

# COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

Vol 2 | No 1 | 2019

## Performing Embodied Translations Decolonizing Methodologies of Knowing and Being

Beudelaine Pierre, Naimah Petigny and Richa Nagar  
University of Minnesota Twin Cities

Introduction by Sima Shakhari  
University of Minnesota Twin Cities

**ABSTRACT** | This performance and transcript emerge from a collaborative journey that grapples with what it might mean to agitate dominant pedagogical and methodological conventions of Eurocentric Anglophone academia. Together, we perform an argument and a search: for multiple entry points into decolonizing feminisms; for multiple modes of knowing and being that can interrupt and challenge the epistemes that are rooted in thoughts and practices of colonialism and colonality; for interrogating the dominant politics of citation that often operate in academic practices in disembodied ways. We search for a politics of knowing that is firmly rooted in relationalities where power and authority can be shared across uneven and unequal locations and languages. We invite you to step into the spaces that we have started imagining here and push all of our collective conversations and imaginations further, beyond the silos that cage us in our disciplined modes of thinking, writing, arguing, and dreaming.

**Keywords:** embodying knowledges; decolonizing epistemologies; radical vulnerability; refusing translation; collaborative praxis



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons | © B. Pierre et al.

ISSN 2537-9879 | DOI: <https://10.26686/ce.v2i1.5665>

Published online 19 December 2019

AUTHOR/PERFORMER BIOS | **Beudelaine Pierre** is a published writer and doctoral candidate in Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Minnesota. She is also co-editor of *How to Write an Earthquake*, a trilingual volume in response to the catastrophe Haiti suffered on January 12, 2010.

**Naimah Petigny** is a Black Feminist scholar and social justice educator. Her research and teaching center questions of blackness, embodiment, memory, and performance. She grew up organizing amongst youth of color in Western Massachusetts and dancing in West African and Afro-Caribbean performance ensembles. Naimah graduated with a B.A in Sociology and Women's Studies from Vassar College in 2014. Currently, Naimah is a doctoral candidate in Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Minnesota. Working at the intersections of Black Feminist Theory and Performance Studies, her dissertation-in-progress *The Hold is also an Embrace: Haunting and Contemporary Black Feminist Performance* theorizes choreography and improvisation as experimental, epistemological practices of Black women's performance that communicate the influence of coloniality, transatlantic slavery, mass incarceration and state violence on contemporary Black life. Naimah's writing blends critical theory and poetics while her pedagogy works to carve out spaces of abundance, honesty, and collective transformation in the classroom and beyond.

**Richa Nagar** is Professor of the College in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota, and currently holds a Russell M. and Elizabeth M. Bennett Chair in Excellence and a Beverly and Richard Fink Professorship in Liberal Arts. Her multi-lingual and multi-genre research and teaching blends scholarship, creative writing, political theatre, and community activism to build alliances with people's struggles and to engage questions of ethics, responsibility, and justice in and through knowledge making. Richa is the author and co-editor of numerous books in Hindi and English including *Sangtin Yatra: Saat Zindgiyon Mein Lipta Nari Vimarsh* (2004), *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (2006), *A World of Difference: Encountering and Contesting Development* (2009), *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (2010), *Muddying the Waters: Co-authoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism* (2014), and *Hungry Translations: Relearning the World Through Radical Vulnerability* (2019).

**Sima Shakhsari** is Assistant Professor of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Minnesota and scholar of Transnational Feminist Theory, Middle East studies, Refugee and Diaspora Studies, and Political Anthropology. They earned their PhD in Cultural and Social Anthropology at Stanford University and have held postdoctoral positions at the University of Pennsylvania's Wolf Humanities Center and the Women's and Gender Studies Department at the University of Houston. Their forthcoming book *Politics of Rightful Killing: Civil Society, Gender, and Sexuality in Weblogistan* (Duke University Press, 2020) theorizes sites of cybergovernmentality where biopolitical security regimes discipline and regulate populations and provides an account of digital citizenship that raises questions about the internet's relationship to political engagement, militarism, and democracy.

