EMBODIED TRANSLATIONS
Decolonizing methodologies of knowing and being

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Entangling our voices, feeling our grounds: three points of departure

One: h(a)unting

This writing begins in May 2017, as Donald Trump’s administration hunts for evidence of crimes committed by Haitian immigrants in order to justify the non-renewal of Temporary Protection Status or TPS, an immigration status that has allowed more than 50,000 Haitians to stay in the US after the earthquake of 2010. How can the US government justify the ways in which it arbitrarily authorizes itself to decide the fate of lives within its geographical borders? Calling this removal violence does not make it such, in the eyes of the US government, nor is it an adequate intervention on my part. As someone very close to the 2010 earthquake and its aftermath, the question that haunts me is not only how to make sense of my own and my children’s situation as TPS holders but, more importantly, how to ethically account for injustices that happen within and beyond the reach of my arms? It demands that I look at the Haitian TPS issue not only through the ways that people of both Haiti and the US theorize each other, but also the resonances and entwining of individual stories of oppression that are often starkly separated, such as that of Philando Castile, who was gunned down by a police officer in July 2016 in Saint Paul, Minnesota; or Trump’s Muslim travel ban during the first months of his presidency; or the killing in May 2017 in Portland, Oregon, of two men on a train who tried to intervene when a man was yelling racial slurs at two women who appeared to be Muslim.

Two: reinvesting

trace your lines of intention
slow and steady, yet with fervor
push your fingers into the divots of your borderless body
feel your body push back

follow the winding stretches of bone, muscle, sinew
this wholeness that is actually a continuous scattering of material
identify where the cuts have been made
split them open – wide – once again
recall all those sites of injury
the broken backs, sullen cheeks, severed fingers of our great grandmothers
the scatterings of self across the break

coherence is a fallacy
the brokenness of being is what we must own

reinvest in the aliveness of your breath
the deep resonances of heel, ball, toe
heel, ball, toe
heel, ball, toe
on wet earth

know that in this treading – the hips, ankles, spine are grounded once again, anchored
in the flesh

the overflows, the spills, the uncontained agents of our bodies
are hard at work, like they always have been
squirreling away, burrowing in deep, preparing for this break

in this break, lies our expansion
in this tension lies our liberation

Reinvest in this aliveness of your breath,
the weight of flesh on your bones,
the curve of your back,
the articulation of your hips.
Reinvest. Reinvest. Reinvest.

Naimah Petigny 2016, 5

Three: war-recording

As the world prepares to celebrate Eid-ul-fitr in June 2017, 15-year-old Hafiz Junaid Khan boards a train with his brothers to return home to his village after buying clothes in Delhi. An argument over a seat turns into slurs against Muslims for wearing skullcaps, for eating cow meat and for being ‘anti-national’. The men pull Junaid’s beard, fling the brothers’ skullcaps and slap them. The teenagers tell the mob that cow meat was not even eaten in their village, but the men pull out their knives and one stabs Junaid until he dies. Junaid’s injured brother Hashim recalls in shock: ‘Instead of saving us, the crowd was egging the attackers on. They held us by our arms, while the men pierced our bodies with their knives.’ A few days after this incident, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi wraps his arms around Donald Trump in the White House, and India purchases drones worth $2 billion from the US. Twelve years ago, the same Modi was denied a visa to enter the US for his role in the 2002 pogrom that killed more than 1,000 Muslims when he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat. Even as these events unfold, I learn that the world’s forcibly displaced people now number approximately 65.6 million, making such people the equivalent of the twenty-first largest country in the world, at the same time as the National Public Radio announces that the United States’ longest war on Afghanistan is expected to continue for years. In Minnesota, my other home, the jury investigating the murder of Philando Castile acquits
the police officer who gunned him down seven blocks from where I live, dashing the hopes of his family and thousands of protesters who were somehow confident that justice could not be denied this time, especially in the face of the damning evidence against the police officer.

