

**The Amphitheatre That Isn't:
Insight Into the Mechanisms and Effects of Diasporic Guilt in Asian Canadians**

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Introduction

Globalization, transnational migration and the emergence of “world cities” have together facilitated a kaleidoscopic environment for convening diasporic communities (Yeoh & Huang, 2000). For decades, popular discourse has assumed associations of the word “immigrant” with a quality of detachedness to their countries of origin, expecting and endorsing a high degree of identity assimilation with the host culture (Schiller et al., 1992). However, it is no secret that that does not hold for the identities of diasporic and transnational communities. The intertwining complexities of the diasporic experience is deeply connected with the shared history of the national identities involved, especially exacerbated by the impacts of the colonial past; this factor is often of particular importance in the relations between Asian diasporic communities, Imperial Canada and the Indigenous First Nations of the territory. Considering the historical and political origins of the Asian diasporic communities in Canada brings to light a long-standing tension between perceiving them as alien and threatening, while simultaneously exoticizing the hybridity of differences (Mitchell, 1997). On the other hand, the same dynamic extends towards them from the direction of their cultural communities of origin, where they remain the *other* despite appearing novel and exotic, hence placing them in an abstract ‘third space’ of belonging, yet not belonging to either and both territories.

In a landscape as fraught with complex cultural identities as this, narratives of the diasporic life trace the ever-shifting “conceptual maps of deterritorialization, multiple forms of identification and transborder cultural production” (Schiller et al., 1992), leaving behind the lingering question of how these identity relations relate to current climates of their countries of origin. In exploring this, it must be noted that identities are composed of a dynamic and complex set of affective and cognitive realizations, which then trigger more complex and dynamic affective, cognitive and behavioural effects (Kretternauer, 2005). Hence dissecting the subjective experiences of affect and cognition which translate to behaviour may be a worthwhile way of investigating the phenomenon of the diasporic

relationship between host and homeland. This paper will explore the identity negotiations of individuals of the Asian diaspora in light of distressing events that may be occurring in their homelands through the framework of diasporic guilt.

When examining the experience of diasporic guilt, particular emphasis is laid on the relationship with the individual and their country and culture of origin, and their identification of that community as their in-group. Güth and colleagues (2009) found that favouring the in-group are not just maintained through high group affiliations but also in part through the mechanism of guilt-aversion; prosocial behaviours towards the in-group are strengthened and maintained through attempts of guilt-aversion when feelings of affiliation and shared beliefs are made salient prior to being faced with a dilemma. Shifting focus to the context of diasporic communities, however, highlights how it can be near impossible to engage with guilt-averting actions from halfway across the world, especially when faced with large scale tragedies that are typically impossible to prevent through individual action. Additionally, it's highly likely that individuals from the diasporic communities come to learn of these tragedies through sources they monitor to stay in touch with the happenings of their homelands (such as regional news sources). Between the bolstered cultural and social affiliation prior to hearing about the occurrence of any tragic events, and the inability to act in prevention of it, it becomes near impossible for them to evade the intense experience of diasporic guilt. This, ultimately, leaves individuals in a cycle of constant distress from the events in their countries of origin, while having to carry forward with their days as normal in their host lands to reconcile with.

Methods

Participants for this project were recruited through convenience sampling, and are personal acquaintances of mine. A call seeking individuals belonging to the Asian diasporic community in Canada was shared on social media platforms, to which 5 people responded. It was made clear to everyone that the interview may touch upon potentially triggering topics

relating to primary and/or secondary trauma, and that the session would be recorded and anonymized. 2 individuals withdrew consent once they were notified of this, and 1 was unable to schedule an interview due to time conflicts. The final participant pool consisted of 2 individuals located in Vancouver (land of the ancestral, unceded x^wməθk^wəyəm, Skw̓xwú7mesh, and Sel̓ílwitulh Nations) who self-identify as belonging to the Asian diasporic community. One of them identifies as a gender-queer individual from Hong Kong, and the other as a man from Bangladesh. No demographic information was collected during the length of the interview, however, the information they volunteered while recounting stories was recorded and analyzed.

Interviews were scheduled and conducted over Zoom, with the calls being recorded. One of the participants requested some (personal and demographic) information be omitted from the analysis, so the relevant bits were omitted from the data during the transcription process. The interviews were engineered to be semi-structured and reflexive conversations that focused on the emotions, behaviours and cognitions of the participants regarding their diasporic identity.

It must be noted that facets of my own identity (as an Asian settler) as well as my continued relationships with the participants potentially plays a role in the interpretations of the data elicited. This could therefore influence the tone of the paper as well as reflect my biases and beliefs.

Discussion

The conversations with the two participants brought a number of complex emotions and thoughts to light around their experience in reconciling with diasporic guilt. Examining the interconnected modes of experience closely brings forward three common themes shared by both participants; the three emergent themes are: having to live a practical life that remains unaffected by the events in their homeland, doubts and barriers in seeking help from

Canadian healthcare systems, and grappling to express themselves through acceptable means. The reconciliation process occurs in intersection of these three themes, and can be better understood through the more fundamental components of affect, cognition and resulting behaviour (Malti, 2016). The following section will present a synthesis of the functions of these components within the context of each of the three themes.

