

The Technopo(e)litics of Rupri Kaur: (de)Colonial Aesthetics and Spatial Narrations in the DigiFemme Age

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***Abstract:** Rupri Kaur, a trending poetess of Instagram, has recently gained critical acclaim online for her newly published poetry collection *milk and honey* which is a stunning depiction of trauma, survival, love, womanhood, and friendship. Identifying as a first-generation Canadian, Punjabi-Sikh, woman of color, Kaur works visually in her book and on Instagram to portray and subvert how space functions to produce the gendered, diasporic subject as a body that is “unhomed.” Through the complex interplay of illustrated imagery and verse, Kaur contests the violent spatial (and bordering) practices of nationalism by positioning her poems’ personae in new and different ways to occupy, produce, and claim space off and online—performances of celebration, reclamation, resistance, and ultimately, acts of (de)colonial self-love. Kaur’s art and cyberspatial narration adds an important dimension to considering the colonial project of space. Occupying space on Instagram, Kaur supplants the place where women have traditionally been relegated. It is exactly the embodied telling of Kaur’s artwork that she attributes to the importance of its public nature: the Instagram becomes the home—rehomed by her art—whereas the nation becomes the network. Through Kaur’s narratives shared online, Kaur connects to a cyberspatial sisterhood and demonstrates that healing through narrative is necessarily collective.*

In the anthology *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur describe diaspora (a highly contested and fraught term) as that which refers to communities dislocated or displaced from their native homelands (1, 4). Postcolonial theorists, including literary scholar Homi Bhabha as well as Braziel and Mannur, refer to this process of diaspora as “unhoming” and this state of being (diasporic subjectivity) as an “unhomeliness” (qtd. in DasGupta 3, Braziel and Mannur 15). Diaspora, or

diasporic identity, then, is a lived and experienced spatial phenomenon whereby one's body is 'unhomed' in a multitude of ways.

Rupi Kaur, a trending poetess^[1] of Instagram, has recently gained critical acclaim online for her newly published poetry collection *milk and honey* which is a stunning depiction of trauma, survival, love, womanhood, and friendship. Identifying as a first-generation Canadian, Punjabi-Sikh, woman of color,^[2] Kaur works visually in her book and on Instagram to portray and subvert how space functions to produce the gendered, diasporic subject as a body that is "unhomed" (Braziel and Mannur 15). In her design poetry,^[3] Kaur resists diasporic 'unhoming' but recovers diasporic subjectivity as one that 'homes.' Through the complex interplay of illustrated imagery and verse, Kaur contests the violent spatial (and bordering) practices of nationalism by positioning her poems' personae in new and different ways to occupy, produce, and claim space off and online—performances of celebration, reclamation, resistance, and ultimately, acts of self-love. Kaur's art and cyberspatial narration adds an important dimension to considering the colonial project of space, one that is central to the "racist, heterosexist, and gendered foundations of nations, nation-states, [and] even diaspora" (16). In sharing her poetry online, Kaur also connects to cyberspatial sisterhoods, demonstrating that healing through narrative is always necessarily collective.

Using the work of Judith Butler, Gayatri Gopinath, Victoria M. Bañales, Eithne Luibhéid, Sherene Razack, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, I first address—in "Gendered/ing Space, Raced/ing Nation"—how Kaur comments upon and critiques the racialized and gendered experience of diaspora as that which makes apparent the processes of social stratification by way of nation through its constructions of female sexuality and in the regulatory norms of white western beauty ideals. Next, in "Naturalizing Femininity: Body as Land, Body as Art," I again employ queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath and feminist scholars Shannon Sullivan and Jane Rendell to describe the ways in which Kaur simultaneously subverts *and* reproduces essentialized visions of women and/as nation, representing the feminine principle and female body aesthetically as natural environments, home-spaces, and objects of art. In the following section, "Sisterhood as/in Cyberspace," I apply the theories of Lisa Nakamura, Chandra Mohanty, Breny Mendoza, Arjun Appadurai, Victoria Bernal, Mary Flanagan, Latoya Lee, Edward W. Soja, and Roderick A. Ferguson to discuss how, through sharing her narratives online through Instagram, Kaur connects with a digital sisterhood, thus claiming Instagram as her and her sisters' *virtual homeplace* (Lee 91). In "Rehoming/Unhoming Resistance(s)," I suggest that Kaur recovers diasporic subjectivity as one that 'homes,' transforms the

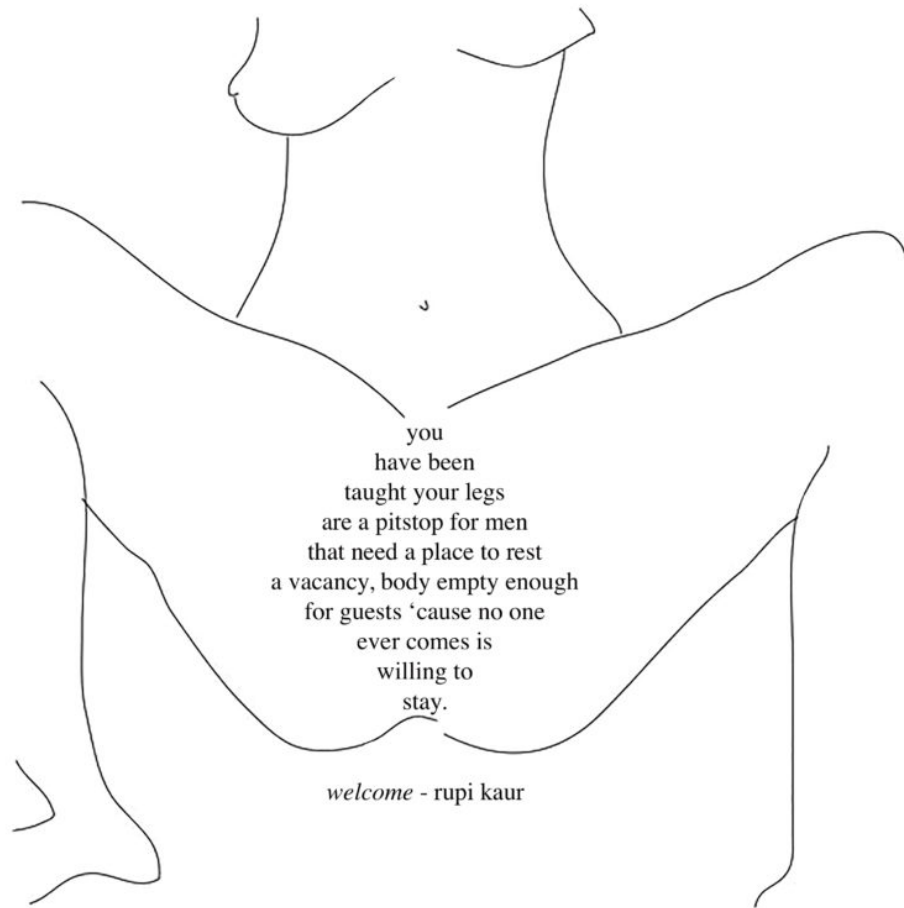
place of her body by celebrating it, and thereby asserts sovereign power over her embodiment. Finally, in “Narrative Healing: (de)Colonial Aesthetics/Sis,” I argue that Kaur’s art offers us an option for communal and self-healing. By utilizing Walter Dignolo’s framework of decolonial aesthetics/Tics, I seek to acknowledge the colonial/decolonial contradictions of Kaur’s art: “like any other option, [it must] deal with internal differences” (209).

