

What the Body Knows: A Code for Living

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ABSTRACT

What the Body Knows: A Code for Living

Emilie O'Brien

This research-creation MA thesis asks not just how our bodies are relational but how the process of embodiment is relational, and shows why this is important to collective flourishing. Prioritizing this alongside the unfolding climate crisis, the primary question in this thesis explores how our body's intelligence intersects with planetary wellness, amplifying innate principles of reciprocity that exist throughout our bodies and the wider systems of life on Earth. Presenting healing modalities and strategies that emphasize the body's intelligence and centre concepts of interconnection, this research unites personal ritual, ceremony, dream and ancestor work, somatic therapy and plant medicine with art-making, scholarly research and writing.

The resulting large-scale textile works, comprised of botanical cyanotypes, hand-embroideries and bilateral drawings on cloth, work together with a written thesis to critically examine the fascia of connectivity between individual, community and planetary wellness. Based in the offer of deep medicine to repair relationships “damaged through systems of domination”,¹ this thesis juxtaposes Western medical frameworks around healing against personal experience and the wisdom of traditional and Indigenous cultures. This concludes with redefining the human body and health to encompass the living-systems theory of Healing Justice, where mutual flourishing forms the heart of personal and collective wellness, and showing that our body's way-of-knowing is inherently linked to planetary health.

¹ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*. New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2021, 496;



Motherwort Banner #1, cyanotype on cotton, H 213.0 x W 152.0 cm, 2024

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Chapter One: Welcoming the Reader

1.1 Gratitudes

Every night when I help my son get ready for bed, we have a ritual of asking each other, *what's your one good thing?* We rarely miss a night, and it feels especially important, even if difficult, to find one good thing when the day has been tough. Feeling gratitude is an act of finding appreciation and value in an experience, and to do so actively means we must look back and pay attention to what comes forward. In this way, giving gratitude is a way of reconnecting, and re-membering ourselves into our environment. On giving thanks, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in her well-loved book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, “Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart.”¹

I extend my first gratitudes to my parents who modelled peace, kindness, and humility along with a true love for the natural world. Also, to my siblings who are my best friends. To all the lands I have lived on, and the peoples who steward them - I am humbled and grateful to live, work, play, and raise my child on these lands. I learn daily from them and hope to become a good ancestor to the generations to come. This Master's work is for my family and the lands, waters, flora, fauna, and all living elements.

To those with whom I make my home here in Montreal - my partner who is my biggest cheerleader, and my child who teaches me every day about what it means to be vulnerable and

¹Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Publications, 2015), 312

honest and resilient, and to my close friends who are chosen family.

To my team of Supervisors at Concordia, thank you for coming to my project with enthusiasm and presence, especially during the pandemic times of great upheaval. I only wish I could have had more unfettered time to learn from you. Special thanks to Kathleen Vaughan for your guidance, humour, and generosity of spirit, as well as inviting me to participate in the wonderful *River's Thread* project which nourished both me and my thesis. And to all the other teachers and the peers I have had the great honour of working with at Concordia - gratitude.

1.2 Notes on Form: A Glimpse into the Project Framework

Western/ized: I use the term western and westernized throughout this paper to define a western European worldview and way of living that has affected much of the world through the process of trade, colonialism, missionaries, and globalization (itself a result of and purveyor of colonial practices). This colonial worldview is one that has historically assumed superiority over other cultures and over the natural world, and where Indigenous or occupied peoples have been forced to adopt European language, modes of dress, entertainment, religious belief, government styles, food systems, medical models, and more. As such, a normative westernized worldview promotes “the reduction and dismissal of Indigenous and traditional thought and ways of being.”²

This Eurocentrism has formed a dominant model of thinking and doing that has eradicated languages, entire human tribes, non-human species of life, and ways of knowing. Also known as genocide, epistemicide, ecocide, and femicide, these acts are ongoing - most notably through

² Amba Jessida Sepie, “Tracing The Motherline: Earth Elders, Decolonising Worldview, and Planetary Futurity.” (PhD, University of Canterbury, 2018), 227, https://www.academia.edu/37319192/Tracing_the_Motherline_Earth_Elders_Decolonising_Worldview_and_Planetary_Futurity_pdf

extreme land and resource grabs in the name of progress, as well as through the continuing devaluing of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and non-male bodies. While some studies show that globally humans are living longer and better, my studies are showing that exactly who is living longer and better is key to this discussion.^{3 4 5} The ultimate result of this domination is the climate disaster we now collectively face.

Feminist Geographer Dr Amba Sepie's explanation of the west as being dis-located from land and cultural core is important, because in identifying areas of lack we find also places for potential growth: "This 'west', with which we are now all familiar, is fundamentally divorced from specific places and unable to provide any shared sense of community, ethos, meaning, or direction, as collated under the sign of 'western'. I would suggest that what afflicts it (and those who inhabit its imagined terrain) is the absence of any consistently held (shared) ethical, or spiritual, core."⁶

For those living in cultures dominated by Westernized thought, models, and practices, this is the water we are swimming in. When we begin to understand this, we also begin to understand the metaphysical worldview many of us have inherited, and how the systems we co-create unconsciously (or consciously in some cases) uphold this worldview.

³ Arline T. Geronimus. *Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society*. Chico, California: AK Press, 2023, 358, <https://www.akpress.org/weathering.html>.

⁴ Steven W. Thrasher, *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Inequality and Disease Collide*. New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2022, 352

⁵ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*, New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2021, 496

⁶ Sepie, "Tracing The Motherline." 98-99

Trauma: I use the word trauma to mean “an unbearable emotional experience that lacks a relational home” - relational home meaning how this trauma is handled and held by the people around us, that we are in relation with.⁷ I understand this to lead to an overwhelm so great that brain processes to cognitively understand and file this experience are shut down, and a person’s energy is switched into survival mode.

Healing Justice: As I engaged in my final thesis I began to rethink the concept of justice - especially in regards to that of Planetary Justice, as worked on by Earth Systems Governance (ESG) scholars Frank Biermann and Agni Kalfagianni,⁸ and challenged by scholars Adrienne Johnson and Alex Sigona⁹ and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Environmental Justice Deborah McGregor, with co-authors Stephen Whitaker and Mahisha Sritharan.¹⁰

Based on the concepts of interconnection and healing-for-all that this thesis is constructed from, and my belief that Indigenous and traditional worldviews must be prioritized in matters of planetary futurity, I have chosen to use the phrase Healing Justice. I want to note that where I use the word Justice singularly in this thesis, I always mean Healing Justice. This means that when I write somatic justice = social justice = planetary justice, I also mean somatic healing = social healing = planetary healing.

⁷ Tami Simon, “MaryCatherine McDonald: The Trauma Response Is Never Wrong.” March 23, 2023, in *Sounds True: Insights At The Edge*, produced by Sounds True, podcast, <https://resources.soundstrue.com/podcast/marycatherine-mcdonald-the-trauma-response-is-never-wrong/>

⁸ Frank Biermann and Agni Kalfagianni. “Planetary Justice: A Research Framework.” *Earth System Governance*, 100049, 6 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2020.100049>

⁹ Adrienne Johnson and Alex Sigona, “Planetary Justice and ‘Healing’ in the Anthropocene.” *Earth System Governance* 11, no. 100128 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2021.100128>

¹⁰ Deborah McGregor, Steven Whitaker, and Mahisha Sritharan, “Indigenous Environmental Justice and Sustainability.” *Current Opinion in Snivronmental Sustainability* 43 (2020): 35–40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2020.01.007>

In this way I hope to reorient the gaze away from colonial notions of justice that are folly to interpretation and reliance on systems of harm, and toward a wholistic perspective where healing is entwined with liberatory change. The paper “Healing Justice: A Framework for Collective Healing and Well-Being from Systemic Traumas”¹¹, and the website for the Institute for Liberatory Innovation were helpful to me in thinking this through.¹² A re-imagining of healing is necessary for this to take hold, and this space of re-imagining is where my thesis plays.

What this is paper is not: While it may be presented in black type on white background, this thesis is meant to play in the grey zones between conceptions of what right and wrong. What this thesis points out more than anything is that dominance is never and has never been the way for us to live well with each other and the Earth. While living systems naturally have predators and prey, there is enough evidence, both in millennia-long Indigenous knowledge systems and in newer ones, to show that long-term, life sustaining systems inherently depend on the collaborative relationships of all who live within them.

This paper is also not a prescription for anyone’s specific illness or healing journey. I am an artist researching embodiment practices, because I believe the intelligence of our bodies is connected to the wellness of our planet, and that learning the language of our bodies can point the way forward to a more promising future for life on Earth.

¹¹ Brooke Bosley, Christina N. Harrington, Susana M. Morris, and Christopher A. Le Dantec, “Healing Justice: A Framework for Collective Healing and Well-Being from Systemic Traumas.” In *Proceedings of the 2022 ACM Designing Interactive Systems Conference (DIS ’22)*, 471–84, New York: Association for Computing Machinery, n.d. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3532106.3533492>

¹² The Institute for Liberatory Innovation, “Our Work” n.d. <https://www.liberatoryinstitute.org>

Notes on this text as an academic thesis: The structure of this thesis follows a research-creation methodology, and therefore is oriented to creative production of art and writing in accompaniment to my academic research, analysis and writing. While the thesis text contains all the conventional elements - research questions, theoretical framework, literature review, methodology, and discussion of research process and outcomes - the form I offer is also a deeply personal narrative where creative prose, poetic interludes and my textile artworks work together as critical endeavours to tell stories that imagine outside “basic norms and categories”.¹³ In this case it is experiences and understandings of the human body that I want to shed light on, and am doing so in part through prioritizing narratives and ways-of-knowing that are often taken for granted and/or marginalized.

¹³ Susan Babbitt, “Reviewed Work: Reading across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance: Shari Stone-Mediatore.” *Hypatia*, Feminist Epistemologies of Ignorance (Summer 2006), 21, no. 3 (2006): 203–6. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810961>

This review of Shari Stone Mediatore’s paper highlights the Mediatore’s emphasis on story writing as a critical, political endeavour precisely because it is telling narratives from outside the lines, or the “basic norms and categories” of the dominant system, including what is considered academic writing within this system.

