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Translation, Weather, and Erasure in Bhanu Kapil’s *Schizophrenia*

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**Abstract:** For Bhanu Kapil, the drafting process of writing involves the translation of non-linguistic realities into storytelling, the nature of which must leave room for the performative experience that shapes writing. In *Schizophrenia* (2011), Kapil engaged in adventitious composition processes when she sealed her manuscript in a Ziploc bag and threw it in the garden to spend months outdoors in the Colorado winter. The text, full of gaps created by the erased parts of the “winterized” manuscript, documents schizophrenia in diasporic Indian and Pakistani communities. The decaying process of the book that created a void in her writing also impacts the narrative’s own exploration of white space, gaps, syntactic experimentation, and fragmentation. These elements attempt to translate the experience of Kapil’s family and the effect of colonization on immigrants. The initial “failed” document attests to the impossibility of telling the story of women’s inter-generational trauma inherited from postcolonial and patriarchal violence. Translating these elements into a new form of narration relies on the refusal to reproduce old narrative patterns inherited from Western and patriarchal modes of writing. Kapil resists traditional plot structures that “re-tell” trauma; instead, she offers a hybrid narrative that evokes “light touch” in its form and content (71). In doing so, Kapil also problematizes racial pathologizing, as this “light touch” exists in the context of the lives of “non-white subjects (schizophrenics)” who were affected by Partition (71). Consequently, this mode of writing proposes yet another level of translation, one that focuses on the information that comes from bodies and its transfer into the physical form of texts. While *Schizophrenia* is not literally a translation, it involves a multi-layered engagement of what can be translated from the trauma of the multigenerational oppression of women.

**Keywords:** Translation, Feminism, Experimental Writing, Postcolonialism, Partition, Trauma, Schizophrenia

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Throughout her writing career, Bhanu Kapil has experimented with the body and its relationship to storytelling. In *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (2001), she weaves the voices of Indian women in a genre-biding collection of testimonies on womanhood. Her next book, *Incubation: A Space for Monsters* (2006), collapses the boundaries between textual frames (introductions, prefaces, forewords, etc.) and the “actual” narration of the book. In *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children* (2009), she examines the colonized body and the violent forces that normalize and scar it. *Ban en Banlieu* (2015) makes performance inseparable from writing in her physical and fictional exploration of violence, rape, racism, cultural oppression, and exile. In *Threads: Lyric Violence, the Nomadic Subject and the Fourth Space* (2018), she collaborates with Nisha Ramayya and Sandeep Parmar to address the oppressive writing structures that exclude writers of color. Her latest publication, *How to Wash a Heart* (2020), is the T.S. Eliot prize-winning volume of poetry that contemplates trauma, immigration, and racism. As these thematic and formal explorations reveal, the translation of corporeality into the written realm involves multiple layers of creation.
that start with the liminal spaces of writing. Kapil’s approach is performative and corporeal—she collaborates with a film crew to write *Humanimal*; she uses her own body as an inherent part of *Ban en Banlieu*; and she draws from the performative processes of winterizing language to write *Schizophrene* (2011), as I will show in this article. Layers of creation also appear in Kapil’s treatment of what is usually considered para-texts: her work challenges the separation of content, preface, end notes, appendices, acknowledgments, and other peripheral writing, such as her blog and published commentary on her performances/writing. Consequently, instead of reifying the “main narratives” of her books, she plays with a layering process that resists the hierarchical organization of dominant literary structures.

These layers of creation engage the body in an intersectional manner, calling for a reconsideration of the issues of sex and gender; postcolonialism, oppression, and racism; intergenerational trauma; and the somatic outcomes of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. These elements co-exist in *Schizophrene*, a book whose draft was sealed in a Ziploc bag and thrown outdoors in the Colorado winter, making the embodied practice of writing at the forefront of the hybrid volume. The materiality of the text invites us to contemplate the historical and psychological forms of erasure that followed Partition. In the fragmented, multi-layered volume, Kapil seeks a form that gives justice to intergenerational trauma, writing from a twice-removed location, from India, to England, to the US. I argue that Kapil’s embodied aesthetics, in attempting to “translate” corporeal exiled realities into language, opens new horizons for women’s writing. To analyze how *Schizophrenre* undoes oppressive structures of power, I incorporate parts of an interview with Kapil that I conducted in 2013. The interview, published in *Divergent Trajectories: Interviews with Innovative Fiction Writers* in 2017, was the genesis of my work on her writing and addresses many issues central to *Schizophrenre*. In *Divergent Trajectories*, I sought to clarify the relationship between innovative forms of writing and the political systems that surround their creation, publication, and reception. Thus, during our discussion, Kapil elaborates on the difficulties of writing about the postcolonial body.

