggle while some others do so well that they offer "better opportunities" to the selected diasporic communities (through strategically "licit and illicit" means) that then take up the next generation of a cheap labor force of the US and the global north?

Much of these answers are found when looking at the historic and systemic roots of global coloniality, yet much like my ancestral history, the histories of migrants are strategically

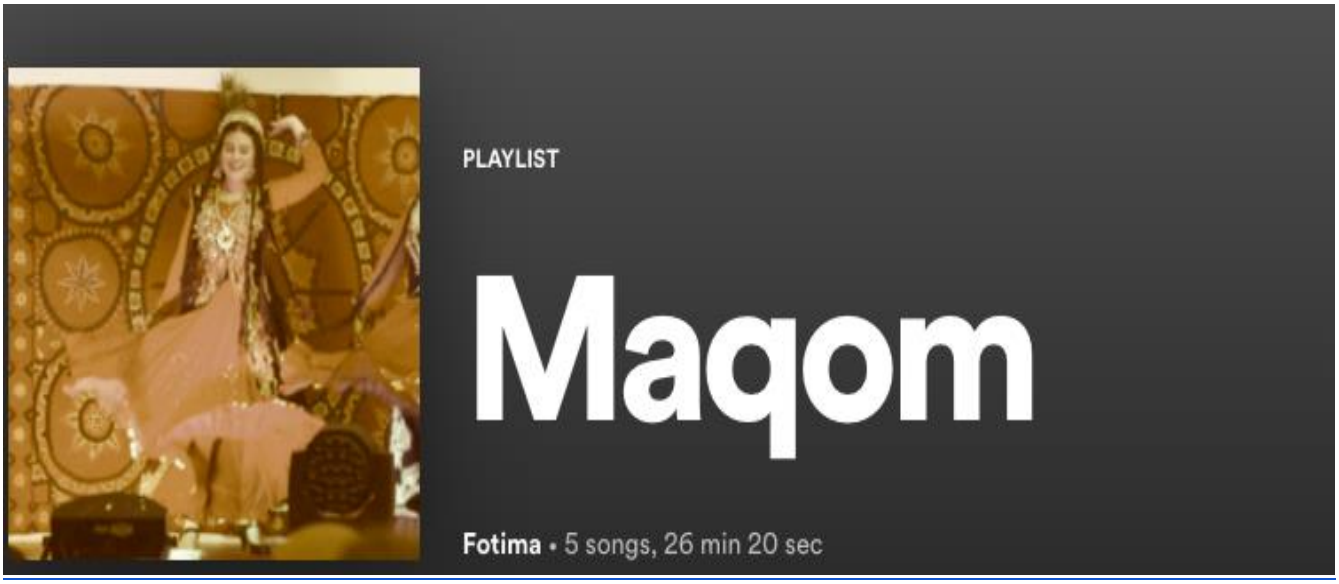
mis-informed into narratives that leave much of erasure and silencing to the complicit paradigms of the neoliberal and colonial order. The silencing of our history and the confusion leaves us to accept the inequities experienced in our disenfranchised communities. This erasure forces us to be “grateful” for the exploitation of our labor and leaves a mark of shame on the racialized bodies of our parents, families, our diaspora-ourselves. These marks feel as though they are permanent because no amount of social mobility cures this self-demonizing rhetoric in our subconscious. When I am writing these words, I am 22 years old, about to graduate from a prestigious four-year university, yet deep down I still feel incapable, inferior, stupid, and unwelcomed. The promise of hard work has allowed me to climb the ladder of illusionary hierarchy, yet my worthlessness is reminded by my constant mindset of self-belittlement. Now as a woman of color, the depth of my self-hatred is obvious in both the worlds I occupy.

And to combat these feelings of inferiority, incapability, and self-pathology, I ask questions in the hopes of re-shifting personal and societal narratives of inferiority and belittlement of myself and others.

Why am I to feel this way after years and years of work toward the promise of social and economic mobility? More importantly, why must my value only exist in the presence of inferiority of others? Why must the survival of my body and the body of my family in this country be the last step of fulfillment? We have migrated but our stories do not end here. Our values live beyond the simple existence of our bodies in nation states. This notion poses a great opposition to the very racial capitalization that keeps us from our potential of self-fulfillment- our resilience!

Yet, I find the strength to write, to question. The fragmented answers to my pain and my struggle more importantly inform my solidarity— revolutionary ways of showing up. To be asking questions is to shake up the unchallenged status quo that upholds exploitation of racialized bodies and the extraction of the Earth to normalcy to erasure. To be questioning is to stand up against the notions of hierarchy that uphold white supremacy. To stand up for mine and other communities who have been the subjects of the colonial and neoliberal order is to take into hand the direction of our survival that exists outside the boundaries of neoliberal healing. To heal is to be in community, in solidarity, to ask for a different world, both inner and physical. To heal is to understand that the wounds in ourselves are revolutionary, that shake up the lies of the world. They push us to justice, to fight, and fully and divinely show up for our community, ourselves.

Resilience as an anchor De-pathologizing the self



Maqom: songs, rituals, stories.

When I dance:

When I dance the voices of self-hatred
Stop!
It is not about that anymore
It's more than my mind's constant
Reminders

When I dance it is like I am in the forest
Mountains, the breeze, and the dance of trees
Much more to be occupied by

than the hatred inside

When I dance, I am not wounded
Like the feeling, I get when I
Lay still at night

When I dance I am more than just my body

I am the rhythm of the doira*
The vibration of the stings in the dutor*
The voice of the singer

When I dance I am not ashamed anymore
Of where my body is from
The land that created me
And keeps the secrets of the dead safe

When I dance I feel connected to people
Who created me
With not force not with a need
But with intention and care

When I dance I am no longer broken
No pieces to put together
No forgotten stories

When I dance I feel worthy of my body
My life

When I dance I am whole, alive, at home

When I dance I am allowed to exist
To breathe the fresh air
To extend my arms as do branches of trees
To feel the presence of the squirrels
To listen to the song of birds
To greed the crows
And to touch the body of the earth
It is my home.

When I dance

*Doira: round hand drums, ancient and ritualistic instrument - actual translation of the word: circle.
*Dutar: 2-string instrument originated in Iran and Central Asia. The Persian word “tar” means string—much of the same word is found in Guitar. - Both instruments date back to shamanistic traditions and rituals of cleansing.

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