1.3 Still Love - A Poetic Interlude

Early skies, birds
 Covering my eyes
 Ragged, worn, soft
 I dreamt about cracks in the sidewalk
 This I know about - how to fix things so the repair remains visible
 and,
 what it means to have fissure
 To feel across rivers,
 from other shores, from far away
 There.
 Trying to sense it
 Listening for silence
 Lying down, headphones in
 Finding joy
 Finding sorrow
 Hold them both in equanimity
 Life
 Templed in the body

This thesis is a love letter to my body and to all bodies everywhere; all types, all abilities, all experiences and freakiness. It is a love letter to the gorgeous, messy, and intricate intelligence of life on Earth as a collective force for goodness: “I love you, and I have so much to learn. I love you and we are just now learning that it’s possible, love on a scale we can survive. I love you, and how generous - how downright miraculous - it is that life would let me learn like this.”¹

That our body’s innate intelligence is built from and for mutualism and planetary flourishing is something I want to write in the sky, not in the least because time is of the essence. Now, more than ever, we must ask - What does it mean to be deeply connected to Mother Earth,

¹ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Emergent Strategies Series, (California: AK Press, 2020), 50

so we can speak with full authority about what she needs?² Surely the answers to this lie in our bodies, whose sensuous beings are created from relationship and reciprocity, and in embodying these relationships that inherently connect us to Earth.

Wake up the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet, your lungs. Say hello to your heartbeat. Ask yourself, what am I holding in my body - today, yesterday, always? Whose joy and pain do I carry? What do I need to feel nourished, right now? What relationships guide me home (human or not)?

When we are nourished, we are able to give. When we listen to ourselves, and are listened to with compassion, we are able to hear others. This all requires having space, getting quiet, and tuning in. “Rest is resistance and sleep is political,” says black feminist writer and activist Alexis Pauline Gumbs.³ “The times are urgent”, writes philosopher Bayo Akomolfe, quoting Yoruban wisdom, “Let’s slow down.”⁴

If I can be so bold - please, take a breath. As I sit here writing I am conscious that you will be reading these words sometime in the not so distant future. And so I ask you to take a breath with me, across time. See if you can take a breath into your stomach so that it rises and falls. Exhale longer than your inhale. Do it again. Look around where you sit, and, un-focus your gaze somewhere farther away, just for a moment.

² Rabke, Erin Geesaman, and Carl Rabke. “You Were Born Into Beauty as Beauty for Joyful Life, and That’s The Truth: A Deep and Wide Conversation With Pat McCabe, Woman Stands Shining.” November 27, 2021, in *Embodiment Matters*, podcast, <https://embodimentmatters.com/a-joyful-life/>.

³ Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, 73

⁴ Akomolfe, Bayo. “The Times Are Urgent, Let’s Slow Down.” Bayo Akomolfe, Accessed September 20, 2024, <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net>

When you arrive back at this page - welcome, and thank you - I am grateful for your presence with this thesis and I'm glad you're here.

Taking a moment to get in touch with my senses is a small but potent method I have learned to align myself with what my heart, body, and mind are bringing to the moment. Some anxiety, excitement, gratitude. Preoccupation and concern about my family, and our world. Tired, often. A buzz of constriction in my chest. A feeling of well-being in my stomach. And more. All at the same time. And that's just today.

Awareness of the messages our bodies are sending us - how they feel in the moment, what stories we are carrying, what we need to feel comfortable or safe, how constricted or open our heart is - helps us to act, speak and respond both inwardly and outwardly with more care and thoughtfulness. This is showing kindness and respect to ourselves, and this inner kindness and respect pays outward to those we are in relationship with. "We not capable of healing in isolation. We need other people," says Dr Diane Poole Heller. "Our brain and nervous system are not isolated, but interconnected and social....Being comfortable in your own skin and having tools to relax is a really big deal, but learning how to feel safe with others is revolutionary."⁵

Let's repeat that last bit: *Learning how to feel safe with others is revolutionary*. I'm openly invested in revolution. So, let's start there.

⁵ Dr. Diane Poole Heller, *The Power of Attachment: How to Create Deep and Lasting Intimate Relationships*, (Louisville, Colorado: Sounds True Publishing Foundation, 2019), Introduction, e-book, <https://one.soundtrue.com/library>

Chapter Two: Introduction

2.1 Somatic! Revolution!

The root of somatic is *soma*, an ancient Greek word which evolved to mean “the living body in its wholeness”.¹ When we look at living systems in their entirety, we see webs of relationship and reciprocity. We are alive inside of bodies that are made up of and nestled alongside of other bodies - from the microbiome to the vastness of lands, waters, other animals, and the collectives we co-create. This is where the change I am looking for is rooted - in process-based, dynamic, whole and alive bodies.

I’ll expand on Dr Poole’s statement in the previous section, to say that I firmly believe revolution first begins in our own skin and works outward from there. African American somatic abolitionist, therapist and author Resmaa Menakem makes this clear when he states, “It begins in your body, then ripples out to other bodies, and then to our collective body.”² While held as deep knowledge in many Indigenous and traditional cultures, current grassroots movements led largely by BIPOC, LGBTQ2a+, and disabled communities are also paving the way for a paradigm shift, in bringing forward their often intimate understanding of the body as a site of trauma and therefore of liberation. Suppose we extend these ideas to include the more-than human world with whom we are also in relationship. In that case, we begin truly engaging in a world wide web of relationality and reciprocity.

¹ Centre for Somatic Studies, “Developmental Somatic Psychotherapy: Definitions”, n.d., <https://somaticstudies.com/developmental-somatic-psychotherapy/definitions/>

² Resmaa Menakem, “What Somatic Abolitionism Does”, Dr. Resmaa Somatic Abolitionism, Accessed December 5, 2020, [https:// www.resmaa.com/movement](https://www.resmaa.com/movement)

I believe the magic of this “great turning”³ lies somewhere between the self and other, in that we do our best learning in relation to each other (including the more-than-human), so that change is necessarily interdependent and perhaps even multi-dimensional. Dr. Peter Levine, renowned psychologist and developer of Somatic Experiencing therapy, touches on this and takes these ripples one step further in a wonderful story he tells from early in his career. At this time, knee-deep in developing his theories on somatic therapy, Levine had a waking vision of Albert Einstein approaching him for a conversation. Levine engaged, and at one point Einstein tipped several stones, one by one, into a river. The resulting ripples in the water expanded, intersecting in all directions. Einstein pointed this out to Levine, saying: “if two of these intersecting wave fronts get stuck, then everything will be distorted.” When Levine asked him how this applied to the somatic therapy model he was developing, Einstein replied, “that is not my work, it’s yours.”⁴

As a somatic therapist, Levine works with releasing what he calls “stuck energy patterns” in the patient's body. As his work matured, he came to understand the dimensionality of Einstein’s ripples as emotional and energetic patterns reaching into the past and future. Healing (and the revolution of healing justice) is nonlinear and multidimensional, and our personal efforts at release can help to “heal our ancestors of their trauma, and their ancestors,” with effects going “forward, sideways, and backwards.”

³ Joanna Macy and *The Great Turning*, Video Inc., 2014, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/greatturning/91432289>

⁴ Maurizio Benazzo, “From Wounds to Wholeness: Peter Levine”, in *Sounds of SAND*, podcast, Accessed July 18, 2024, <https://scienceandnonduality.com/audio/82-from-wounds-to-wholeness/>

2.2 Research Questions

My thesis holds that revolution of the kind needed on our Earth - a return to systems-of-care that fully recognize our interdependence with the Earth and each other - requires, in part, unblocking patterns of harmful belief, trauma, and behaviour held in our individual and collective bodies. There are many ways to work toward this, and my thesis focuses on healing strategies I used in my practice-led research - namely art making as healing, working with plants as medicine, somatic therapies, ritual, ceremony, and dreamwork - and reflects on how these practices ripple out into my family and community.

These ripples are where I am looking when I ask three questions:

What is embodiment?

What is body intelligence and how do we attune to it?

And, what does it mean to heal?

(or: How are embodiment, body intelligence and healing entwined?)

(or: How do we connect through our bodies to a larger living world?)

Let me break down and explain these questions. More than anything, I am curious about the body from the point of view of relationship, because I have learned that relationships are key to thriving together over the long term. This concept is a primary thread throughout my research as a way of mapping connections between living systems - in and between the human body and the

bodies of other animals, plants, microorganisms, elements, territories, communities, planetary and cosmos. In this way, my thesis looks at the web of intelligence that the human body is both made from and belongs to.

This larger network and our place in it form the root system through which I want to grow the idea that *how we think of our body* is of great importance when approaching embodiment as a critical endeavour. The verb embody, in the sense I am using it, means to fully inhabit the body one lives in - and therefore *all of the body's interconnections*. This is what anti-oppression therapist Leah Manaema means when she refers to mapping our 'field of being'.⁵

My query asks not just how our bodies are relational, but how the process of embodiment is relational, and shows why this is important in the context of collective flourishing. Through my investigations I have learned, and want to share, that these relationships tell us something about the nature of life and what it means to be alive as a human here on Earth, especially now at this historical moment that is referred to as the sixth mass extinction.⁶ This is why I choose to marry the words Somatic and Revolution to introduce these ideas.

Our individual, physical boundaries are porous and not so easily defined. Our great potential as humans depends on the profound recognition that an intrinsic, reciprocal intelligence exists at once within our bodies, and in the world around us. "The body... is the missing piece,"⁷

⁵ Leah Menaema (@co_cu1tur3), "Open sourcery from the body of work Tiriki Onus and I are currently working on. Posting here for communities of resistance.", Instagram reel, April 20, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/co_cu1tur3/reel/C5-mL_nR63v/

⁶ Robert H. Cowie, Philippe Bouchet, and Benoît Fontaine, "The Sixth Mass Extinction: Fact, Fiction or Speculation?" *Biological Reviews* 97, no. 2 (January 10, 2022): 640–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/brv.12816>

⁷ Maurizio Benazzo, "From Wounds to Wholeness: Peter Levine."

says Dr. Peter Levine. As my research will show, this is not a new concept, but it is one whose time has come.