**Trauma, Silence, and Writing**

The beginning of *Schizophrenre* exposes not only the limits of language to translate trauma but also the limitations of narrative structures to do so. The book starts with “PASSIVE NOTES:”

For some years, I tried to write an epic on Partition and its trans-generational effects: the high incidence of schizophrenia in diasporic Indian and Pakistani communities; the parallel social history of domestic violence, relational disorders, and so on. Towards the end of this project, I felt the great strength of the page: its ability, as a fibrous surface, to deflect the point of my pen. The paper, and then the screen, as weirdly reflective, repelling the ink or the touch. On the night I knew my book had failed, I threw it—in the form of a notebook, a hand-written final draft—into the garden of my house in Colorado. (2011, i)

Facing the failure of the “epic” form to portray Partition, Kapil integrates a composition tool outside of her control, the snow that randomly erases her handwritten work. While I will explore how the intervention of the weather on writing materializes control over the postcolonial traumatized female body, it is important to focus first on the question of failure as it is utilized in *Schizophrenre*. The failure that Kapil posits at the beginning of the book is not just the infamous failure of writing that many writers have documented—the impossibility of representing corporeality, attesting to the gap between experience and language. In *Schizophrenre*, failure is deeply ingrained in the un-representable intergenerational trauma of the division of India and Pakistan.
The premise of *Schizophrene*, as it works through the failure of the “hand-written final draft,” gives voice to the “bankruptcy of words” that qualifies the accounts of Partition. As Tarun Ravikant notes, “We do not have rich archives in terms of historical, literary or biographical documentation” (2001, 160). In addition to the paucity of records, women did not “articulate on the topics such as rape, abductions and forceful marriages,” so that the “experience of dislocated women” led to an “invisible rhetoric” (Kashyap 2002, 87). This “invisible rhetoric” relies on the silence of women and on the patriarchal structures that created it, subsequently encouraging its continuation. As such, this rhetoric is the outcome of two co-existing phenomena: (a) Writing that followed the 1947 Partition focused on causation and power; and (b) Accounts of Partition initially relied on the avoidance of pain, violence, and suffering, so that the experiences of abducted, rapped, and murdered women were erased from the narratives that male writers predominantly proposed to make sense of the “million people [who were] left dead and at least seventy-five thousand women [who] were raped and abandoned,” as well as the “twelve million people [who] were displaced” (Kabir 2005, 178). Thus, the “suppressing [of] the truth with respect to the patriarchal attitude towards abducted women” adds to the lack of documentation of the horrors of Partition (Ravikant 2001, 165). Furthermore, women’s struggle to verbalize the oppressive forces that caused the violence imposed upon their bodies and conditioned their existence after Partition perpetuated the “invisible rhetoric.” These internalized patriarchal modes of communication and action furthered the effacement of women’s trauma.

In this context, the process of “failure,” partial erasure, and re-writing of *Schizophrene* is a response to the “bankruptcy of words” and the “invisible rhetoric” that have contributed to the violence against women. Kapil asks us to consider the literary form that originates from the effacement of women’s lives via the weather’s removal of the text: both forms of erasure comment upon control and narration. The winterizing process of writing invites us to ponder how to read a text whose “absent” composition is very much present in the finished artifact. What was but is no longer—the written erased randomly by the weather—calls attention to the white page underneath the text, a void or silence that becomes more obvious, materialized in the “unwritten.” This palpable “silence” of the page manifests the silenced women of Partition. Yet, in the voids it creates, the decomposition of the book highlights a physical space of writing that refuses to tell the effacement of women’s reality but instead embodies its existence in the materiality of the volume and its gestation process. As Sarah Howe notes, Kapil’s “archival poetics” through the “performance of rewriting out of the notebook’s wreck” creates a “tension between incarnation and erasure, between a visceral embodiment and the performance of disappearance” (2019, 137, 138). As I will show, this visceral approach to writing involves the qualities of touch translated in the context of writing and postcolonial realities. Kapil’s engagement with the sensory qualities of touch problematizes the habitual distinctions between body and psyche: in offering an embodied approach to the trauma of Partition, she breaks down the binary structures that isolate the body of the migrant from the psychiatric diagnoses that originate from patriarchal and racist frameworks.

