Liberating the spirit through education transformed: The teacup memorial for Roxana Chu-Yee Ng

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**Breaking out of solitude: Angela Nardozi**

We rely so heavily on words in academia that I forget for long stretches of time that there are other ways to express myself. Diving into the Ph.D., in a field rife with trauma and resistance, and all the pressure to write, read, present, read more, keep writing, argue, argue, argue, I began to drift towards solitary spaces. Roxana challenged us to see another way forward, but I resisted it at first. Beginning with Qi Gong felt positive but the feeling was unfamiliar and my eyes would flicker open constantly – my mind wandering, thinking about the readings I would do the next day, the deadline coming next week. I felt relationships growing around me but was hesitant to invest. I remember seeking out a seat next to the little Japanese Zen garden and raking, raking, raking throughout the whole class, calming myself in order to fully listen to what others were saying and contribute.

It has been just over a year since Roxana passed. When someone proposed we create art, and I saw tea cups, I never thought that an idea I contributed to a piece of art would be valid, or that we would do it. But we kept coming together, sometimes after months, sometimes over dinner. Once we did Qi Gong. I took a trip to Philadelphia towards the end of our process, and took time to view some of the mosaics of Isaiah Zagar. On a tour of his Magic Gardens the docent told us how Zagar dove into his art after receiving guidance from a doctor, assigned to him after an attempt to take his own life. As we went through the Gardens, I felt waves of positive energy wash over me, and I felt light and adventurous in the space. As I looked into the sections of mirror scattered through his pieces, I saw myself in them, and felt Zagar was showing me a glimpse into the positive and potential within myself.

I realized then that it was through their own healing that Roxana and Zagar created a sense of healing for others, and by putting their positive energy into their work, reflected that energy on to their students/audience. After seeing Zagar’s mosaics I realized that when the day’s light reflects through and off the glass on the pieces we created, the light that comes through is healing. Roxana’s methods have slowly crept up on me since her passing. Challenging us to feel things rather than just think, think, write, and think. Most of us were really hesitant to smash the teacups; in theory I knew I could do it, but when faced with the task I froze at first. When I finally raised my hammer and smashed it down, I felt an amazing release even giddy afterwards. Roxana challenged us to think about different ways of being and organizing within the academy, to pay attention to our bodies, and what we are learning through them. To come together in a positive way to make change. To take time to come together as more than just graduate students, and to break shit.

**The light within and without: Cathy Lee**

This “coming together” to make change and to “break shit” as Angela has shared has been an amazing journey, a journey that began for our group of seven in the fall of 2012 when we each joined Professor Roxana Ng for her *Decolonization and Transformative Education* graduate
course at OISE. True to its name, this course is among some of the most transformative learning experiences, both personally and professionally, of which I have been fortunate to be part of.

Our learning began with Roxana suggesting, in our second class, that we move from our windowless inner core classroom to a more comfortable space that she knew of, the Center for Women’s Studies on the second floor of OISE. There we could settle comfortably into couches, which formed a circle, near a large window, surrounded by plants. In doing so, she had already begun to create a space of welcome, inclusivity, respect for diversity and safety, and an environment conducive to building relationships of respect and care.

Our weekly gatherings grew to be times I eagerly looked forward to attending, participating in, and being together with colleagues who inspired, who challenged, who supported and who cared for and about each other. These weekly classes often began with grounding in Qi Gong practices (the cultivation of energy through bringing together breathing, intention/focus and movement), which Roxana led to prepare us for our reflections and discussions on colonization and decolonizing through embodied learning practices. We shared food, drank tea, savoured dark chocolate and reflected, pushed and challenged our own individual and collective thinking, debated, listened with heart and supported each other in this learning process.