### Introduction by Sima Shakhsari

'Performing Embodied Translations: Decolonizing Methodologies of Knowing and Being' is a collaborative project that seeks to agitate and decolonize pedagogical and methodological conventions that dominate U.S. academia. Whether disciplinary or interdisciplinary, most academic fields privilege individualism over collaboration and normalize Eurocentric epistemologies through colonial and neoliberal practices. Beautifully performed and executed, Richa Nagar, Naimah Zulmadelle Petigny, and Beaudelaine Pierre challenge these epistemological and pedagogical norms, and put into practice what Geeta Patel and Anjali Arondekar (2016) have described as 'telling stories in fabular form' – a form of epistemic displacement that decenters Euroamerican epistemologies while engaging with the messiness and the excess that translation inevitably fails to convey. Their words, movements, and gestures go beyond a simple translation of theoretical concepts, inviting the audience to take part in pushing back against the erasure of landscapes, pasts, and presents that are often forgotten in pedagogies, research, and citational practices.

In a way, they ask us to challenge what Mino Moallem has aptly called the 'emplacement of dismembering' – the dual process of making certain texts canonical, and 'forgetting the social and historical conditions that lead to this form of memorizing' (2002: 370). Stringing together seemingly disparate landscapes and events, the authors/performers embody a transnational feminist practice that Ella Habiba Shohat (2002) has called a 'relational approach.' They go beyond a theoretical rehearsal of this concept through unsettling the borders of authorship, academic rank, and disciplines, while highlighting the overwhelming presence of these borders, as well as the material effects of geopolitical borders that include and exclude them in and out of academia. They challenge the common split that is reproduced in academic settings between the U.S. women of color scholarship and transnational feminist scholarship, by interrogating the neoliberal logic of competition and 'modes of knowledge that place past-present-future, mind-body-spirit, being-doing-knowing into neat compartments' (Pierre, Petigny, Nagar, this piece).

The collaborators skilfully embody a form of politics grounded in social justice and solidarity through affective, corporeal, and epistemic refusal, while being aware of the risks of appropriation and complicity as scholar/activists in U.S. academia. This is a difficult task, not least because of the disciplinary ghosts, citational practices, and desires for canonization that haunt any interdisciplinary scholarship that is produced in the U.S. academy (and in the English language). This is precisely why this collaborative project is a practice in 'radical vulnerability' (Nagar, in *Journeys with Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan and Parakh Theatre*, 2019), given that black and brown female bodies are often recolonized in neoliberal multicultural academic settings that turn them into spectacle, or expect them to 'speak from experience.'

Yet, rather than reproducing the Euroamerican epistemological traditions or succumbing to the norms of the neoliberal university, the authors call for a transformative politics of refusal and solidarity that challenges recolonization and confronts the patronizing dismissal of the masculinist postcolonial canon.

Producing brilliant scholarship such as this piece is the first step in the massive (and almost impossible) task that is ahead of us. Translating it into hiring practices, changing the culture of competition and grant-chasing, disrupting publishing for the sake of tenure, collaborating and co-writing in this manner prior to tenure, and training students who are not overburdened by ‘professionalization’ is the monstrous task that we (and those who came before us) face.

### **Embodied Translations: Decolonizing Methodologies of Knowing and Being**



Video permalink:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xa9ZRfsO1EjSuUF8hg-32Jz1sfI7qCSD/view>

### **Performance Transcript**

BEAUDELAINÉ: Thank you for coming and for inviting us to share our work in the Geography, Environment and Society Coffee Hour. Today, we share with you some collectively authored musings and meditations. We draw these musings from a short chapter titled: ‘Embodied Translations: Decolonizing Methodologies of Knowing and Being.’ This chapter contains some entry-points into a journey that will remain in progress for each one of us for a long time to come. The fragments from this chapter that we are about to share today emerged from an invitation that Richa received last year to contribute a piece on ‘decolonizing methods’ to the *Routledge International Handbook of Gender and Feminist Geographies*.

