

Spaces of belonging: Spiritual Landscapes of Identity

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Abstract

This visual and textual narrative explores the landscapes of identity when one leaves one's country of origin for another, one culture for another and walks with the question "what is home?" I travel to a town in Mexico yearly for several weeks and have had the opportunity for extended stays. These profound moments of relationality and the connection of spirit to time and place resonate in past and current memories. A multimodal bricolage of photography, drawing, painting, poetics and text, ground this holistic living inquiry, reflecting the liminality of sensual experiences, and spiritual geographies that informed and transformed my identity. Tropical tree and plant roots became the metaphor for what holds us to a place. How we are rooted to a place, that is not one's birthplace, is also shaped by the visual soundscapes and topography of the town. Over the course of nine weeks, I walked in wonder, with curiosity, meandering with the moments.

Keywords: *walking encounters, visual narrative, identity, spirituality, holistic education*

Prelude

a voice whispers, "you are home"

mi corazon murmurs, "i am home"

as mis amigas y amigos express, "welcome home".

I travel to a town in Mexico yearly for several weeks and have had the opportunity to live there for longer periods of time. Though geographically bound to my birth country, as I step off the plane in Puerto Vallarta, my heart echoes, "I am home" each time I arrive, and aches when I leave. Rooted in a holistic philosophy (Miller, 2016; Miller, Nigh, Binder, Novak & Crowell, 2018), and drawing on the walkography, a/r/tography and the slow scholarship work of Laszcik Cutcher (2018), Irwin (2013) and Laszcik Cutcher and Irwin (2017), I explore the shapeshifting landscapes of identity when one leaves one country for another, one culture for another and walks with the question, "what is home?"

It is acknowledged that while not a resident nor 'expat', the term tourist does not apply. I recognize that I come from a place of privilege and can be perceived as such as I enter into a colonized country and local spaces. And yet, there is an in between space of connection where I dwell. There is land we travel upon that deeply resonates with us and touches us spiritually. Here is such a place of longing and belonging where I seek as a settler to understand the land I walk on, the people past and present who dwell here. As Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows) shares:

everything on earth

has a spiritual purpose

interconnected energy

landscape is sacred

the spiritual energy of ancestors

sentient landscape

community

deep sense of kinship

(found in* Topa & Narvarez, 2022, pp. 15-16)

Lasczik Cutcher (2018) explored the practice of walking through the metaphor of movement. Tropical trees and plant roots were my metaphor for what holds us to a place and allows for the contextual rhythms of one’s spirit to unfold. These musings on how we are rooted to a place, that is not one’s birthplace, also unfurl in the visual soundscapes of the cobblestoned streets, parks, rivers and ocean of this town. This nine week a/r/tographic self-curated “living inquiry” (Triggs, Irwin, & Leggo, 2014, p. 23), slowed down thinking, allowing for “emergent walking practices” (Lasczik Cutcher 2018, p. xix) where one must trust the dynamic process of ambiguity, and move in, with and through reflexivity, and the liminal spaces where identity can linger and emerge (Le Blanc, Florence Davidson, Ryu & Irwin, 2015).

The stories we tell, we “trace with our feet as well as our eyes” (Solnit, 2000, p. 71). Through such an embodiment of sensual experiences and mapping (O’Rourke, 2013), the liminality of spiritual spaces and wayfinding embrace the landscapes that shape our identities (Binder, 2016) and a becoming with one’s environment. Profound moments of relational connection of spirit to time and place resonate in past and present memories. No matter where I am bodily positioned “mi corazón siente que ha vuelto a casa/my heart feels that it has returned home”.

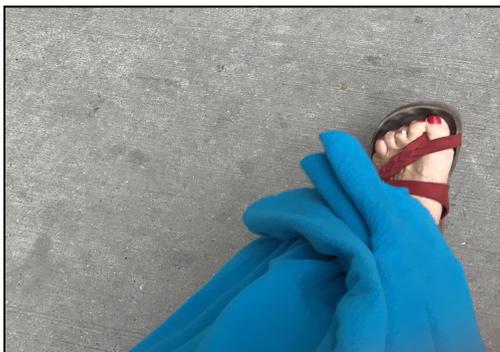


Figure 1: Photograph by author

i offer you

the reader a glimpse

into my lived worldly inquiry

a vignette of images and responses

my metaphoric thinking

i am

second generation canadian of

jewish, russian, romanian, turkish (I was told)

descent

my reality

spiritually embodied in a

sensual ancient world different from

my own

my confusion

placed in a world, foreign in tongue

yet, culturally and spiritually familiar with

ancestral ways

my liminality

an old identity, merging past with present

seeking meaning in what

is home

my time

There is a strong connection felt for this place; the land of The Wixárika, (the Huichol people as they are frequently called). Learning about their art as ceremony, ritual and prayer opened a window of understanding into the ancient cosmology of their world. I began to learn about the depth and complexity of their visual symbolism such as the blue deer, peyote and the importance of shamanic visions (Maclean, 2005). These are the places where their identities dwelled.