The primary question embedded within my MA project title, *What the Body Knows*, emerges from my deep interest in what it means to be human in our bodies, and how we connect and heal from this place. Prioritizing this alongside the unfolding climate crisis, I am asking: *How does the intelligence of our bodies intersect with planetary wellness?* Presupposing the body-in-healing as an activated site of interconnectivity, my thesis uses research-creation methods to investigate healing modalities and strategies that emphasize the body's intelligence and centre the concept of interconnection (within the body and self; with other living beings; with land; ancestors; Creator/Divine etc).

Based in Robin Wall Kimmerer's influential notion of making relationship with kin⁸, my foundational research is personal and unites ritual and ceremony, dream-work, somatic therapies, ancestor work, open-ended hand-embroidery and bilateral drawing, as well as time spent with 'green allies' learning and making plant medicines, inks, and botanical cyanotypes. Many of these methods engage with a kind of magic-realism that suspends 'rational' thinking; a magic that is threaded throughout my thesis.⁹

⁸ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Publications, 2015).

In chapter ___ Kimmerer invites us, the readers, to refer to the natural world with respect, using the pronouns "ki" and "kin" instead of "it." Coming from the Anishinaabe word "aki," meaning earthly being, Kimmerer tells us this a grammar of animacy to be treated as gift.

⁹ Nicole Bowers. "Creating Magical Research: Writing for a Felt Reality in a More-Than-Human World." In *Reimagining Science Education in the Anthropocene*, 73–90. Palgrave Studies in Education and the Environment. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Bowers explains that magical realism is an important method in pushing habits of conveying and receiving what might be thought of as 'data': "Magical elements disrupt normal reading habits and ask the reader to co-create/co-think with the text." 84

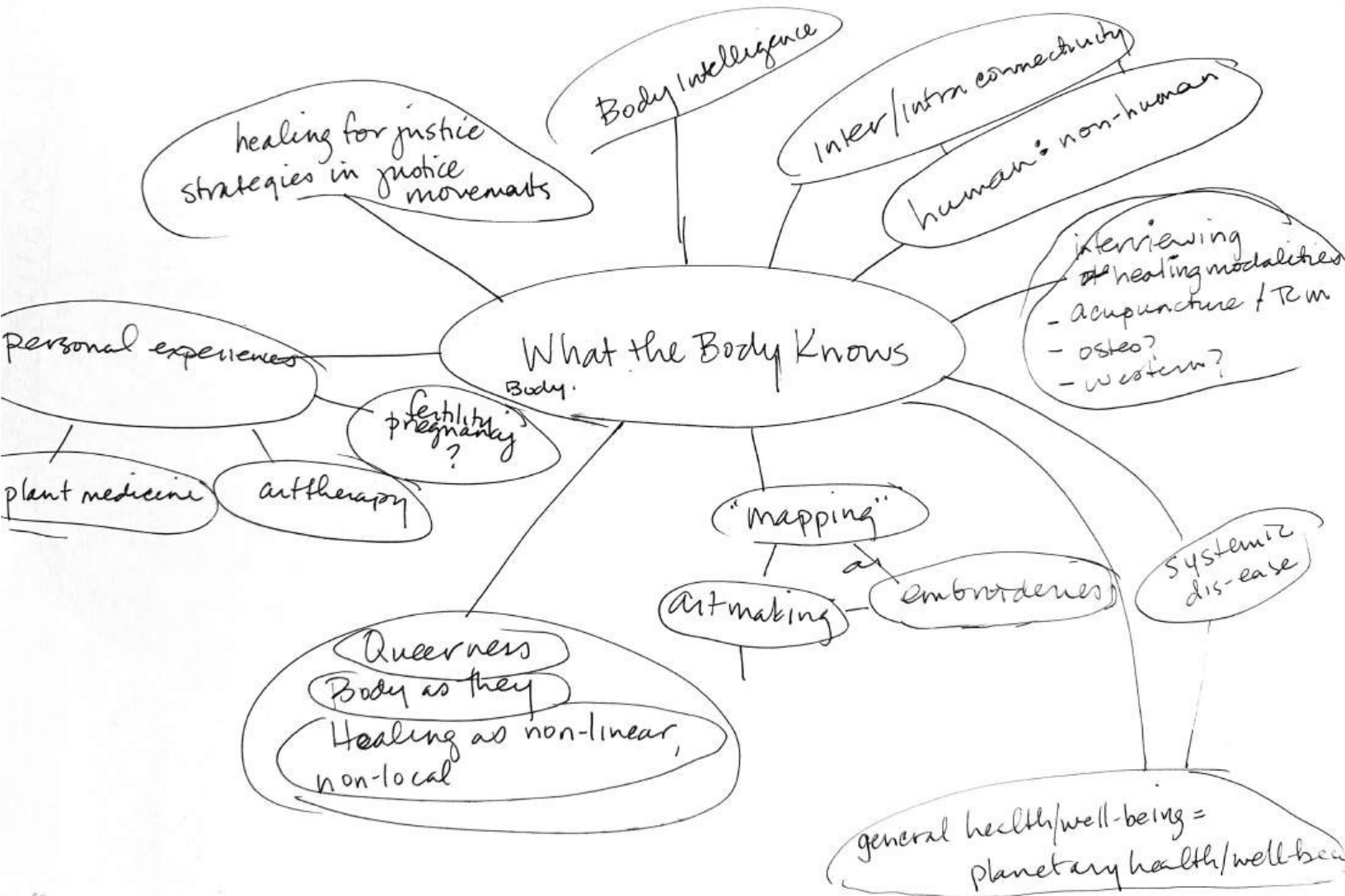
With a focus on art-making and personal story, my resulting thesis comprises written and large-scale textile works that critically examine the fascia of connectivity between individual, community and planetary wellness. Included are images from artists whose work influences me as well as personal sketches, and in-process elements that give a glimpse into my practice-led process of thinking through ideas. Based in embodiment studies and the offer of deep medicine to repair relationships “damaged through systems of domination”,^{10 11} this thesis is built from and lives within the praxis of somatic justice as social justice as planetary justice.

¹⁰ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*, (New York: MacMillan Publishers), 2021. On page, — the authors state that deep medicine “starts with the act of repairing those relationships that have been damaged through systems of domination.”

¹¹ African Policy Research Institute. “Intersectionality.” Accessed November 28, 2024. <https://afripoli.org/projects/glossary/intersectionality-explainer>. This brings me to intersectionality, popularized by critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and defined by the (recently closed) Centre for Intersectional Justice as “the ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class and other forms of discrimination “intersect” to create unique dynamics and effects.”

Chapter Three: The Theories that Inform My Work

3.1 Mind Map



3.2 Theoretical Framework

As an interdisciplinary artist-researcher, I best understand my practice through the theoretical lens of feminist new materialisms (FNM). I find FNM in alignment with the three R's of Indigenous Methodology¹, as both systems of thought emphasize the key concepts underpinning my practice: intersectional, anti-colonial, body-mind-centred, more-than-human, whole-systems thinking. In using this lens to trouble and rework the materiality of my practice, I get to unpack research methodology, world-making, knowledge-making and art-making, language, personal narrative, connectivity, the sacred triad of Body-Mind-Spirit, and related concepts of justice.

I find resonance for my approach in professor, author, and creator Sarah Truman's explanation of feminist new-materialisms as diverse, disparate and porous fields entangling together, thus bringing "attention to the relationship between nature and culture, turn(s) to matter, distributive agency and privileging relations, prioritizing affect, and a movement away from the linguistic turn and representationalismdisrupt[ing] common orientations to research methodology and decenter[ing] humanism in a variety of ways".² The border-jumping³, anti-colonial, and body-centred nature of her description forms the theoretical foundation for my MA

¹ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2008); Virginie Magnat. "Honouring the 3 R's of Indigenous Research Methodologies." *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches Théâtrales Au Canada* 35, no. 2 (May 16, 2014). <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/TRIC/article/view/21967>.

² Sarah Truman, "Feminist New Materialisms." In *The SAGE Research Methods Foundations*, ed. by Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont, Alexandru Cernat, Joseph W. Sakshaug, and Richard A. Williams, (SAGE Publications, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036808740>.

³ Karsten Schulz. "Decolonizing Political Ecology: Ontology, Technology and 'Critical' Enchantment." *Journal of Political Ecology* 24, no. 1 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.2458/v24i1.20789>. This is a term used by Schulz in this paper to describe movements that cross theoretical borders to engage critically by making new connections.

thesis. Within this framework, I consider myself a whole-systems thinker and am guided in this by the work of Buddhist, deep ecologist and whole-systems theorist Joanna Macy⁴ and filmmaker, writer, and educator Nora Bateson.⁵

I love authors Rebecca Coleman, Tara Page, and Helen Palmer's statement in their 2019 online essay "Feminist New Materialist Practice: The Mattering of Methods", on why the FNM approach to materials and methods is particularly feminist: "First, the energy required to overthrow conventional (abstract, ideal) reasoning in favour of messy mattering of methods is precisely the energy that is required to break down barriers and borders that prevent us from understanding and affirming difference without prejudice".⁶ Yes! Through this breaking down and affirming of difference, we also uncover foundational interconnections. bell hooks once stated, "I began to use the phrase... 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' because I wanted to have some language that would actually remind us continually of the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality".⁷ As I am learning through my thesis and my own feminist-activism, relationships, sensorial priorities, and the 'messy mattering' of concepts must take place to manifest meaningful action.

