

## Biographical Erasure as Oppression

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### Abstract

In this short paper I argue that the migratory journey of many newcomers to Canada is marked by an experience of biographical erasure, which is detrimental to their health and wellbeing. First, I present some contextual considerations about migration, and mention some of my own experiences as an immigrant to introduce the concept of biographical erasure. In the second part of the paper, I present three poems that illustrate how biographical erasure shapes the experiences of research participants. While the notion of erasure was initially described in the introduction to these poems (Gastaldo, 2004), in this article, I expand the concept inspired by the idea of *biographical emptying*, an expression utilized by the Brazilian journalist and poet, Fabricio Carpinejar (2012).

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For migrants moving to the global North, where Canada is situated, neo-colonial relations and capitalist rule are the structural forces that frame their experiences of whom they are and who they become. For those migrating to Canada through the skilled worker program, this very frequently means a considerable loss in social and economic status, moving from the ranks of middle and upper-middle class in other countries to become working class in Canada (Goldring & Landolt, 2009).

Those who do not speak English as their first language, and those whose credentials are not recognized in Canada, encounter an accentuated mismatch between educational background and job opportunities, irrespective of which language they speak (Canadian Multicultural Education Foundation, 2011; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005). First-world English accents or a “thin/slight” accent (antonyms to “thick”), previous Canadian work experience, and “local demeanour” are expectations that signal that immigrants’ previous cultural life, knowledge, and identity are not valued here.

Biographical erasure is a complex phenomenon because it requires active engagement of the host society in disclosing lack of interest, ignorance, indifference, or even prejudice against immigrants’ ways of being, talking, and thinking about the world and Canada. Concomitantly, it requires a responsive engagement on immigrants’ part which is commonly characterized, at least initially, by the internalization of the discourses of Canadian superiority and gratefulness for being here (Gooden & Gastaldo, 2009). In this process, a limited possibility of critique coupled with calls for letting go of who people used to be and were proud to be – the erasure – are not accompanied by an alternative identity that is desirable and prestigious within the host society.

While biographical erasure can offer a possibility for self-reinvention, including leaving behind unwanted features of one self, it acquires an oppressive character when the experience is mainly dominated by loss. In structural terms, in so-called advanced liberal societies like Canada, full citizenship can only be achieved through a certain level of consumption (Ong, 1996); in this sense, Canada is not an economic democracy for most immigrants (Dowbor, 2012; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005). Being a capitalist system, success and failure is measured by economic, social, and cultural capital accumulation. However, if immigrants' initial journey is characterized by major losses (e.g. lack of vocabulary, lack of shared cultural values, and very limited professional possibilities) and diversity and multicultural policies fail to create economic and social participation, immigrants' primary social identity is that of "loser".

In the case of skilled immigrants, oppression is experienced by those who face the impossibility of becoming a "real" Canadian through being a person with a positive social and economic insertion who still resembles who s/he used to be before migration. However, finding an equivalent job does not suffice for belonging. For many, the experience of biographical erasure is associated with stereotypical identification and lack of cognitive justice (Santos, 2007; Visvanathan, 1997). In subtle or overt ways, one's original culture, ethnicity, or national affiliation can be described as a handicap, a condition that perpetuates one as 'foreigner' or portrays a person through a colonial stereotype, and these are also forms of erasure (e.g. Arab women as submissive or Latinos as sexist). Oppression occurs when immigrants' differences are perceived as inadequate a priori.

Using my personal experience to illustrate this point, after 10 years in Canada, I said in an informal conversation, "we Canadians..." and some people laughed at me because I considered myself as Canadian as them (they were second generation Canadians). After 17 years here, I had my colleague announcing my arrival, without noticing I could hear her, say "the Brazilian has arrived" with her hands up in the air; this was followed by her assistants' laughs. Even though I know she was mocking me, I still don't know how to fully interpret such an event. Despite being fully integrated in professional and economic terms and having my contributions frequently acknowledged in Canada, I am being reminded I am not Canadian enough or I am still far too Brazilian to belong.

The poems below come from immigrants in their first 3 years in Canada. The process of loss is evident in these women's considerations. The poems are skilled worker immigrants' own words slightly modified with full consent to create a rhythm that captures ideas and emotions about the migratory process. They speak about the intersectionalities that constitute recent immigrant experiences in Canada. In them, we find interwoven language, nationality, gender, employment, acquired identities, and experiences of prejudice. The poems also reveal struggle and attempts to resist the biographical erasure these immigrants have started to experience. The poems speak clearly on their own, but some additional information is offered to situate the reader. Participants have provided written consent to disclose their names and to use these poems for academic publications, teaching, and health promotion activities.

### *I Was Very Important*

*Context: Maggie was an accountant in Haiti. After 2 years in Canada, she started a personal support worker course.*

*I remember my country, my last job  
I was very important  
If one day I did not go to work, people would say  
Mrs. Jean Charles, we missed you,  
Mrs. Jean Charles, we needed you yesterday,  
Mrs. Jean Charles, you have to do that today,  
I was really appreciated  
But here I don't have anything like that  
Here I don't feel important  
I can't do the same job  
But in my country, I used to be important.*

### *On Strength*

*Context: The focus group facilitator asked the participants to talk about how they felt their lives and health had changed after coming to Canada. This research participant talks about the impact of not having a job like what she used to do and the lack of social network has had on her life.*

*I used to be happy, lively,  
But now something has changed  
It's not the same me I used to be at home  
Oh no  
Not at all  
First of all, I'm not doing a job  
I feel I should be doing  
Willing to start it  
Make sure that at least I get a job,  
Which will make me happy  
So that rules my life  
So I want to do something  
Which I'll feel good about myself  
So I'm no longer myself at all  
I'm a different person totally  
A different person  
Yes, but I try to pretend I am happy, but right now . . .  
I'm not  
So many changes  
So it's not the me . . .*

*I used to know myself as I am, but . . .  
 And so it's a big difference  
 A big difference  
 The loneliness  
 No genuine friend  
 So many problems  
 So the family not being around too  
 Makes you lonely  
 And sometimes you get really depressed  
 Very, very depressed  
 But you fight the depression all the time  
 But some moments you really feel like you are going really down  
 But you try to fight it and come back  
 Yeah, there are times when you feel so tired  
 That you can't even take care of yourself  
 You get tired you can't even take a bath  
 But you try to fight it and say  
 No, I have to get back  
 So it's only my kids who keep me coming back  
 I don't want them to see what I'm going through  
 I don't want them to know that I'm going down  
 Because they will also go down  
 So I try to . . . to fight it*

### ***Others See, Others Don't See, We See***

*Context: Ana has a 5-year university degree, works as a cleaner in homes and does volunteer work. Maria Eugenia who has technical education is currently unemployed, searching for a job and working as a volunteer. This is their dialogue about how they are perceived in Canada.*

*When people look at us, they see new immigrants  
 We look like new immigrants because of our appearance,  
 Our physical features, our accents  
 Some think we are competition for jobs  
 Others see us as perfect to do the jobs Canadians don't want to do  
 Also, people don't see what we bring  
 Our degree of preparation*

*We see ourselves as people with many capacities  
 People with good training who face challenges in Canada  
 We see ourselves as friendly, warm people who can offer a lot to this country  
 We also see we are not used according to our potential, our talents  
 Canada is losing big time*

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#### Author Note

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