Rather than approaching it merely from the perspective of her own intellectual and political journeys and locations, Richa asked Naimah and me – with whom she had been working and learning in multiple capacities – if we would like to join her in responding to this invitation.

Naimah and I accepted this invitation and together the three of us began engaging this topic in ways that are often foreclosed to us, even in the

transdisciplinary field of feminist studies. In a large measure, this foreclosing is due to our chosen audiences in such sub-fields as Black Studies, critical development studies, performance studies, literary studies, and Caribbean studies, to name a few.

NAIMAH: So we three came together to try to wrap our heads around how to approach this invitation, and specifically the editors' framing and call to talk about decolonizing methods, something that each one of us were both excited but also wary about.

On the one hand, a critical engagement with questions of colonization and decolonization ought to be present within all scholarly work that seeks to analyze or theorize: power, oppression, and shifting contexts – and landscapes – of resistance to dominant epistemologies and ontologies. On the other hand, decolonization has become a buzz word in the academy, where almost every field (including Sociology, Geography, Education, Anthropology) is holding conferences to decolonize itself. Yet, the dominant hierarchies and practices of inclusion and exclusion through which knowledges are legitimated or illegitimated in these fields remain intact for the most part.

The humanities and social sciences on our campus have been truly privileged to have many creative theorists, researchers, and writers who have been engaging seriously with questions of decoloniality and decolonization in relation to settler colonial contexts, especially in North America. Their engagements have taken to task the settler state's investments in: (1) maintaining not only violent, extractive, relationships with lands and marginalized bodies, but also (2) its continuing disavowal of ontologies and epistemologies that embody a radical break from those structures of capture. In this short piece, we begin to center other streams of thought and writing that often remain uncited in relation to decolonizing methods and methodologies.

Our co-authored beginnings emanate from a commitment to:

- (a) acknowledge and engage the multiplicity of ways in which coloniality has imprisoned our creative imaginations, and
- (b) invite all of us to imagine non-canonical modes of knowing, re-telling, and performing that grapple with what it might mean to decolonize methodologies of being in the dominant academy in which we breathe.

RICHA: So what we tried to do in these beginnings is to offer an argument and a search: for multiple entry points into decolonizing feminisms; for multiple modes of knowing and being that can interrupt and challenge the epistemes that are rooted in thoughts and practices of colonialism and coloniality; for interrogating the dominant politics of citation, that often operate in academic practices in disembodied ways.

And last but not least, these beginnings are an argument and a search for a politics of knowing that is firmly rooted in relationships and in relationalities where power and authority can be shared across uneven and unequal locations and languages.

What we share here are mere beginnings that are waiting to be stretched, deepened, twisted, questioned, interrogated, and rerouted. We invite you to step into the spaces that we have started imagining here and push all of our collective conversations and imaginations further, beyond the silos that we are so accustomed to in our disciplined modes of thinking, writing, arguing, and dreaming.

We'd like to begin by **Entangling Our Voices and Feeling Our Grounds Through Three Points of Departure...**

BEAUDELAINÉ: **One: H(a)unting/Hunting** [29 May 2017]

This writing begins 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 U.S. after the earthquake of 2010. How can the U.S. 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 U.S. 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 United States 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 against a man yelling racial slurs at two women who appeared to be Muslim.

NAIMAH: **Two: Reinvesting** [November 9, 2016, the day after the US elections]

*As Naimah speaks, Beaudelaine and Richa begin to encircle each other in a slow, gestural dance.*

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.