Akin to white feminist discourses that flatten difference, in Kaur’s writing, biologically-regimented and essentialized femininity—through word and images of traditional female bodily forms—reinforce the construction of binary “womanhood” (as it relates to sisterly solidarity) that takes place in her compositions: “We are so graceful. So regal. We have the universe inside of us. The power of our bodies is a miracle. I love my womanly curves [...] I love that about us, how capable we are of letting ourselves feel so much...that takes strength. Just being a woman, calling myself *woman*, makes me feel like a queen” (Brown). I employ the terms “female” and “woman” respectively in my paper, not to conflate the two, but rather to lean into and critique the cis-centric^[4] ways cyberfeminisms may operate and convene around Kaur’s art (Mendoza). As an anti-cis gesture, I employ the phrase *digifemme* to acknowledge the room for those who read Kaur’s art from a multiplicity of genders and in all sorts of ways, as femininity is largely the terrain Kaur writes upon and (re)negotiates.^[5]

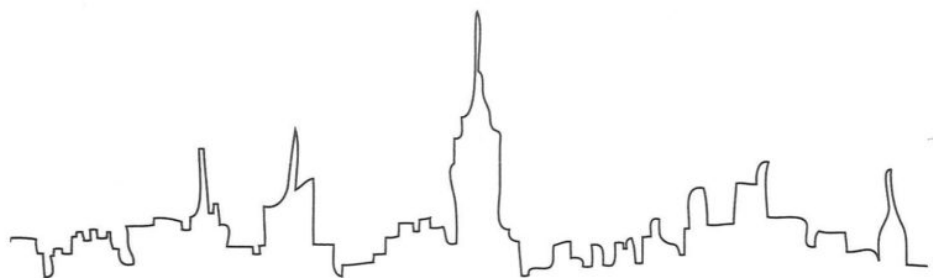
Gendered/ing Space, Raced/ing Nation

Queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* describes how “discourses of female sexuality are central to the mutual constitution of diaspora and nation” (10). According to the transnational feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “women are not only mobilized in the ‘service’ of the nation, but they become the ground on which discourses of morality and nationalism are written,” ones that are, “embodied in the normative policing of women’s sexuality” (133). Additionally, ethnic studies Professor Eithne Luibhéid in *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* has demonstrated how sexual violence comes, “to signify not what is done to woman but what is done to nation” and in the process, “access to women’s bodies and sexualities become constructed as a matter for males, rather than females, to determine” (qtd. in Razack 118, 127). Playing a key role in nationalist discourse, global south, women of color bodies emerge as both literally and figuratively essential to the space-making practices of nation and diaspora. For these theorists, global south, women of color bodies are the site for state’s negotiations of nationalism: their bodies are not their own, but exist for the purposes of

reproducing global north nations. Kaur, however, visually reasserts dominion over her own sexuality by reoccupying her body in her poetry, and the poems that we will title “Welcome”^[6] and “Did You Think I Was a City” offer such an illustration (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



(Fig. 1)



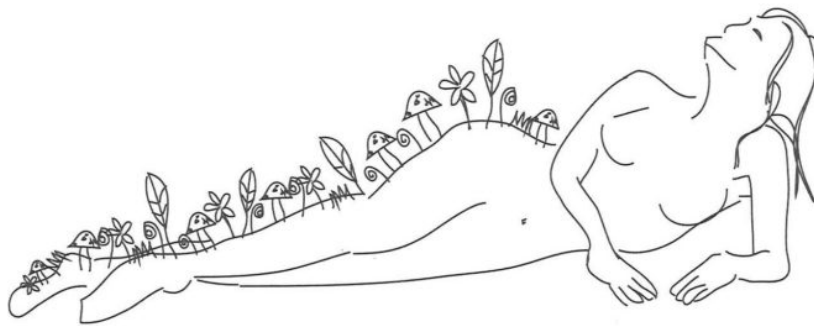
did you think i was a city
 big enough for a weekend getaway
 i am the town surrounding it
 the one you've never heard of
 but always pass through
 there are no neon lights here
 no skyscrapers or statues
 but there is thunder
 for i make bridges tremble
 i am not street meat i am homemade jam
 thick enough to cut the sweetest
 thing your lips will touch
 i am not police sirens
 i am the crackle of a fireplace
 i'd burn you and you still
 couldn't take your eyes off me
 cause i'd look so beautiful doing it
 you'd blush
 i am not a hotel room i am home
 i am not the whiskey you want
 i am the water you need
 don't come here with expectations
 and try to make a vacation out of me

(Fig. 2)

Characterizing “sex as a regulatory ideal” in the production of gendered subjects, philosopher Judith Butler has suggested that the relationship between gender and space is arranged via patriarchal sexual violence (52). In “Welcome” and “Did You Think I Was a City,” Kaur critiques the notion that a woman’s body is spatialized either as a “pitstop for men” or a vacation “big enough for a weekend getaway” (4; 2, 97). Both the personas become metaphors for hotels: ones with room “empty enough/for guests” (6-7). Fashioned like a concrete poem—a poem whose visual appearance matches the topic of the work—“Welcome’s” visual treatment of space comments upon how a woman’s body is regarded as a penetrable place for men^[7] to enter. At the same time, the persona reclaims the right to her own body: it is now ‘impenetrable’ by way of its speech. Similarly, in “Did You Think I Was a City,” Kaur draws her body akin to a town—a home instead of a hotel one passes through. Rather than making “public” her “privates,” Kaur’s poetry privatizes her personas’ bodies publicly.