⁴ Joanna Macy & Her Work, "Joanna Macy." Accessed November 28, 2024, <https://www.joannamacy.net/main#work>

⁵ The International Bateson Institute, "Founder, Nora Bateson." Accessed November 28, 2024, <https://batesoninstitute.org/nora-bateson/>

⁶ Rebecca Coleman, Tara Page, and Helen Palmer, "Feminist New Materialist Practice: The Mattering of Methods." MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture, May 15, 2019, Accessed February 2, 2021, <https://maifeminism.com/feminist-new-materialisms-the-mattering-of-methods-editors-note/>

⁷ "Bell Hooks - Cultural Criticism & Transformation", Interview by Media Education Foundation, (1997) <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Bell-Hooks-Transcript.pdf>.

“We now live in fugitive times, and...[these] require fugitive epistemologies”,⁸ says Yoruban writer and scholar Bayo Akomolfe. We might weave in his notion of fugitivity here, as it speaks in the language of FNM. In art conservation, we use the term fugitive to describe a material that is transient and most often highly sensitive to light - for instance, a pigment that fades quickly or a solution whose stability is highly impermanent.⁹

The plant inks I made during this research fall into this category, and for this very reason I was advised not to use them in my artworks by many of my conservator friends, due to the inks instability over time. However, through these inks I purposely work with the idea of fugitivity as holding promise in its defection from the desired norm of longterm predictability. Akomolfe’s thinking reflects FNM and a spectrum of scholarly discussions that relate to my MA, including Indigenous epistemology, art therapy, theology, sociology, and anthropological studies, in promoting materialities and ways of knowing that are hidden, fleeting, proprioceptive, and speculative; open to shifting under the light of other entangled knowings.

In my project, the element of time is also important to acknowledge, partially in order to politicize how knowings are constructed; this includes reclaiming time at the speed of life in a body that interrelates with the cosmos, which emphasizes slowness, deep time,¹⁰ and the ebb and

⁸ Ayana Young, “Dr. Bayo Akomolfe on Coming Alive to Other Senses.” In *For The Wild*, produced by For The Wild, podcast, <https://forthewild.world/listen/dr-bayo-akomolafe-on-coming-alive-to-other-senses-300>

⁹ Paul M. Whitmore, Xun Pan, and Catherine Bailie, “Predicting The Fading of Objects: Identification of Fugitive Colorants Through Direct Nondestructive Lightfastness Measurements.” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 38, no. 3 (Autumn-Winter 1999): 395–409. <https://doi.org/10.1179/019713699806113420>; “BPG Media Problems.” AIC Wiki, American Institute of Conservation, 2022, https://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/BPG_Media_Problems.

¹⁰ Living Forest Farm, “Part 13: Deep Time Work - the Work That Reconnects With Joanna Macy,” YouTube, August 13, 2012, educational video, 3:49. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCXxFU4igAU>.

flow of cycles and seasons. Time as a vital, dynamic force is a key concept in FNM, found in Karan Barad's theory of agential realism, where elements are constantly engaged in intra-action "...exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably".¹¹

When I am practicing ritual and ceremony, alone or with others, time can feel thick with a texture that is outside of the everyday. This plays out in the studio as well, where tactile awareness of how a material slips, sticks, allows and refuses can echo my emotional, mental, and/or physical state, and further to this, can help to bring my thoughts and gestures to balance, merge and collaborate at the moment of making.

Slowness as a revolutionary movement has been growing over decades, and art has taken this up from Elaine Lipson's *Slow Cloth Manifesto*,¹² to Tricia Hersey's *Nap Ministry*¹³ and Montreal's own Victoria Stanton's project *Doing Nothing*.¹⁴ FNM highlights time by prioritizing *making-doing* as an 'event' of research,¹⁵ ¹⁶ legitimizing thinking theories through matter, method, and the senses.

This is a good place to segue into Buddhist ideas on time and form, something I discovered

¹¹ Whitney Stark, "Intra-Action." *New Materialism*, August 15, 2016. <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/i/intra-action.html>.

¹² Elaine Lipson, *The Slow Cloth Manifesto: An Alternative to the Politics of Production*. Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings, 711, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/711>

¹³ "About." *The Nap Ministry*, Accessed August 13, 2022, <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/about/>.

¹⁴ Victoria Stanton, "The 'Doing Nothing Project.'" Accessed July 18, 2024, <https://bankofvictoria.com/2023/11/16/the-doing-nothing-project/>.

¹⁵ Sarah E Truman, *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation: Writing Pedagogies and Intertextual Affairs*. New York: Routledge. 2022

¹⁶ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi. "Toward a Process Seed Bank: What Research-Creation Can Do." *Media-N. Journal of the New Media Caucus*. Accessed July 12, 2023. <http://median.newmediacaucus.org/research-creation-explorations/toward-a-process-seed-bank-what-research-creation-can-do/>.

in my early days of art school, where my concerns with the materiality and connectivity of bodies, experiences and being/s first began. Years later, I am struck by how well physicist Karan Barad's concepts of entanglement and intra-action¹⁷ align with Buddhist ideas on form as an ever-emergent co-creation. As I understand it, in both Baradian and Buddhist thought, there is no independent object, subject or event, and there is no singular time in which these exist. In his essay titled Buddhism, Barad and Materialism, Professor of Philosophy of Education Dr. Jim Garrison finds that "The relata, subjects and objects, are entangled; they emerge and are extinguished together in co-dependent relation."¹⁸

This is whole-systems, w/holistic, and or, even, holographic thinking¹⁹ and reminds us that ontology, or how we perceive reality, matters profoundly. I have once again found it helpful to learn from Joanna Macy, who uses this lens to shed light on the metaphysical roots of power²⁰ that underpin the Westernized world, training most persons therein to see life in terms of separation. For millennia two ways of seeing have predominated - the first based in dynamic flux, fluidity and ongoing change, as found in the writing of Greek philosopher Heraclitus and many traditional and Indigenous cosmologies, and the second, found in the writings of Plato and

¹⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).; Karen Barad, "On Touching - The Inhuman That Therefore I Am." *Brown University and Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 2012. http://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-pdf/23/3/206/405804/DIF_23_3_08Barad_Fpp.pdf.

¹⁸ Jim Garrison. "Buddhism, Barad, and Materialism." *Symploke* 29, no. 1, 2021, 475–91, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1353/sym.2021.0024>.

¹⁹ Manulani A Meyer, "Holographic Epistemology: Native Common Sense." *China Media Research* 9, no. 2 2013, 94–101. In this essay, the author unfolds the concept of the holograph as a cosmological framework for thinking about being human in a living universe.

²⁰ Sepie, Amba Jessida. "Tracing The Motherline: Earth Elders, Decolonising Worldview, and Planetary Futurity." PhD, University of Canterbury, 2018. https://www.academia.edu/37319192/Tracing_the_Motherline_Earth_Elders_Decolonising_Worldview_and_Planetary_Futurity_pdf. Sepie refers to this concept in many ways, throughout her thesis.

Aristotle,^{21 22} where reality is made of “things, pieces and entities; substance not flow”.²³

Holism or whole systems thinking segues naturally into the concept of planetary justice (PJ), a newly emerging term in the formal world of justice theory^{24 25} but clearly, an ethics that is as old as our dear Earth herself. Using FNM and the feminist notion of response-ability²⁶ to guide my MA thesis, I am looking to root cause and whole system/holistic thinking to link embodiment to justice for life on Earth - through what I have come to call Healing Justice. That is, consciously living *through* our body-mind-spirit *with/in* the living world around us promotes individual and collective wellness, and, that this is a fundamental right for all of life on Earth.

3.3 Key Literature

In my personal and academic engagement, I have especially learned about systems thinking and embodied activism from deep-ecologist Joanna Macy’s writing, lectures and her program The Work that Reconnects.²⁷ For concepts of deep medicine, I want to highlight Drs Rupa Marya and

²¹ Living Forest Farms, “Part 11: The Systems View of Life - The Work That Reconnects with Joanna Macy.” YouTube, August 13, 2012, Educational video, https://youtu.be/J7gt1YePVaE?si=ntejenzE_PCyjGO

²² Matthew Hall, “Pagans, Plants and Personhood” in *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), 119-136

²³ Part 11: The Systems View of Life - The Work That Reconnects with Joanna Macy.

²⁴ Frank Biermann, and Agni Kalfagianni, “Planetary Justice: A Research Framework.” *Earth System Governance*, 100049, 6 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2020.100049>;

²⁵ Adrienne Johnson, and Alex Sigona. “Planetary Justice and ‘Healing’ in the Anthropocene.” *Earth System Governance* 11, no. 100128 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2021.100128>.

²⁶ Vivienne Bozalek, “Chapter 7: Rendering Each Other Capable.” Postqualitative Research Collective, Accessed November 22, 2024, <https://postqualitativeresearch.com/chapter-7-rendering-each-other-capable/>.

²⁷ The Work That Reconnects Network, “The Work That Reconnects Network.” Accessed November 23, 2024, <https://workthatreconnects.org>.

Raj Patel, whose book *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice* is an incredible synthesis of research linking embodied inflammation to that of economic, political, cultural and social systems within empire colonialism and capitalism, and who write that “studying the ways in which systems interact to create health or illness is the leading edge of a revolution in medicine.”²⁸ Also in this category is Dr Aviva Romm for her specific dedication to rethinking medicine for and about women’s bodies.²⁹

The work of scholar Stacey Ann Langwick is a huge influence on me, in her exploration of the power of medicine in plants and the collective at the TRMEGA community gardens in Tanzania.³⁰ adrienne maree brown and Nora Bateson’s work around the concept of emergence³¹ threads throughout, as do Bateson’s conversations about complexity theory and warm data.^{32 33} A sensory lens toward concepts of healing, justice and revolution has been influenced by all the above scholars and the work of David Howes, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology, legal scholar and Director of the Centre for Sensory Studies at Concordia University.³⁴

A fundamental text for me has been Dr Amba Sepie’s award-winning 2018 PhD thesis, *Tracing The Motherline: Earth Elders, Decolonising Worldview, and Planetary Futurity*. In her

²⁸ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*. (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2021). 10

²⁹ Aviva Romm MD. “Aviva Health,” n.d. <https://avivaromm.com>.