**RICHA: Three: War-Recording** [June 18, 2017, two days after Philando Castile verdict was announced]

As the world prepares to celebrate Eid-ul-fitr in June 2017, fifteen-year-old Hafiz Junaid Khan boards a train with his brothers to return home to his village after buying new clothes in Delhi. An argument over a seat turns into slurs against Muslims for wearing skull-caps, for eating cow meat, and for being ‘anti-national.’ The men pull Junaid’s beard, fling the brothers’ skull caps, 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 United States of America. Twelve years ago, the same Modi was denied a visa to enter the USA for his role in the 2002 pogrom that killed more than 1,000 Muslims when he was the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. Even as these events unfold, the National Public Radio announces in the same hour that the world’s forcibly displaced people now number approximately 65.6 million, making such people the 21st largest country in the world. AND that the USA’s longest war – on Afghanistan – is expected to continue for years. And I just learned that the jury investigating the murder of Philando Castile acquitted the police officer who gunned him down seven blocks away from where I live, in St. Paul, 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 cop.

BEAUDELAINÉ: Recording each war.

NAIMAH: Enunciating each displacement.

RICHA: Gesturing towards every haunting. Naming every lynching...

BEAUDELAINÉ: 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.'

NAIMAH: 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.

RICHA: We demand 'discontinuous, contradictory, multifarious' legacies without requirement of resolution (Hong 2015: 3) so that our translations or retellings (Merrill 2008) 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.

BEAUDELAINÉ: We must interrogate modes of knowledge that place past-present-future, mind-body-spirit, being-doing-knowing into neat compartments (see also, Keating 2016; Anzaldúa 1987). We must interrogate and challenge the systems of power that remove specific streams of thought from the spheres 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.

NAIMAH: 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.

RICHA: 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 neo-liberal institutions of formal learning, activism, within and despite which we grow, struggle, and build dreams and solidarities for justice.

BEAUDELAINE: 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.

NAIMAH: 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 labor 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.

RICHA: 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 (including 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 imagined 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?

BEAUDELAINE: Grappling with the possibility and impossibility 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 labor must be political, spiritual, and invisible and indivisible (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. It is such a commitment that informs what we offer here.

*Beaudelaine begins to sing, Richa chimes in a few seconds later with a new song, sung over Beaudelaine’s melody. Both stop singing after 35 seconds.*

NAIMAH: We dwell in the entanglements of spaces, identities, and languages that search for ethics, justice and solidarities in at least two ways. First, we center 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.

RICHA: In addressing these themes, we also collapse, blur, and stitch the borders among brown/black/indigenous/china@x/transnational/women of color/anti-caste 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; Nagar 2014).

BEAUDELAINÉ: We provide glimpses of instances where embodied engagement through dance, theater, and writing have animated our efforts to decolonize 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.

NAIMAH: Decolonizing Bodies.

*After a pause.*

NAIMAH: In September of 2017, I 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 my writing about this experience. The 'I' here refers to me, Naimah, even as all three of us co-own the ways in which we sew, stitch, and knot my individual reflections with our collective churnings.

NAIMAH: Joined by performance artists across the Twin Cities, I participated in workshopping Ouizguen's new piece *Corbeaux*. *Corbeaux*, which translates to 'crows' in English, is both a living sculpture and rapturous performance.

*Naimah plays a short clip from Corbeaux performance, 2017.*

NAIMAH: Marked by its uninhibited and serendipitous nature, *Corbeaux* enlivens difference amidst universality, all the while contesting partitions which divide performers from audience, movement from knowledge, and bodies from landscapes.

*Naimah shows slides with pictures from the performance of Corbeaux in September 2017 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.*

NAIMAH: Since premiering 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 *Corbeaux's* score

*Naimah performs the gesture three times, then Richa and Beaudelaine join in and they all do the gesture three times, then stop at staggered intervals.*

NAIMAH: The sharp backwards thrusting of the head, tilting toward the sky with a broad open chest, accompanied by a guttural outcry – deep and resounding [*Naimah does the gesture with sound*]. 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.

RICHA: 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.