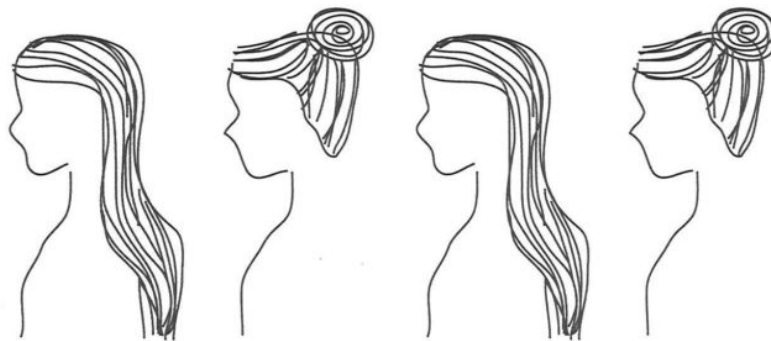
Another way western nations remap gender and racial hierarchies is by imposing particular standards of “beauty.” Documented in Victoria M. Bañales’ article, “‘The Face Value of Dreams’: Gender, Race, Class, and the Politics of Cosmetic Surgery,”^[8] beauty norms—“as according to racist, Western standards of feminine beauty”—are used in projects of empire (133). Throughout much of her poetry, Kaur challenges western criteria of physicality that attempt to colonize her body; she reclaims her body as home by destabilizing the colonial ideologies that would lay siege upon it. One example of Kaur’s use of spatial “rehoming” takes place within the poem “The Next Time” (Fig. 3).

the next time he
points out the
hair on your legs is
growing back remind
that boy your body
is not his home
he is a guest
warn him to
never outstep
his welcome
again



(Fig. 3)

i like the way the stretch marks
 on my thighs look human and
 that we're so soft yet
 rough and jungle wild
 when we need to be
 i love that about us
 how capable we are of feeling
 how unafraid we are of breaking
 and tend to our wounds with grace
 just being a woman
 calling myself
 a woman
 makes me utterly whole
 and complete



(Fig. 4)

Addressing the (white) cultural norm that excessive body hair is unfeminine, Kaur gives the reader visual metaphors for the natural beauty of the female body. Rather than a place for sexualized, gendered, and racialized hierarchies to settle, Kaur depicts flowers, mushrooms, and leaves growing upon the figure's legs instead. Beauty is natural and alive like a meadow; it is not artificial nor can it be contained. Just like in the preceding poem discussed "Welcome," Kaur's body isn't "*welcome*" for the readers, the male antagonists, or the nation's projections (11, 9-10). In the poem we will coin "Stretch Marks," it is the denigrated flaw of stretch marks that attests to a woman's strength and instead becomes a source of feminine beauty that make us "utterly whole/and complete" (Fig. 4, 13-14).

Naturalizing Femininity: Body as Land, Body as Art

Interestingly, many of Kaur's pieces describe women's bodies as natural environs.^[9] In one poem alongside a drawing of an oceanic tidal wave imprisoned in a cup, she declares: "I am water/soft enough/to offer life/tough enough/to drown it away" (Kaur 137). Further compositions present Kaur, her personas, and her implied readers as works of metaphorical art or the architecture that houses them.^[10] The jagged whirlwind of a tornado blows: "your body/ is a museum/of natural disasters/can you grasp how/stunning that is" (Kaur 173). Feminist scholars Shannon Sullivan and Jane Rendell have noted the "crucial ways in which raced, sexed, and imperial(ized) bodies are linked" with landscapes whereby "femininity is connected with chaotic and disorderly space, while logocentric space remains masculine" (209, 107). Kaur, however, flips this repressive association of women's bodies with nature into one that makes uncontainable the power of the feminine principle.



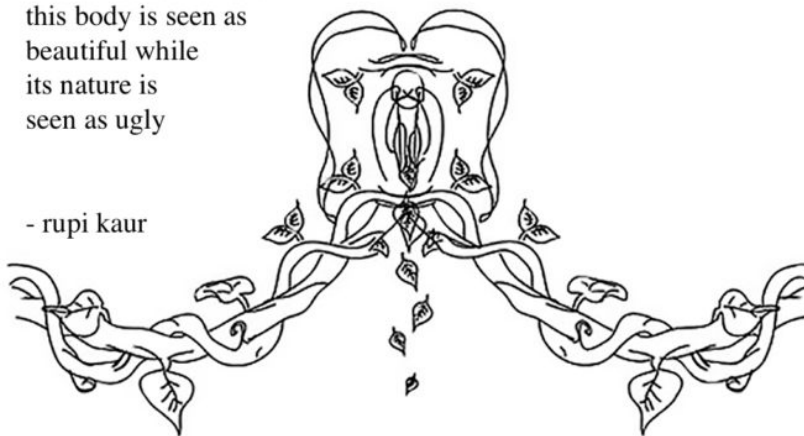
(Fig. 5)

apparently it is ungraceful of me
to mention my period in public
cause the actual biology
of my body is *too real*

it is okay to sell what's
between a woman's legs
more than it is okay to
mention its inner workings

the recreational use of
this body is seen as
beautiful while
its nature is
seen as ugly

- rupi kaur



(Fig. 6)

Through social media, Kaur has also become well known for condemning body-shaming and naturalizing bodily processes (such as menstruation and giving birth) as fundamental to feminine empowerment. Publicly criticizing Instagram's policy of censoring a collection of images that she took of herself menstruating, she counters in a post: "i bleed each month to make humankind a possibility. my womb is home to the divine." In a similar poem from her published collection, Kaur envisages the reproductive system as entangled, blooming vines wherein she espouses: "the recreational use of/this body is seen as/ beautiful while/its nature is/seen as ugly" (Fig. 6, 177).