I struggled with a number of the readings which put front and center concepts of power and privilege, of colonial control, of misogyny, of history of abuses of terror raged on women’s bodies, writing by authors such as Paula Allman, Prasenjit Duara, Paulo Freire, Albert Memmi, Denise Nadeau & Alana Earl Young, Andrea Smith and Roxana Ng. As a mother of daughters who are of Inuit, Irish and Scottish ancestry, as a woman of Irish and Scottish ancestors, settlers who left their own countries as colonized, who moved to Canada in the mid 1800s and in so doing displaced Anishinaabe peoples in the Sarawak and Hope Bay areas of Ontario - in turn becoming colonizers - I had to reflect on my own families’ narratives and complicity in the context of the fabric of Canadian society. I had to dig deeper to better understand my own relations with family as a member of an Inuit family (by marriage) and community in Nunavut. To understand relations with community members who had been forced to move off the land in the 1950s, to government created and run communities; who had in some cases seen their entire dog team killed, eradicating their link to the land, their heritage, their means of hunting and livelihood; who had seen their children taken to residential schools in Churchill, MB; who watched as the CD Howe ship left with family members on board, en route to Hamilton, ON to a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients, to name just a few of the legacies of the colonial history of the Eastern Arctic regions. This messy business of unpacking power and privilege, of hearing the difficult narratives of continuing on a journey of understanding my own responsibilities, in not just understanding, but in living decolonizing practices, of “bringing being into alignment with thought, of bringing together theory with praxis” as Roxana often reminded us, is now the basis of my own journey. I have continued on this decolonizing path of listening, of opening heart and ears and eyes to the individual and the collective narratives of our her/histories as Canada - no longer just a one-sided, hegemonic story. Now being heard are the narratives from Indigenous
perspectives, honouring Inuit, First Nations and Metis, calling on all Canadians to truly hear and
to take personal and collective responsibility, in what I have termed as AAAT - to become
Aware, to Acknowledge, to Accept and to Transform within and without!

The time and skill Roxana took in facilitating the creation of the space, in developing
the relationships with and among our group, is testament to her skill, knowledge and
authenticity. It has motivated us to continue to meet and to advance her work in our own lives
and to share our learning with and from Roxana with others. It led us to carry forward her work
in two collective memorial art pieces, one being a stained glass effect piece, depicting the
morning dawn (reflective of Roxana’s given names – Chu-Yee) using bits of broken coloured
glass arranged on a window frame. It is a juxtaposition of the movement of dark to light and light
to dark, of the complexities of large jagged shards of glass with smooth rounded glass beads. It is
complexity and simplicity, love and hate, that ever-changing dance of life between opposing and
composing forces between alienation and communion.

The second piece, also an image of morning dawn, painted on a plywood panel, is superimposed
with Roxana’s name in handwriting, on which pieces of broken teacups have been placed. The
time to continue to get together with my colleagues, my mentors, and my “critical friends” (a
term shared with me by colleague, mentor and good friend, Fiona Walton) has been a
continuation of a journey of healing, a returning to a place of faith and hope grounded in
mindfulness.

The learning has seeped into every cell of my being, my spirit, my soul, and radiates
within and without in ways I have not before imagined. For that, I am eternally grateful to my
colleagues, together with whom I am walking this path, and especially to Roxana, who created
the space and time, who broke ceilings of colonial, hegemonic and paternalistic glass into both
jagged shards and polished pieces and who shone her light, radiating within and without. Her light shines on.

_Flower: Loren Delaney_

Fumbling in and through spaces was how I got around in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and one day I showed up in Dr. Roxana Ng’s class. I would love to take credit for this honour, but I cannot, as I no longer believe in coincidences but rather, mountains that choose to coincide. My belief in the divine in all things only grew stronger, creatively invested, spun like webs, running circles in high, swift tempo around distant times and places into our current spaces, within and outside of systems, structures and hierarchal fables. I came back to life in Dr. Ng’s class.

