

Isa Hussain

GS400 Senior Thesis I

Oct 21, 2021, edited Nov 21 – Dec 22, 2021

Prof. Najnin Islam

Senior Thesis Performance Project Methodologies

Crafting this project and the process of getting there has taken months upon months to articulate, and much personal growth has been necessary in its development. Leaving my undergraduate institution with this last project – a culmination of my experiences in the academy thus far, as well as a reflection of the lived-experiences I’ve had as a Brown person navigating the US my whole life – must be situated in and around my own body, the vessel that has carried me through time, rooted me in physicality, and provided a home for me when no other *location* could. In many ways, my primary methodology is through body, my body, which has remained an essential part of this project since inception. In mining the possibilities of my own body, the word ‘Brownness’ kept arising as one of the only aspects of my identity that felt grave and reliable enough to build upon. I come to this thesis with the belief that the body holds a universe of experience, emotion, memory, and knowledge, and Brown bodies possess Brown versions of these things. Initially taking place in a US-based college named after the colonial and bordered ‘Colorado’ in a nation that originally was home to the Ute, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne Brown people, the body becomes the only place, besides oceans and other bodies, that my non-Indigenous self can find a notion of home. Additionally, creating from a settler colonial nation and college built on the genocide and labor of Brown- and browned-bodied people, I understand Brownness as holding subjugated universes of experience, emotion, memory, and knowledge. In

other words, Brownness here, in its relationship to colonialism and European logic, is already queer. It exists on the outside (Munoz 2020).

It is through this project that I seek to mine these queer universes from the contexts of myself. Therefore, my understanding of how my Brownness works is mine. No one knows it better than I do. Nevertheless, I create this project alongside a collection of mentors, guides, and creative ensemble members who have helped me hone in how ‘Brownness,’ its feelings, and its theory could manifest in a performance that orients around the body.

Furthermore, this performance intends to produce a space where Brownness can be normative – or un-queered. This means two things. (1) I am invested in creating a space that allows for individual specificity while also being capacious enough to allow for universes of possibilities. It is meant to be engaged with by many. (2) I seek to queer European colonial epistemological traditions (of categorization, race, war, state, commodification, etc) through centering Brown world-making through performance (Kapadia 2018; Munoz 2020). For Kapadia, “Indeed it is this mode of queerness that we might elaborate in our work by employing reading practices that denaturalize or queer that is, make strange processes like security and warfare that rely upon the presumption of their naturalness” (2016).

Finally, I want to mark the methodologies I’m working with as feminist and embodied – which are very much in overlap with each other. Without repeating what I have said thus far, this project is situated. It takes place in the day-to-day happenings of my life – through prayer, wudhu and washing, vocalizing, resting, breathing, and so on. It exists through the Brown and browned bodies that have (in)formed the ways that I think, know, and believe. It is a project from love, of the body, of my self, of my communities, and of God. The rest of this document further flushes out the feminist and embodied methodologies I take to this project, then discusses the

actual making of the performance itself: through animating textual theory and histories as well as going into more detail about my creative process.

Feminist Methodologies

The first focus of these methodologies is on feminist methodology. Situating my creative work in feminist methodological traditions allows me to engage with my own lived-experiences (through emotions, positionality, religion, etc) in ways that permit me to articulate Brownness in new ways that are in conversation with the likes of Jose Estaban Munoz, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Rajiv Mohabir, and Aliyah Khan. This tradition embraces the subjectivity innate to all epistemological categories within the academy. Especially in a project that blatantly engages the personal through positionality, journaling, movement exercise, community, and other subjective modes of knowledge production, I want to give credit to the feminist thinkers who helped make situated and subjugated knowledges, emotionality, and art viable foundations for producing knowledge within the academy, where my thesis is being made.

Without reiterating much of the methodological work I have already completed, I aim to briefly summarize the methodological practices I engage during this project. For a more detailed look into my choices to engage feminist epistemological and methodological traditions, I point to my "Diasporic Artistic Epistemologies: Methods" essay. However, in considering this paper, there are some developmental changes to mark. First, instead of claiming a nationalistic or ethnic identity, I replace mentions of 'Guyanese' or even 'diasporic' with the word 'Brown,' as I configure Brownness grounded more in a shared earthy humanness than preoccupied with colonial racial politics. This, of course, does not refute the membership Brown bodies hold with different communities but opens up this project to more possibilities that lie beyond European epistemological organizations. Additionally, the final section entitled "For the Future" may be

disregarded or read as a section limited to the work-in-progress stage of this project. The other sections may also be read as developed during the work-in-progress stage, but they are able to migrate into this document, which outlines my final methodological engagements for this thesis.