³⁰ Stacey Ann Langwick, “A Politics of Habitability: Plants, Healing, and Sovereignty in a Toxic World.” *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 3, 2018, <https://journal.culanth.org>.

³¹ adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change Shaping Worlds*. (California: AK Press, 2017), 280

³² Nora Bateson, “What Is Submerging?” *Medium*, February 18, 2021, <https://norabateson.medium.com/what-is-submerging-ad12df016cde>

³³ Nora Bateson, “Hope & Horror, Parts & Wholes.” *Norabateson*, blog, August 16, 2017. <https://norabateson.wordpress.com/2017/08/16/hope-horror-parts-wholes/>.

³⁴ Concordia University. “David Howes,” n.d. <https://www.concordia.ca/faculty/david-howes.html>.

thesis, aimed largely toward bridging relationship between westernized academia and Indigenous worldviews, Sepie locates the climate and current socio-ecological crises in a colonial worldview that has been inherited by the majority of Westernized peoples, including institutions, activists and scholars who "...may actually support the idea of change [but] may still perpetuate the status quo by physically, and metaphysically, remaining bound to certain aspects of it."³⁵ In so doing, Sepie targets differences in how institutions conceptualize and teach information, knowledge and wisdom, noting historic dismissals of Indigenous and traditional wisdom as "religious, cultural, irrational, spiritual, pagan, animistic, unimportant, invisible, imaginary, fictional, primitive, or suspicious."³⁶ All of this has relevance to my experiences in climate activism, arts institutions and universities - seemingly progressive spaces that have historically shown themselves to maintain the status quo when it comes to truly standing in solidarity with decolonization.

Working with this hypothesis, Sepie's PhD takes the wisdom of Indigenous voices seriously.³⁷ Toward her assertion that "traditional and reestablished forms of Elder wisdom"³⁸ always shift toward positive outcomes for all of life on Earth, her extensive research involves a wide array of Indigenous and Elder voices from across the globe, both deceased and contemporary, that reveal established ways-of-knowing for "how to live well, and sustainably, together."³⁹ She points out the simple truth about the pressing question of how to live well with

³⁵ Amba Jessida Sepie. "Tracing The Motherline: Earth Elders, Decolonising Worldview, and Planetary Futurity." (PhD, University of Canterbury, 2018). https://www.academia.edu/37319192/Tracing_the_Motherline_Earth_Elders_Decolonising_Worldview_and_Planetary_Futurity_pdf.

³⁶ Sepie, "Tracing The Motherline", 44

³⁷ Sepie, "Tracing The Motherline", 32. Sepie explains the origin of the phrase taking seriously within the humanities, and maintains that "Taking seriously is fundamental to indigenous studies of any kind."

³⁸ Sepie, "Tracing The Motherline", 41

³⁹ Sepie, "Tracing The Motherline", 41

the Earth - that instructions already exist and are being offered freely if only we would listen.

As a feminist in the field of geography, Sepie argues that a renewed sense of story and relationship to place matters greatly in engaging fruitfully with ecological wellness. As such, she urges scholars to engage directly and rigorously in “...the Earth-minded, relationally-based, spiritually-revered, culturally-grounded, and ethical components of Indigenous and traditional ecologically-oriented worldviews”, in order to also take seriously their own work toward change they desire for the world.⁴⁰

Her captivating work in this area has been a touchpoint for my thesis, and I want to highlight the ideas that coming into alignment with these original instructions begins through our bodies, and that principles of embodiment are inherent in the concept of living well, together. As such, I propose that answering calls to re-indigenize⁴¹ must begin through a kind of emplacement and re-indigenization within our own landscapes of bone and flesh, and the spirit and stories held in our DNA. In so doing, we open pathways of interconnectivity that promote the capacity for healing in ourselves and others.

“Embodiment is a huge part of decolonization” says Diné Elder, teacher and speaker Pat McCabe (Woman Stands Shining).⁴² McCabe explores the theme of embodiment as healing justice by recounting her journey to reconnect with her culture, a community she was separated

⁴⁰ Sepie, “Tracing The Motherline”, 32

⁴¹ Sepie, “Tracing The Motherline”, 155: “Westernised peoples have permission, so clearly expressed by the Haudenosaunee and others, to begin the processes of re-indigenising humanity to the planet, to do so under the direction of traditional Elder leadership, and to ally with indigenous communities for collective planetary healing. In fact, it could be argued that westernised peoples are being pleaded with – then and now – to stop acting in ways that are destructive.”

⁴² Erin Geesaman Rabke and Carl Rabke, “You Were Born Into Beauty as Beauty for Joyful Life, and That’s The Truth: A Deep and Wide Conversation With Pat McCabe, Woman Stands Shining.” In *Embodiment Matters*, podcast, Accessed June 20, 2024. <https://embodimentmatters.com/a-joyful-life/>.

from due to the impacts of residential school and her upbringing in the Dutch Christian Reformed Church. After leaving home and church and finding herself afloat, she was invited to participate in a Lakota sweat lodge - her first native ceremony. “What I felt immediately was what it was like to include the body in prayer. It was huge, I can’t underestimate this enough. It’s kind of paradoxical ... to seek the spirit and say that one of the most powerful parts about it was really noticing and being in the body.”⁴³ She goes on to speak about patterns, much like Dr Peter Levine does, and the need to interrupt ones that are no longer serving us. “One of the crucial parts about getting back into the feeling body is...to be able to release traumas. And there is a lot of frustration built up somatically in the body around this. And so, keep releasing...allow all the emotions to come forward...invite in new patterns.”⁴⁴

My research into embodiment as healing justice leans heavily into activists, scholars, healers, artists and academics whose somatic border-thinking ennobles the body far beyond the colonial mechanics of capitalism and patriarchy. This includes, but is not limited to, the work of writer and teacher Bayo Akomolfe,⁴⁵ somatic practitioner Prentis Hemphill,⁴⁶ Sophie Strand’s mycelial texts,⁴⁷ and a host of Indigenous scholars and activists who speak extensively on the rigour of Indigenous experiential knowledge, including Hawaiian educator Manulani Alulu

⁴³ Rabke and Rabke, “You Were Born Into Beauty as Beauty for Joyful Life, and That’s The Truth: A Deep and Wide Conversation With Pat McCabe, Woman Stands Shining.”

⁴⁴ Rabke and Rabke, “You Were Born Into Beauty as Beauty for Joyful Life, and That’s The Truth: A Deep and Wide Conversation With Pat McCabe, Woman Stands Shining.”

⁴⁵ “Báyò Akómoláfé,” Accessed August 23, 2024, <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net>.

⁴⁶ “Prentis Hemphill,” Accessed August 23, 2024, <https://prentishemphill.com>.

⁴⁷ “Sophie Strand,” Accessed November 10, 2024, <https://sophiestrand.com>.

Meyer,⁴⁸ Mohawk seed keeper Rowen White,⁴⁹ Lakota ethnobotanist-activist Linda Black Elk,⁵⁰ Diné elder Pat McCabe (Woman Stands Shining)⁵¹ and Irish medical biochemist, botanist Diana Beresford-Kroeger.⁵²

If interconnection is the theme of my MA, then intersections are implicit throughout. As my thesis makes clear, I am particularly interested in finding links between current politics, climate-related news, and areas of medical knowledge both “k(now)n” and “(k)new”⁵³, with a special emphasis on interconnection and body intelligence. I am referencing the writing of Indigenous Hawaiian epistemologist Manulani Alulu Meyer in the use of brackets with the words known and knew to highlight the well-supported idea that traditional and Indigenous knowledge remains current and rigorous science, much of which is being discovered anew by current western science.

In developing the fundamental notion of a ‘root cause’, I further align myself with a vast order of BIPOC and non-Indigenous scholars and activists who emphasize a direct link between

⁴⁸ *Hawaiian Epistemology: Meyer, Dr. Manulani Aluli*. Streaming video. Vimeo: Kohala Centre, 2009. <https://vimeo.com/7910477>.

⁴⁹ Sierra Seeds. “Rowens Story,” n.d. <https://sierraseeds.org/rowens-story/>

⁵⁰ @linda.black.elk. “Linda Black Elk.” Instagram, n.d. <https://www.instagram.com/linda.black.elk/?hl=en>.

⁵¹ Pat McCabe. “Woman Stands Shining (Pat McCabe): For Thriving Life, Light and Love.” Accessed December 1, 2024. [Woman Stands Shining \(Pat McCabe\) For Thriving Life, Light and Love](#).

⁵² Diana Beresford Kroeger. “About Diana.” Accessed October 7, 2024. <https://dianaberesford-kroeger.com/about-diana/>.

⁵³ Manulani A Meyer, “Holographic Epistemology: Native Common Sense.”

colonization, social justice and climate crisis.^{54 55 56 57 58} To quote Dr. Martin Luther King in his famous 1963 Letter From a Birmingham Jail: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny”.⁵⁹ Canadian ceremonial leader and wisdom keeper Erika Gagnon turns this notion toward healing when she says: “we all carry the ancestral traumas, current life traumas, cultural traumas; so [its important] to do one’s own personal healing...understanding that individual healing is collective healing. In the Indigenous traditions, when we heal we help heal the seven generations behind us and the seven generations yet to come”.⁶⁰

The work of my thesis supports Indigenous futurity and the growing global movement across Indigenous nations that includes land-back, seed sovereignty, and a return to traditional foods, medicines, and healing practices. And as Erika Gagnon’s quote makes clear, a thriving future on our planet depends on embodiment practices and traditional wisdoms that stem in part from Indigenous and traditional communities, because these traditions tend to care for all beings,

⁵⁴ Allan Greer, “Settler Colonialism and Beyond.” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 30, no. 1 (2019): 61–86. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070631ar>

⁵⁵ Karsten Schulz, “Decolonizing Political Ecology: Ontology, Technology and ‘critical’ Enchantment.” *Journal of Political Ecology*, 24, no. 1, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v24i1.20789>

⁵⁶ Kim Tallbear. “Dr Kim Tallbear.” Accessed December 1, 2024. <https://kimtallbear.com>

⁵⁷ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1, 2012: 1–40

⁵⁸ Kyle P. Whyte. “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises.” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, no. 1–2 (2018): 224–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618777621>.