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Recording each war. Enunciating each displacement. Gesturing towards every haunting. Naming every lynching … So that we can gain the strength to reinvest, to fight, to overcome, to breathe, to dance … without identifying that which has already happened as belonging to the ‘past’. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, 15) puts it, ‘The past – or, more accurately, pastness – is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past’. We must push back on the temptation to forget – the sweet drawl of clean, confined pasts. Instead, we claim pasts that spill over into present futures and conjure the buried agents beneath. We demand ‘discontinuous, contradictory, multifarious legacies’, without requirement of resolution (Hong 2015, 3), so that our translations or retellings (see Merrill 2009) can try to do justice to landscapes like the ones we describe above. We cannot let these landscapes slip away, because, within them – rooted deep – are lessons about how to be in community, again and again. We begin here because – like others who have written, danced, rallied and performed before us – this is where decolonial praxis must begin: we must interrogate modes of knowledge that place past-present-future, mind-body-spirit, being-doing-knowing into neat compartments (Keating 2016; Anzaldúa 1987). We must interrogate and challenge the systems of power that excise specific streams of thought from the realms of knowledge that are pronounced to be valid or superior. We must insist on feeling, embodying and relearning the knowledges that have been erased or foreclosed due to ongoing projects of colonization, displacement and ethnic cleansing. Armed with such commitments, our praxis must insist on unearthing a set of maps that chart a different movement of bodies – of our multiple selves, of our ancestors and of multiple others – through times and spaces that both acknowledge and refuse borders (Hartman, 2007).

These are only some of the many possible starting points for co-authoring and stringing together a movement – an agitation of words, passions and commitments – that seeks to articulate what it might mean to decolonize methods of knowing and being. We embed our reflections in not only a world of wars, displacements and lynchings but also in a landscape of neo-colonial and neoliberal institutions of formal learning, activism, within and despite which we grow, struggle and build dreams and solidarities for justice. Neoliberalism is only interested in the selective protection of life; it offers up remembrance as a form of containment, and it disallows knowledges that hold multiple and overlapping ‘modes of being, affects, memories, temporalities’ in suspension (Hong 2015, 16). These institutionalized landscapes show us the limits of the knowledges imprisoned in them, even as they give us the reasons for imagining past them.

To decolonize the methods of knowing and being requires us to reform, even revolutionize, the relationships among multiply situated knowledges and knowers in incommensurable worlds and journeys. One way to begin embracing such labour is by recognizing the epistemic agency of those whose bodies and beings are relegated to the ‘margins’ or declared to be ‘past’ (Smith 1999). Making this choice means learning to learn from doing and dreaming, being and moving, remembering and relating in deeply embodied ways. It also implies intervening in the dominant academic politics of knowledge production by learning when and how to refuse citational practices that fragment the bodies (of knowledge) that constitute our consciousness and conscience and that reduce modes of creating knowledges to recognizable and nameable individual sources, while at the same time erasing the necessarily complex collective processes from which we all come to know and be known. The questions, then, are: how to co-imagine and co-create alternative citational practices where knowledge can also be
understood as a political-spiritual-activist force that flows out of fragmentation, reduction and uprooting, a force that is ever partial, ever irreducible and ever embracing of the tensions and frustrations that emerge between and across incongruent and vastly unequal sites, epistemes and bodies (Alexander 2005; Collins 2000; Simpson 2014)? Grappling with the (im)possibility of accounting for all that goes on in knowledge making is a commitment and a process that cannot be formalized or mastered. By its very nature, this labour must be political, spiritual and ind(e)visible (Keating 2016; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983). It demands that we meditate from a place of knowing and unknowing, a place of inexplicability and love, that is forever open to embracing new co-travellers in the journey so that we can continue to yearn for justice: for bodies, histories, places and rhythms that often remain hidden, uncounted, unacknowledged or dismissed in our worlds (Nagar, in journeys with Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan and Parakh Theatre, 2019). It is such a commitment that informs what we offer here.

We dwell in the entanglements of spaces, identities and languages that search for ethics, justice and solidarities in at least two ways. First, we centre as a site of knowledge and struggle bodies that have been multiply marked, violated and erased, including along the axes of race, religion, caste, gender, sexuality, place and citizenship. Second, we consider how feminists’ searches for decolonizing methods have inspired dynamic engagements with translations or retellings that fully engage our embodied beings. We underscore the need for embodied translations that fight geographies that keep the so-called ‘margins’ partitioned and that reclaim the stories, places, paradigms and methodologies of knowing, being, protesting and (re)creating that have been repeatedly erased by institutionalized systems. In addressing these themes, we also collapse, blur and stitch the borders among Brown/Black/Indigenous/China@x/transnational/women of colour feminisms, without reifying the boundaries that have created these as disciplined fields or subfields. As well, disagreements and disruptions are essential ingredients of this full-bodied agitation so that, even as we invoke situated solidarities across multiple borders, we are aware of the ever-present need to attend to the faults and fractures that inevitably shape the collectivities we forge (Nagar 2006, 2014).