Queer theorist Gopinath, previously mentioned, has discussed the ways in which female diasporic subjects have been characterized as and related to the home space(s) of nation (194). Although Kaur attempts to invert the devaluation of femininity (as repressive home-space) to one of recalcitrant subjectivity, she still reterritorializes women's bodies as (gendered) spaces to be entered/penetrated and beauty becomes the category through which female "bodies achieve humanness" (Nguyen 368).

Heterosexuality, then, also becomes the "structuring mechanism" and "key disciplinary

regime” of not only Kaur’s definitions of femininity (and sexuality) but of state and diasporic nationalism as well: “instead. lie me down. lay me open like a map [...] my legs will split apart out of habit. and/that’s when. i pull you in. welcome you. home” (Gopinath 10, Kaur 77).

Firmly couched in her experience as a cis-gendered woman, Kaur’s poetry assumes that the reader—sharing in her experience—also identifies as one^[11]: “i want to write about women, i want to write about love, the experience of loss, beauty, sexuality. *all the things that make you you, and make me me*” (Grate, emphasis added). Indeed, unless directly speaking to a subject she names as her (and potentially our) male assailant or lover,^[12] Kaur’s creations consistently reach out to her sisters^[13]—that of her readers and the “we” who, presumably, share in her gender. In *milk and honey*, she professes that she must “nurture/and serve the sisterhood/to raise those that need raising;” “my heart aches for sisters more than anything/it aches for women helping women/like flowers ache for spring” (Kaur 184, 187). The question remains: if gender is conflated with sexual anatomy (Fig. 6), if femininity is imagined solely through aesthetic gestures (Fig. 3 and 4), and if women are again conceived of as land^[14] or home (structured by and through the male gaze), is Kaur merely reproducing ideologies of nationalism or is she rewriting them (Fig. 1 and 2)?

Sisterhood as/in Cyberspace

While Kaur mentions previously publishing her writing on a blog (and according to her website^[15] fans can also follow her on the platforms of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), the primary way in which Kaur’s visual poetry has been circulated other than by print is through Instagram (Kaur, Grate). Developed in 2006 and launched in 2010, Instagram is an instant photo-sharing service and mobile app whereby each image uploaded can be edited through a variety of filters and design options, featured with captions, text, likes, and shared within external networks and sites, such as email, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, and Foursquare (Eager and Dann 249, Larach). The use of Instagram to express the thoughts, feelings, and everyday experiences of its users visually as a narrative event to an external audience, aligns perfectly with the affective content of Kaur’s artwork: engaging spatially and aesthetically with the complicated, nuanced, and daily aspects of her experience as a diasporic, female subject (Larach). Because Instagram allows for sharing with and cultivating a social media following through affirmative likes, comments, and communal viewing, Kaur draws on the capacities of Instagram and the Internet to promote her art (including updates on her

speaking schedule). Her visual poems are further disseminated by fans, followers, and fellow users, echoing and appropriating Kaur's experiences and beliefs as their own.

Professor Lisa Nakamura, in her collection *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, declares that the internet has always been a visual technology—"a protocol for seeing that is interfaced and networked in ways that produce a particular set of racial [and gendered] formations" (202). Similarly, Instagram,^[16] implicitly engaged with ways of seeing and being seen, is an apropos platform for the production of counter-images and narratives that engage in an "aggressive reclaiming of the female body"—ones where women celebrate and (re)formulate their own ideas about their bodies (Murray 490). According to Mohanty in "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," "Feminist struggles are waged on at least two, simultaneous, interconnected levels: an ideological, discursive level that addresses questions of representation (womanhood/femininity), and a material, experiential, daily-life level that focuses on the micropolitics of work, income, family, sexuality, and so on" (64). Although the ephemerality of Instagram prevents knowledge of exactly who reposts Kaur's images or how many of her photos have been circulated—since screenshots of Insta-art are outside of the artist's control—individuals and media forums who share her content usually redistribute them on feminist sites.^[17] Kaur's Instagrammed art is embedded or screenshot in articles and reposted vis-à-vis a magazine's own social media account. This becomes a performance of the medium's (western-located) transnational feminist politics and the user's representation of their ideals and goals.

For scholar Breny Mendoza in her piece "Transnational Feminisms in Question," "Implicated in the novel notion of *transnational feminism* is the desirability and possibility of a political solidarity of feminists across the globe that transcends class, race, sexuality and national boundaries" whilst pointing "to the multiplicity of the world's feminisms and to the increasing tendency of national feminisms to politicize women's issues beyond the borders of the nation state, for instance, in United Nations (UN) women's world conferences or on the Internet" (296). With Kaur's 1.1 million followers, garnering well over 100,000 comments on her posts, and with around 75% of Instagram's users located outside of the U.S., what can we make of Instagram in the context of community-making over transnational, societal, and cultural bounds (Kaur, Smith)?

Cyberspace makes Kaur's poetic spatial productions particularly legible within the context of diaspora. Arjun Appadurai, Victoria Bernal, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita

Mannur, respectively, have tackled the ways in which, “diaspora[s] [are] being remapped through cyberspace interfacing” (Braziel and Mannur 15). Through emergent mediascapes and the technologies of online forums, new collectives such as social networks, public spheres, and diasporic cultural art forms have been reconfigured, thereby “undermining nationality and nationalism as discrete categories of identification” (Appadurai 25; Bernal 161; Braziel and Mannur 8). The virtual world has become the space for community building, and its sustenance globally across diasporas. It is also a place and space where women of color are able to showcase their art, hobbies, and talents, especially when they have historically been denied access to traditional marketplace economies. Although more literature is written on the dangers of the Internet for women of color,^[18] for author Jessie Daniels in “Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment,” it is an “internetworked global feminism” enabled by the “cyberfeminist practice[s] of online organizing” wherein discussions and activism about racism and sexism can and do take place^[19] (106).

