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These are the stories of our physical activities: Decolonial re-existence and poetry

Abstract:

In this paper, I aim to disseminate the knowledge that was generated during participatory art-based action research on which I collaborated with a group of young Afghan asylum seekers in Sweden. The focus of the research was the lived experiences of the youth in relation to sport and physical activity. I have chosen a narrative poem that I crafted using *vox participare* [voices of participants] (Norton & Sliep, 2019) to do this work. In this way, I have grounded the dissemination of our research in the shared epistemology of our peoples, the Khorasani peoples of central/western Asia. By adopting the persona of شاعر [the poet] (Olszewska, 2015), and by writing in a reflective manner that does not obscure my own privilege, I work towards decolonising the process of research and knowledge generation as it relates to sport. I attempt to show how Afghan youth re-make sport (and physical activity) in ways that re-create conditions of dignity for themselves and their community in their everyday living. In this way, I aim to disrupt the dominant understandings about what sport is, what it is supposed to do, and how it can be utilised by those who are living with social injustices.

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Introduction

In the following poem, I aim to disseminate the knowledge that was generated during participatory art-based action research that I collaborated on with a group of young Afghan asylum seekers in Sweden. The focus of the poem is the lived experience of Afghan youth as it relates to sport and physical activity. I attempt to show how the youth re-make physical activity and sport in ways that are linked directly to their daily lives. Through this active and reflective work, which is done in continuous presence of the violence of displacement and social injustices, they re-generate their own meanings and understandings in relation to sport (and physical activity) in ways that create and re-create conditions of dignity for themselves and their community.

This article is also my personal and public attempt to decolonise the dissemination of my work by grounding it in the epistemology of my people, the Khorasani peoples of central/western Asia. Khorasani peoples have used poetry and other forms of art for knowledge generation for centuries (Olszewska, 2015). In doing this, I start with a poem in the Iranian tradition of شعر سپید [white verse]. This tradition was initiated by Ahmad Shamlu and does not follow any rhythmical order; it can be organised in any way the poet desires in order to fully convey ideas that are often about social justice (Jamshidi, 2009). Although the poem aims to reflect the stories and artwork that were produced by the youth, I am the sole writer of the poem. In this way, I adopt the persona of شاعر [the poet]. In the epistemology of Khorasani people, the poet is seen as the learned scholar, and people use the prefix شاعرمیگه [the poet says] to give legitimacy to an argument (Olszewska, 2015). Adopting this persona, however, is not problem-free. As an academic in a Northern university, I do carry certain privileges that I cannot negate. Yet, as a Khorasani woman and as a migrant from the South, I also have a vantage view into how life is made and re-made in the borders of North-South. It is this re-making and re-existence (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) of life that I aim to *show* with this poem.

Edwards (1986), writing on poetry in Afghanistan, argues that poetry is used to make explicit the relationship of the individuals to their past and present, guiding people to see their existence in relation to the social and temporal universe of which they are part. This form of expression is also employed in the narrative inquiry tradition where *Vox Participare* or “Found” poetry brings the participants, researcher, and readers close to data by expressing human experiences more vividly (Norton & Sliep, 2019).

Keeping with the epistemology of my people, I have chosen to let the poem speak for itself so as to allow for the nuanced, multiple, and multi-layered readings of it by different readers, at different times and across different walks of life. What follows afterward is a brief overview of the larger project through which this poem came to be. I will first outline my theoretical and epistemological arguments that have given rise to the poem, and then continue with a brief description of the participatory research, its aims, and findings, through which this poem is grounded. I will then conclude with the endnotes. The endnotes map the cartography of my epistemology and reaffirm its historical existence. My hope is that this article becomes both the expression of, and the embodiment for, my attempt to decolonise my research practices

while also challenging normative understandings of what sport (and physical activity) is supposed to be and do.