Below, we provide glimpses of instances where embodied engagement through dance, theatre and writing have animated our efforts to decolonize the dominant methods of knowing and being in academic, activist and artistic spaces. By bringing these instances into a conversation, we embrace a praxis of translation or retelling that can enliven flattened renderings of space into lived geographies. Our intimate rendering of home, historical memory and landscapes inserts certain bodies into the very spaces that have attempted to erase their existence; it insists that landscapes are never closed off from the energies – dead and alive, animate and inanimate – that circulate within them.

Decolonizing bodies

In September 2017, Naimah spent a week moving with Moroccan dancer and choreographer Bouchra Ouizguen and her contemporary dance company based in Marrakech, Morocco. The discussion in this section draws upon Naimah’s writing about this experience. The ‘I’ here refers to Naimah, then, even as all three of us co-own the ways in which we sew, stitch and knot her individual reflections with our collective churnings.

Joined by performance artists across the Twin Cities, Naimah participated in workshops for Ouizguen’s new piece, Corbeaux. Corbeaux, or ‘Crows’ in English, is both a living sculpture and a rapturous performance. Marked by its uninhibited and serendipitous nature, Corbeaux enlivens difference amid universality, all the while contesting partitions that divide performers from audience, movement from knowledge and bodies from landscapes. Since its premiere in 2014, Corbeaux has toured the world with an intergenerational company made up of professional
dancers from Marrakech and local women from each city in which the piece is performed. A singular gesture inspired the Corbeaux score: the sharp, backwards thrusting of the head, tilting toward the sky with a broad open chest, accompanied by a guttural outcry – deep and resounding. From Marrakech to the Cour Carrée at the Louvre to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Corbeaux has offered an intimate engagement for dancers and audience-cum-witnesses alike. Although the piece does not draw upon ‘traditional’ Moroccan movement forms, it integrates Mediterranean styles of dress and Moroccan–Senegalese ritual gestures into varying city landscapes across the globe.

Centering a variety of forms of cultural production, Black performance theory attends to ways of knowing and movements of being that engender fluid, dissident underpinnings of Black social life (Nyong’o 2015; Williamson 2016). This Blackness insists on a mode of embodied engagement that conjures histories, hauntings and possibilities of embodied resistance across multiply violated geopolitical sites, and it hungers for justice. Performance, then, is marked by that which ‘subverts cultural norms … blurring the lines between action, performance, and works of art’ and, in the process, constitutes powerful practices and pedagogies of everyday life (McMillan 2015, 4).

Even though Corbeaux arises from a particular set of impulses that were birthed in a Moroccan context, it necessitates a co-constitutive enlivening of individual life and collective (after)life (Sharpe 2016, 3). In this co-constitutive enlivening, the dancers encounter new terrains of self, contoured by the affects, passions and complicities that structure who we are and how our bodies show up in the world (Cox 2015). We expand approaches to contemporary performance that allow individual dancers to harness the elasticity of choreography while still working from within the same movement repertoire. We enliven the bodies, breath and terrain in concert with the discursive – referents, utterances and other communicative practices – as a means of intervening in and re-imagining the world (Taylor 2003, 15). No two of us execute the movement in the same way, and our collective virtuosity curates a rich, multiplicitous performance. A week spent together in rehearsal and performance is a week full of creative and political lessons – it allows us to teach one another new ways of moving, new methods of breathing and new ways of being fully in our bodies.

Artistic exchanges like this one hinge upon remembrance, vulnerability and release of expectations that affix to bodies and mark them as incommensurable across disparate geopolitical locations. And yet, the challenge is to collaboratively string our movement together across moments of both agitation and collective embrace. This collective agitation and embrace must reject simplistic narratives of multicultural alliance and instead take up the much more difficult task of committing one’s desire for freedom to movement – in all the senses of that term.

