CHAPTER 5

Genders, Sexualities, and Decolonial Methodologies

Brinda Bose

A Fistful of Critical Lineages

The words I use shift from desire to explore to reflect to question to deconstruct to interrogate to contest to disrupt to hope to decolonise. They are deployed for a specific purpose: to tangle up and tangle down what it means to live and work in-between: on the borders, on the edge, across, through and with difference: alongside knowing, being and doing I describe as intersubjective, intercorporeal, and intercultural. I think these words give me a way into, to *inter*.

Elizabeth Mackinlay, *Autoethnography, Feminism and Decoloniality*

To restore passion to the classroom or to excite it in classrooms where it has never been, professors must find again the place of eros within ourselves and together allow the mind and body to feel and know desire.

bell hooks, "Eros, Eroticism and the Pedagogical Process," *Teaching to Transgress*

There is no "object of study" that decoloniality can exhaust. Objects or events will always exceed decoloniality; there is no single method that will exhaust the objects or events. Decoloniality is an option among others.

Walter D. Mignolo, "On Decoloniality: Second Thoughts"

This book is an amorous gesture, a dedication to another kind of sexual future. It is an episode of language that reaches for the possibility that something else awaits us. This gesture is a kind of touching, a way of sensing what might flow between us. It is sexual in the queerest of ways, meant to inspire intense feeling rather than reproduction; it is multisensory, asynchronic, polysemous, perverse, and full of promise.

Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*

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a decolonial perspective on gender means conceptualizing the category of gender as always already trans.

Alyosxa Tudor, "Decolonizing Trans/Gender Studies?"

Literatures, like Genders and Sexualities, Are a Palimpsest

I wish to take from Walter D. Mignolo the call for deconstructing in decolonial mode – "decoloniality shall focus on changing the terms of the conversation that would change the content" (Mignolo and Walsh 144) – and run with it via genders and sexualities to think about multiple, daring, trans/gressive methodologies for the English literary curriculum. I am not invested in cancel cultures, and my brief therefore is not to throw out (fictional or theoretical) texts of the West to replace them with those of the non-West; the decolonial method offers possibilities, I believe, to engage with literature historically and geopolitically as well as critically, and in those spaces to attempt to change the terms of interrogation, discourse, and discussion. In giving this essay its title, I wanted to emphasize the plurals – gender*s*, sexualitie*s*, methodologie*s* – as I consider plurality the first and necessary expansion that decolonization invites: a sense of breaking open boundaries imposed by the (once) institutionalized and therefore more powerful critical praxis to let in multifarious, conflicted ideas that kaleidoscopically create new and recalibrated patterns of reading and writing.

I take what Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh formulate as "*pluriversal decoloniality* and *decolonial pluriversality*" (2), a sense of spaciousness in investigating and engaging with all that has been inherited from modernity and coloniality. I distance myself from those understandings of decolonial practice that seek to discard and replace: for literatures, like genders and sexualities, are a palimpsest, they build on waves of what is experienced and encountered through lineages; there are deaths and memories as well as traces and continuities, and I would want that they all be folded in, for the reading, teaching, and writing experience to be, as bell hooks outlines, exciting and passionate – and as Mignolo insists, exceeding the "object of study." A palimpsest, to me, does not have a goal of betterment: it is simply a layering of innocence with experience, in which the most recent layer is lost yet again through a covering, but in which all layers can be exposed again to be encountered afresh when unpeeled: there is a telos, but it can also be overturned.

