

Daily Bread: The body tells stories of labour and diaspora

By *Abedar Kamgari*

Portuguese-Canadians have been contributing to the building and functioning of Canadian cities for decades. They, like immigrants of other ethnicities, often endure physically demanding jobs to put food on the table. *Daily Bread*, a new exhibition by Toronto-based artist Teresa Ascencao, commemorates the work of Portuguese-Canadian immigrants. Being surrounded by manual labour in her upbringing — her family worked as worm pickers, butchers, homemakers, in-house childcare workers, cleaners, and construction and garment workers — Teresa recalls the difficulties, but also the humility, she witnessed as a child. These early recollections drove her desire to seek out and interview Portuguese immigrants at work in Hamilton and Toronto. The resulting anthotypes in *Daily Bread* expand our understanding of labour and diaspora by using embodied, people-centered approaches to artistic production.

Teresa's interest in anthotypes was sparked during a trip to the Azores a few years ago. The warm Azorean sun, wild plants and freshly farmed vegetables provided the ingredients needed to create the first images. Anthotype is an image-making process in which a light-sensitive emulsion reacts with sunlight to create soft, ethereal traces. To create the emulsion, fresh produce is selected and juiced, and the liquid filtered through a sieve before being brushed onto paper in layers. The paper is then covered in transparent materials and exposed to light, causing the uncovered sections of emulsion to fade. Teresa uses fruits and vegetables common to Azorean and Portuguese cuisines to create anthotypes of Portuguese-Canadian workers in Hamilton and Toronto. The process resembles following a recipe for cake — precise, slow, and the results often unpredictable. The success of each image is highly dependent on available natural conditions, such as cloud cover or variety of kale.

When first discovered in the 19th century, anthotype processes were deemed impractical for their long exposure times and tendency of images to fade away.¹ For Teresa, these same qualities make anthotypes ideal for illustrating the invisibility of manual labour. The physical aspects of the individuals' jobs are mirrored in the physical process of preparing an anthotype. Teresa's practice is *embodied*: it follows an intuitive, corporeal knowledge much like women's domestic

¹ Malin Fabbri. "The history of anthotypes," *Alternative Photography*, accessed May 1, 2018. <http://www.alternativephotography.com/the-history-of-anthotypes/>.

work in the home. Instead of simply exhibiting digital photographs, Teresa chooses to direct her labour as an artist to creating depictions that necessitate a directed care and time commitment. By opting for embodied techniques that are physically labour-intensive, Teresa uses her artistic privilege to highlight the hands behind the work, marking them as worthy of thoughtful consideration as high art.

Diaspora refers to complex, multi-generational navigations of social, cultural, and political systems that impact lives of immigrants long after the physical act of migrating.² In Canada, diasporic experience is often marked by inequitable work. Immigrants face disproportionately lower wages, lack of benefits, and unsafe work conditions compared to their fellow White settlers — the gap is even wider for racialized newcomers.³ The question is not one of skill or expertise, but of structural barriers that limit the types of jobs immigrants can access. While factual research on diaspora can identify patterns of wage growth and access, it's not a substitute for grasping the lived experiences of individuals in our communities. Teresa tells me of her meeting with Carlos, who toured her around his welding shop and proudly demonstrated the function of the different machinery. Carlos' success in the business didn't come easy. Despite having had the skillset, he had to work as a welder's assistant for many years before being able to open his own shop in Toronto, CL Custom Fabrication & Services. The owners of Hamilton's well-loved café, Ola Bakery and Pastries, whose baker Arnaldo was photographed for *Daily Bread*, still remember the uncertainty of their early days. They took a leap of faith when they opened the now-thriving business on James Street North, being new immigrants and never having run a bakery before. The people photographed for *Daily Bread* may share a cultural heritage, but their distinct histories of migration and work are vastly different. The reality of diasporic labour is one of grueling work for many, too often without proper reward. With *Daily Bread*, Teresa presents Portuguese-Canadians, not as romanticized heroes or a homogenous community, but as unique, everyday people whose labour deserves recognition.

Research on the intersections of labour and diaspora are often so mired in academic language that they miss the important complexities of daily life. Lived experiences of work and migration are felt intimately in the body, and bodily knowledge can be messy and emotional. Embodied artistic approaches can help bridge the divide between theoretical and emotional knowledge, expanding our understandings of diasporic labour. Teresa's anthotypes in *Daily Bread*

² Marianne, David, and Javier Munoz-Basols. "Defining and re-defining diaspora: from theory to reality." Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary, 2012. 72-75.

³ Monsebraaten, Laurie. "Income Gap Persists for Recent Immigrants, Visible Minorities and Indigenous Canadians." *Toronto Star*, October 26, 2017, www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/10/25/income-gap-persists-for-recent-immigrants-visible-minorities-and-indigenous-canadians.html.

purposefully leave exposed the imperfections of the artist's hand: brush strokes, pin marks, smudges. These subtle facets of the artistic process enhance the artwork's accessibility, easing engagement for viewers of all backgrounds. Teresa rejects the pressure towards artistic professionalization — a byproduct of capitalist hierarchies that has seeped into the arts — for an embodied, humanistic approach. Rather than unpacking diaspora with a formula, she allows workers to lead the way. Some share a lot, others little. In the end, the function of the art is to give them a comfortable space to share what they decide. In the resulting interaction, Teresa captures candid glimpses that later become intimate anthotype portraits of each unique individual at work. This approach has yielded a body of artwork that is critical *and* emotional, with inconsistencies in size, colour, and composition, just like the real humans it depicts.

Teresa uses embodied artistic strategies rooted in emotional and bodily knowledge to create ephemeral images honouring the labour of Portuguese-Canadians in Hamilton and Toronto. The time and labour-intensive anthotypes made with vegetable emulsions mirror the invisibility of local workers in their tendency to gradually fade away. Teresa centers the lived experiences of immigrants at work, allowing their stories to take up physical space in the art gallery. Working on an emotional level as opposed to a purely scientific one enhances accessibility, allowing viewers of all backgrounds to create empathic connections with complex narratives of work and diaspora. Through *Daily Bread*, Teresa makes visible the labour of a multifaceted community of people whose humble hands have contributed to Canadian society for decades.

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