The methodology, then, is in the practice – in the opportunity to create something afresh while rearticulating and re-energizing new ways of collapsing the ‘I’s’, eyes and the many provisional ‘we’s’ that make us at (in) any given time, place and struggle. In decolonizing our bodies in this manner, corporal and aesthetic risk co-constitutes more than just artistic vision (McMillan 2015, 7). This risk embraces radical vulnerability as a collective mode of unlearning and relearning (Nagar, in journeys with Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan and Parakh Theatre, 2019). It dares to leave things undone and to allow the body to be an engine of that undoing. If decolonized bodies are to exist across fragmented sites, splintered histories and embodied memories, then our methods must also resist concretizing or systematizing movement. It is precisely because we are entangled with those who live while also being inhabited by our dead (Simpson and Smith 2014) that we do not, we cannot, seek neat resolutions. We look to what survives abjection, exclusions and ontological negation. A decolonizing mode of studying and being demands that we surrender to movement and collective action through a mode of radical vulnerability that defines a non-individualistic ethic of engaging one another and being
together – so that we can plot and map; so that we can recollect our souls and beings in order to reimagine the meanings of accountability and justice.

**Decoloniality and politics of living**

That the world’s displaced people approximate 65.6 million; that the growing mobility of people carrying multiple citizenship erodes the boundaries of the nation state; that some refuse passports and shun symbols of freedom and mobility; and that more than a third of Haiti’s population lives outside of its territory. These are only a few resonances of struggles, projects and worlds that demand that we turn away from reading these struggles as commensurable with the modern praxis of political democracy or as stifled by imposed states of backwardness in need of civilizing. Through our interbraiding of multiple sites of embodied translations, our readings deploy an understanding of the broader and deeper political charges these struggles carry – struggles that refuse to be read within frameworks that are contained and worded through the ongoing practices and processes of slavery and colonization.

As one of the many possible ways of extending the search for decolonizing methods, we ask: what might a just and ethical story of Haiti within our present local, national and transnational contexts look like? This question summons us to place ourselves in the faults between lived experiences and the stories made possible within them. The dominant ways of knowing sometimes make us feel as if stories and bodies exist outside of the languages that narrate them and bring them into being. An alternative way of knowing is by learning to feel how one’s being is tied to others – both human and other than human – in ways that engage both the story and the body as conditions of possibilities. There are stories the body writes as an open-sided sphere of entangled cultural–natural phenomenon, as a site of articulation that enables a coiling up of everything – languages, signs, logics, histories, myths and thoughts – without precise intentions or genealogies: only the pretence to a bliss, a dream, a vision that tends towards knowing. Let’s pay attention to the Haitian American poet, Valerie Deus, in her poem ‘Haiti Unfinished’:

> I want to write you another note about feeling like a jack-o’-lantern hollow with the seeds and threads missing with the soup and the guts gone there’s no independence day long enough or revolution deep enough to save me from writing a poem about watching novellas with your mother while drinking tea or picking hazelnuts in her backyard

Valerie Deus 2011, 77

The poem offers a space of contemplation and inquiry from which both the poet and the narration co-emerge. Such contemplation suggests that the awareness of one’s experience within the collective and of the telling of that experience contribute to the movements and possibilities of history/ies. It troubles the question of how Haiti, or any location or place for that matter, should be thought. The poem crafts a poetics of retelling that exposes the intensities of living between forces and energies of all sorts: the moving back and forth across times, the crossing of geographic boundaries and of protagonists; the intimate and confessional tone in and through which the narrator makes an entrance within webs of beings. For Deus, her location within the project called Haiti is one that is constantly in the making – open, ‘unfinished’
Embodied translations

and marked by playful shifts between interpellating and being interpellated. In offering a poetic narrative that exposes how one’s body engages painfully, purposefully, as well as creatively within complex webs of relationships, Deus emphasizes the kind of labour most people undertake in the face of embedded multilayered violence. She retells the coming into one’s own identity. Aimé Césaire terms this impulse ‘poetic knowledge’, the sole force capable of effecting a ‘co-connaissances’, a knowledge from which emerge both the self and the narration altogether (Césaire and Pinkham 2012).