These are the stories of our physical activities

You were on my side of the border,
your wrong side,
reciting *my-your* poetry.
and I was astonished:
they had told me you don't belong 'here'.
Why then, I wondered, you speak my mother tongue so eloquently?

I did not know then
that my grandmothers were your grandmothers
that 'here' and 'there' was a 150-year-old invention
that my mother tongue, my stories have been intertwined with yours
for time immemorial.

(Why was I not told of this then?)

Alas...

Borders are solid
they divide,
separate
invent difference.

So, you are 'my people' and you are not,
your herstories are 'my herstories' and they are not.

We both have seen our fair share
of war,
displacement,
migration;
separated from our homeland,
sentenced to walk the globe in search of
'home'.

(Is there anything fair about that?)

But all this time, I have held the right passport
and you did not

(have any).

Now
30 years later,

Yet another continent, another life,
Sweden,
and here I am again with you and your sisters, brothers.

We both are on foreign grounds,
and still, you are more foreign than I.

I hold the right passport, you see
and you still
do not have any.

I have tried to absolve myself
of this lifetime of guilt,
of my complicity in your destitution.
(What a futile attempt,
absolution is yet a complicity, a move to innocence,
and I know I am not innocent)

I need to understand you are your own person;
that you have your own stories, herstories,
that 150 years of border divides us still.

So, I ask you to tell me your stories and
here is what you say:

“Before ‘here’ we have had herstories
Before ‘here’ our bodies have known many stories

Our mouths have laughed innocently on top of the trees,
They have tasted the thrill of small chases in lazy summer afternoons.

Our mouths have learned,
are learning
to pronounce foreign sounds,
unfamiliar words.

Our small hands have worked hard,
laying brick on top of brick

picking strawberries under the hot sun.
They have sewn your sweaters.

Our small hands have,
lovingly, excitedly
built football fields
out of nothing
for our evening football meets.

Our hands are glorious!
They reach up to serve the ball over the net.
They reach higher to dunk the ball into the basket.

And our legs...
Our legs have walked distances,
across the fields,
 mountains,
 cities,
 countries,
 continents.

Our legs are still walking...

They are alive with energy!
Sometimes they don't sleep at night...
trapped in the dark memories of our راه پیمایی [Cross-countries walking];
restless in the anticipation of kicking the ball
across the field.

Our hearts have expanded to fit all the sorrow, all the love of our mothers
fathers,
sisters
brothers
at the moment of خداحافظی [goodbyes].

Our hearts have shrunk in fear of the
border security,
of the darkness of the smuggler's trunk,
of the abyss of the blue seas.

Our hearts have yet to give up
when filling up with air swimming in the endless waters;
when beating hard watching Cristiano Ronaldo move towards the goal.

Our heads have been clever,
inventing childhood games in the old streets,
searching for answers at the doorsteps of the United Nation's office,
wondering,
alone in the dark nights of Islamabad.

Our heads like to think,
to reflect,
to know;
to know
that our bodies are شکست ناپذیر [undefeatable]:
huddled in a float boat
in the endless blues of the Mediterranean;
seated enthusiastically in the classroom
in a new land.

Our heads know that our bodies are always moving,
falling
rising
falling
rising
learning to bike in the streets of Sweden.
Our heads know that we are able, agents, in control.

We are Yasamin(s), Mohammad(s), Hasan(s), Ali(s)
We are جوانان افغان [Afghan kids],
and
these
are the stories of our physical activities.

Poetry as epistemology

Words have power and writing is never innocent. Academic writing is no different. Words always inscribe. They either reinscribe academia and institutions of social science as the only legitimate forms of knowledge or they unsettle those institutions and empower those whose

ideas and epistemologies are excluded from the rhetoric of academia (Richardson, 2016). In this paper, I give privilege to, and write from, the vantage point of a woman of colour from the historic region of Khorasan. This position has granted me certain experiences and a way of knowing and being. In writing this poem, I invoke this epistemology to reclaim (Smith, 2005, 1999/2012), reconstitute (Mignolo, 2009; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006), and retell the stories of a group of young Afghan asylum seekers.

