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VISUAL JOURNALING AS A FIELD GUIDE FOR THINKING THROUGH MAKING

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One day Jody and Shivani were walking to the bus stop after a presentation at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Jody asked, "How are you doing?" and Shivani told the truth. She was overwhelmed, and unsure of her place in academia. It's powerful to let yourself cry in front of someone. Remembering it, Shivani says, "I'm grateful I had a caring soul with me, offering me space to be vulnerable without pretending to be in control."

While working on my dissertation, I realized that art making and writing played an important role in expressing the complexity of my disability experiences. Though I have been engaging in art-making practices for a long time, working on my dissertation over the past few years helped me explore the relationship between art-making practices and my disability experiences through various formats like paintings, artist books, and visual journals. In this paper, I will specifically discuss the formats of visual journaling that started almost two years ago to discuss how it allowed me to record my everyday experiences around caretaking, the intersectionality of disability identity, and the connection of disability with my spiritual and cultural practices.

The format of visual journaling became especially handy in expressing some of the aspects of my disability experience that I struggled to articulate in other visual and written formats. Unlike the bigger writing projects or artworks that took days to finish, working in the journals became a way to capture my fleeting emotions and unstructured thoughts. Working in the journal felt like memoing to capture my spontaneous thoughts and emotions in a

fluid and less rigid manner. Also, in this journal, I identified an overarching connection between various aspects of my everyday experiences, between abstract and complex phenomena related to disability. It became a place to think through ideas and concepts as if conversing with myself; recording and articulating these thoughts became a way to know myself better.

In this chapter, I will discuss the connection between disability and intergenerational trauma by analyzing my connection with my ancestors and the importance of grieving. The journal became the foundation for forging connections between my disability and cultural nuances around disability and illness. The connections that I felt existed deep down within me, but I could not articulate them through my writings yet. It became a place to sit with hunches and intuitions and meditate upon them through art making and free writing in the journals.

Thinking Through the Absences

Donna Haraway (2016), in “Staying With the Trouble,” discusses how a humble inquirer must approach the research from curiosity. Referring to the work of Hannah Arendt (1982), Haraway introduces the concept of “to go visiting” (p. 127), which requires one to train and involve one’s whole being and not just one’s imagination to make others (research subjects) interesting. Since in my autoethnographic research, this other is me, I try to approach my experiences by being true to my innermost self.

The process encouraged me to think about various aspects of my existence and whole being through my connection with people, places, and ways of being, both present and absent from my life. Since, in my current phase of life, the feeling of absence predominates over presence, the overwhelming feeling of loss often saturates my visual journals. Working on the journal became a way of mourning for my family members no longer in my life, my sense of self and ways of being before being diagnosed with a chronic illness, and my struggles with disability and illness. Referring to Vinciane Despret’s (2015) work, Haraway (2016) referred to mourning practices in human beings as part of philosophical ethology. Looking at research practices as a form of response-ability, Haraway refers to the importance of storytelling to coexist with the living and dead, “many kinds of absence or threatened absence must be brought into ongoing response-ability, not in abstract but in homely storied cultivated practices” (p. 132). Approaching my research as a form of response-ability, visual journaling becomes a place to tell stories of loss experienced by my grandparents as they witnessed the post-independent massacre caused by the partition between India and Pakistan and how it appears in our lives through intergenerational trauma.

Working in this journal, I also thought about how this intergenerational trauma manifested in our lives through the presence of mental illness and other illnesses in the family. After multiple iterations of working in the journal and writing about these seemingly unrelated ideas and experiences that started making sense, I could see a pattern emerging. It wasn't a linear process but writing and working in a journal through drawing often went hand in hand and helped me develop these connections further. The images existed independently; they did not illustrate the written text, but the written texts and images often complemented each other.