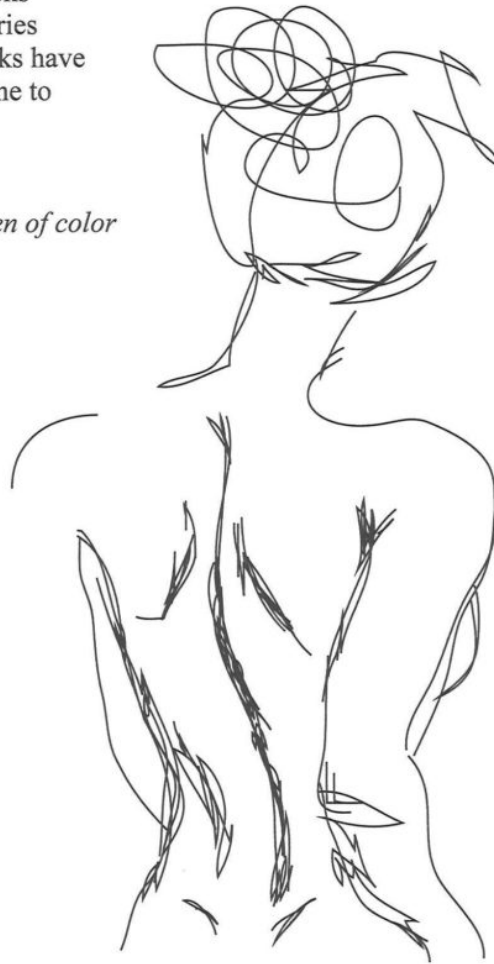
Additionally, in *Women of Color and Social Media Multitasking: Blogs, Timelines, Feeds, and Community*, authors collectively contend “that social media afford[s] women of color de-temporally and anti-linearly robust means to identify, interrogate, and (re)frame the issues and narratives impacting them and their communities” as well as “creat[e] extended communities, locat[e] support for self and others, and work to affect change” (Tassie and Givens 12-13). Communicating across digital platforms via shared storytelling is where communal resistance is forged, and it is here that Kaur makes a space for herself and her readers.



(Fig. 7)

our backs
tell stories
no books have
the spine to
carry

- *women of color*



(Fig. 8)

Kaur occupies space on Instagram and creates “alternate, spatialized narratives,” supplanting the place where women have traditionally been relegated (Flanagan 75). She calls both the online medium and style of her poetry “design poetry:” poetry based on the spoken word that voices communally what is often silent (Kabango 4:52). In an interview with journalist Rachel Grate on the website *Hellogiggles*, Kaur explains the place of Instagram and her blog:

the blog has become an open space for these discussions where we all come together to learn and create narratives for things we don't regularly discuss. and if i can't answer a question i open it up to others who might be able to help. it's just home, you know? my home.

Instagram becomes the home—rehome(d) by her art—whereas the nation becomes the network. This larger online home could be described by Mohanty as: “not as comfortable, stable, inherited, and familiar space but instead as an imaginative, politically charged space in which the familiarity and sense of affection and commitment analysis is a shared collective analysis of social injustice” (128).

In Latoya Lee’s “Virtual Homeplace: (Re)constructing the Body through Social Media,” Lee describes social media as a *virtual homeplace*: that is, a “(real or imagined) place that offers comfort and nurture[ance], where one can seek safe harbor against the racial and sexual oppression [one] may face on a daily basis” (108). According to Lee, it is this *virtual homeplace*^[20] that is a “site of affirmation, a space to discuss issues of concern, provide support, elevate spirits and also resist hatred; a site of networking, a space providing economic independency (and dependency); and as a site of recovery, a space of healing” (108). However, as a virtual homeplace, Instagram—as a private, safe-space made public—is often subject to online harassment and abuse of feminists, a means, according to Sahana Udupa^[21] in “Gaalī Cultures: The Politics of Abusive Exchange on Social Media,” for participating politically in discursive engagements as it reproduces relations of domination (4).

Through Kaur’s narratives shared online, she connects to a cyberspatial sisterhood.^[22] By invoking sisterly solidarity, as seen in the interview above, Kaur emphasizes the centrality of women in her life and in her art:

it’s the strength in women that has inspired me. my mother, my sisters, my friends. the women throughout history who have endured. who have fought against patriarchy and fought for the rights of those around them [...] since i’ve embraced and began to nurture sisterhood at a grassroots level in my community, i’ve really started to grow, and have been able to help some and see other women rise. and that’s all it’s about. the power to uplift. we have that within ourselves and we have to use it (Grate).

This “sisterhood that has completed” her—one she recognizes and aligns herself with—is specifically a women-of-color-sisterhood (Brown, Fig. 8). In the poem “Our Backs,” Kaur identifies with the shared oppressions as well as the irrepressible might of women of color (Fig. 8, 171). The lines “stories/no books have/the spine to/carry” expands figural space and resists any attempts from man or state to claim the space of hers and her sisters’ bodies as their own (2-5). Additionally, she rejects the reading of the Internet as a post-racial place of democratic egalitarianism wherein “users leave their bodies

behind when online” (Brophy 929). It is exactly the *embodied* telling of Kaur’s artwork that she attributes to the importance of its public nature: “we [women of colour] are able to narrate and document our own stories now, and that’s a big deal” (El-Safty). While Kaur might have “re-embraced [her] body along with space, in space, as the generator (or producer) of space” on and offline, women who respond to her art are largely curated as a multicultural audience (Fig. 7, qtd. in Soja 52).

In his work on the push for diversity in the university, Roderick A. Ferguson^[23] argues that the “contemporary mode of whiteness [now operates] not primarily through the denigration of minority difference but through its hegemonic affirmation—that is through an appreciation of diversity *and through the avowal rather than the disavowal of whiteness*” (Ferguson 1101). This multiculturalism as whiteness—similar to that of transnational feminism’s erasure rather than critical engagement with difference—can also be applied here. Although Kaur disavows certain forms of whiteness (western beauty ideals and patriarchy), there yet exists a tension between Kaur’s use of Instagram as a commercial platform for dissemination—in the way that Kaur’s audience is advertised as a multicultural utopia (Fig. 7)—and the subversive tactic of using the “female” body as way to push against colonialism vis-à-vis digital means.