What’s more, the impact of snow on Kapil’s initial “epic on Partition” implies that she released authorial choice over its progress and direction, which leads us to consider the questions of agency and power. This un-writing of the “epic” implies that Kapil opened the text to the voids of erased writing that can indirectly “tell” her lost heritage and the lost stories of women in the white expanse of the page. Thus, the whiteness underneath the text is not just a space where words are written. It takes on a structural role that conveys as much of *Schizophrene* as the words printed on it. This is apparent from the first page of the book, where Kapil introduces movement, through the physical gesture of throwing the book, which correlates with her search for writing that comes “from the capacity of the body to form and extend a new gesture” (2013). Juxtaposed with this physical gesture, is the movement of travel and the account from where it originates, followed by a large un-written space:
I. SCHIZOPHRENE
I threw the book into the dark garden. The account begun mid-ocean, in a storm. (2011, 1)

The first two sentences of the volume evoke distancing—of Kapil from her book, of someone distancing oneself through a journey. The trope of travel, introduced on the first page, although unclear in the sentence, “The account begun mid-ocean, in a storm,” is connected to other fragmentary tellings of travel: “The ship left Bombay at dawn, a pink smear, the sunlight both a position and an entity;” “The ship docked. The ferry left Calais at dawn;” “A line for someone on their first voyage” (Kapil 2011, 3, 4, 6). The trips of Kapil’s family and migrants conflate in the elusive first few pages, provoking an overlapping of times, which, as we will see, is essential to trauma writing. The ungrammatical use of “begun” also adds a layer of temporal and spatial “confusion,” as “the implication of begun is that it now has begun or it was begun—two different tenses, neither of which are resolved” (Grimmer 2020, 47). As C. R. Grimmer notes, “the opening challenges poetic traditions’ assumptions about the beginning, middle, and end remaining temporally and spatially secured within a larger narrative arc” (47). In addition to these temporal and spatial movements—creative and geographical—Kapil posits a form of record, an “account,” that “a storm” perturbs. The turbulence, symbolic of the traumatic context of Partition and its aftermath, leads to silence: the two sentences above constitute the entire text of the first page of Schizophrene. The rest of the first page is blank: the white page expands on about three-quarters of the first page of the volume. Consequently, we enter the book through the “rhetoric of silence,” as we experience its erasing effects.

Weather, Time, and Psychosis

In giving room to this silence, Kapil invites two kinds of time to cohabitate: the time of the creation—the process of writing (“I threw the book into the dark garden”) and the time of the narration (“The account begun mid-ocean, in a storm”). As Sofia Samatar points out, Kapil tells “the story of trying to tell the story. Failing to tell the story, maybe. Failing to return” (2015). Indeed, Kapil narrates the story of the story through a crossing of writing and of the experience of such writing. This is an unusual balancing act. The time of the book—the corporeal time of making the book is in progress and unfixed: it is in tension with the linear and fixed nature of the printed codex. While this tension exists in all writing, giving access to the time of the draft, which is lived and stretched, disrupts the compact and controlled time of the published document. The intervention of the weather in the artistic process, akin to performance, whose time is less controlled, furthers this tension. What’s more, the weather, naturally “chronological,” disrupts the chronology of Kapil’s “final draft,” adding another layer of time.

The winterizing of the manuscript also engages writing and the writer’s body differently, as Kapil waited instead of writing for months; yet, this waiting was her writing. Translating these elements of time becomes the center of the “incomplete” narrative, so that the permeability of writing also emulates the “dissociation of the remembering self from the remembered self,” which is essential to trauma narratives (Kabir 2005, 182). Schizophrene attempts to embody the memory of a past that was both experienced and repressed through a form of amnesia manifested in the silencing of the events of Partition. As such, it “refuses a purity of origins” (Grimmer 2020, 53) and the temptation to re-tell silenced colonial and postcolonial realities, while also participating in “archival poetics” that relies on “the ruined notebook [recalled to] lend[d] its shape to Schizophrene” (Howe 2019, 137). In situating her work at the juncture between these two modes of understanding and remembering the Partition, Kapil strives to give justice to the intricacy of intergenerational trauma and its complex temporal existence.
Indeed, the contrast between the “past” of Schizophrene and its “present” expresses the multi-layered construction of post-Partition identity. As Dilpreet Bhullar explains, “the phenomenon of the fractured identity during the ensuing years of Partition has defined the contours of the memory and recollections. The traumatic dislocations are layers within a labyrinth of creative observation to function in the zone of memory where past and present are intertwined” (2015, 7). In addition to the consequences of “dislocations” and “fractured identity” that have altered the relationship between the past and the present, the repression of the troubling memories of Partition adds a layer to the unsettlement of memory and narrative. As Ananya Jahanara Kabir notes, the division of India and Pakistan resulted in an “evacuation of the subject of partition from the public domain—[a] repression,” which has forced subsequent narratives to “reintegrate traumatic memory” and “bear witness to women’s experiences” that “are elusive to generations for whom that world is obtainable only through postmemory, not lived memory” (2005, 189–90). Kapil attests to this intergenerational traumatic experience when she writes, “these notes are directed towards the region I wanted to perceive but could not” (2011, 5). This sentence highlights the difficulty for the child of parents exiled from India to “perceive” a “region” that she did not experience, that is also impossible for her to access:

I think of the novel as shattered, just lying there, in the rich green grass next to the fountain—or perhaps it is the water of the fountain itself: disappearing and becoming with such great force. Blue-bright. In an England I seek to recuperate. In an India that is an India that is never seen or truly known. But also here, where I put my head beneath the streaming water—every day. The water is writing before it is writing or could be writing and is still this other thing: an intense sensation or thought. (Chevaillier 2017, 89)

This commentary on Schizophrene posits Kapil’s sentiment of incompleteness, which also relates to the lack of historical records on Partition and the ensuing difficulty in providing renditions of it, especially as a third generation vis-à-vis Partition and its repressed aftermath. Here, Kapil also points out the impossibility of accounting for a space of “reconstituted Punjabianness,” after the genocidal violence (Kabir 2005, 181).

This impossibility mirrors the unretrievable first draft of Schizophrene, which materializes the unspoken intergenerational trauma of Partition. As Kapil explains:

In writing a traumatic text, what potential is there, for a writer, to reverse the traumatic effects they are writing about? To work—fifty years on from the event—with the trapped energies of war in the bodies of the descendants of those who lived through war? As the child of a refugee, I am back once again to the questions of poverty, sexual violence, chronic forms of racism, urban housing, and ethnic density—that also accompany these questions. (Chevaillier 2017, 89)

Working through the “revers[ing]” of this intergenerational trauma leads Kapil to explore a different kind of storytelling. She presents two modes of translations of the real into the written realm—one that focuses on narrating the text we read, and the other that focuses on the processes that enable and hinder this narration. The time of writing, technically eliminated from the final project, is also a part of its core existence in the white space, deletion, contradictions, and direct commentary on editorial choices. Furthermore, the elimination of the “time of writing,” through nature, through the uncontrollable weather, allows the text to become what we read. The complexity of this layered time (and what it signifies) generates a new cultural production that, instead of re-creating the trauma of the violence, dislocation, and rape in a fictional representation, allows readers to experience the gaps Partition caused, the disjunctive reality that
resulted from it. This is the mode of translation that Kapil proposes: one that invites readers to feel rather than envision the turmoil of Partition and exile.

Kapil renders this disjunctive reality through the elusive progression of *Schizophrene* and through the dislocation of information "lost" in the snow. The numerous italicized words are physical reminders of the maturing process that damaged the page and became part of the reading experience, akin to the hardening of each word in the snow, an accent that crystalized meaning, while possibly cutting it out of its initial context, eroded by various forms of water: “It was a contemporary voice that had the same power as a foundational voice. No. It’s a first line, then a second, the fragments overlapping with a visceral sound, where the pages stick. I unstick them to see. To read” (Kapil 2011, 58). One can infer that the power of the “foundational voice,” which evokes the origins of a traumatic past (the voice of pre-colonized India, the voice of the British empire, the voice of the Indian and Pakistani people during Partition) is the foundation for the “contemporary voice.” It may also represent the voice of the first “failed” narrative of *Schizophrene*. The italicized “No” that follows offers a response to the equalization of power that precedes. It also introduces, in the physical emphasis of italics, the commentary on Kapil’s writing process that follows. The act of “unstick[ing]” the pages of the book thus represents the difficulty of uncovering “a foundational voice” and making sense through the act of “read[ing].” The decaying process of the book also creates a void that leads to an exploration of white space, syntactic experimentation, and fragmentation: each winterized word becomes a locus of reflection on writing, permanence, and control. As such, in line with feminist recovery projects, Kapil gives voice to the obliterated experiences of women. Her work provides an intersectional space for recovery of the colonial, gendered, racial, and geopolitical violence that oppressed and elided women. Yet, Kapil’s writing also questions the recovery of lost and underheard voices in the process of de-composition of her work and in the fragmentary, ambivalent, and elusive “final” draft that is *Schizophrene*. Thus, she reveals the limitations of re-grounding women’s realities within a framework that re-tells their stories to make sense of them, categorize them, and stabilize them. Instead, she decolonizes the “voices” that must be physically “unst[uck],” to be “read,” offering a visceral, embodied approach to writing the postcolonial body (Kapil 2011, 58). This embodied mode of writing positions the text in translation, in-between modes of expression, evading the closure of meaning-making narratives of Partition: the multiple frames, physical disjunctions, and associations that are part of the “final text” convey the in-between, post-colonial position of *Schizophrene*.