Poetry (and art) has been used extensively in social sciences, whether to create stereotypical and orientalist images as accompaniment to the Western empire (Said, 1978/2003) or within poststructuralist theories and phenomenology with the aim of creating multiple understandings and meanings (McNiff, 2008). My interest in poetry is neither of these. Rather, aligned with Black feminist and borderland theorists, I view poetry as an epistemology (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012; hooks, 1990; Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). Western colonial thought, in its separating and ordering of things, has made a distinction between theory and art; that is, art expresses what is felt and theory states what is known. One is produced through the heat of the moment, while the other is scholarship (Bereano, 1984). But Black feminism takes a sharp turn from this rhetoric when it declares poetry not as luxury but as a vital necessity of existence (Lorde, 1984). Lorde (1984) affirms that “poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (p. 35). It is from this negated epistemology that I write this poem. Poetry has been the dominant mode of inquiry and knowledge generation in different parts of the world and, in particular, in my ancestral homeland, Khorasan. Through the application of poetry, I work towards reconstitution of this epistemology in ways that can bring re-existence (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) for those whose ways of being and knowing have been negated, rejected, exotified, and excluded from what is known as knowledge.

Poetry in Khorasan

From time immemorial, Khorasan has been an elastic and expanding region located in the easternmost provinces of Iranian Federative system and beyond, its borders reaching the river Amu Darya, in central Asia (Crews, 2015; Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2004). At present, this region is located across the national borders of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (Crews, 2015; Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2004). In Khorasan, and other neighbouring regions, poetry has a long and rich tradition. People from all walks of life practice, write, read, and recite poetry. For us, poetry is wisdom. For us “شعر، برداشت هایی از زندگی نیست؛ بلکه یک سره” [poetry is not just an expression of lived lives but it is life itself] (Shamlu, 2012, p. 3). Poets can finish arguments and start new ones. What the poet says is authoritative: what “شاعر میگوید” [the poet says] is imbued with wisdom, knowledge, and purpose (Olszewska, 2015). For centuries, poetry has been a medium of mass communication and an instrument of political and cultural contestation (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2004; Olszewska, 2007, 2015). Through poetry, Khorasani poets have revived languages (Ferdowsi) [1]; conceptualised philosophies (Molana Jalaloddin Balkhi) [2]; studied the cosmos (Khayyam) [3]; perfected the art of healing (Avecinna) [4]; resisted their displacement through public dialogues (Kazem Kazemi) [5]; and written on feminism and even died for it (Meena Keshwar Kamal) [6].

The backdrop of the poem

The research

This poem is the result of a participatory research project that I conducted with a group of young Afghan asylum seekers over a four-year period in Sweden. The premise of this project, which was part of my doctoral education, revolved around exploring the experiences of sport and physical activity of young Afghan asylum seekers from a decolonial perspective. My aim was to demonstrate how sport and physical activity affect youth and how youth navigate, experience, challenge, and generate knowledge in relation to physical activity and sport. Moreover, in working within a decolonial participatory framework, I attempted to challenge the rhetoric of sport and integration by taking the stories and knowledge of youth as a starting point. In doing this, I also wanted to de-link from dominant ways of presenting and speaking about sport and/or physical activity, and instead attend to another way in which these topics can be thought about. I have published the specifics of the project elsewhere (Enderle & Mashreghi, in press; Mashreghi, 2022); therefore, here I only provide a brief description.

Why (not) sport?