One could argue, ironically, that Kaur’s blog becomes another occupied space in the enterprise of colonial appropriation,^[24] challenging her imagined community of women of color, feminist sisters.^[25] What this suggests, however, are the ways in which gendered and sexually “inflect[ed] diasporic formations” operate in the interests of global capitalism and how “diasporic cultural forms are produced in and through transnational capitalist processes” (Gopinath 9, 13). Indeed, it’s questionable as to whether Instagram can ever be truly decolonial as it is a platform that exists on occupied territory, held by an occupying force, and is something one cannot own.

Rehoming/Unhoming Resistance(s)

Let us now return to the spatial “rehoming” that takes place within Kaur’s poetry, critical to understanding her illustrated writings of self-love. Kaur recovers diasporic subjectivity as one that ‘homes’ in the poems “My Name is Kaur” and “Searching for Home”^[26] (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10). In “My Name is Kaur,” Kaur reconfigures her identity as undifferentiated from liberation; they are one and the same. She expands her body and her self spatially outside of anything that can be constituted by the state or contained in a book (1-7). Kaur’s texts perceptibly take up the page or visually extend outside of its margins^[27] (Fig. 1). She is not a body that is acted upon but is instead a body that acts,

and she reminds us that she always has been (9-10). Also, as space-making and spatial recuperating endeavors, Kaur's creations are above all home-makings (Fig. 10). Rather than accepting a diasporic body that is 'unhomed,' Kaur 'unhomes' anything other than herself that could take up room there. The text makes home possible while the image, or its concrete shapes, solidify home in a physicality that is also metaphorical. In "Searching for Home," Kaur rehomes her own body and 'unhomes' all other occupancies. Her poetry also reminds us that the space of home lies solely within ourselves: "it [is] when [we] stop searching for home within others" that we find the "foundations of home within [ourselves]" (1-2).

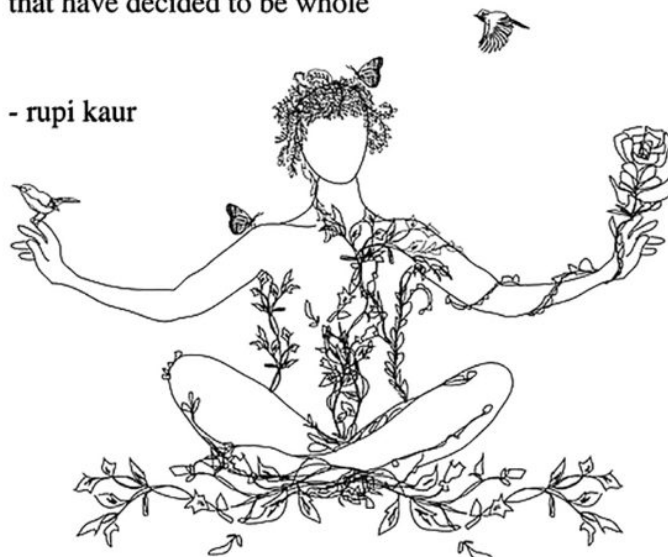
the name kaur
makes me a free woman
it removes the shackles that
try to bind me
uplifts me
to remind me i am equal to
any man even though the state
of this world screams to me i am not
that i am my own woman and
i belong wholly to myself
and the universe
it humbles me
calls out and says i have a
universal duty to share with
humanity to nurture
and serve the sisterhood
to raise those that need raising
the name kaur runs in my blood
it was in me before the word itself existed
it is my identity and my liberation

- *kaur*
a woman of sikhi

(Fig. 9)

it was when i stopped searching for home within others
and lifted the foundations of home within myself
i found there were no roots more intimate
than those between a mind and body
that have decided to be whole

- rupi kaur



(Fig. 10)

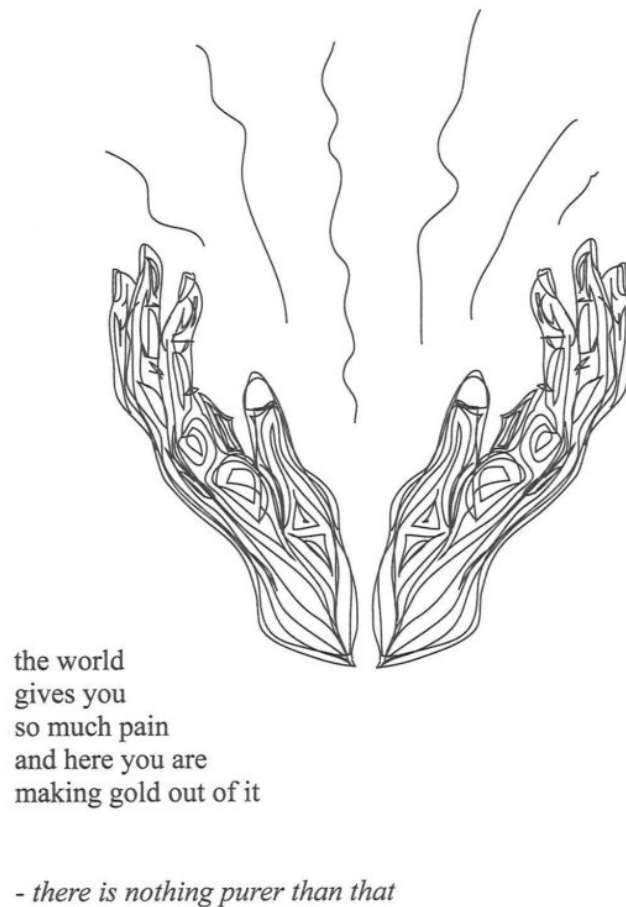
Through reclaiming space for her own creation-making vis-à-vis the subject matter of her visual verse and virtual design, Kaur transforms the place of her body—now her home—by celebrating it. In fact, much of her book is a reveling in pleasure, evoking Audre Lorde’s concept of the *erotic*^[28]: “our most profoundly creative source [...] is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (59). Can we consider these poetic self-affirmations decolonial acts? Kaur has described her book *milk and honey* as a meditation on self-love (Brown). She has also referenced Junot Díaz as one of her inspirations, well renowned for his literature’s enactment of decolonial self-love (Shafaque). While Kaur’s rejoicing serves to transform feelings of inferiority and shame into the sensibilities of self-worth—those that strive to delink us from the processes of colonial “erasure, devaluation, and disavow[al]”—her expressions of bodily ownership^[29] could be construed as being predicated upon western, capitalist notions of singular selfhood (Gaztambide-Fernández 198). The work of Semiotician Walter Mignolo may provide a helpful framework to evaluate the aesthetic practices and spatial reclamations applied in Kaur’s poetry.