Both Davis (2009) and Abram (2010) spoke about what we can learn from ancient wisdoms, the reciprocity of relationships with the natural world and what we have lost overtime. They encourage, not just an opening of the mind, but of sensual wonder; to view the world through the imaginative soul of old eyes. We need to walk with the world, not just in it.

acted like a muse healing the soul
silencing the inner critic
allowing past
and present identities
to merge
interact
discover
rediscover
some might say i was escaping
but no
the messiness of
my personality
the ethos of place reawakened
the intimacy of the heart
where i could be
still
responsive
unresponsive

Curiosity/Wonder

I dwell in the words of Celeste Snowber (2014) who wrote:
“The geography of the inner life beckons me through the visible paths of the natural landscape and I listen, stop, move and dance” (p. 121). I found inspiration walking the streets, being aware, paying attention with intention. My senses connected to the sounds and tastes of the air. As I felt the ocean wind, the muscles in my body were stretched and challenged as I found my flow of belonging.

and sometimes
there are connections
that cannot be explained
in words

I wonder what shapes my walking, my meandering moments, random and some defined? What speaks to me? Uphill and downhill... I wander the streets of the town,

some are intentional routes of discovery, others, spaces I have not been in, or streets not explored. My curiosities.

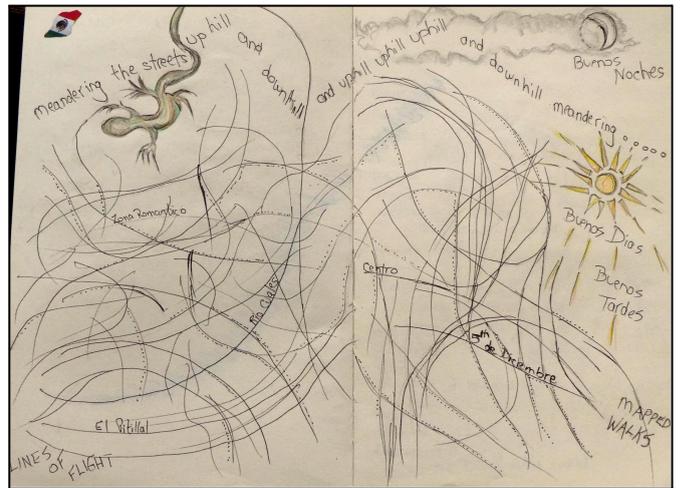


Figure 5: Drawing by author



Figure 6: Photograph by author

many possible routes and becomings
approaches, encounters, leading outward, shifting,
sometimes askew, receding into a landscape, leaking
I must also witness my own stories
enter and step out of my own lines of flight.
(found in Salverson, 2016 p. 3, p. 65).

i feel at home
with
the contextual contours
the streets
old walls
chipped stones
bent street signs
where the plants
creep out peek out of crevices
from unknown sources

Over time, a growing rootedness gave way to familiarity of place where I found an embodied rhythm. Each time I returned to my geographical home a part of my identity remained behind. Is it the freedom I feel of becoming, of being, as I step into the skin of a new self? Is this exploration of self what Susan Walsh (2018) spoke of as the “of opening the heart” (p. 1) and “opening the space of the heart” where there is “a dissolution of self as I usually experience it” (p.17)? Is this where I breathe in the liminal space of the moment? Walsh (2018) suggested that it is “becoming awake and aware” and the willingness “to stay with, rest with whatever arises” (p. 3).

It is these lingering moments of the everyday experiences, looking up, looking down, in and with, that I catch images I would not normally and possibly not pay attention to. These delicate but pervasive hibiscus grow so close to the ground, hiding behind beach lounge chairs trying to stay out of sight.

i run my fingers through the sand
as i cup the hibiscus flowers ever so gently
growing low to the ground
yet a towering tree above
roots spiraling horizontally
brilliance of colour

“see me, they cry, i am here for the moment!”