Mimerose Beaubrun in her book, Nan Dòmi, deploys a similar approach to the body that is creative, aesthetic and spiritual. She conceptualizes the body as a site of open-ended systems in interaction and in differentiation with the material discursive environment. Beaubrun begins her journey with the goal of learning about the Lakou project and its importance in Haitian political struggles. She ends up engaging with the Lakou through her own body and that of others as a kind of vital space and a place of multidimensional life. The author’s journey, then, is an ongoing process of being and becoming at the level of the body as a site of knowledge. The body in Nan Dòmi is an ontological condition that depicts a means of being and a means of knowing (Beaubrun 2013). This intervention is reminiscent of Maria Lugones’s work (2007), in which she draws from Quijano (2000) to propose a reading of how lived experiences negotiate the arrangements of colonial relations and, in so doing, make possible elaborate responses to oppression. Both Lugones and Beaubrun rethink the possibilities of the self and selves by emphasizing the logic of difference and multiplicity. Lugones, in particular, insists on a mode of theorizing that demands a body-to-body engagement and that attends to the ways in which colonial relations cut across everyday practices, ecology, economics, government relations and spirituality to evolve modes of being and knowing that stand in their own right as struggles that enact refusals. Such refusals make possible worlds, visions and movements with transformative and political consequences (Lugones 2003).

The body, in this sense, is inseparable from the complexities of the everyday through which power relations of all sorts are forged and articulated. A turn to the body propels us to ask what kinds of embodied knowledges emerge within the dynamic balance of diverse spiritual, economic, cultural energies and worlds within which a person and their personhood are rooted. Our search for decolonizing methods and ethics of retelling is a similarly unsettling inquiry accompanied by a basic demand — the demand to remove the focus from dominant epistemes and to direct it towards alternative epistemic forms of being through which new politics can be imagined to nourish the lives of all of us who have been variously colonized.

Continuing co-tellings

To decolonize methodologies is to insist on the necessarily entangled and inseparable nature of embodied pedagogy, research, artistry and movements that strive for connection and justice across communities, worlds and struggles. For those of us creating knowledge from a location of such power and privilege as a US research university, such methodologies must necessarily involve agitating against the ways in which the academy’s rhetoric of interdisciplinarity often allows for a coming together of disciplined fragments, albeit without requiring a transformation of those fragments. The co-authored retellings or translations we offer here are a part of an anti-definitional agitational praxis through which unplanned freedoms and serendipitous movements for justice can be imagined and enacted (Nagar, in journeys with Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan and Parakh Theatre, 2019). In embracing the idea of spiritual activism as an undefinable and non-reductive mode of co-travelling and co-making knowledges across worlds and struggles, we join many other feminist scholars and activists who simultaneously remain
grounded in the structures, processes, languages and feelings that constitute those worlds and struggles. We embrace our responsibility as bearers and co-creators of knowledge in ways that appreciate knowledge as an unfixable living and throbbing force, without an easily identifiable beginning or end, yet always partially within the reach of our hearts and minds. This possibility of reaching and feeling knowledge inspires us to reclaim and reword, to remember and retrace, to redo points of reference and bring them into tension — so that we can dodge and dismantle the traps that choke the truths that have been violated. Knowledges emerge from different voyages that involve singing, naming and mourning; playing and laughing and dancing. These journeys ask that we linger with the possible meanings of not only that which is utterable but also of that which is silent. For us, being silent is a state in which one might silence all thought; it is also a refusal of predetermined frameworks, which enables us to more responsibly witness those modes of living, being, fighting and knowing that are consistently rendered invisible or invalid.

Whether our attention is turned towards the Haitian TPS in the era of Trump, or the ways in which Black bodies navigate deathly terrains with the softness of ‘heel-ball-toe’ or the threats leveled against Muslims for being ‘anti-national’ in Modi’s India, a commitment to decolonize knowledges involves a shared thirst to know the multiple geographies, bodies and scars of these hauntings so that our movements may work through varied levels of intimacy and so that we may realign commitments and practices with all co-living bodies that summon us. We, then, continue to search for such practices of discontent that will push us to patiently and steadily unearth the modes of dwelling in and linking all those traumas and scars that the prevailing maps present before us in isolated forms. It is from here that we reopen ourselves to each other so that we may continue traversing known and unknown terrains in our collective search to re-imagine, undo and redo the ways in which we come to know.

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Key readings


References

Embodied translations