Narrative Healing: (de)Colonial Aesthetics/Sis?

In the transcribed interview “Decolonial Options and Artistic/Aesthetic Entanglements,” Mignolo engages with the idea that art is decolonizing or can be. According to Mignolo, decolonial aesthetics refer to any “thinking and doing [...] geared toward undoing” the aesthetics of coloniality or its sensibilities (Gaztambide-Fernández 201). Ultimately, the goal of decolonial artistic methods is to heal from the “colonial wounds” that “operate through making people feel inferior”:

Healing is the process of delinking, or regaining your pride, your dignity, assuming your entire humanity in front of an un-human being that makes you believe you were abnormal, lesser, that you lack something. How do you heal that? Through knowing, understanding, decolonial artistic creativity and decolonial philosophical aesthetics, and above all by building the communal (not the Marxist commune, neither the liberal common good, but the communal; the legacies of “communities” beyond Eurocentric legacies of Christian and secular family and “society”) (Gaztambide-Fernández 207).

Kaur compellingly depicts her wounds as ruptures needing to be healed through her writing: “the thing about writing is/i can’t tell if it’s healing/or destroying me” (148). In the afterword of *milk and honey*, it also states that Kaur, “shares her writing with the world as a means to create a safe space for progressive healing and forward movement” (n.p.). Writing by space and through space is what Kaur conceives of as a form of narrative healing^[30] for herself and her followers: “i don’t know why/i split myself open/for others knowing/sewing myself up/hurts this much/afterward” and “you split me open/in the most honest way there is/to split a soul open/and forced me to write/at a time i was sure i/could not write again/-thank you” (125, 204). Her cyberspatial writing creates the space for women to speak, and therefore, allows for communal and self-healing.^[31] Kaur posts poetry on Instagram and literally opens up new territories for her sisters to interact. Each click, posting, and connection generates new scapes where Kaur’s self-recovery happens within a collective context. Healing is singular only as much as it is communal: recovering the space of one’s own body as ‘home’ recuperates space for others as well. Although it is questionable as to whether Kaur’s border-thinking^[32] is altogether decolonial,^[33] as Mignolo suggests, the decolonial is an option and always must be for to “promote the co-existence of non-imperial options” is to foster and nourish “decolonial love” (209). Through “alternative visions of the home and homeland,” Kaur’s visual and spatial narrations are just one option in a world so desperately needing of healing (Brazier and Mannur 13).



(Fig. 11)

End Notes

1. Poetess is a moniker employed to describe Kaur in the interview “WildTalk: Exclusive Interview with Poetess Rupi Kaur” (Brown). Instapoet and micropoet are other descriptors also used for Kaur in an article from *The Guardian* “How do I love thee? Let me Instagram it” (Qureshi) and on CBC radio (Kabango).

2. Explicit claims to Kaur’s first-generation immigrant identity in her writing include poems on pages 14, 32, 37, 170, 171, 184, on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/p/5_Fb-4nA8a/?taken-by=rupikaur_&hl=en, and in multiple interviews.

3. Cited in “‘Micropoet’ turns short verse into social media stardom.”

4. For example, “accept yourself/as you were designed” (Kaur 172).

5. Kaur says, “i want to show the different dynamics of a woman...we’re not simple. we are complex and we feel and experience many different things. we *are* many different things at once” (Grate).

6. Because Kaur regularly posts her poems (as well as new ones) on Instagram with minor reformatting changes, there are discrepancies between the online versions of her poetry and their printed form. The word “Welcome” in italics is added below to her Instagram post but is not present in the published version (page 13). Additionally, there is a space between “pitstop,” vacancy is rewritten as vacant, and “cause” is now “but” in the book.

7. Making equivalent western man and western nation.

8. This idea is also examined by Mimi Thi Nguyen in the article, “The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialisms and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror,” a source cited later in this paper.

9. See pages 18, 65, 118, 149, 153, 158, 170, 178, 179, 187, 188, 192, 193, and 195.

10. Additional examples include a loosely sketched image of an easel that declares: “the very thought of you/has my legs spread apart/like an easel with a canvas/begging for art” and another that announces above open forms of bended, female bodies, “i was music/ but you had your ears cut off” (57, 115). Other instances are on pages 57, 71, 100, and 115. Women represented as edibles are also on pages 11, 31, 97, and 101.

11. See pages 13, 15, 99, 103, 143, 153, 161, 165, 169, 171, 175, 179, 188, 191, 193, and 197. If not mentioned directly in Kaur’s writing, her references are apparent in the complementary drawings of the womanly-forms she represents.

12. Kaur speaks about and to a male abuser on pages 12, 15, 19, 31, 36, 38, 41, 86, 89, 99, 121, 165 and 178 and a male lover on pages 47-49, 51, 54-56, 62- 63, 68, 76-77, 81, 82, 85, 88, 91, 93, 98, 103, 105, 113, and 133. A general male subject is engaged with on 11, 16, 28, 35, 37, and 56.

13. Poems on 171, 175, 179, 184, 187, 191, and 193 regard either sisterhood or a community of women.

14. However, Kaur also likens her male lovers (or their love) to nature, edibles, and art (50, 51, 66, 87, 89, 98, 99, 108, 119). Furthermore, her visual poetry could be a mode of insurgent mimicry, noted by Madeline Hron and Homi Bhabha as that which “negotiate[s], question[s], or even resist[s] [...] cultural constructions by virtue of its own constructedness” (3).