⁵⁹ A.B. Ali-Dinar (ed.), “Letter from a Birmingham Jail, [King, Jr].” African Studies Centre - University of Pennsylvania, Accessed September 7, 2022. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

⁶⁰ Wisdom Keepers. “Interview with Erika Gagnon.” *Wisdom Keepers: Reigniting The Ancient Ways*, July 5, 2019. <https://www.wisdomkeepers.earth/post/interview-with-erika-gagnon>.

forward and back in time. Amba Sepie speaks about this when she quotes Seneca author, historian, and social activist John Mohawk: “Native American pragmatism is a way of thinking about the world that demands the thinker look at the outcomes. When you think about the great quotes from Native American people you get quotes like, ‘Let us look forward to what we do today and how it benefits the coming generations, seven generations in the future.’ ‘Let’s put our minds together to see what kind of life we’ll give to our children,’ etc. This is the concept of outcome. And it’s different than Kissingerian realism in that it requires that all elements of an outcome be desirable.”⁶¹

Further to this, in order to work beyond ‘decolonization as a metaphor’ my approach in this paper takes seriously the notion that settler persons such as myself must become ‘unsettled’. In cases such as mine this includes both acknowledging whiteness, and rediscovering our own, often fragmented immigrant history, as uncomfortable as this can be. This is important because, to quote scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang from their oft-cited paper *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*: “Settlers are not immigrants. Immigrants are beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands they migrate to. Settlers become the law, supplanting Indigenous laws and epistemologies.”⁶²

And so, beginning with the personal, this paper lays out my ancestry as a part of reclaiming my family’s immigrant-settler history on Turtle Island/Canada, up to present-day Tio’tia ke/Montreal, where I planted myself at 36 years old and where my son was later born. As a part of

⁶¹ Sepie, “Tracing The Motherline.”, 41

⁶² Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.”

this decolonizing work, I conduct my research-creation as an open-ended question of how settlers can make meaning on ‘stolen’ land. It is a sincere response to Metis artist and activist Christie Belcourt’s statement that, among other clear steps toward Indigenous and climate justice, non-Indigenous persons can “Believe that the Earth is alive, believe she has spirit. Pray and make offerings to the land...pray for the future generations with gifts and petitions for Mother Earth, and ask the spirits to help.”⁶³

⁶³ Christie Belcourt and Starhawk, “Building a New World in the Shell of the Old to Face the Climate Crisis: Between Transition, Resilience and Resistance.” Webinar, *The Center for Research on Innovations and Social Transformations (CRITS)*, November 12, 2020. <http://innovationsocialeusp.ca/en/event/building-a-new-world-in-the-shell-of-the-old-to-face-the-climate-crisis-between-transition-resilience-and-resistance>.

Chapter Four: Introducing Myself

4.1 Hello

When I was in my mid-twenties I lived in a housing co-op, and was raking leaves in the communal parking lot as a part of my member duties. It was a blue-skied, silent autumn afternoon with no one around. Seemingly out of nowhere, a breeze picked up, moving the leaves in a swoosh around me. The warm wind brushed my cheeks and quickly circled in, closer and closer, surrounding me in what I can only describe as an embrace. I was so overcome with a feeling of utter love and support, that I stopped and stood still, the rake in my hand. In this moment and for a lingering time afterward, I carried in my body-mind an unquestioning sense of being held by a loving and whole universal force.

Many years later I learned the term ‘peak’ experience, coined by Abraham Maslow in 1964 to describe “an altered state of consciousness characterized by rare, exciting, oceanic, deeply moving, exhilarating, elevating experiences that generate an advanced form of perceiving reality, and are even mystic and magical in their effect...”¹ This project’s beginning can be traced through momentous events such as this one in the parking lot, as well as that of becoming a mother, which truly required the joint medicines of Western and ‘alternative’ modalities to actualize. I also acknowledge the guidance of my waking body language, intuition, dreams, plant medicine, and my art-making with which (whom?) I hold constant dialogue.

In her 2021 essay for *Canadian Art* magazine titled “Listening in Reciprocity”, Lindsay Dawn Dobbin, a Kanien’kehá:ka Acadian Irish water protector, artist, and educator writes,

¹ Wikipedia. “Peak Experience.” Accessed December 1, 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/>.

“Hearing, the physiological act of perceiving sound, happens within listening, as do all other sensorial experiences. These perceptions are a pathway to listening, but they are not the listening itself. Listening is the space where all phenomena meet. It is the conscious attention we offer to life.”² I appreciate the collaborative notion of ‘deep listening’, and in Dobbin’s words, I find a home for my experiences and the resulting questions pursued through my MA.

I come to this project as an artist and professional art conservator of over 30 years specializing in contemporary art, the older mother of an 11-year-old child, a student of Western herbalism, a climate justice activist and an ex-Catholic child of a medical physicist and an avid gardener and watcher of the skies. As a person of mixed-European roots living on stolen lands, I refer to the three R’s of Indigenous research methodologies³ - respect, reciprocity and relationship - in framing my efforts in this Masters of Arts, through which I aim to become “a listener who [is] part of the great listening”.⁴

4.1 Locating this Project in Personal Health

In 2018, I experienced a serious burnout that, due to extreme fatigue, impacted my ability to walk. Although there are other instances in my life relevant to the work of my thesis, I begin here because so much is captured of what led me to this MA project and the research-creation practices within it. For two months I could barely leave my bed, and it took a further four months

² Lindsay Dobbin, “Listening in Reciprocity.” *Canadian Art*, March 11, 2021, <https://canadianart.ca/features/listening-in-reciprocity-lindsay-dobbin/>.

³ Virginie Magnat. “Honouring the 3 R’s of Indigenous Research Methodologies.” *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches Théâtrales Au Canada* 35, no. 2 (May 16, 2014). <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/TRIC/article/view/21967>.

⁴ Lindsay Dobbin, “Listening in Reciprocity.”

for me to recover enough to work outside of the home. I now know this was largely brought on by hormonal imbalance, a good part of which grew out of inherited, habitual, and chronic stress, and likely inherited nutritional deficiencies as well. In discussing my story, I want to acknowledge my privilege as a white, middle-class woman with a partner, because so often single, BIPOC, and otherwise marginalized mothers carry heavier loads right from the start.

Working part-time, parenting full-time for a child with special needs, collaborating on local activism for climate justice with a group of other mothers (women are 2.5 times more climate active than men)⁵, responsabilized and struggling in unhealthy nuclear family dynamics far from my own family - I was quite literally burdened with the mother-load. Underlying this all was a striving toward productivity and success as defined by capitalism and under that a little girl trying to be accepted in a world that denigrates women. Overwhelmed and under-supported, I was being gaslit to the nth degree by systemic sexism, capitalism, and grind culture. Often, I wondered to myself, *why does this feel so hard?*

This pressure and the resulting burnout exacerbated my already imbalanced hormones and limited ability to cope, eventually leading to early menopause - what Traditional Chinese Medicine optimistically refers to as the second spring.⁶ This did not feel like a rebirth to me - at least not yet - as a late-in-life mother I had only stopped breastfeeding a year before! With an ill-equipped doctor and no female mentors to guide me, I arrived feeling alone and wholly unprepared to deal with this new chapter in my life.

⁵ Solitaire Townsend, "Women Over 50 Are Leading On Climate Action." *Forbes*, November 14, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/solitairetownsend/2024/11/14/women-leading-on-climate-action-who-are-over-50-years-old/>.

⁶ Xiaolan Zhao, *Reflections of the Moon on Water: Healing Women's Bodies and Minds through Traditional Chinese Wisdom*. (Toronto, Ontario: Vintage Canada, 2007), 336, 243 - 276

In her 2016 short story and film *Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World*⁷, scholar Sheena Wilson documents a harrowing early morning drive through the ‘Industrial heartland’ of Alberta’s oilfields to find medical help for her wheezing, asthmatic son. Her account poignantly sums up much of my mothering experience for a child with chronic respiratory disease and speaks directly to the increasingly dark side of modern individualism, where we are singularly tasked with righting violence systemic in nature. This violence infiltrates all of our bodies, everywhere.

Anxiously aware of particulates from refinery fields and traffic exhaust steadily entering the car while her son struggled to breathe in the back seat, Wilson writes,

...as I look into the dawn, I realize that there are influences...seeping into my son’s life that are far beyond my control. Despite social constructions of me as his mother, which suggest that I’m either to blame for his health or that I can manage it - by labouring to achieve increasingly high standards of domestic hygiene and by making appropriate consumer choices - I know that scouring our home and feeding him the best organic nutrient-dense foods available for consumption are feeble attempts to mitigate the fallout of what is really feeding our current political-economy. And I know that it is not only my son, but all of us, who are suffocating.⁸

Stress, pollution, racism, sexism, extreme resource extraction, toxic individualism. Our bodies may have visibly clear edges, but as has become more and more evident, those edges are not impervious to their surrounding world. The world is inflamed and so are we. And the more non-male, non-able, and non-white that bodies are, the more they are discriminated against and

⁷ Sheena Wilson. “Petro-Mama.” Sheena Wilson. Accessed December 1, 2024. <http://sheenawilson.ca/projects/petro-mama/>.

⁸ Sheena Wilson, “Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World.” In *Telling Truths: Storying Motherhood*, eds Sheena Wilson and Diana Davidson, (Ontario, Canada: Demeter Press, 2014.), 307–14.

the higher the “cumulative burden of chronic stress and life events”,⁹ otherwise known as allostatic load.

We are interconnected and interdependent, and our bodies speak to us loud and clear, if we are willing to listen.