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Octavio Paz, in an essay on Jean-Paul Sartre upon his death, writes: "much that he said, even when he erred, seems to me essential. Let me state it differently: essential *for us*, his contemporaries. Sartre lived the ideas, the battles and tragedies of our age with the intensity with which others live out their private dramas. He was a conscience and a passion" ("Memento"). Paz is as forthright about Sartre as he says Sartre was about his ideas and opinions: he does not dismiss Sartre for his erring words but embraces them as essential, and he does not dismiss "passion" in contradistinction to "conscience" but weighs them in together. Paz was an exemplar of the Mexican avant-garde in his poetry and essays and continually engaged with many artists (of the Global North) who are easily dismissed from within fixed frames of sexual morality and aesthetics, such as the Marquis de Sade and Marcel Duchamp. Instead, he retrieved them and held them up to critical light and insight. I would wish to work with this as a decolonial method, to revisit old and new frameworks of genders and sexualities for literary studies via avant-garde modernisms – in themselves an exemplar of the excessively nonconformist. Keeping many thinkers and poets as unruly talismans thrown together in an unruly manner, I want to look at paradigms of gendered/sexual signs to rethink pedagogies and research methodologies for English literature in the Global South: what could be a template to read historically, critically, and imaginatively across and between Western and non-Western texts with an incisive, generous, difficult passion that marks all erotic pursuit as errant and explosive, even the intellectual?

Sukanta Chaudhuri writes in *The Metaphysics of Text*, "We read texts in more or less stable states captured in time . . . We can cite those stable states to oppose a more problematized notion of the text, as Dr Johnson refuted Berkeley's idealism by kicking at a stone. But the text, like the stone, was not always in that state; and its formation can only be explained in terms of other forces and other orders of being" (4). Indeed, one cannot hope to penetrate any text with some reasonable understanding without the penumbra that surrounds it, an understanding of where it drew its layers of being from, metaphysically as well as physically, and what makes it lodge itself in the present moment with the possibility of dislodgement always already imminent. Alongside I may place Marjorie Perloff's recent study, *Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics*, in which she draws from Marcel Duchamp's *Notes* on *infrathin/inframince* (1980), a method of reading where one reads minutely, through marking *difference* which is "*infrathin*": as Perloff interprets it, Duchamp iterates "that the same is never the same, and that hence every word, every morpheme and phoneme, and

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every rhythmic form chosen makes a difference" (6). The poet creates relationships – between words, images, contexts – that have *infrathin* possibilities of difference, and the reader comes to poetry with an eye to telling this difference.

Strung between the vastness of metaphysical forces and orders of being that surround a text (Chaudhuri) and the *infrathin* difference of micropoetics as a method of reading/writing (Perloff) lie, I suggest, multiple possibilities of a different, decolonial practice, erotic for being quick with uncontained and turbulent promise. If these two methods – of studying the penumbra, and of diving into the text with a pointed eye that exposes shifting meanings of words and sounds and offers new insights – appear to be contradistinctive, they are meant to be so: somewhere in the chasm that yawns between metaphysics (penumbra) and physics (*infrathin*) the shadow may lift, if only momentarily, to light up a third possibility of reading.

Walter Mignolo talks of the centrality of knowledge creation, and its locations: "it is composed of actors, languages, and institutions. The institutions involved are mainly colleges, universities, museums, research centers (think tanks), institutes, foundations, and religious organizations" (Mignolo and Walsh 143). We are particularly concerned here with institutions of higher education, and pedagogies and curricula for English literary studies – that which is at base a colonial practice. It would be easiest to wish to decolonize it by stripping it of its existence in the Global South, and to replace it with whatever is at the other end of the spectrum, untouched by the experience of the colonial. Is this possible? Can any knowledge be divested of its traces of the past? Should all literatures in English – not to mention critical writing – from the once and future colonizing territories be expunged, and a tabula rasa decolonial script be inscribed solely in noncolonizer/once-colonized tongues? Will the erasure of content erase the terms of the conversation – and how would conversation ensue, from nothing? If literature, and the teaching-learning of literature in the classroom, "must find again the place of eros within ourselves" as hooks sharply admonishes (199), would a homogeneous, secure, shared sense of origin with no fraught histories, located in the comfort zone of the familiar and acceptable, be the best impulse for the erotic?