In the paper, I first discuss the method question itself using Katherine Side's chapter "Methods" (2012) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012): What is a feminist methodology? Why have I chosen to situate myself in feminist methodological traditions as a performance artist? Secondly, I delve into a discussion of how and why I use (diasporic) subjectivity, citing Alison Jaggar's "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" (1989), Donna Haraway's "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988), and Ronak Kapadia's "Up in the Air and On the Skin: Drone Warfare and the Queer Calculus of Pain" (2018). In doing so, I also respectfully engage and somewhat reconceptualize the themes of outlawed emotion and diasporic expressive culture, which are used in Jaggar and Kapadia's pieces, respectively. Throughout my discussion of these themes, I remain committed to situating my investment in diasporic artistic epistemologies and their usefulness to deconstructing and challenging western epistemological culture. Further, I rely on the ways that diasporic and specifically Brown people make 'sense' of the world they find themselves in, entailing an epistemological commitment to subjectivity. Therefore, my angle in this artistic project is one that takes my own positionality seriously as a singular Brown diasporic way to make sense of the world. In other words, my art can be a truth, without attempting to become 'the truth.' The contributions I make to diasporic artistic knowledge help offer another positioning, another account; this helps make my own subjectivity a feminist objectivity.

Imagining Futures with Embodied Practices

I present my creative approach as this project's second methodological strategy. An embodied methodology entails both producing knowledge from the ideas of the body as well as the practical applications of it. The ideas and mythologies that live within the body invite me to create in conversation with ancestors, spirituality, and other perhaps intangible residents of the body.

What I want to discuss briefly in this section is the storytelling potential of practical exercise of the body, through its movement and physicality. Working with generative prompting, video and handwritten journaling, and unguided movement work, I am able to use my body to apply the intellectual research and preparation I have done as a precursor to this performance's development. In this context, performance becomes the method where I manifest the personal and intellectual labor that compose my methodologies. Through creating performance for surveillance and consumption, I theorize Brownness as a manifestation of the world that has always been (Brown) and the world that exists on the horizon (queer) (Munoz 2020). This project is invested in futures, and critical to any project figuring 'future' is the importance of imagining. Imagining, in this case, exists in a space that lies beyond the knowledge presently available, or dominant.

Helping me configure this future is a collection of works by artists and thinkers who engage Brown, Black, and diasporic histories and offer new ways of understanding the intimacies intrinsic to Brownness. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Ronak Kapadia, Wafaa Bilal, Aliyah Khan, Jose Esteban Munoz, Kareem Khubchandani, Lisa Lowe, Vivek Bald, and others who are located across disciplines underscore the pervasive nature of Brown worldings and intimacies. Through migration, labor, war, and colonization, bodies that were never meant to exist together forged intimate connections despite European invasive logics' attempts to divide

and exploit (Tinsley 2008; Khan 2020). These intimacies inform the ways in which I understand Brownness's omnipresence and futurism, as well as the way I physically move through life and into this project.

In engaging movement, voice, and pretend, I draw from the knowledges which have been produced within my own communities and ancestries. To be clear, when I reference 'Brown' throughout this thesis, it does not necessarily have or need a precise definition. Much of the work that I am doing in this paper relies on my own positionality and personhood and therefore can be related to by anyone who finds home in the word 'Brown.' In creating from a Brown location, I take responsibility for the ways that I theorize Brownness through its place on my body and in my ancestral-present experiences; as I mentioned before, it is situated. Furthermore, this creative methodology fundamentally originates from the theory, fluidity, opacity, and inconsistency of Brownness.

Themes of capacious and resistance intimacy, joy in criminality and mischief, play and satirical commentary, queer religious lasciviousness, and the (im)possibilities of loss all arise as parts of a queer, feeling-being Brown betweenness. These themes are mined through creative, generative explorations of movement, screaming/vocalizing, and (non)sensical writing from my universe of diasporic, displaced, and exiled Brown community. Survival, poverty, labor, music, and touch are all aspects that exist amid the themes above, with this project placing joy at its beginning. In doing so, I humor the murkiness and clean indefinability of Brownness as it exists in locations and systems that brown (verb) feelings and bodies.