4.3 Locating this Project in Recent History

It has been 5 years since I began my MA with Concordia University, in September 2019 - much longer than I expected. In this time, the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of the world, alongside the growing urgency of climate crisis, species extinction and loss of habitat, and several unfolding eco-genocides. At the same time, I have been walking a personal path of recovery and wellness that began before this Master’s, has threaded through every part of it, and will continue long after. At the heart of my query is a passionate belief that our body’s innate intelligence connects our wellness to that of our Earth. The following reflection is created to anchor my thesis, which took shape in these currents of personal and collective experience.

On March 11, 2020, I was in the second term of my first year back at University after 25+ years in the work world. Still attending classes in person, I was increasingly following news of the novel virus COVID-19 pandemic’s global spread. People were beginning to wear masks in transit and the streets, and an ominous quiet filled the air. Just two days prior, I had called my son’s school to inform them that we were pulling him, against their reassurances that everything

⁹ Jenny Guidi, Marcella Lucente, Nicoletta Sonino, and Giovanni A Fava. “Allostatic Load and Its Impact on Health: A Systematic Review.” *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 90, no. 1 (2021): 11–27. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000510696>.

was fine, after which I slept heavily, having answered the gripping anxiety in my stomach. My son's chronic respiratory condition was a going-concern, and keeping him home was the first of many difficult decisions whose ramifications were far-reaching. On March 12, we received notice that all schools and many workplaces were closing indefinitely. The entire country was shutting down.

Both my son and I homeschooled. Family Zoom meetings bridged the hundreds of kilometres between me and my parents, siblings, and other loved ones. Private and public was fraught, with outdoor space being sought after and contested through social distancing, especially in urban centres like Montreal. My partner, my son and I took walks along the nearby railway tracks to avoid people, and bore intimate witness to the rare event of our Hasidic neighbours singing prayers in the streets.

Local journalist Joseph Rosen reflected on the poignant reminder of community, resilience, and spiritual commitment contained in this normally private act made public. He saw how physical distancing, in this case, actually brought us closer together. Rosen also echoed an important observation that the pandemic brought to light - about the falseness of borders, from bodies to nations. Noting how breath, prayer, and song can be fraught with beauty, community, and potential threat at the same time, he wrote: "The Hasidim pray together. And my neighbours, facing the green fence, sing loudly right onto my stoop, potentially increasing my viral exposure. The coronavirus highlights how permeable the borders are between our bodies, and how much our private choices affect everyone around us."¹⁰

¹⁰ Joseph Rosen, "For Years I Felt Rejected by My Hasidic Neighbours. But COVID-19 Brought Us Together." *Globe & Mail*, May 15, 2020, sec. Opinion. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-physical-distancing-is-designed-to-keep-us-apart-but-it-has-brought/>.

The unprecedented, strange beauty of praying in the streets was one of many surprises the pandemic brought forward. On a collective and personal level, we lost much, but like this moment above, we also gained in unexpected ways. Anxiety, confusion, loneliness, and death happened alongside community mutual aid programs, kindness from strangers, urban quietude and the return of wildlife to places like the Venice Canal.¹¹ Industrial animal farming came under scrutiny, and I observed concepts related to my research, like interdependence, step from the fringes into the mainstream. People's jobs changed form and folks realized how tired they were from a lifestyle determined by capital, productivity and linear notions of progress.

Collectively, we learned who our front-line workers are, and how little they are acknowledged in relation to how much we depend on them. In particular, we saw how many Black and Brown community members make up the front lines of crisis work, from teachers to paramedics.¹² And, as numbers were tallied, it became clear that these same communities were experiencing notably more serious and higher numbers of COVID infections - highlighting the fact that health and colonial-capitalism are tied together, something many health experts have been saying for years.^{13 14}

¹¹ John Brunton, "Nature Is Taking Back Venice: Wildlife Returns to Tourist-Free City." *The Guardian*, March 20, 2020, sec. Environment, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/20/nature-is-taking-back-venice-wildlife-returns-to-tourist-free-city>.

¹² Elise Gould and Valerie Wilson, "Black Workers Face Two of the Most Lethal Preexisting Conditions for Coronavirus—Racism and Economic Inequality." Economic Policy Institute, Website, June 1, 2020. <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>.

¹³ Marlene F Watson, Gonzalo Bacigalupe, Manijeh Daneshpour, Wen-Jui Han, and Rubén Parra-Cardona, "COVID-19 Interconnectedness: Health Inequity, the Climate Crisis, and Collective Trauma." *Family Process*, Special Issue: Covid-19, Families, and Family Therapy, 59, no. 3 (June 26, 2020): 832–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12572>.

¹⁴ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*. (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2021), 496

As this all unfolded, the parent-climate activists I work with moved our meetings to virtual. This community is a balm for me, in part because we long ago normalized saying things like *I'm scared* and *I'm struggling with what's happening in the world*, while actively campaigning for a hopeful future. I am learning that this ability to hold opposing feelings, like despair and hope, is a part of building resilience in a world of extremes.

The holding of opposites is also embedded in Yoga Nidra embodiment practices¹⁵ and other body scan meditations that calm the nervous system and observe the opposites of what our bodies hold, from joy to sorrow, comfort to discomfort. These are practices I began to use for hormonal insomnia, but grew to use daily when pandemic concerns intersected with various unfolding family health crises. Reliance on guided meditation saved me when I couldn't calm my wired nervous system or my racing mind. I learned directly about the need to enter through the body to find surrender, and in doing so, discovered an abiding nourishment that brings a smile to my face even when I feel shrouded in darkness.

Curiously, I have found that this is accessible only through slowing down and tuning into my physical self first - calming fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, face, top of head, torso, abdomen, hips, right leg, left leg, into the feet, into the toes. My heart palpitations slow when I practice 'entrainment' by placing a hand over my heart and gently thanking the intelligence that is alive in the ever-thrumming organ. I have discovered that my body is a doorway I must go through to find calm and a sense of elevation. I observe that spiritual practices across the world enter prayer through the body, whether through calming means or singing and dancing in ecstasy. Perhaps there is no other portal but through the body, no matter who we are.

¹⁵ Sam Turner. "What Is Opposites in Yoga Nidra?" Sam Turner Yoga, May 19, 2022. <https://www.samturneryoga.co.uk/>.

The effects of the pandemic continue to ripple into our ever-emergent present. Intimate, public, social, political, planetary waves; some temporary and some longer lasting. My family experienced loss in a manner that was subtle at first, then overt, and still ongoing today. Loss was experienced across the globe but it was not equal in distribution.¹⁶ Alongside the grief, the pandemic also opened possibilities, became a portal for alternative ways-of-doing, and centred conversations that had lived for years on the fringes, most notably around health, inequality and “our place in a collective entanglement of bodies”.¹⁷

Systems of care took up space. Social media platforms helped in community building and resource sharing. In my time spent there, I saw embodiment practices like breathing, self-soothing, meditation, rest and joy openly understood to be necessary in countering the mounting mental health problems. And art - song, poetry, dance, painting - was freely shared and acknowledged as particularly nourishing for our wellbeing. Many of us recognized the pandemic as a valuable moment to reflect upon just how tied up we are in systems that harm us.

And yet, despite the strong teachings about mutuality and collective responsibility, in the almost 5 years since COVID-19 began, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)’s latest reports are terrifying, ocean levels continue to rise, and activists protest geno/eco/femi/scholasti-cides and canvas the governments, banks and whoever will listen. More and more, the cry goes out - *we are the ones we are waiting for*: “In your country as well as mine, there is no moral leadership, except the leadership springing up from the grassroots.” says Canadian writer Naomi Klein in a speech at And Still We Rise: The War on Want festival of Solidarity and

¹⁶ Steven W. Thrasher, *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Inequality and Disease Collide*. (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2022), 352;
Marlene F Watson et al., “COVID-19 Interconnectedness,”; Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed*;

¹⁷ Steven W. Thrasher, *The Viral Underclass*, from advance praise by Naomi Klein

Resistance, “All that we have is one another. We should pause over this, because it is part of the horror and vertigo of this historical moment.”¹⁸

At the moment of writing this thesis, there are many ongoing eco and genocides, and lands across our planet are subsumed by fires wrought by extreme resource extraction and colonial toxicity. New prefixes on old words, like eco + terrorism, throw off the scent. As a climate justice advocate, I ask - exactly who are the terrorists and who are the victims? As adrienne maree brown writes in her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Shaping Worlds*, “The crisis is everywhere, massive, massive, massive.”¹⁹

I don’t mean to catastrophize, as my therapist once charged me with....still trying to remain hopeful! (...albeit through gritted teeth). While it feels essential to acknowledge all of the challenges, this thesis moves forward in the spirit of acknowledging love, hope, and joy as pragmatic and necessary ingredients in building our future.

One of my current, favourite contemporary textile artists is an American quilter named Zak Foster. His latest project is a series titled *The New Apocalypse*, in which he is “exploring self-defeating narratives about the future”,²⁰ and re-imagining possible, positive trajectories for our world. Sewing up bits of poetry and repurposed fabrics, his quilts are riotous and imperfect efforts at hope, or at least the possibility of it. This aim to propose other narratives and other ways forward is mine also, combined with a fervent belief that there has got to be a better way for all of

¹⁸ War on Want. “Naomi Klein Speaks at #AndStillWeRise Festival.” YouTube, March 19, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sr224DmNB4s>.

¹⁹ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change Shaping Worlds*. (California: AK Press, 2017), 280, 30

²⁰ Zak Foster (@zakfoster.quilts). “COLLAPSE WE THOUGHT WAS CERTAIN A Couple Weeks Ago....” Instagram, February 29, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C38FnFPLKyF/>.

us to live together. In my thesis, rooting inward through the intelligence of our bodies is an essential part of this path.

As the pandemic became endemic and curfews dropped, life opened up to a new normal of masks on the metro, and a general acceptance of taking more accountability around illness and fatigue. Many of us said we would not return to how things were before, and I remember a distinct feeling of anxiety that the pace would pick up again and that expectations would return to what they were before. Of course, in most ways this has happened, but our bodies remember what we learned. Lessons about silos and loneliness, trust and fear in the dominant medical system, the peace of a walk in the forest, interdependence as birthright, the resilience of community, and the fact that we need each other, now more than ever.