This in-between-ness also evokes the schizophrenic symptoms Kapil (2011) cites in the epigraph of the volume, which is from Dinesh Bhugra and Peter Jones’s essay, “Migration and Mental Illness”:

> The key question here is whether migration itself acts as a stressor and produces elevated rates of schizophrenia, or whether the stressors occur later . . . However, the stress and chronic difficulties of living in societies where racism is present both at individual and institutional levels may well contribute to ongoing distress. These factors may also interact with social class, poverty, poor social capital, unemployment and poor housing.³

As noted in the epigraph, the research on migration and mental illness has concluded that “the process of ‘selective’ migration has been put forward as a plausible hypothesis to explain the high incidence rates of schizophrenia among migrants, in that more vulnerable people are more restless and rootless” (Bhugra and Jones 2001, 218). Furthermore, as Kapil notes in “ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS and QUICK NOTES,” the work of Kamaldeep Bhui and Dinesh Bhugra corroborated “the link between racism and mental illness” that “[she] had made,” while venturing to write “an epic on Partition” (2011, 71, i). In *Schizophrene*, Kapil documents the oppressive conditions that resulted in the high incidence of schizophrenia, while also situating its correlation to racism, as a form of pathologizing that explicates and stabilizes post-Partition
realities. As such, Kapil expresses the “schizophrenic “hallucination: the organization of acute matter,” while also situating schizophrenia within the larger patriarchal narratives for making sense of trauma that racialize pathologies (71).

Therefore, the concept of permeability, as it relates to the winterizing process of Schizophrene, takes on another connotation: hallucinations of people crossing through walls or windows, stereotypically presented as experiences of schizophrenia, involve a form of permeability—a crossing of physical boundaries and a crossing of the real and unreal. As Grimmer explains, Kapil does not “forg[o] the violent conditions that mobilize diaspora and schizophrenic possibility in the first place” but in “co-articulat[ing] mental illness and migration in the South Asian diaspora,” Kapil “implicat[es] bodies being gendered and racialized through rhetorics of (dis)ability” (2020, 46). In exploring the symbols of porousness and composing her fiction through a performance of the permeable nature of life, Kapil reveals that the division of India and Pakistan, as well as the dislocation and trauma it caused, is worked through schizophrenic episodes while also problematizing such pathologizing and its racist history.

Kapil’s work articulates the schizophrenic person’s unsettled experience of reality and the “mad progression” that is the partition of countries: “A mad progression that exceeds a central frame, like seeing something then falling down” (2011, 8). Kapil highlights the “mad progression” to denounce “the problem of propertied space as also national underpinnings that determine normative pathologies to retroactively justify border-crossing violence” (Grimmer 2020, 47). This is evident in the following page of Schizophrene:

It is psychotic to draw a line between two places.

It is psychotic to go.

It is psychotic to look.

Psychotic to live in a different country forever.

Psychotic to lose something forever.

The compelling conviction that something has been lost is psychotic.

Even the aeroplane’s dotted lines on the monitor as it descends to Heathrow is a purely weird ambient energy.

It is psychotic to submit to violence in a time of great violence and yet it is psychotic to leave that home or country, the place where you submitted again and again, forever.

Indeed, it makes the subsequent involuntary arrival a stressor for psychosis. (2011, 53)

On this page, the repetition of the word “psychotic,” as it relates to the illogical and inhuman consequences of Partition, creates a pattern that roots psychosis in the rhythms of somatic realities. The repetition also delineates, in its list-like mode, the simple yet deeply traumatizing structures of exile. The beating rhythm materializes the feeling of entrapment in an uncontrollable system that grows into impossible scenarios, all equally “psychosis” inducing. In addition, the progressive expansion of the narrative that extends from short sentences to paragraphs adds complexity to the reality that the “immigrant” must face, problematizing the racist frameworks that surround pathology (2011, 1). This development of the narrative also insists on moving away from clear-cut divisions, as Kapil seeks to evade a re-tracing of the division of India and Pakistan: “But to write this narrative is not to split it” (7). Instead,
Kapil offers a conceptual and formal framework that “dis-writes” the dividing principle of Partition in its basic existence (Chevaillier 2017, 88).

Textual Materiality and the Body

This “dis-writing” involves crossings of genres: fiction vs. poetry; performance vs. fixity of the printed codex; medical vs. artistic; the “fixed” quality of writing and its corporeal realities. Page 7 focuses on such crossings: “The emanating structures appear in the light that comes from the body, and it is these structures that perform a rudimentary narrative.” A memory or two?” (Kapil 2011, 7). The expansions and contractions of Kapil’s writing process materialize the attempt to translate the “light that comes from the body” into her work, allowing the crossings of writing and the experience of such writing (7). Bodily presence emerges from a pattern of repetition and association, as well as an emphasis on textual materiality: the notebook, the earth, the screen, the book we hold. Through this emanating structure emerges a scarred body—a body that is not neat, that is instead unruly and that does not conform to the clear delineation between the white page and the words on it. This play with the damaged and marked body of the text evokes the bodies, as well as the voices and realities that colonial and patriarchal structures have eradicated.