Creative Process

In this section, I will expand upon my creative process and how it has been built using the body as well as some of the historical and theoretical readings that I've engaged this past semester.

Fitting into the methodologies introduced above, one of the biggest methods I engage through this process is external processing/community venting. This step inherently implores the involvement and collaboration of my advisors, my family, friends, and creative peers.

Furthermore, one fundamental intention in this project was to resist genrefication as symbolic of Brown resistance to Western epistemological organizational frameworks. For example, [ERROR // ist](#) emphasizes movement as one of its primary modes of storytelling – not dance. Additionally, vocalization – not song – serves as a mode of storytelling that resists the narrative that language is an essential part of a Brown way of being.

Below is a breakdown of each of the main pieces in *ERROR // ist*.

(1) **(Im)**

The first major piece in *ERROR // ist* attempts to complicate notions of home for Brown, queer, and queer Brown individuals, especially those who experience loss through migration, queerphobia, death, and war. Home here is a space inherently filled with familiarity, warmth, and play but also can be a space of discomfort, danger, and harmful normativity. This piece specifically deals with queer migration, or queer departure, as a cyclical, browning/queering process.

Much of this story was pulled from the very real experiences of both the active mover, Tsering Dhondup, and me (seated). Therefore, creating the movement, vocalizations, and storyline pushed us to interrogate our relationships and images of 'home', migration, and

racialization. Through this deliberation, images of the ocean, ‘finger foods,’ and sandals mimed their way into some of the movement in the beginning section in order to designate the first space as ‘home.’ This first section is the initial point where we had to play with how my voice and Tsering’s movement could mimic, follow, depart from, and confront each other. Here, my voice and Tsering’s movement alternate in leading where the narrative moves next: to an intimate space of community care, feasting, and passing heirlooms.

From this point, the warmth of the home space drastically shifts, and discomfort makes its way into voice and body – through itching, choking, wailing, and pulling. This is where the queer Brown departure initiates, and migration ensues across a minefield of shoes stolen from the audience, who left their shoes at the theatre entrance (implicating possibilities of war, criminality, and masjid etiquette). In the final section, more queering/browning happens, and this new space of refuge/escape/opportunity also becomes a space of discomfort and mustering agency. Here, artificial Asian dances and exaggerated vocal parts juxtapose to underscore the absurdity of racialization and racial performance in the context of recognizable racial or cultural difference. This is inevitably followed by a sort of realization of being browned and a reckoning with the foreignness of one’s own Brownness in diaspora. This leads to a scene of a breakage from ‘home,’ carried by the dissonance between the movement and vocal work; then, a second breakage takes place: from the new, third space, carried by Tsering’s return to the shoe-full, liminal space where he commiserates with me (as elder, as family, as partner, etc) and takes agency in forging an ambiguous path for himself.

The process of creating this piece involved a lot of play, journaling, feedback, telepathy, and revision. In the process of coming up with a vocal roadmap, I sat down after hitting a block and called my mother to ask her a long list of questions about her life, her favorite songs, and her

motherhood. This process brought a level of emotionality, combined with a healthy dose of humor, to the vocal parts of (Im). The last creative strategy I want to mention here is this piece's investment in improvisation, which is both symbolic of the play involved in creating the piece as well as in the telepathy required from Tsering and me in order to bounce off each other. In the planning process, we both developed an idea of what kind of sounds and movements we may feed each other, creating shared vocabularies for ourselves to become familiar with the others' affect.

(2) Pieces

Entitled 'Pieces' after originally being referenced as the 'queer Brown piece,' 'Pieces' shed its 'queer Brown' title in the spirit of normalizing and unqueering Brownness and Brown intimacies. Heavily influenced by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," Vivek Bald's *Bengali Harlem*, and Aliyah Khan's "Voyages Across Indenture," this piece delves into the breaking and forging of Brown bonds that were never meant to exist – brought on by systems of forced and coerced labor, colonization, poverty, and war.

