

Farha Najah

Honouring Fierce Resistance

2017

Iridescent gold acrylic paint and metallic gold pencil on black cardstock

As a racialised (South Asian) settler/citizen and anti-racist, feminist, Queer artist-activist living in Tio'tia:ke ("Montreal"), unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory, it is crucial for me to recognise that my home and life have been built on Native land. As such, I am committed to working towards decolonisation and anti-racism. This process entails understanding the process of historical and ongoing genocide of Indigenous nations and cultures, including nation-state building projects such as the exploitation of Indigenous and Black lives through slavery. Canada and the United States of America are such colonial nation-states. Canada is sometimes viewed as a haven for Black slaves coming from the United States, particularly within the narrative of the Underground Railroad. However, this is far from the truth. Slavery was legal in parts of Canada for over 200 years. The founder of McGill University, James McGill, owned slaves (Everett-Green, 2014). Indeed, as George Elliott Clarke (2006) states,

We must recognise that slavery was practiced in a solid third of what is now Canada — in Upper Canada (Ontario), New France (Quebec), New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia; that it numbered thousands of slaves (with the greatest number in New France), held "legally" under various colonial regimes and traded globally; that it lasted for more than two hundred years; and that it ended only because it was not vital to the boreal economy. As historian James Walker has argued, because colonial Canada held African slaves, its society fostered anti-Black racism — Negrophobia that persists in Canada today. (p. XVI)

As a second-generation immigrant, I did not learn through official schooling about Canada's colonial past and present, nor of its systemic anti-Black racism. Despite growing up in an anti-imperialist home, being surrounded by anti-colonial sentiments towards British colonialism in South Asia, I nevertheless participated in the North American model minority framework during my earlier years. More specifically, I was taught by white Canadian society to be grateful for its multicultural framework, and to reap the benefits of a colonial nation-state that profited, and continues to profit, from systemic racism and the racialisation of people in the context of white supremacy.

This included seeking education in institutions like McGill University. Prior to that, during my primary education, the colonial narrative was imposed on me, including on field trips to Old Montreal. I did not learn about the theft of Indigenous lands, slavery, nor stories of Black people by my white teachers. Indeed as writer, historian, and poet Afua Cooper (2006) states,

Canadian history, insofar as its Black history is concerned, is a drama punctuated with disappearing acts. The erasure of Black people and their history in the examples of the Priceville Cemetery and Africville is consistent with the general behaviour of the official chroniclers of the country's past. Black history is treated as a marginal subject. In truth, it has been bulldozed and ploughed over, slavery in particular. Slavery has disappeared from Canada's historical chronicles, erased from its memory and banished to the dungeons of its coast. This in a country where the enslavement of Black people was institutionalised and practiced for the better part of three centuries. (p. 7)

As a South Asian second-generation immigrant, it continues to be crucial for me to make the connections between my own experiences of systemic racism; Canada's inherently racist immigration system, including laws that target(ed) South Asian migrants (e.g., The Continuous Journey Regulation via an order-in-council in 1908 to prevent Indian migration to Canada) and racist and misogynist programs impacting Racialised womxn, including Black womxn (e.g., domestic workers programs); the history of Black slavery; and ongoing realities of systemic anti-Black racism on unceded Indigenous territories.

Drawing these connections has meant countering the model minority framework and channeling the rage of systemic racisms and oppression. Doing so has entailed ongoing learning and discussing rich stories — both past and present — of Black resistance and Black liberation struggles within South Asian spaces in Tio'tia:ke and beyond.

In this spirit, every spring/summer, I go to Old Montreal and observe tourists reading the descriptions of the colonial city which erase the stories and legacies of Black (and Indigenous) slaves and warriors. I read *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (2006). I read about the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

I read the words of Afua Cooper as she describes her own reflections walking around the Old City, tracing what would have been the path of Marie-Joseph Angélique's murder in 1734. I walk through this path myself, and the colonial symbols that this trajectory meets (from cobblestones to monstrous churches). I discuss this with family and friends living in, or visiting, Montreal.

Angélique was a slave woman "who was executed for setting fire to one of the principal colonial settlements" (Cooper, 2006, p. 8). Angélique's guilty verdict was based on hearsay, suspicion, and a confession under torture (Cooper). Although one can, and should, question not only this verdict, but the oppressor's impetus behind it, Cooper encourages the reader to shift focus to Angélique's agency and her motives to set the fire:

[Angélique's] motive was revenge. Her mistress had not only refused to set her free, but had also sold her. Added to that, Angélique was an abused slave who was bent on fighting back. She detested the French in general, her mistress in particular, and wished them all dead. (p. 286)

Cooper states that arson was a common tool of resistance used by African slaves in the Americas, and that Angélique blew hard on the coals on cross beams. The flames that this determined action led to inspires this art piece.

This calligraphic art piece depicts fire. It is an acknowledgement, affirmation, and ongoing support of struggles for Black liberation, past, present, future. It is part of my own unlearning/learning of not only Black history, but of stories of resistance on Turtle Island (colonially referred to as North America). The use of Urdu/Hindi phonetics of the statement, Black Lives Matter, via Arabic-Persian Script (inspired by Nasta'liq and Thuluth scripts) is a way to honour fierce resistance as an Urdu/Hindi-speaking South Asian geographically located on Turtle Island. It is a way to demonstrate solidarity with Black people struggling for social justice and liberation. It is a way to contribute to ongoing work within Brown South Asian communities against anti-Black racism. This piece aims to echo and honour the following #BLM statement: "Black lives and struggles for Black liberation have played, and continue to play, a critical role in inspiring and anchoring, through practice and theory, social movements for the liberation of all people" (Twelve Gates Arts).

Bibliography

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- Everett-Green, R. (2014, February 28). 200 years a slave: the dark history of captivity in Canada. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/200-years-a-slave-the-dark-history-of-captivity-in-canada/article17178374/>
- Twelve Gates Arts. (2016). *Masterminding Our Ordered Rage [Exhibition Description]*. Retrieved from <http://www.twelvegatesarts.org/>