Mignolo acknowledges three thinkers whose formulations on freedom and coloniality helped him construct his own theory of the decolonial – Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 1987), Aníbal Quijano ("Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," 2007), and Rodolfo Kusch

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(*Buenos Aires*, 1962) – to explain why he does not merely discard Western philosophers to replace them with the non-Western ("On Decoloniality" 1). Of Kusch, who studied Indigenous thinking of the Aymara population of northern Argentina and Bolivia, he sums up succinctly: "He reversed the geography of reasoning: instead of 'studying' Aymara's thoughts from Heidegger, he interrogated Heidegger through Aymara's thought" (1). In this traffic, Heidegger is not *replaced* but *displaced*. To me, this is far edgier in its politics, more erotic if one will, not to bluntly discard the enemy but to insinuate a wedge of suspicion, discomfort, and disentitlement that rocks the boat of power (what Mignolo calls the "colonial matrix of power," or the "CMP"). And this sharply political displacement can be pushed further, into conversation with both Mackinlay's living desire in-between, the "inter" – "intersubjective, intercorporeal, and intercultural" (155) – and Tudor's "category of gender as always already trans" (238).

Of Being Adrift and Reckless among Many Unknowns

Between *inter* and *trans* may fall the shadow: of hanging between, of bridging, or of shifting. There is always a strange tautness, for example, in poetry of the gendered body, about the sexed body – as if the body of the poem is exceeded by the shape of its words, always greater in the imagination before it is confined to a page. Poems of the body in particular seem to speak to each other across distances of space, time, and culture, often at counterpoint, sometimes throwing up uncanny echoes: creating conversations interspersed by shifts and fractures. I was struck by a concretization of this sense while browsing poetry: in an online competition inviting illustrations of poetry, three poems were listed from an eclectic collection of love poems selected and edited by Imtiaz Dharker. The poems, each electric, seemed to shoot sparks at each other when placed in conjunction: John Donne's "The Good-Morrow," Emily Dickinson's "Wild Nights – Wild Nights!," and Dharker's own "The Trick." Competing illustrators vied to come up with visuals for this set of poems, imaging assonances and dissonances, critical and creative minds coming together and pulling apart in this exercise. So much learning and expansion of thought, along with a sense of being adrift and reckless among many unknowns: both are achieved at the same time. This is a livewire method of exploring sexualities – throwing selected writings from varied sources together which exhibit some echoes and overlaps, and reading them closely for all that one may glean of and from them, together and separately, in their expressions and transgressions as well as their histories and geopolitics – and would work

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well in the literature classroom to shake the teaching-learning experience out of routine explicatory exercises.

From the three poems, I pick some lines to place against each other:

> Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
> Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.
> My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears
>
> Donne, "The Good-Morrow"

> Done with the Compass –
> Done with the Chart!
> Rowing in Eden –
> Ah – the Sea!
> Might I but moor – tonight –
> In thee!
>
> Dickinson, "Wild Nights – Wild Nights!"

> In a wasted time, it's only when I sleep
> that all my senses come awake. In the wake
> of you, let day not break. Let me keep
> the scent, the weight, the bright of you, take
> the countless hours and count them all night through
>
> Dharker, "The Trick"

A fascinating map of love, sex, time, space, exploration, dream, and longing emerges from the poems when read with and against each other, in their entirety of course – but even in extracts. From this map, multiple senses of history, geography, knowledge, culture, gender, form, and the imaginations of the three poets – completely distinct in location and age – are extracted, and a cross-section of ideas and expressions around lovers' bodies across oceans and time derived. Donne, English Metaphysical poet of the seventeenth century, envisions love and the lover's body in the wonder of exploration and the ultimate discovery of "worlds" in each other. Dickinson, young, isolated American poet of the nineteenth century who was herself "discovered" posthumously, is still communing with the charts and compasses of exploration – a central preoccupation of the Western world from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries – but rejects them in favor of mooring in the haven of a lover's body. Dickinson's distinctive poetic style and form, comprising staccato phrases and hung sentences, exclamation points, capitalization, and the liberal use of the dash that identifies her like no other, puts the similarity with Donne's immersion in the lovers' bodies out to sea, marking difference. Dickinson, writing in secret, can afford an abandon in her utterances (even as a young woman

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reared in conservative New England and schooled in a seminary) that Donne, a scholar-poet, a worldly man of many pursuits, including women, who finally became a dean of the Church of England, would hardly have been inclined toward. Dharker, a British poet of South Asian descent writing from the late twentieth century into the present, returns to the image of lovers at night with a distinct shift in mood and visualities, though the focus still hovers on the body and its sexual gratification. The cadence is more akin to prose conversation, the sexualized images more graphically daring – and yet the echoes with Donne and Dickinson reverberate.