Set upon the sounds, movements, and setting of the ocean, this piece tells a story with no inherent beginning or end. It is introduced by a rain dance performed by a godlike figure, Tamar Crump, who commands the laying of the fabric of ocean. From there, the narrative of Brown oceanic intimacy fills a window of only a few minutes, allowing a glimpse into the bond forged and broken between performer Rayn Fox's body and mine. This piece is highly focused on pulling attention toward the surveillances directed toward Brown intimacies – especially in the ones marked as queer – by the state and war apparatuses, media, European beauty standards, normative family members, and the self (via intrinsic and interpersonal sabotages spread by systems of queerphobia, colonialism, racism, etc). It is these systems that oftentimes prevent and

threaten Brown intimacies from thriving; nevertheless, this piece is also a love letter to the Brown intimacies that do exist and thrive despite the systems put in place that orient Brown lives, value, and bodies around whiteness and material capital.

In the movement itself, I was inspired by water, marine life (flora and fauna), Tinsley's stylistic writing in "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," as well as by boats. This flowy, liquid movement was infused into a story inspired by the conversations Rayn and I shared, as well as by the intimate conversations and relationships I share with many of my close friends and family members – many of whom also mark themselves as queer. The exact location (in time, space, life, or death) and the exact nature of Rayn and my relationship in the piece are meant to be ambiguous and fluid, like water. The possibilities are wide for how I intend "Pieces" to be read. Mimicking seaweed, fish, and drowning, the movement itself embodies the waters which many descendants of slavery and indentureship have intimate relationships with, because there is no other choice. Much death and birth occurred over waters, where indigeneity and ancestral knowledges were taken away and amnesia-ed – creating a brand of diaspora I call severed. Nevertheless, new bonds and new cultures were and are being produced by these Brown, diasporic communities, becoming the metaphorical lungs for each other to keep breathing (choreographed in the final moments of the song "TRANSPARENCY" by KAMAUU), which Vivek Bald engages throughout *Bengali Harlem* and is exemplified in Kareem Khubchandani's "Terrifying Performances." Therefore, this piece is grounded in the intimacies, coalitions, and solidarities among communities which Western epistemological frameworks try to divide via hierarchical understandings of class, caste, race, religion, and so on.

Some other aspects of the movement work done for "Pieces" that I would like to discuss are its attention to gender queerness and the fabric set itself. Firstly, the piece plays with the

gender roles inherent in heteronormative relationships, projected from its surveillers specifically, having moments of physical, support, mutuality, and control that refuse to be prescribed exclusively to either one of us. This was especially important for us to include in the movement (such as through grabbing necks, guiding, holding, laying on each other, pushing, pulling, lifting, protecting, etc), as two non-binary, markedly subversive, queer individuals. Finally, the set itself was made of many textures and colors of fabric which, in combination with the lighting design, offered the intention of water that simultaneously worked as a symbolic quilt, a metaphor for the mismatched intimacies stitched together in diasporic communities.

(3) e-ارح

The final piece, e-ارح ,ح held the most anxiety for me, as it embodies one of the most vulnerable, yet adamant, part of my Brown experience: the relationship between my queerness and my Islam. To be clear, this piece is invested in commenting on the tampered versions of Islam as a religion of power; at the same time, it also embodies and repossesses Islam as a religion of love. Queerness, like nationality or ethnicity, in this piece becomes something Muslimness exists alongside and intertwined with; they affect each other, and there is no ‘answer’ for how Islam is supposed to be in conversation with it, a concept discussed by Aliyah Khan in her book *Far From Mecca*.

That said, I want to draw attention to how movement, Islamic structuralism, and sound all work together to create a queer Muslim ‘lascivious’ narrative, which for me is rich in satire, spirituality, and deconstructive dissonance. The beginning portion of the piece involves my moving diagonally across the performance space, beginning with ablution from a bucket of water. In this wudhu, I wet my socks, which is the beginning of the breakage of logic and Islamic structuralism sitting throughout the piece – a play on the normative illogics projected onto queer

Muslims in normative communities. Throughout this scene, however, there is also a focus on soothing. A constant bassy humming sound accompanying the first section enforces a more personal, genuine, and peace-giving image of Islam oriented around love, which offers security and warmth in spite of the villainy and deviance ascribed to queer Muslim bodies. The movement portion occurring between the wudhus also aligns with this idea of soothing through gentle, simple choreography, but moreso works to situate the body in the space around it, allowing for a repossession of an Islamic body (punctuated by ablution on either side) to begin.