Embodied ideas unfolded in the spirited movements through each one of our bodies. Week after week, we danced together and apart, but all the time dancing as one, opening a space we never believed existed; yet, knowing all too well of its existence in our bones. Rotated presentations, consistent with progression, one by one and at times together, Roxana closed our eyes and opened our hearts and minds, showing us how to unpack narratives of his-stories of a “colonized” “decolonization”, embodied in “de-colonizers” and “activists”, “colonizers” and “colonialists”; sometimes we laughed about it and sometimes we just cried. Ideas racing to heaven and ideas held tightly in the ground, we experienced a sense of wholeness, shared between them and us, us and them, me and you: one and the same, awakening body-mind Spirit. The intent to critically think was overthrown for moments to simply be, so much so, that this state of awakening, I now call becoming, positioned the bodies of 7 divine souls in space and time to co-exist at the particular moment that I was honoured to show up in Dr. Ng’s class.
Roxana embraced us like wild golden Dandelions with rhythm and interest to know the unique pitch of our distinct voices. She nourished these voices, a gift she called them, alongside those wounded parts we all have like refined indigo Daisies. Once upon a season, her light shined so bright that a fumbling flower at last blossomed. So I guess I broke to pieces: purple and yellow glass against the heavy walls I have outgrown; a testament to the skin of the self I combusted out of; and for those parts in our story that are unfair. It is through Dr. Roxana Ng’s life work, pioneering Spirit, and love, that she has and continues to guide us endlessly. Nothing since our class has been the same, nor should it be. I am eternally grateful: for all the gifts my colleagues have gifted me; for they too have walked into my world and at the same time have let me walk into theirs; for each and every moment I am honoured to simply know and be with them.

One another out of time: Robert Bickford

I think of decolonization, and recall Roxana's open-hearted offering she brought to each class - her spiritual presence, insight, her acuity for academic detail, and her embodiment of the beliefs and values for which she advocated at the university and beyond. She expanded the academic notion of decolonization through her personal Qi Gong practice that she shared and taught every time our group met at the Centre for Women's Studies in Education. Her work, both written research and in her role as a teacher, speaks to the necessity of embodiment in the discussion of decolonization.

I remember when Roxana was ill, one of the activities she asked us to do in her absence was to share with each other what we gained from our class experience together, and so we had a chance to reflect on the value we each have in one another's lives - Angela, Cathy, Loren, myself, Steph, and Vijay. I believe we are still in this space, more than a year after our class has ended, valuing and celebrating one another's diverse perspectives and the decolonizing process of learning that brought us together.

Roxana's open heart teaches about the personal work necessary to 'know' decolonization. She moved in her own way, a gracious self-contained movement, and the movement that could never be contained, that seeks to connect with all, that emanates energy and honours the energies that come from seemingly inanimate objects. My last discussion with Roxana was about canning - the feeling and significance of taking out jars of preserves in wintertime when the land seems frozen shut. The six of us students have come back to our art pieces, our tea cup memorial, that Cathy has patiently preserved in her shared office, as a way to nourish our souls and sustain us through a second academic year grieving for our teacher.

We don't know where in OISE we may leave these objects we are making in memoriam. Nobody has sanctioned their presentation, or pre-designed an audience for them; however, they are brimming with energy we want to share, as a way to honour Roxana's energy. This is not the type of energy one encounters in a finely cut conclusion, razor sharp data analysis, or perfectly melded bibliography (though Roxana would appreciate each of these elements of research). The
teacup memorial is messy; it disrupts the usual expectation and notions of academic output, as homage to the personal work needed in the process of decolonizing.

As the pictures show, the result is an item that can be hung in a window, or displayed on a wall. The process has been email threads, conversation, and whenever possible, sharing food and tea. We have undertaken our own field study with the hypothesis that if we can share real nourishment in academic spaces, then there is hope for the personal processes needed for meaningful decolonization.

*Embodying growth and gratitude: Stephanie Moynagh*

It’s a bit overwhelming to try to put the experience of being in Dr. Roxana Ng’s class into words. Though my colleague-friends have done a pretty great job! I resonate with much of what they have expressed so beautifully here. Healing through breaking, Roxana’s transformative space making, purple and gold [[becoming]], grief, the mess of personal growth, blurring rigid lines, and the power in relationship-building. It truly did feel like a spirit-filled and spirit-driven experience to be a part of Roxana’s class at that moment in her life. It’s clear at this point that our class never ended and that Roxana’s energy continues to weave us together in an ever-expanding web of learning and unlearning, surprising ourselves again and again.