Goaded by the dialogic possibilities of grouping a set of poems to read between and across, I offer three more poems from distant locations and tongues, which are, however, from poets broadly analogous in time. These may seem like collations common enough to world literature courses or anthologies, but my emphasis is on an unworlding rather than a worlding, and it works outside of marking specificities of location, culture, and time to explore forms and shapes of language and meanings that meet and splinter at once; the "penumbra" and the "*infrathin*" of the text as word. These poems are slotted under modernist to postmodernist/postcolonial in literary histories to provide rich material for a decolonial investigation into poems of/on the body speaking from diverse locations: "Corona" by Paul Celan, "Counterparts" by Octavio Paz, and "The Prisoner" by Kamala Das. While "Corona" is a slightly longer poem, "Counterparts" and "The Prisoner" are four and six lines each; all three focus on a single moment of intense physical togetherness, when the mind strays to hope, longing, fear – despite, or because of, bodily proximity. The first lines of each of the three poems set up the dramatic scenes of encounter:

> Autumn eats its leaf out of my hand: we are friends.
>
> Paul Celan, "Corona"

> In my body you search the mountain
>
> Octavio Paz, "Counterparts"

> As the convict studies
> his prison's geography
>
> Kamala Das, "The Prisoner"

I shall read a single image from each, to then expand into a larger understanding and critical knowledge of each poet's literary being and oeuvre.

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My eye goes down to my lover's sex:
we gaze at each other,
we speak of dark things

Celan, "Corona"

In your body I search for the boat
adrift in the middle of the night.

Paz, "Counterparts"

I study the trappings
of your body, dear love,
for I must some day find
an escape from its snare.

Das, "The Prisoner"

In immense intimacy, a shadow descends: this is the bare, perhaps incomparable truth of sexual love and longing. Celan, Paz, and Das are avant-garde modernist poets from distant continents, each groping to find words in their own languages of poetry to make sense of this shadow that is an inevitable corollary to desire's immersion in the body of a lover. The Romanian-born poet in German Celan is known for speaking "of dark things" in the history and politics of the Western world; here it is remaindered to the quietest act of intimate speech, when there is almost no physical space between lovers. Paradoxically enough, this possibility of speaking – especially of "dark things" – when physically intimate or imagining/anticipating intimacy, is what makes such moments memorable, difficult, exquisite. Paz, Mexican poet, diplomat, and literary scholar, steered his poetry around politics and/of sexualities, searching not for moorings but for "the boat adrift in the middle of the night" in the lover's body: for desire is to lose, rather than find, oneself in the other. A boat adrift invokes the impossibility of language, poignant too for those reading in translation: however close a translation is in letter and spirit, it can only approximate the original.

Searching for a boat adrift in the dark is to search for meaning in what cannot be apprehended; as T. S. Eliot (whom Paz admired greatly) has it in "Little Gidding,"

Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.

Fellow Mexican critic Ramón Xirau has a sharp comment on Paz's poetic play: "The poetry of Octavio Paz does not hesitate between language and

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silence; it leads into the realm of silence where true language lives" (219). One could propel it further along to think about what Paz does with a lover's longing to find in the body of the beloved "a boat adrift in the middle of the night": what, then, is the equivalence of being adrift in a body one is intimate with, if not to be continually lost and searching, continually distanced and desiring? And what does it mean, in the poem, for two lovers' desire for each other to be couched in two seemingly apposite metaphors from nature – a sun hidden in mountain forests, a boat adrift in the middle of the night – both evocative of a search, perhaps a futile one?