Once the track itself begins, the breaking down of the queer Muslim body ensues – a breaking down that is physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. The movement, as well as its accompanying cacophonous track, embodies the dehumanization (and demonization) deeply felt by queer Muslims in many normative Muslim spaces. Here, Islamness and Muslimness depart from each other until the end of the piece, except when religious performance (such as prostration, rakat, and facing the qibla) is implicated and deconstructed through fractured movement – inspired partly by Aliyah Khan's *Far From Mecca*'s commentaries on Muslimness as religious performance. The in-between movement is filled with moments of the body holding fear, lewdness, pleasure, and violence, offering a physical manifestation of what it feels like for one's Muslimness (community, identity, religion) to be divided from one's Islamness (Allah, spirituality, peace). Overall, this piece attempts to share a narrative of queer Muslim breakage until there is no other option but to repossess Islam in explicitly queer, love-oriented ways. This process of being dirtied, bloodied, and consumed thus ends how it began: through cleansing (from wudhu to head shaving), dhikr, and queer celebration (through piercing/penetration and Brown male handholding).

The last thing I wanted to include here is one thing one of my advisors, Pallavi Sriram, observed from attending the works-in-progress showings. The final moment of *ERROR // ist* helps shed some light on the overall structure of the performance. It arises a collection of duets, with familiar faces of the ensemble rotating throughout the first pieces until the very end when there is a new bond introduced with an unfamiliar, new face – Pralad Mishra.

Conclusion

In a short conclusion, I aim to summarize *ERROR // ist* as a performance invested in futures, including how I will use it as a developmental milestone in doing more creative work post-undergrad. The process of creating *ERROR // ist* has combined much intellectual engagement, artistic and physical rigor, and community storytelling. It has offered me practice in fusing these worlds together in order to use performance as a space of new world building invested in unqueering Brownness in all the ways it shows up – through migration, feeling, intimacy, labor, religion, diaspora, sex, and so on (Munoz, 2020). I feel confident in continuing to hone in my own situated, creative process – involving depths of fluidity, community care and feedback, music, journaling, prompting, listening, my faith, quotidian abstractions, and play – in the future. Until then, I anticipate taking moments of rest leading into and becoming part of the next creative engagement – for which change must happen; life must be lived; and lessons must be learned.

References

- Bald, Vivek. "Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America." 2012, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674067578>.
- Espiritu, Yê'n Lê, and Lan Duong, 2018. "Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2018, vol. 43, no. 3: 587-615.
- Haraway, Donna, 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575-599.
- Jaggar, Alison M., 1989. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," *Inquiry* 32 (1989): 151-176.
- KAMAUU. "TRANSPARENCY." Spotify. https://open.spotify.com/track/3LR7zdsIIHxU32N15gXY6a?si=VRvAsZ1jTOOerdE_61l-ug.
- Kapadia, Ronak, 2016. "Up in the Air and On the Skin: Drone Warfare and the Queer Calculus of Pain." In *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*, ed. Nada Elia et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 360-375.
- Kapadia, Ronak K. *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War*. Duke University Press, Durham. Art History Publication Initiative, 2019.
- Khan, Aliyah. *Far from Mecca: Globalizing the Muslim Caribbean*. New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134360-09501026>.

Khan, Aliyah. "Voyages across Indenture." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016, pp. 249–280., <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3428771>.

Khubchandani, Kareem. "Terrifying Performances: Black, Brown, Queer Borrowings in Loins of Punjab Presents." *Journal of Asian American Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Oct 2016. pp 275-297.

Muñoz, José Esteban, et al. *The Sense of Brown*. Duke University Press, 2020.

Side, Katherine, 2012. "Methods," in Catherine Orr, Ann Braithwaite and Diane Lichtenstein (Eds.) *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies* (New York: Routledge): 51-64.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai, 2012. "Foreword," "Introduction," and "Imperialism, History, Writing and Theory," in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Second Edition (London: Zed Books): ix-xv, 1-78.

Tinsley, O. N. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2-3, 2008, pp. 191–215., <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-030>.