Kapil writes, “I wrote about her body, the vertical grave she created in my mind and in the minds of anyone who heard about her, this anonymous and delicate ‘box.’ This imprint” (2011, 23). Here, who “she” is remains obscure, so that “she” might be a woman “pinned” “against the tree,” described earlier, about whom Kapil asks, “Did I literally give her life?” (23). “Her body” might be the body of the woman Kapil imagined, but the narration is elusive enough to also evoke the many female bodies that were violated and murdered. This body is not without reminding us of the “systematic rape of women” that turned their bodies into a space “whereby Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim men sought to humiliate and annihilate the ‘other’ while imprinting their own identity on the bearer of future generations” (Kabir 2005, 179). In the above passage, Kapil also uses the word “imprint,” echoing some of the traumatic experiences of Partition, while also evoking the imprinting involved in her experimentation with writing and snow. The imagery of death in the use of the words “grave” and “box” situates the woman’s body in the “common sorrow in the time extending from August 1947 to the present era” (Kapil 2011, 51). As Schizophrenene progresses, fragmentary images of “releasing ash into the water,” reveal “mourners [who] smashed their urns upon the step: “fire and water flowed from each cracked point” (2011, 65, 66). In this scene, Kapil merges images of finality and fluidity, which culminate in defiance of boundaries: “This image knew no bounds” (66). This page is followed by a black square that encompasses the entire page, materializing the references to the “grave,” “box,” “verticality,” and “urn.” This black square is the fullest page of Schizophrenene, as the rest of the text plays with the white gaps that divide expansively the fragmentary narrative. Instead of representing the darkness, death, and mourning, the back square evokes the “box” that physically appears on the page.

This physical manifestation reveals “the impossibility of restoring [the injured] body to view in any unmediated way,” which “explains why the text disallows the reader from ever ‘looking’ directly upon the injured body” (Misri 2014, 83). Here, Deepti Misri (2014) focuses on the trauma of Partition in Shauna Singh Baldwin’s What the Body Remembers. While the works of Baldwin and Kapil cannot be conflated in their purposes and formal explorations, Misri’s argument about the impossibility of representation of the violent treatment of bodies during Partition illuminates the unrepresentable realities that Kapil seeks to express, being well aware that redescriptions is inept at translating intergenerational trauma. In fact, Schizophrenene’s only “direct” representation of the violence against women comes in the form of a childhood memory:
My mother’s mother put a hand over my mother’s mouth, but my mother saw, peeking between the slats of the cart, row after row of women tied to the border trees. ‘Their stomachs were cut out,’ said my mother. This story, which really wasn’t a story but an image, was repeated to me at many bedtimes of my own childhood.

Sometimes I think it was not an image at all but a way of conveying information. (2011, 40)

Even as she recalls the twice-removed witnessing of trauma, Kapil qualifies it as an “image” and a form of communication “repeated” at “bedtimes.” She captures the shocking flash of the recurring image and links the present to the traumatic past, but also notes that it is not a “story,” one that would contextualize or make sense of the shocking scene. Yet, the succinct rendition of the bedtime ritual also reveals the identity-shaping process of the repetition of this “image.” Instead of rebuilding the “story” behind the “image” of her childhood bedtimes, Kapil crafts a narration that allows readers to experience its impact and resists “disclosure” (Chevaillier 2017, 89).

At the end of page forty-six, she highlights that the scene she recalls is more a “way to convey information,” emphasizing process over accurate memory. In this process lies the violence against women whose bodies were “cut out,” the silencing gesture of the grandmother’s “hand over my mother’s mouth,” and the transfer of information through the bedtime ritual. Thus, the stories of dislocation, rape, and murder are not directly described, but instead, Kapil gives voice to the processes that shape traumatic realities. This is because “redescription” of trauma turns out to be “only a more active form of omission: rather than leaving out of the fact of bodily damage, the fact itself is included and actively cancelled out as it is introduced into the spoken sentence or begins to be recorded on a written page” (Scarry 1987, 69).

Kapil’s narration refuses to redescribe the violence upon women’s bodies, avoiding this form of cancellation, and protecting them from a voyeuristic gaze. Instead, she seeks a kind of writing that embodies, in its form and rhythms, corporeal trauma.

**Touch, Healing, and Feminist Forms**

Therefore, in *Schizophrene*, Kapil seeks to render the “posture” of the traumatized body: “I am increasingly thinking of a text as performance instructions for my own: body. Between the first drafts and the last, I want to figure something out. I take the posture, for example, of the bodily life I am trying to describe” (Chevaillier 2017, 83). This embodied form of writing undoes old narrative patterns inherited from Western and patriarchal systems that have dictated how to address the history of women during the Indian subcontinent’s rupture. In other words, Kapil un-writes the “epic” (Kapil 2011, i) genre and other patriarchal “formulaic, linear accounts” that “uphold hierarchically organized categorizing systems” (Belsare 2020, 369). Her corporeal, “antidevelopmental’ aesthetic” relies on “partial listings and juxtaposition” to counter traditional modes of storytelling that favor organization, hierarchy, logical progression, and closure (Belsare 368).