Between the years 2014 and 2016, nearly 40,000 asylum-seeking “unaccompanied” children were registered within the Swedish migration agency (Migrationsverket [Migration Agency], 2019). This number is in addition to the children and youth who arrived with their families during the same years. In response to this mass migration which came to be popularly known in Europe as the “refugee crisis”, various measures were taken by governmental and non-governmental bodies to look after, integrate, control or manage the so-called “crisis” (Djampour, 2018; Mashreghi, 2022). Within the discourse of integration, one of the important institutions that has become involved in the lives of the migrant youth is sport (Agergaard et al., 2016; Azzarito, 2012, 2016). The concept of integration in and through sport, however, is directly linked with colonial and racialising undertones such as beliefs about civilised and disciplined Europeans in contrast to the “savage”, undisciplined and uncivilised other (Besnier et al., 2018; Carrington, 2015). This is evident, for example, in the general policies of international sports organisations in relation to sport for development and peace where sport is seen as a universal civilising/developing agent that must be managed and directed by Northern stewardship (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011; Sykes & Hamzeh, 2018).

Another example is the overemphasis of university scholarship on researching assimilation and participation of migrant youth in established global North sports clubs when research on leisure activity of the youth, as an independent subject, remains limited (Agergaard et al., 2016; Spaaij et al., 2019). This discourse has also constructed the youth as people without past or history at the doorsteps of Europe (Agergaard, 2018; Djampour, 2018). Moreover, integration interventions offered by the global North sport associations have mostly focused on monitoring the leisure time of the migrant youth and promoting engagement in politically recognised and normative leisure/sport activities (Agergaard et al., 2016). These examples also highlight the

persistence of certain dominant narratives about what sport is and what it is not (Besnier et al., 2018; Carrington, 2015). In such a way, other relevant and already existing ways of living physical activity and sports have been consistently muted to make sense for, and from, Eurocentric framings. In doing decolonial research and in writing this poem, which disseminates the findings of the research, it was important for me to de-link from the rhetoric of integration and/or sports clubs as well as from the dominant understandings of sport, and instead take the lived experiences of the youth and their knowledge, which they themselves co-generate, as my point of departure.

The youth

As mentioned earlier, the Afghan youth in this research were part of a larger group of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers who, at the start of the project, had been living in Sweden for 2-4 years. According to both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Swedish laws, an “unaccompanied minor” is an individual seeking asylum under 18 years who, at time of arrival, is separated from their parents or guardians (2005). Considering these legalities, I had to first acquire permission from the Swedish ethics board in order to engage with the youth in participatory research. After I gained permission in 2018, ten youth between the ages of 17 and 20 (one female and nine males), volunteered to participate in, and consented to, sharing their stories. The majority of the youth had spent extended time in other countries (namely Iran and Pakistan) before their arrival to Sweden, and some were born in displacement.

The I in this research

During the redrawing and partitioning of the Khorasan region that took place in the mid-nineteenth century (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2004), my ancestors happened to be located on the Iranian side of the borders. Despite having direct links to places and people in Afghanistan, this chance coincidence granted my great-grandparents Iranian citizenship and enabled them to prosper within relatively stable conditions during the early 1900s, which in turn endowed me the privileges of a middle-class family with free access to good quality education and health care. This middle-class position also enabled my family to legally immigrate to Canada under the class of skilled workers when I was a teenager. This granted me a Canadian passport and a rather seamless transition (for the most part) into Canadian society. Later, when I migrated to Scandinavia to pursue my education, my Canadian passport allowed me, yet again, an effortless migration experience. These are privileges that have been denied to the Afghan youth in this research. Whether as asylum seekers in Iran or Sweden, their migrant status and living conditions have always been precarious. In Iran, many have not had access to health and education, and in Sweden they are still striving to attain legal status.

It is worth mentioning that my encounter with the Afghan asylum seekers was not a new experience. In fact, I had known and interacted with them, both negatively and positively, in my childhood in Khorasan. Since then (and probably from long before that) our stories have been intertwined, separating and coming together on different occasions and on three different continents. Positioning myself as a somewhat insider does not mean that I assume to absolve myself of any power or privilege in relation to the Afghan youth, neither does it mean that I

negate our differences. Rather, I aim to foreground their voices in relation to my own and to reclaim our shared epistemology.