Kamala Das, fiery feminist Indian poet who wrote with equal felicity in her vernacular tongue Malayalam and in English, drives the knife of antagonism deep into the wedge between lovers' bodies in her short and succinct poem, "The Prisoner," where she imagines the beloved as a jailer, both from whose confinement and in whose body she must seek escape. The contradiction is as inescapable as the lover's predicament as "the prisoner": she must "study the trappings" of her lover's body closely – seek and find greater intimacy and knowledge in her explorations – so that she can plot her escape from its "snare." The poem is centered on the line "I study the trappings of your body, dear love" following on "As the convict studies / his prison's geography": the extended metaphor of a map (of her prison) runs through the entire six-line poem, a prison that is her lover's body, which she scrutinizes minutely in order to map a path for getting out. Or so she says. The trap is in the endearment, "dear love," carelessly appended to an apparently dire pronouncement; it balances the "snare" as Celan balances speaking of "dark things" with the line that follows it in "Corona" – "we love each other like poppy and memory" – and Paz has two perfect images for the two lovers, of traveling the body in four lines: one searching "the mountain / for the sun buried in its forest" and the other for a boat adrift on the water in the middle of the night.

This journey across poetic triads in languages, time, space, silences, and images that echo and separate, takes us around again to Elizabeth Mackinlay when she talks (quoted in the chapter epigraph) of finding "a way in, to *inter*" via decoloniality – albeit in the discipline of ethnomusicology – as the route she traces is one that can well be borrowed or stolen for literature: "to tangle up and tangle down what it means to live and work in-between: on the borders, on the edge, across, through and with difference" (155). A singular way to decolonize is clearly to upset the applecart of established teaching-learning frameworks that categorize and separate writers into boxes that cannot be messed with or tangled up. The politics

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of genders/sexualities point us to a very basic principle of deconstructing immovable frames: that they must be tangled up and tangled down and shifted around so that their paradigms are shaken and stirred, to fall into new and changing patterns of perception and knowledge. To be decolonial, one must not be afraid to sail into territories marked different – for difference, as Mackinlay quotes French feminist thinker and theorist Hélène Cixous, is the word that everything comes back to, in the end (156). To decolonize is to *inter*, to find one's way into established and bounded texts and categories, and as genders are and sexualities do, tie them up and tie them down, into and out of knots of one's own intricate making. What emerges at the end is an untying and an unknotting that disinters and discombobulates even as it produces new substances of wonder and curiosity.

Queer Method: "Sexual in the Queerest of Ways"

My interest in the decolonial is located in the boiler room of methodologies, where ideas about approaches bubble and steam – in Mignolo's *pluriversal* mode, as claiming a single efficacious method to "do" decoloniality would overturn the premise of heterogeneity and difference in which I have a critical stake – what one could call, in shorthand, genderqueer methods of doing the humanities. In a warm and generous call for new "sexual futures" spun by "Latina longings," Juana María Rodríguez opens her book by defining it as "an amorous gesture," and a queer one: "This gesture is a kind of touching, a way of sensing what might flow between us. It is sexual in the queerest of ways, meant to inspire intense feeling rather than reproduction; it is multisensory, asynchronic, polysemous, perverse, and full of promise" (1). There is little that can be stable and conserved amid such immense fluidity, polysemy, perversity: it can only upend and turn the expected around, and then around again, till one's known universe is trembling on the verge of endlessly new births. Suniti Namjoshi, feminist fabulist, had mocked our known universes thus:

> "And then, of course,"
> she was saying,
> "we have grown so great
> that now we dream
> only of the possible."
>
> "Altitudes"

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Namjoshi was among the first known queer poets to venture into impossible territories for her poetic form, and her feminist fables opened up a new vista for poetry and prose from the then fairly young stables of Indian English writing in the late decades of the twentieth century.