In doing so, Kapil’s corporeal text provokes a shift in storytelling that engenders new forms of expression and generates positive spaces for creation. She materializes such spaces through touch—the quality of touch of the manuscript that was born out of the frozen notebook. The vibrating pages echo, verbally, the “touch” Kapil writes about at the end of the volume:

> From cross-cultural psychiatry, I learned that light touch, regularly and impersonally repeated, in the exchange of devotional objects, was as healing, for non-white subjects (schizophrenics) as anti-
psychotic medication. In making a book that barely said anything, I hoped to offer: this quality of touch.

from “ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS and QUICK NOTES” (2011, 71)

In the touch of the pen on the page, in the physical act of writing, which is inherently touch, Kapil identifies a tension—the “repelling” qualities of the page and the screen, which she combats with the snow that made her writing “decayed but curiously rigid.” This battle between the hard (“rigid”) and soft (“fibrous”) qualities of surfaces is not without evoking human interactions through touch, which can be hard and soft (2011, i).

Passages such as these highlight that Kapil looks for a form that can contain the exclusion, division, and violence of partition, while she imagines what “healing” could feel like, in one’s body and in the text of Schizophrenie: the void of the un-written parts, the syntactic experimentation, and fragmentation attempt to translate the healing touch. Yet, it is important to note that this “healing” is not a cure, a solution that resolves post-Partition or compensates for racial pathologizing. As Kapil explains, “I was also interested in a writing that would not build itself through lividity, through the pleasure of language—which, for me, was always the antidote. I wanted to write something for which there was not a cure” (Chevaillier 2017, 88). In an attempt to avoid aestheticization of the violated bodies and solution-based restorations of “normality,” which would be yet another mode of objectification, Kapil proposes a “healing narrative,” one that does not encompass or explicate the trauma but focuses on the short time span of touch on a body. She states, “I cannot make the map of healing and so this is the map of what happened in a particular country on a particular day” (2011, 48). The “map of healing” echoes the many references to maps in the volume, as they mark the division of Pakistan and India: “A map of three black days and beneath it in pencil a sentence;” “it gives the map hard value;” “deep in the map;” “a map is a kind of short term memory: the genealogy of a historical time versus the chronology of geographical form” (2011, 43, 44, 48, 51). These references to the map capture the finality of division and underline the failure of the map to apprehend the complexity behind the decision to divide the Indian subcontinent. Instead of producing a macro-representation of the conflict, similar to the map, Kapil explores the micro-elements of “what happened in a particular country on a particular day.” This individualized and momentary focus goes hand in hand with the fragments that “survived” the winter, akin to the brief, repeated touches that Kapil wishes to offer because her work is “less about what happened than allowing what happened to be unraveled, contacted, engaged, withdrawn, pulled out—and then, without language—but through other, smaller or non-verbal movements—the sensorimotor sequence—to the ‘released’” (Chevaillier 2017, 89). In Schizophrenie, this “release” takes the shape of a corporeal form of writing, that, in its materiality, establishes the physical and psychological sufferings of the traumatized body. In offering a material approach to the body and its dismemberment, Kapil avoids the textual violence of patriarchal representation. The transient fragments, akin to touch, and the dis-writing process of the manuscript de-composed in the snow are micro-elements that express a non-verbal movement of “the sensorimotor sequence.”

3. A HEALING NARRATIVE
Fragments attract each other, a swarm of iron filings, black with golden flecks but without a soul. I stroke them with my finger so they scatter then relax.

In correspondence.

In the involuntary response to being touched.

On a plate. (2011, 22)
“A HEALING NARRATIVE” emphasizes movements (“attract,” “swarm,” “scatter”) that evoke the contraction and expansion of touch, as well as the movement of the 1947 turmoil. Both are corporeal, “In correspondence.” The healing response to touch, “involuntary,” also evokes the “involuntary” outcome of Partition, the ordained relocation of people. The tension between these poles, reflected in the attraction/scattering movements, materializes on the page the multi-layered conflict of Partition and exile. Yet, this narrative is “less about what happened,” about making sense of the causes and aftermath of Partition, than it is about the momentary contact, the “glimpse into something that the body can tolerate and thus discharge” (Chevaillier 2017, 89). This “discharge” is embodied in the physicality of the book whose performative writing process and weaving structure plays with past and present, control and release, thereby questioning the forms that we use to express postcolonial realities. As Kapil concludes, “I am not interested in disclosure. I am interested in discharge” (Chevaillier 2017, 89).