*Naimah continues to show slides from the performance.*

NAIMAH: As one grounding within which to understand gesture, Black Performance Theory attends to ways of knowing and movements of being that engender fluid, and dissident practices of social life. Such embodied modes of engagement conjure histories, hauntings, and possibilities of resistance across multiply violated geopolitical sites as they hunger for justice. How, then, can we understand performance as that which subverts cultural norms... blurring the lines between action, performance, and works of art – further engendering practices and pedagogies of everyday life?

BEAUDELAINÉ: Even though *Corbeaux* arises from a particular set of impulses that were birthed from a Moroccan context, it necessitates a co-constitutive enlivening of individual life and collective (after)life. 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. 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.

NAIMAH: 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 curated a rich, multiplicitous performance. A week spent together in rehearsal and performance became a week full of creative and political lessons – it allowed us to teach one another new ways of moving, new methods of breathing, and new ways of being fully in our bodies.

RICHA: 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.

BEAUDELAINÉ: The method, 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. 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.

NAIMAH: 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, that we do not seek neat resolutions. We cannot seek neat resolutions. We look to what survives abjection, exclusions, and ontological negation.

RICHA: 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.

*Naimah performs the gesture once, then Richa and Beaudelaine join in and they all do the gesture three more times.*

BEAUDELAINÉ: Decoloniality and Politics of Living

BEAUDELAINÉ: That the world's displaced people approximate 65.6 million; that the growing mobility of people carrying multiple citizenships erodes the boundaries of the nation state; that some refuse passports and shun symbols of freedom and mobility; that more than one 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 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 ongoing practices and processes of slavery and colonization.

RICHA: 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?

NAIMAH: 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 non-human – in ways that engage both the story and the body as conditions of possibilities.

BEAUDELAINÉ: There are stories the body writes as an open-ended 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 pretense to a bliss, a dream, a vision that tends towards knowing.

*Beudelaine pauses for two seconds.*

BEAUDELAINÉ: Let's pay attention to the Haitian American poet, Valerie Deus. She writes 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 novelas with your mother  
 while drinking tea  
 or picking hazelnuts in her backyard

RICHA: 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.

NAIMAH: For Deus, her location within the project called Haiti is one that is constantly in the making – open, 'unfinished,' 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 relationality, Deus emphasizes the kind of labor 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-naissance,' a knowledge from which emerges both the self and the narration altogether.

BEAUDELAINÉ: Mimerose Beaubrun in her book *Nan dòmi* (2013) deploys a similar approach to the body that is creative, aesthetic, and spiritual. She conceptualizes the body as site/s 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.

*Beaudelaine points to the slides and narrates the photos.*

BEAUDELAINÉ: Let me stop a little bit here to explain a little bit about the Lakou. The Lakou in Haitian traditions refers to clusters of dwellings in which Haitian families reside. It's an extended, multigenerational family that is from Haitian culture. Members of the Lakou, or this form of arrangement living – they work cooperatively and support each other with financial and multiple other forms of engagement. The Lakou also brings together extended family farms property, cemetery, and a washing area. This living arrangement, which is of African origins, considers that the individuals' well-being is a collective project that relies upon a wide circle of people. The Lakou, in that sense, deploys an understanding of personhood which is fundamentally relational, and grounded in the dynamic balance of spiritual, economic, cultural, energies, and worlds. Drawing from this conceptualization, we see the Lakou as an epistemology that causes us to acknowledge competing and entangled political struggles that cohabit within multiple hegemonic forms of living. We ask: how does the Lakou as an epistemic location provide a broader cannon of thought that advances alternative terrains

from which Haiti can be thought of – creatively, theoretically, imaginatively, and materially?

RICHA: So, what does Beaubrun say?

BEAUDELAINÉ: Yes, Beaubrun 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.

RICHA: 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), where 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 [*Richa's tongue intentionally stumbles as she utters Beaubrun's name and she checks with Beaudelaine whether her pronunciation of Beaudrun's name is correct*] 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.

NAIMAH: 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, rooted in coloniality and colonization, 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 colonized.

*Beaudelaine and Naimah sit down, facing each other, and begin to sing to each other. Their singing get softer and softer as Richa begins to speak.*

RICHA: Continuing Co-tellings.