It is necessary and important to distinguish between queer methods for the social sciences and the humanities, as queer aesthetics have a playing field that is quite unique, allowing im/possibilities of form and content that are factored in by the freedom of creative imagination and impelled by the need, if not demand, to be always already different. In a special issue of the *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* in 2016 titled "Queer Methods," its editors Matt Brim and Amin Ghaziani begin their introduction by claiming a space for method over theory ("Queer studies is experiencing a methodological renaissance. In both the humanities and the social sciences, scholars have begun to identify research protocols and practices that have been largely overshadowed by dramatic advances in queer theory" [14]) and then go on to trace the reluctant recognition of "queer methods" in the broad disciplines, together and separately. As Brim and Ghaziani posit, it was not as if the early scholars who worked toward establishing gay and lesbian studies were not using queer methods, but that they were chary of delineating them as such as "that might have threatened queer theory's constitutional claims to inter/antidisciplinarity" (15). Along with a nascent queer method, there appeared to be an "overriding queer suspicion of method . . . Framed as a watershed . . . queer theory could then do new intellectual work: work unrestrained by identities, disciplinarities, and traditional methods" (16). However, as they note, this was an overwhelming paradox, for queer theory's use of self-narration/self-invention was nothing if not a methodological intervention and inquiry.

More recently, this wariness about claiming a method for queer academic work has waned, and along with this, perhaps, the distinction between methods for the social sciences and the humanities has become clearer. In the social sciences, queer methods reject empiricism as ultimate knowledge and generalizations as unviable, giving space to subjective narratives and embracing "multiplicity, misalignments, and silences" (Brim and Ghaziani 17). In the humanities, Brim and Ghaziani write, the changes have been manifold, coming from multiple quarters – feminist/queer, trans, non-White and non-Western – introducing distinctly resistant and intimate archival/imaginative methods of doing queer scholarship to the Anglo-American origins of LGBTQ studies. Juana María

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Rodríguez offers a felt account of these, and also other, winds of change in her book that explores sexual futures and queer gestures:

> Thinking about queerness through gesture animates how bodies move in the world, and how we assign meaning in ways that are always already infused with cultural modes of knowing. The gestures that I take up in this book are about the social and the sexual: the social as that force of connection and communion that binds us to friends and strangers, and the sexual as that tangled enactment of psychic encounters that promise ecstasy and abjection. (2)

The humanities, in not being tied to empirical data and analytics, allows for expansions and contractions beyond the categories of identity catalogued by Brim and Ghaziani – along with agreements and disagreements, shock, surprise, horror, pain, and joy – that can fold into itself what Rodríguez's gestures call for, multiple entanglements "that promise ecstasy and abjection," flying above and below singularities of color and community. Many of these entanglements call for comparison, contradiction, resistance, and rejection, along with abjection, hurt, and sadness – through to the other end of the spectrum: ecstasy, wonder, thrill, love, passion, beauty. The humanities is capacious enough to hold these in changing shapes, to examine them and interrogate them, to embrace them or discard them, but always to engage – which is why they do not need to reject any of their pasts or antecedents, but keep them in necessary and critical circulation as they enlarge or shrink their ambit at will, much like the social encounters and sexual entanglements one sieves in the course of living. Brim and Ghaziani reference a range of new critical queer thinking in the humanities, in which Phillip Brian Harper argues for "speculative rumination" making space for "guesswork and conjecture"; Peter Coviello for "long exposure" to texts; Heather Love for "close reading and thin description"; Paisley Currah for a "provisional and generative" transgender feminist methodology that is modeled on gender asymmetry rather than neutrality or plurality (18–19). Drawing upon these queer methods for literature will mean upending traditional methodologies: not by replacing them, but by accepting the path of "complex returns" to intellectual, social, and political inheritances, and by creating a space of interaction with them for new methods to emerge that will propel conversations forward.