The praxis

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) argues that decolonial scholarship enables marginalised communities and peoples to reclaim and tell their stories in their own ways and give testimony to their collective histories and struggles. These stories of struggle and imagination contest what counts as knowledge. In order to foreground and give privilege to the stories of the youth in their own ways, I utilised the tenets of participatory action research in a way that enabled me to engage in a collaborative dialogue (Freire, 1970/2005; Heron & Reason, 2008; Kidd & Kral, 2005; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Moreover, together and in collaboration, we used art-based research as a methodology through which this dialogue could occur (Gerber et al., 2012; McNiff, 2008; Pentassuglia, 2017). Through this collaborative dialogue, based on love, humility, hope, and trust, we generated, explored, and analysed knowledge in relation to their experiences of sport and physical activity. To start with, the youth used self-created posters to explore their own stories of physical activity and sports. These artefacts became the point of departure for our collaborative dialogue around their experiences.

Collectively, as a group, they used these artefacts and our conversations around the posters to thematically analyse their own experiences and to establish several themes, or “stories” as they preferred to call them. These stories and the generated knowledge were then disseminated through two different exhibitions in Sweden in a collaborative manner. That is, the youth were involved in all aspects of this research project. Through this participatory research, the youth revealed that they have transformed and re-made sport and physical activity into spaces where they creatively reinterpret their identities, belongings, and communities. The youth demonstrated that having been always fully aware of the materiality of their displacement, they have continuously worked to re-create conditions of dignity for themselves and their communities. Their deeply reflective analyses also unsettled the underpinning assumptions (civilised vs. uncivilised) of sport and integration discourse, and offered a different understanding of what sport means to youth. For example, they did not distinguish between sport and physical activity, or any other physical work for that matter. More importantly, their stories emphasised that for the Afghan youth, sport was not separate from life. What happened in life and sport were intertwined and, as a result, the youth’s relationship with sport and physical activity was linked to their migration journeys, hopes, dreams, school achievements, and everyday living (Mashreghi, 2022).

The writing of the poem: Limitations and affordances

Found poetry or *Vox Participare* [voices of participants] refers to the practice of crafting a poem from the words of the research participants (Norton & Sliep, 2019; Prendergast, 2009). As previously mentioned, during our participatory research, the Afghan youth created posters depicting their stories of sport and physical activity followed by open dialogue with the youth in relation to these posters (see Mashreghi, 2022). Later, the youth, with I as facilitator, analysed these materials and established several themes which were showcased in our

exhibitions. Using all these interactions and artefacts in a reflexive manner that did not obscure my own privilege and power, I crafted the above poem in order to reclaim our shared epistemology in disseminating the knowledge that our participatory research generated.

Even though the youth are aware of this poem, they have not been able to provide me with direct feedback. The issue of language has made this an impossibility. This draws attention to yet another privilege and position of power that I have occupied in relation to the youth. Yet, occupying the persona of the poet, as a Khorasani practice, has also allowed me to work towards decolonising our research practice in ways that foreground our ways of being and knowing. The intention here is not to re-write (hooks, 1990) or tell *about* the experiences of the youth but to encourage the readers to think-feel *with* them and *from* their positions. This position carries an inherent dilemma: How to write neither without being reinscribed in the dominant structure, nor without reinscribing what I argue against (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015; Stein et al., 2020). Accepting this dilemma in my work for decolonisation and social justice ensures that I continually struggle with it, working to disrupt and shift my own gaze in ways that shed light on my own privilege, power, and complicities; I encourage readers to do the same.

Notes

1. Abolghasem Ferdowsi Toosi (940-1020 CE) was born in Toos, Khorasan (currently in Iran). He was an influential poet in Iranian and Khorasani literature whose masterpiece *Shahnameh* [The Epic of Kings] is not only one of the world's longest poems but is also said to have been influential in the revival and persistence of Persian language after the Arab conquest in the region (Dabashi, 2012; Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2012).