Figure 7: Photograph by author

I am reminded of Greene (1995) and Lasczik Cutcher (2018) during my walking experiences. Greene encouraged wide-awakeness and attending to present moments of observation and curiosity, where hidden gems and enlightened discoveries present themselves. Lasczik Cutcher gave me permission to be lost and found.

wrapping
mapping
a signature
in small spaces
as i wrap, map my signature in small spaces
time for self
non-linear explorations of geographical
biographical connectedness
in two places
as i dwell in the in between

Uno y Uno... one and one.... take turns
when stopping... no parking.

An expression of being aware of what is around you... to
pay attention.

Signs tilting on slanted walkways, on edges of roads; I pause
and wonder about the meaning, imagine other meanings...
and curious if anyone pays attention.

Uno y Uno, one and one... one at a time, slowing down
pace, breath (and still an overactive mind).



Figure 8: Photograph by author

Roots

to listen
to touch a stethoscope
to the skin of a landscape
to hear what stirs below
dreams
attached to roots
to our ancestors
no one tree
lives alone
a place where spirits
and waking reality merge

(found in Haskell 2017, p. ix, p. 16)



Figure 9: Artwork by author

As I consider the complexities of my identity, I write:

dreams
attached to rediscovered roots spiritual
roots
connected to a past reawakening
where a waking reality
merges with a new present
a quiet hum in the roots and trunk can be heard
if one listens
trees
working in a community
of peculiar growth patterns, shapes, textures
joined by networks,
as social beings
reliance and resilience.

(found in Wohleben, 2016, p. 68)

Thich Nhat Hanh (2013) encouraged us “to get in touch with the earth” so “we will know we’re already home” (p. 62). Each day, as I climbed up and down 88 steps, I would always find myself resting halfway beside the breath of a plant, a pause before the next step.

mindful walking deep communion take
refuge become

breathing in

arrived

breathing out

home

the present moment

(found in Thich Nhat Hanh, 2013, pp. 62-63)

In the Panteon, I wandered through the endless sea of shrines and tombstones, where souls and identities are remembered. Many reflect not only the person buried there, but the centuries of ancestral ways embodied in honouring the traditions and rituals through artifacts lain on the stones. I reflected on my biological roots and ancestry while feeling a strong connection to this place. This spoke to the tensionality of the two trajectories I often find myself in.

Leggo (2015) wrote about the importance of attending “to our souls, our psyches, to the breath and life that is in us” (p. 160). The imperative to

recover
uncover
discover
 our voices
our living stories
are always in process
lingering

(found in Leggo, 2015, p. 160, pp.162-164)

It is here in the lingering moments of walking, in those liminal spaces, where I am able to (re)claim my spiritual and biological identities, bridging the relational and intersections of personal interrogations. The Brussats’ (1996) spoke about a spiritual literacy where we are able “to read the signs written in the texts of our experiences” (p. 1).

This deep awareness and meaning making settles into those rhizomatic spaces where migrating identities merge, are informed and transform.

Epilogue

In his poem, Charles Olson (1997, p. 106) writes:

“whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle
and the dirt
just to make clear where they come from.”

From his Indigenous worldview, Cajete (2017) suggested that in understanding how we live a “mythic life” (p. 117), our ancestral storied lives, we understand what it means to live in relationship to the world. This gives us the means to carve out our “geographical landscape” (Cajete, 1994, p. 122). In this pandemic world, while I was prevented from returning physically to Mexico for several years, I dwelled in a place where I no longer asked: “what is home?”



Figure 10 (photograph by author)

i am
the geographical landscape
the journey
 the spiritedness
 the rootedness
my identity
wayfinding
embodying
a place
 where
mi corazon siente
 que ha vuelto
 a casa
my heart feels it has returned
home

*The creation of found poems are used throughout this paper as well as traditional citations. The use of found poems is used to bring together words and phrases over several pages of text to elicit the essence of significant ideas from a particular author's work. This arts-based education research and poetic inquiry method is drawn from the work of Dr. Sandra Faulkner and Dr. Monica Prendergast.

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Author Acknowledgement

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Marni has been involved in several podcasts/webinars about holistic education and art education. As well as numerous published articles and chapters, she was a co-editor for *The International Handbook of Holistic Education*, and for *Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele*.

<https://www.torontomu.ca/early-childhood-studies/about/people/faculty/marni-binder/>