Alyosxa Tudor in "Decolonising Trans/Gender Studies?" makes a brief but remarkable statement that invites the decolonial project for genders/sexualities to recognize gender's inherent and sustained characteristic of shape-shifting – "a decolonial perspective on gender means conceptualizing

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the category of gender as always already trans" (238) – which finds a promising equivalence in literary studies. To conceptualize – understand, recognize, and imagine – the shape of a category of identification as changing, shifting, chameleon-like, is to question the essential nature of that identity, expected to be always already stable. What does this mean for a method of study? It means at base that a queer method should neither seek stability in the representations or discussions of gender that it studies, nor aspire to be stable and unchanging in its ways of apprehending them. "Always already trans" then opens up possibilities not just for the present and future, but also for the past: this is to me particularly significant, for it allows revisits to stubborn pasts that can also now be seen as "always already" shifting and uncertain.

While the dismissal of radical positions that use "a simplistic understanding of sexual violence to legitimize feminist transphobia" (Tudor 244) in the West, and some strains of antigender debates in the Global South (Tudor 245), are well taken, Tudor clarifies that "trans-ing gender" involves the crucial practice of *criticizing* and *interrupting* (249) dominant Western scripts and methods for doing trans/gender studies – and therefore, not *dismissing* them to cater to neoliberal academia's fetishes:

> I see the endeavor of decolonizing higher education as a necessarily multilayered and collective process that pays attention to gaps, complex contradictions, and differently positioned complicities. In my view, any decolonization must bridge diaspora approaches with approaches from the global South, connect indigenous studies with migration studies, and question the paradigm of the nation-state. Moreover, feminist, queer, and trans perspectives and their deconstructions of gender and sexuality are crucial for decolonizing epistemologies and spaces. (250)

The assimilation of a new literary curriculum anywhere in the world must be a similar process, accruing to itself multiplicities of content and method, both of which come naturally to gender and sexuality studies. If far more destabilizing queer/trans methods of critical interrogation can be imported into literary studies – those that begin and continue with a strong and clear sense of the various layers that constitute a text, its changing histories, its assonances and dissonances, its own shifts in shape as well as critical and/or resistant responses to it – then a more contemporary and political approach to literary studies via trans-ing is possible. This will be distinct from other methods – such as feminist, Marxist – that also seek to destabilize established structures of power in narratives, by focusing on the body, or shape, of the text, in how words carry (or fail to carry, as Jack

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Halberstam claims movingly and eruditely in *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2011) the brunt of its meanings, and how the text itself is never rigid for its masses of readers across time and space. It is crucial to see instability and uncertainty as richness and depth rather than as shortcomings, in order to embrace the shape-and-color-shifting nature of a text as a characteristic that gives and gives.

Heather Love in her short, succinct essay "Queer Messes," in the *WSQ* Special issue on "Queer Methods," cautions: "Because it is not merely an epistemological conflict, the tension between *queer* and *method* can never be resolved. Rather, this tension is material – and here to stay" (347). This, I would think, is especially felicitous for a transhistorical, transnational, and difficult matter such as a curriculum for literature, that the tension between identity and method is irresolvable, material, and here to stay. It is the only way into, and "to *inter*," as Mackinlay had it, the unruly, transforming realities and fantasies that make up literature, wedging one's gaze in the "*infrathin*" difference between uncertain knowledges of the gendered material body that is "always already trans," and the shifting, textured, layered materiality of the text.

Coda

This essay – this text – wishes to be a shape-shifter: to constrict and expand, to engorge and contract, changing through its encounters with various other words and texts, poetic and critical, as it meanders toward this coda – to end by reaching out to touch the symbolic and the elemental. It attempts to challenge the governmental/colonial/institutional/academic sense of how a reading must proceed, how it should set out all parameters of its argument at the start, how it should contain the number of poets it alludes to, how it should explain each line it quotes and reference its referent in the argument – by spilling over its edges, repeating, constricting, layering (like the palimpsest I claimed as a metaphor for literatures and genders/sexualities at the start) – hoping that some thought here, some idea or poetry there, will echo like a footfall in the reader's vast repertoire of conscious and unconscious readings and experiences. That the exploration of "trans-ing" appears as a late thought in the sequence of writing in this essay about trans/gressive erotic methods of critical reading is deliberate: it wants to be that layer in this essay that is discovered only to uncover those that lie beneath it (of feminist theories of the social, for example), to revisit and revise even as one reads or writes. Trans-ing brings us closer to the body like no other – the body of the self, the lover, the parent, the child, the