Kapil’s interest in discharge implies that writing “release[s] the woman’s injured body from its deployment as pure signifier” and instead re-visions its physical complexity (Misri 2014, 85). When she throws her book in the garden—a physical gesture—Kapil produces a reaching that immerses the body into the text while creating a bodily processing of the “failure” of writing Partition. Schizophrene’s physical evolution generates a kind of re-membering both of the text and of the bodily parts affected by the physical, cultural, and emotional violence of Partition. In this formal exploration of pain, disjunction, memory, and its gaps, Kapil rejects patriarchal narrations that make sense of the trauma. This does not mean that Kapil’s purpose in creating an alternative, corporeal form of expression is solely to denounce the limitations of patriarchal plot structures that focus on coherent historical organization. Kapil resists logical progression and elements of narration that build toward a climax and eventually, if not resolution, then closure, but her goal is not merely to expose patriarchal and colonial representations. While it also has this effect, her work strives to offer novel horizons for postcolonial women’s writing—a corporeal mode of storytelling that does not represent the body through a voyeuristic framework but rather invites readers to experience the “discharge” of postcolonial migration. This kind of thorny work demands slow, careful reading, one that pays attention to the elusive meanings and the unconnected structures of the text. In doing so, the reader comes close to the body of Schizophrene whose pages have been controlled and damaged through the winterizing process, much like the political, physical, and psychological processes shaping the bodies that this weathering emulates.

**Conclusion**

Kapil’s experimentation with erasure, damage, and voids is a kind of “reversing” of the traumatic history that lies in the body manifested in corporeal writing processes. The violence and trauma of Partition penetrate the shape of the syntax and of the pages of the book, as the back and forth between voices, sources, and times marks the development of the narrative and the visual arrangement of the page. As I have shown, this material emphasis is not without evoking the erasure of the voices of traumatized women. The recuperation of lost voices and social patterns calls for new narrative forms that can “translate” these violent realities and their “erased” status. Such forms seek to express the sense of incompleteness that Kapil experiences while working through the consequences of the conflict of Partition and the dislocations that ensued. Yet, Schizophrene also highlights the limitations of “recovering” frameworks that re-root women’s “absence” in re-telling processes. Instead, Kapil focuses on “the fact, which [...] destroys content as yet unwritten: I don’t exist” (2011, 32). Kapil conveys here the intricacies of postcolonial consciousness, where identity has been rescaled, fractured, and eradicated. At the end of Schizophrene, Kapil writes, “Later that
night it rained, washing the country away. A country both dead and living that was not, nor ever would be, my true home” (69). There is no “closure” to this unsettled existence, as it remains rooted in the unresting realities of the restructured lives of post-Partition trauma.

In *Schizophrene*, the bereavement of “a country both dead and living that was not, nor ever would be my true home” also becomes a re-membering that interlayers past and present, as well as control and release to question the forms that we use to convey postcolonial realities. These textual experimentations express—in the artifact of the fiction itself, in the body of the text—the fragmentation and violence of Partition and of racial pathologizing. Thus, in its gaps, blanks, and contortions, the volume offers a material production of damaged bodies and elusive identities, rooted in postcolonial discharge. The process of Kapil’s writing, permeable and porous to the environment, stresses correlation as opposed to division. This exploration of permeability leads us to contemplate not only geopolitical frontiers but also the boundaries between body and language. Such a focus on corporeality opens the possibility for women to write themselves in a form that undoes Partition in its very process.

Notes

1. Books like *Schizophrene* call into question the categories of “prose” and “poetry,” as the volume expands the possibilities of writing. Thus, the book has been categorized both as a work of fiction and a volume of poetry. Kapil herself addressed such issues of categorization: “I’ve been variously described or introduced as a poet, a novelist, a cross-genre writer, a hybrid writer, a creative non-fiction writer, a lyric essayist, a writer working at the intersection of lyric and documentary aims, a fiction writer, a performance artist, and a prose–poet” (Kapil 2013). She expands on the categorizing of her work in her conversation of the “poet’s novel” with Laynie Browne and addresses questions of form and hybridity in *Divergent Trajectories*, where she refers to *Schizophrene* as “novel” that she is “dis-writing” (Chevaillier 2017, 89). Because *Schizophrene* resists categorization in the “prose,” “poetry,” and “hybrid” categories, I have chosen to emphasize its material qualities, referring to it as a “book” or “volume” since its physical existence and evolution are at the forefront of my analysis.

2. For more detailed information on the ways in which Partition has been framed and recorded, see Tarun K. Ravikant, *Translating Partition: Stories, Essays, and Criticism* (New Delhi: Katha, 2001).


References