RICHA: To decolonize methodology 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

U.S. research university, such methodology 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.

BEAUDELAINE: The co-authored retellings or translations we offer here are 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-traveling 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.

NAIMAH: 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.

*Beaudelaine and Naimah begin to sing again. Their voices overlap and keep going as Richa begins to speak.*

RICHA: 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.

*All singing stops.*

RICHA: For us being silent is a state in which one might silence all thought; it is also a refusal of predetermined frameworks that enables us to more responsibly witness those modes of living, being, fighting, and knowing that are consistently rendered invisible or invalid.

BEAUDELAINE: 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.

NAIMAH: 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.

RICHA: It is from here what we reopen ourselves to each other so that we may continue traversing known and unknown terrains in our collective search to re-imagine, to undo, and to redo the ways in which we come to know and be.

*Audience claps loudly.*

\*\*\*

RICHA: So instead of a traditional Q & A what we would like to do is to invite you to share how you might step into this search, this argument – well, you can disagree with the argument – from the locations you occupy. We invite you to build upon this conversation we have just begun.

## References Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria

1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.

Beaubrun, Mimerose

2013. *Nan dòmi, an initiate's journey into Haitian vodou*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers.

Césaire, Aimé, and Joan Pinkham

2012. *Discourse on colonialism*. Marlborough, England: Adam Matthew Digital.

Deus, Valerie

2011. Haiti Unfinished. In *How to write an earthquake: Comment écrire et quoi écrire mo pou 12 Janvyè: Sixteen Hatian writers respond: Seize écrivains Haïtiens parlent: sèz ekriyen ayisyen reponn*, edited by Beudelaine Pierre and Natasa Ďurovičová, 77-79. Iowa City: Autumn Hill Books.

Hong, Grace Kyungwon

2015. *Death beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Keating, Ana Louise  
2016. Spiritual Activism, Visionary Pragmatism, and Threshold Theorizing. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 5(3): 101-107.
- Lugones, Maria  
2007. Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System. *Hypatia* 22(1): 186-209.
- Moallem, Mino  
2002. Women of Color in the U.S.: Pedagogical Reflections on the Politics of 'the Name'. In *Women's Studies on Its Own* edited by Robyn Wiegman, 368-82. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Merrill, Chisti A  
2009. *Riddles of Belonging: India in Translation and Other Tales of Possession*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Nagar, Richa, in journeys with Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS) and Parakh Theatre  
2019. *Hungry Translation: Relearning the World Through Radical Vulnerability*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Nagar, Richa  
2006. Introduction. In *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven Lives in India*, xxi-xlvi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.  
  
2014. *Muddying the Waters: Co-authoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Patel, Geeta, and Anjali Arondekar  
2016. Area Impossible: The Geopolitics of Queer Studies. *GLQ: Gay Lesbian Quarterly* Special Issue 22(2): 151-172.
- Beudelaine Pierre, Naimah Petigny, and Richa Nagar  
In press. Embodied Translations: Decolonizing Methodologies of Knowing and Being. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Gender and Feminist Geographies*, edited by Anindita Datta, Peter Hopkins, Lynda Johnston, Elizabeth Olson, and Joseli Maria Silva. New York: Routledge.
- Shohat, Ella Habiba  
2002. Area Studies, Gender Studies, and the Cartographies of Knowledge. *Social Text* 20(3): 67-78.

Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa

1983. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color.

Quijano, Anibal

2000. Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America. Michael Ennis translator. *Nepantla: Views from South* 1(3): 533-580.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai

1999. *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Taylor, Diana

2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University.

**Sima Shakhsari**

Department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies  
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus  
sshakhsa@umn.edu

**Beudelaine Pierre**

Department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies  
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus  
dorel002@umn.edu

**Naimah Petigny**

Department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies  
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus  
petig002@umn.edu

**Richa Nagar**

Department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies  
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus  
nagar@umn.edu