15. Noted in the “faq” section of Rupī Kaur’s website (www.rupikaur.com) (<http://www.rupikaur.com>) and in *Hellogiggles* article “Talking to Feminist Poet Rupī Kaur Made Us Love Her Even More,” “the blog has been a huge space for conversation on many difficult topics. i have women asking me about all types of things they might not be comfortable discussing otherwise. body hair. sexuality. questioning their gender. raising children. getting out of bad marriages. figuring out how to get out of unhealthy relationships” (Grate).

16. Instagram is also an interesting forum for Kaur’s work against white western feminist ideals, as Instagram’s content and tools reinforce a focus on discourses of aesthetic appearance and normative beauty standards.

17. Or along with feminist messages.

18. Such as Lisa Nakamura’s incredibly important work “Unwanted Labour of Social Media: Women of Colour Call Out Culture As Venture Community Management,” “Gender and Race Online,” Lori Kendall’s “Meaning and Identity in ‘Cyberspace’: The Performance of Gender, Class, and Race Online” and Michelle M. Wright’s “Finding a Place in Cyberspace: Black Women, Technology, and Identity.”

19. Bernal suggests in her research on Eritrean diaspora online that, “Eritrean websites have fostered the emergence of counter-publics and spaces of dissent where unofficial views are voiced and alternative knowledges are produced. [It consists of] people inventing a public sphere that [makes] possible the articulation of ideas and sentiments that could not be expressed elsewhere” (176). Cybertheorist Lisa Nakamura has also demonstrated, “when women create their own networks for posting content about video game racism and sexism, they can have unexpectedly wide-reaching and powerful effects” (3).

20. Specifically for Black women in the article.

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22. Although not necessarily those articulated as her own.

23. See also Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*.

24. See geographer Edward W. Soja's definition of counterspace or *thirdspace of political choice*: "a meeting place for all peripheralized or marginalized 'subjects' wherever they may be located" (35, 68).

25. "I am suggesting, then, an 'imagined community' of Third World oppositional struggles—'imagined' not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and 'community' because in spite of internal hierarchies within Third World contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant, deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the idea of the nation, calls 'horizontal comradeship'" (Mohanty 2).

26. This poem was posted rather than published by Kaur and can be found online only.

27. Into cyberspace.

28. Lorde also defines the erotic as: "function[ing] for me in several ways and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (56).

29. Including "you/are your own/soul mate" and "*you belong only to yourself*" (Kaur 176, 189). Further examples are on pages 55, 112, 150, 153, 161, 167, 172, 174, 186, 189, 197.

30. Narrative healing is a technique Kaur attributes to Warsan Shire's workshops, the root inspiration for Kaur's poetic style and genre: "I wouldn't have explored 'paper' poetry if it wasn't for Warsan's work. Her poetry literally flipped my insides out. Her poetry forced me to heal. It was a slow, yet beautiful process that changed me"

(Shafaque, Brown). More could be said on whether Kaur's artistry is a form of homage or aesthetic appropriation (Kaur 34).

31. The name of the collection, *milk and honey*, also refers to medicine used in her upbringing and is a metaphor for healing central to her community: "when i think about my people and all the struggles they've gone through, from the genocides we've faced and all we've lost, i think we're as smooth and sweet as milk and honey. my father also told me once that honey is the one thing that does not die. no matter how long it's been sitting in a jar, ten years or a hundred, honey, in its natural, raw and unrefined state lives forever, and i think that's just about the most beautiful thing" (Grate).

32. For Mignolo, diasporic epistemology or "Border thinking and doing (artistic creativity as well as any other forms where thinking is manifested) is precisely the decolonial method" (206).

33. Mohanty is very clear on what decolonization entails and it's questionable as to whether Kaur engages with anticapitalist critique (8).

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Fig. 1. Kaur, Rupi. *Welcome*. Instagram. Web. n.d.

Fig. 2. Kaur, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015. 97. Print.

Fig. 3. Kaur, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015. 165. Print.

Fig. 4. Kaur, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015. 169. Print.

Fig. 5. Kaur, Rupi. "Period." *Rupikaur.com*. Rupikaur.com, 2016. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.

Fig. 6. Kaur, Rupi. *Apparently It Is Ungraceful Of Me*. Instagram. Web. n.d.

Fig. 7. “English Alum Rupi Kaur Makes Top Seller Lists With Poetry Collection.”

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Fig. 8. Kaur, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015. 171.

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Fig. 9. Kaur, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015.

Print.

Fig. 10. Kaur, Rupi. *It Was When I Stopped Searching For Home Within Others*.

Instagram. Web. n.d.

Fig. 11. Kaur, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015.

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Footnotes (returns to text)

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26. This poem was posted rather than published by Kaur and can be found online only.
27. Into cyberspace.
28. Lorde also defines the erotic as: “function[ing] for me in several ways and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (56).
29. Including “you/are your own/soul mate” and “*you belong only to yourself*” (Kaur 176, 189). Further examples are on pages 55, 112, 150, 153, 161, 167, 172, 174, 186, 189, 197.
30. Narrative healing is a technique Kaur attributes to Warsan Shire’s workshops, the root inspiration for Kaur’s poetic style and genre: “I wouldn’t have explored ‘paper’ poetry if it wasn’t for Warsan’s work. Her poetry literally flipped my insides out. Her poetry forced me to heal. It was a slow, yet beautiful process that changed me”(Shafaque, Brown). More could be said on whether Kaur’s artistry is a form of homage or aesthetic appropriation (Kaur 34).
31. The name of the collection, *milk and honey*, also refers to medicine used in her upbringing and is a metaphor for healing central to her community: “when i think about my people and all the struggles they’ve gone through, from the genocides we’ve faced and all we’ve lost, i think we’re as smooth and sweet as milk and honey. my father also told me once that honey is the one thing that does not die. no matter how long it’s been sitting in a jar, ten years or a hundred, honey, in its natural, raw and unrefined state lives forever, and i think that’s just about the most beautiful thing” (Grate).
32. For Mignolo, diasporic epistemology or “Border thinking and doing (artistic creativity as well as any other forms where thinking is manifested) is precisely the decolonial method” (206).
33. Mohanty is very clear on what decolonization entails and it’s questionable as to whether Kaur engages with anticapitalist critique (8).

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