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other, the poem, the word – and keeps us there insistently in its discomfiting materiality of presence, reaching out to nudge and touch us into confronting all that shakes us out of ease. I cannot emphasize enough how capacious and enriching this unease is and must be, and how its failures are as illuminative as its successes: for opening up, for striking down, for unbuilding, for unworlding, for decolonizing those seemingly large boxes within which we are told we must operate in our critical forays into literatures, genders, sexualities.

I will end by lighting a path through a few texts that excavate this body and this touch. Henri Cole, contemporary American poet, writes of sycamores and the burning human body that emerges from and melts into its limbs, "touching across some new barrier of touchability":

> I came from a place with a hole in it,
> my body once its body, behind a beard of hair.
> And after I emerged, all dripping wet,
> little drops came out of my eyes, touching its face.
> I kissed its mouth; I bit it with my gums.
>
> "Sycamores"

Cole makes a series of astonishingly erotic moves between and beyond the human and natural worlds, "I lay on it like a snail on a cup, / my body, whatever its nature was, / revealed to me by its body": we are not sure what "it" is, but there "was a hard, gemlike feeling . . . like limbs of burning sycamores." The approximation, the signifier, the measure of everything that is experienced as bodily sensation, is this liquid and fiery thing, *the limbs of burning sycamores*. The body *inters* and *trans*-es in this one fluid movement. Its beauty is, and shrivels, simultaneously – "I did not know I was powerless before a strange force. / I did not know life cheats us" – but this intensely erotic contradiction is still "touching/across some new barrier of touchability."

In a study "on touching and not touching" across (old, constructed) barriers of un/touchability between humans alone in a specific historical and cultural context, Aniket Jaaware reads carefully between elements and forms of touch and notes that while elements of touch are common to all touch, "touch, however, has only one *form*, which is that of contact. It can be seen, we believe, that contact itself is of a two-fold nature: It is the *form* of touch, and at the same time, the *content*" (21). In social realities, the form and content of touch may diverge to create disturbances and dislocations, while in the philosophical and creative imagination, it is possible for these

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barriers and fissures to dissolve, engendering new and changing patterns of touch that rarely ossify.

Octavio Paz, in reading the Marquis de Sade philosophically and aesthetically in *An Erotic Beyond: Sade*, talks of the necessary and "universal dissolution" of erotic barriers between the living and nonliving if one is not to live as an automaton: "There is nothing more concrete than this table, that tree, that mountain . . . they only become abstract through the force of a will that uses them or a consciousness that thinks them. Turned into instruments or concepts, they abandon their reality; they cease to be these things, but they continue to be things" (*Erotic Beyond*, 53). Paz demurs that the psyche of the libertine treats fellow humans as "erotic objects": he "does not desire the disappearance of the other consciousness. He conceives of it as a negative reality: neither concrete existence nor abstract instrument . . . The erotic object is neither a consciousness or a tool, but rather a relation, or more exactly, a function: something that lacks autonomy and that changes in accordance with the changes of the terms that determine it" (*Erotic Beyond*, 54–55).

The changing literary erotic object finally comes to rest in language: language that is inherited and tussled with, like the poet's inspiration, and language that is elusive and transforming, like the beloved's, which the poet both touches and cannot ever fully touch. In Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali's lyrics that give a new embodiment to the *ghazal* form, the veins of the poet imprison the blood of his poetic ancestor; in turn he transforms his inspiration into another language, trapping form and lineage even while transgressing tongues. In a succession of bodies, poetry enacts a bloodline and its exile at once:

> Your lines were measured
> so carefully to become in our veins
> the blood of prisoners. In the free verse
> of another language I imprisoned
> each line – but I touched my own exile.
>
> "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz," 58

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