Life as usual

This first theme is arguably most broadly recognized as a function of diasporic guilt; it centres the conflict in individuals between experiencing the secondary trauma of events in their homeland and having to tread on with life as usual in their practical lives. Delving into the affective experience of the participants, the two major emotions that were expressed are guilt, and anger (directed at themselves). They describe their feeling of guilt as having risen through the realization that they cannot directly act in ways that provide relief to those affected, as they see themselves as living in a privileged life in a distant land. Following this, both participants expressed feeling as if they didn't deserve the privilege of being an unaffected onlooker, while watching their family, friends, and compatriots suffer immense trauma. This was closely followed by anger; feeling as if they were enjoying a life of joys far from home, they expressed feeling sharp, prolonged bursts of anger towards themselves. It would then reinforce their beliefs that they were somehow betraying their native community through living such a life, at such a distance.

But the anger did not seem to carry forward when they were forced to read/hear about the details of the atrocities that triggered their guilt. Instead, it faded away leaving nothing but the feeling of emotional distance. They both described feeling as if they were onlookers, as if they were watching a fictional story unfold.

“It was like sitting in the third row of a darkened amphitheatre, watching a play about young people taking to the streets to protest the Extradition Law. You know, except people I went to school with being trapped and injured. There were moments when I would have to look through old photos to remind myself that these were real people, people I knew... not actors playing characters in a dramatically directed production.”

- Participant A, on their numbness during the protests in Hong Kong, 202-

The lack of tangible connection with the impacts of the ongoing events in their homelands prompted them to attempt to numb themselves, the participants reported. This was often realized through behaviours such as indulging in substance use and disconnecting themselves from people who shared their cultural identity. However, the effects of such behaviours didn't seem to last long; as they made efforts to separate themselves from the events and avoid related triggers, they felt increased anger and guilt for not actively participating towards the cause to a higher degree. And so the cycle continued.

Is it okay to ask for help?

A second salient theme that emerged from these conversations was the pain of rapidly oscillating between feeling desperately in need of help and justifying their condition being overlooked by others around. Both participants very clearly articulated the pain from the contradicting thoughts of wanting to feel recognized/comforted and feeling as though they weren't affected “enough” to receive help. The pain, they both recounted, was very likely to turn into anger directed at their friends and family, as it was a less vulnerable way of expressing the pent up emotions. One of the participants described the underlying thought process as his battle to validate his need to seek relief for the trauma and distress he was living with, with acknowledging the constant presence of an inner voice that questions the

validity of his membership with the community, as “afterall, why should he blow it out of proportion when he wasn’t even directly affected by those events?”

But it doesn’t end there. In the moments during which the need to validate his trauma wins, he says he often spends time researching the mental health resources that are available to him in Canada. However, when asked about what usually follows, all he had to say was:

“I mean, I’m a scrawny Brown guy without citizenship. All I can do is dream about and window-shop for affirmative care.”

- Participant M, on accessing therapy to deal with diasporic trauma

This cycle, unlike the last, ends beyond the hands of the people involved. It displays a culture of institutional exclusion that upholds barriers against individuals of diasporic communities in a way that even those who manage to break free of their internal struggle with guilt perceive as being impossible to overcome.

Silence: a loud statement

The last theme that came out of these conversations was on the topic of public expression, notably around social media discourse and activism. An environment rich with virtual mobilization and activism is tempting to think of as a source of solace for those experiencing diasporic guilt (Askins, 2009), but neither of the participants seem to agree with this notion. Instead, they characterize it as yet another factor that contributes to their deep sense of shame and perceived inaction.

“Social media activism is for allies to indulge in. They can retweet, sign petitions and donate to charities, because that’s all [that] is expected of them. I can’t do that! I’m supposed to be down there with my people. I may be in Canada, but I’m still Bangladeshi... and I should be doing my duty, not sitting around on [the UBC] campus!”

- Participant M, on why social media activism feels dissatisfying

A common thread that arose from both participants was the frustration of having to choose between being silent (which risks being perceived as apathetic) and engaging in a form of activism that they believe to be performative and unsatisfactory. When questioned about where that idea stemmed from for each of them, they both reported feeling anger towards trends of allyship that they felt weren't necessarily helpful to those in need. They expressed fears of being called "whitewashed" by others in their community if they were seen engaging in social media activism, regardless of whether it was performative or not. Once again, this distress heavily contributed to their acts of withdrawal and numbing, as they felt as if disappearing into vapour was the only way out of the pulls of guilt and fear.

Conclusion

The identity of a "transnational diasporic individual" is a complex and multidimensional one, that brings with it dynamic affiliations with both the individual's country and cultures of origin and of residence. The tension between existing in both spaces together often leads to a myriad of distressing experiences, especially when there are tragic events that take place in their homeland, to which they cannot directly provide assistance and aid. The conversations detailed in this paper with two individuals belonging to the Asian diasporic community in Vancouver brings to light the qualitative experiences of reconciling the guilt of continuing to live a regular life in relative safety with identifying trauma responses and seeking help to soothe them. The accounts of the participants share many similar features, almost all centred around the idea that no matter what they do, there is no way to win.

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