A Place to Join the Dots

In *Interpretive Autoethnography*, Norman Denzin (2013) refers to autoethnography as the methodological framework for joining the dots between various aspects of an individual's life. Working in a visual journal felt very personal and allowed me to approach the topic of disability subjectively and acknowledge my past experiences and the cultural environment in which I grew up, hence helping me join the various aspects of my existence. It became especially important after relocating to the United States and losing my past ways of being, which led to feeling *dis-ease*. This further encouraged me to a connection between the state of *dis-ease* with the disease. I could see how being in this state of *dis-ease* for an extended period was responsible for the prevalence of mental illness and other diseases in my family. This process of making connections, joining dots through multiple iterations, and acknowledging my experiences bestowed a strange calmness that is only experienced when you can express yourself and feel seen and heard. For me, art making was my way of doing that.

Also, this space encouraged me to connect disability with spiritual and cultural practices and a feeling of wellness. I was encouraged to analyze the experiences of my other family members and develop a connection with my ancestors. Dwelling on the concept of illness and disease from the non-Western perspective by exploring the relationship between the living and the dead helped me forge the connection between intergenerational trauma and disability (Figure 11.1).

My exploration became more than what I had initially planned. My relationship with my ancestors stood out to me in this visual journal that I have referred to over and over again in many different ways. Making connections—finding similarities between their struggles and mine, trying to identify their presence in my life which I also explore through narrative writing in my dissertation. It also became a place to connect my personal and spiritual life with my scholarly interests. And I was exploring the relationship between my ancestors and their gratification of my well-being.



FIGURE 11.1 The Act of Gratifying the Ancestors.

Page from visual journal by Shivani Bhalla, 2021.

A Place to Make Kin

While working on this journal and making connections, I am “making kin” (Haraway, 2016, p. 99) with the scholars whose work resonates with me, and this book becomes a witness to my fascination and love for scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 2015). Anzaldúa’s work greatly influenced my research approach and theoretical and philosophical positioning. I see her as one of my academic ancestors. Reading the work of Anzaldúa, I could feel deep love and respect for her that instantly made me recognize her as one of my *kin*. After reading about her experiences with her illness and her struggles living in the *borderlands*, I could feel a deep spiritual connection with her which I could only justify as claiming her as my ancestor. The visual journal became a place to witness and record my connection with her as one of my *pitrs* (ancestors) (Figure 11.2).

As Hindus, we often show our gratitude towards our ancestors, who we believe visit us in the form of birds and animals, through small acts like feeding them. Feeding the sparrows is an important part of my daily practice, which I look forward to. In one of my drawings, I show Gloria Anzaldúa as a (*pitir*) ancestor visiting me in the form of a sparrow. Just like Haraway’s (2016) “Camille stories,” which explores the symbiotic joint between a human child and monarch butterflies migrating between Mexico and the United States, in my drawing, Anzaldúa appears as a hybrid creature, a symbiotic joint between a sparrow and human. And like Haraway’s (2016) symbiotic human child, *Camille*, who is a connection between past and future generations, my representation of Anzaldúa as my ancestor is also reminiscent of the connection between the living and the dead.



FIGURE 11.2 Gloria Anzaldúa's Visit as a Bird.

Page from visual journal by Shivani Bhalla, 2021.

A Place to Grieve

Sometimes when I was feeling too overwhelmed, I would let my experiences overflow and be absorbed in the pages of the book. Sometimes the handmade paper of the book acted as a blotting paper to absorb that excess of emotions. It became a place to delve into the experiences of death and loss and make peace with the unknown. They condensed at the places where emotions were running high.

My fascination with death and the relationship between the dead and the living is also evident in my artworks. I don't know if my preoccupation with death was my way of preparing for my mother's death, who was a hospice patient. My fascination with death becomes very visceral in these journals. I am even exploring the cultural nuances of death in Hindu culture and how to care for the dead after death. It is considered important to gratify our dead family members and ancestors. It allowed me to capture the materiality of death. How do we want to capture the intangibility of death? I am exploring the cultural nuances around illness, death, and disease in a very personal yet objective way.

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