2. Molana Jalaloddin Mohammad Balkhi (1207-1273 CE), or Rumi, as he is known in the Western world, was born in the province of Balkh in the historical Khorasan region (currently in Afghanistan). He was an influential philosopher who argued that only great love can create an ideal world. His post-humanistic beliefs advocated for the connectedness of all things and that if humans want to reach enlightenment and harmony, they have to let go of individualism and ego. He articulated his philosophy through various styles of poetry and used stories to convey his teachings (Mojaddedi, 2014).

3. Omar Khayyam (1048-1131 CE) was born in Nishapur, Khorasan (currently in Iran). He was a mathematician, astronomer, and poet. He worked on the classification and solutions of cubic equations and designed the Jalali solar calendar, which to date is considered one of the most accurate calendars in the world (Britannica.com, 2019).

4. Avicenna, or, as he is known in Persian, Ibnecina, (980-1037 CE), was born in Afshana in the historical Khorasan region (currently located in Uzbekistan). He was a philosopher, astronomer, physician, and poet. His ground-breaking work in medicine is illustrated in a five-volume book called *Cannon of Medicine*. This book is a comprehensive collection of anatomy, medical substances, and treatments for various ailments; the work has been influential in the development of modern Western medical practices (McGinnis, 2010). In his own words, Avicenna wrote:

"از قعر گل سیاه تا اوج زحل
کردم همه مشکلات گیتی را حل
بیرون جستم ز قید هر مکر و حیل
هر بند گشاده شد مگر بند اجل

[From the depth of the black earth up to Saturn's apogee,
All the problems of the universe have been solved by me.
I have escaped from the coils of snares and deceits;
I have unravelled all knots except the knot of Death] (McGinnis, 2010)

5. Mohammad Kazem Kazemi (1968-) is an influential Afghan literary scholar and poet. He was born in Herat, Afghanistan. In 1984, after the start of the civil war and the invasion of the Soviet army, he immigrated to Iran as a refugee. He is best known for his poem, "The Return", in which he describes the plight of the Afghan refugees in Iran and critiques the Iranian public and government on their treatment of the refugees. This poem was published in the mainstream media and opened a critical dialogue with his Iranian counterparts and Iranian public as a whole which, since then, has resulted in many instances of scholarly and public solidarity with the Afghan refugees in Iran as well as many initiatives and grassroot community actions (Olszewska, 2007).

The Return (excerpt)

At sunset in the hot breath of the road I shall leave
I came on foot, and on foot I shall leave
The talisman of my exile will be broken tonight
And the tablecloth, which was always empty, will be folded tonight.
And on the eve of feast days, neighbour!
No more will you hear the sound of weeping, neighbour!
The stranger who had not a penny shall leave
And the child that had no dolls shall leave
(My own translation; original can be found in Kazemi, 2005, p. 40)

6. Meena Keshwar Kamal (1956-1987) was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. She was a feminist, poet, and a political activist who founded the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) in 1977. She also launched the political magazine *پیام زن* [Women's Message] in 1981. She was a powerful voice against the Soviet's occupation of Afghanistan as well as the Mujahedin's fundamentalist dogma, which later resulted in the formation of the Taliban. Her strong advocacy against the Soviet occupation and fundamentalist beliefs eventually led to her assassination by unknown agents in 1987 (Biography of Martyred Meena, RAWA's Founding Leader, n.d.)

I'll Never Return (excerpt)

I'm a woman
awaken now
arisen from the ashes of my children's burnt bodies,
have become a storm
arisen from streams of my brothers' blood

empowered by my people's wrath
every burnt village of my homeland
fills me with resentment for the enemy
now my compatriot
no longer think of me as I was
I'm a woman

awaken now
I've found my path
I will not return

(Translation by Fani, 2011; original can be found on 'Biography of Martyred Meena, RAWA's Founding Leader' n.d.)

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