I don’t think I was aware in our first class together - September air, that small windowless room - the last term of my M.Ed., which had me feeling a bit hardened or guarded as graduate school had re-entrenched some of my experiences of disconnection and alienation. But, as early as our second class, as we took our time getting comfortable in the Women’s Centre that Roxana moved us to - making tea, chatting about the day, sharing treats or what Roxana offered us of her dinner - I realized it was going to be a different experience of academia. Not without an immense amount of reading! But with real time and space to connect with each other and with ourselves. To breathe, to release and restore through Qi Gong movement, to be emotional, to recognize ourselves as spiritual beings and to nourish ourselves in a myriad of ways.

Roxana said a line that always stuck with me - how do we bring our beings in alignment with our thoughts? She reminded us that even if we have strong intellectual analyses, there often remains a wide gap between the way we think and the way we act. And what are the consequences of that? And what do we about this? What does this mean for our lives, and our selves, what does it mean for systemic and transformative change? I am still working through the complex notion of decolonization and what it means for me, as someone of white-settler ancestry, what it means to use that term or apply it to my life. I’m still learning about the colonial histories and ongoing processes in place on this land and how my existence is implicated. Roxana’s body, mind and spirit-informed teachings have been integral to any and all of my movements in shifting my own consciousness and engaging in collective resistance against violent structures. I am forever grateful for the way that Roxana modeled this life work and for the way that she thoroughly smashed the academic teacup and humanized grad school for me. Roxana demonstrated for me how incredibly strong (physically! and otherwise!) a small-statured
person can be and the extent to which a small group of people can benefit from a collective, transformative experience that ripples out and lives on, engaged in both physical and spiritual worlds.

**A process of breaking and transforming:** Vijay Ramjattan

Part of the process of creating our art pieces involved breaking tea cups and various types of glass, and transforming the random shards into something new, coherent, and inspiring. When I think about decolonization, I often see it as a similar process: breaking and transforming. In the case of political decolonization, for example, the colony broke away from the control of the metropolis and sought to re-organize and transform itself into an independent nation (albeit not always successfully). In terms of our thinking, being, and doing, decolonization also retains its destructive and creative quality. Indeed, decolonization requires us to break apart our old notions of what is right and wrong, embrace the messiness of this destruction, and transform the chaos into new, improved selves.

During my time in Roxana's class, I often had to break and re-form my own understanding of the workings of a graduate-level course. What I most often noticed and came to value in class was the blurring of boundaries when it came to learning about decolonization. Rather than thinking about decolonization solely in the intellectual realm, Roxana usually encouraged us to think about this process in terms of our own personal and professional lives. This blurring of academic, personal, and professional experiences most often came to life in the reading journals that Roxana asked us to keep during the course. Instead of being brief literature reviews, these journals were reflections of ourselves in relation to the course content.

I believe that Roxana wanted us to relate various aspects of our lives to the course content because she was genuinely interested in our individual backgrounds. I always remember her writing copious notes when each of us would comment on some particular reading or idea, which showcased how much she wanted to learn from each student. Thus, another way that Roxana blurred boundaries in the class was through the student-teacher relationship. That is, no one was solely a teacher or a student. Rather, Roxana encouraged us to constantly learn from each other.

While we blurred the boundaries between teacher and learner, we also blurred the boundaries of time in class. In fact, Roxana encouraged us to savour the moments with each other, even if that meant we did not stick to strict deadlines. Sometimes our breaks would be longer than the actual class because people were sharing interesting details about their lives, which we all immensely enjoyed hearing. Or someone's presentation generated so much discussion that we did not have time to hear the others. Whatever the case, quality was indeed more important than quantity. I think we all adhered to this point in the creation of our art pieces because it has been almost a year since we first decided to start these projects. We needed such a long time because we wanted to put as much effort and detail into these pieces as Roxana put into the courses she taught.
Decolonization is an ongoing process because decolonization is far from easy. We may return to our old ways of thinking, being, and doing, and may need to start the decolonizing process all over again. In breaking and transforming teacups and shards of glass into two stunning art pieces, I am reminded to continue breaking and transforming as part of my own decolonizing work. Of course, I am grateful to Roxana and my colleagues, the authors of the above narratives, for inspiring my work!