Zak Foster (@zakfoster.quilts). "COLLAPSE WE THOUGHT WAS CERTAIN A Couple Weeks Ago...."
Instagram, February 29, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C38FnFPLKyF/>.

4.4 A Note on The Sacred

There is something that almost slipped my mind, and yet its importance cannot be overstated. Its essence colours everything I do, most definitely including the work of this thesis, and that is the influence of my upbringing in two ways: the Catholic Church, and alliance with the natural world.

Although I exited Catholicism when I left home and entered college, my time spent in church left me with a palpable sense of the divine as it exists through human creation. And so, I need to share with you that my textile works are influenced in part by the church banners and paraments I stared at on Sunday mornings throughout my youth. The grand sizes of my thesis textiles echo some of these linens and are intentionally as big as, and bigger than my body and probably yours too. That my inspiration also lies in protest and peace march banners means that my works hang as banners for a kind of sacred revolution; one where humans re-member their place in the web of life through awakening and responding to the sense and viscera of mind-body-spirit wonder.

A church of the body. Body as church. By this I mean the body is a portal to story and interconnection with each other and the more-than human. Therapist, somatic teacher, author, and justice worker Prentis Hemphill says "...this is the place where I dwell in order to be connected to the infinite. That is, I can dwell in this place and inside of me is an altar. Inside of me is a temple. Inside of me is a door that connects to the all....Once you feel, once you sit inside of yourself, a world of mystery and wonder opens up. And...there is tremendous power in that

experience.”²¹

And while the hermeneutics of Sunday sermons might not have spoken to me, being in church taught me that space, image, action, object, and word can be sacred, a feeling that artist-writer-engineer Sara Hendren describes as “the distinct separateness of that sensory environment”.²² As I grew older, I found something akin to this feeling in the making, housing, gesture and artifact of art, and have consequently lived a life of intimate involvement with this world. As an art conservator, my work in museums and galleries is a precise caretaking of the artifacts housed within. I began making art in childhood and this evolved alongside my professional care-work. As an adult, I have consciously nurtured art-making as a way of asking sacred and restless questions about being human, animal, and spirit, in a cosmic universe.

Recently my brother and I had a conversation exploring the feeling of wanting to step away from it all. We decided to take the discussion on a walk with us, right then and there, through the woods that border our family’s 1950s Ontario cottage. I brought along a small bag and collected St John’s Wort and Self Heal flowers along the pathway as we talked. The small yellow buds and flowers of St John’s are most known for lifting the spirits, warding off virus and massaging sore muscles.²³ Among other things, Self Heal, or Heal All is excellent for skin troubles and I often

²¹ Prentis Hemphill, “Becoming the People with adrienne and Prentis Hemphill.” In *Becoming the People*, (podcast), Accessed July 25, 2024. <https://endoftheworldshow.org/episodes/becoming-the-people-with-adrienne-and-prentis-hemphill>.

²² Krista Tippet. “Sara Hendren - Our Bodies, Aliveness and the Built World.” In *On Being with Krista Tippet*, (Podcast), Produced by On Being Studios. Accessed August 3, 2024. <https://onbeing.org/programs/sara-hendren-our-bodies-aliveness-and-the-built-world/>.

²³ Angela Justis, “St. John’s Wort: Not Just for Depression.” Herbal Academy (Website), May 15, 2017, Accessed September 30, 2024, https://theherbalacademy.com/blog/st-johns-wort-not-just-depression/?srsltid=AfmBOooaMeYWbkGzhml0yi9I7mhJLNjWeuCYU2gAU9mgNOQMZWVevV_ch.

make a wonderful salve with it.²⁴ Our walk itself became medicine, as we wondered about the point of life, and spoke about the urge to sit with these sacred questions and find place and purpose through them.

I remembered then, and reminded my brother, that my grandmother, my *Nonna*, had wanted to become a nun when she was young. At around 20 years old, before my mother came along, she had gone to the train station with her friend who also planned to enter the convent. As my Nonna tells it, she had a suitcase in hand and one foot on the train step when she froze, unable to continue boarding. *God had something else in his plans for me*, she would say.

Similarly, my mother tells a story about seeking out the priest in her teenage years, convinced she wanted to enter the convent in service to her faith. This time it was the priest who dissuaded her from the path, telling her she was too young and had other things to accomplish in the world. My mother eventually fell away from the Catholic church but never from her faith in the beauty and spirit of the natural world. I still remember lying out together on bedspreads to watch celestial events on summer nights, or finding her walking on the street late at night when I returned from a party as a teenager, looking up at the sky for a comet or a special full moon.

I admitted to my brother that I also felt called when I was younger, to lead some kind of a thoughtful life of quiet and dedication to sitting with the questions. Because I could not and did not want to root this feeling in Catholicism and dogma, and because I didn't know how else to fulfill this longing, I have followed a trail quite like Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs, through

²⁴ Rosalee de la Forêt. "Season 5 Episode 10: The Self Heal Plant, Health Benefits of Self Heal + Two Self Heal Recipes." Website. Herbs with Rosalee, May 15, 2017, Accessed June 2, 2022, <https://www.herbalremediesadvice.org/podcast56.html>, Accessed Sept 24 2024.

the forest, lost and found at different times.

I believe the feelings that run through my family have very little to do with religious fervour, and everything to do with an urge to connect, or reconnect with something our ancestors were much closer to. In fact, I am beginning to think of it as an ancestral calling that each of us has/is responding to in our own ways. Not an easy feat when lines have been broken and we have been cut off from ways-of-knowing that include how to live well with the world.²⁵ There is little space in the capitalist model for the intimacy of Lindsay Dobb's listening-in-reciprocity.

The works I am making with cloth and thread and the words I am writing for this thesis are dedicated to the sacred questions of what we are 'meant' to be doing on Earth as humans, and how to live well with the Earth and with each other, reaching back and forward for generations. My research and writing, the slow stitch and fluid gestures of making art and working with plants - all of this is, in its way, a kind of working prayer to the ancestors, the Earth and whatever divine it is that I sense in this world. I like to imagine that even the intellectual pursuit, that of research, writing and thinking-with, can be worthy of being called prayer.

The following quote from Irish priest and poet Pádraig Ó Tuama continues this thought. He reminds me that the act of putting-into-words is a sacred and embodied gesture from its inception: "1st act genesis...God was seen or heard to be giving words to humans as one of the first things he did...so that every time you put something into words, especially something that has been difficult or something about yourself, that this is like making a sacrament. This is

²⁵ Ayana Young. "Woman Stands Shining (Pat McCabe) on Humanity's Homecoming." In *For The Wild*, (Podcast), episode 251, Accessed May 20, 2022. <https://forthewild.world/listen/woman-stands-shining-pat-mccabe-on-humanitys-homecoming-251>.

In this interview, Pat McCabe talks about the breaking of lines of knowledge, for women and nature-based knowing, during the European witch trials. She speaks about the witch hunts as an "Archetypal Wounding of Humanity"

something sacred, putting volume to something and finding a way to say it... Words are not ethereal - words come from the body, from which the words come.”²⁶

And onwards we go.

²⁶ Krista Tippett, “Pádraig Ó Tuama: This Fantastic Argument of Being Alive.” In *On Being with Krista Tippett*, (Podcast), Produced by On Being Studios, March 2, 2017, Accessed April 3, 2020, <https://onbeing.org/programs/padraig-o-tuama-this-fantastic-argument-of-being-alive/>.

Chapter Five: Taking Up My Research Questions

5.1 Methodology and Approaches

In her 2022 book *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation*¹, Sarah Truman speaks about her approach to research-creation as a methodology of collaboration and attunement across methods, theories and disciplines. The point of this “as a concept within the siloed-academy”, is its function as “an interdisciplinary orientation to research into theory and the arts (with a queer-feminist-anti-racist bent!).”² As discussed in the previous section on theory, I am particularly invested in non-normative ‘border-jumping’ because I believe this is where we find new and foundational relationships that have been wrongly separated in these siloes, and that can point us toward new possibilities.

These ideas are reiterated as outcomes of research-creation by sound artist and Professor Owen Chapman and Communications Professor Kim Sawchuck in their 2012 paper *Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and “Family Resemblances”*, where they frame the methodology as “an epistemological intervention into the “regime of truth” of the university”³ and, “a methodological and epistemological challenge”⁴ to normative academic scholarship, with experimentation often being a primary manner of working.

In alignment with these points, my MA thesis intervenes with creative and somatic practices

¹ Sarah E. Truman, *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation: Writing Pedagogies and Intertextual Affects*. (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2021), 188

² Sarah E. Truman, *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation*, 31

³ Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuck, “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and “Family Resemblances”.” *Concordia University Press, Canadian Journal of Communication*, 37, (2012): 5–26.

⁴ Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuck, “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and “Family Resemblances”.

that experiment in revealing relationships between mental, physical and spiritual health, (largely separated in Westernized medicine), as well as between personal well-being and that of the collective and the planet. In so doing, I thread together science and art, land and body, human and non-human, micro and cosmos, tradition and emergence, to new constellations about body and health through a lens of system-wide liberation. I reflect on these experimental practices through scholarly writing and by reading and thinking across different fields including sensory anthropology, feminist geographies, western biomedicine and various traditional medicines, Indigenous perspectives and methodologies, and theories of emergence and systems thinking. My plant medicine creations and large-scale embroideries, cyanotypes, and bilateral-drawing are forms of research that inform and respond to these studies and work in tandem with this written analysis to form my thesis.

Through these processes of engaged materiality and making, this thesis also aims to open up possibilities and nuance for those on the receiving end. How this thesis lands with others is perhaps less linear and easy to measure, in part because it is more deeply personal. This is because my artworks and ideas live inside of the personal narratives I share and because I speak to the reader/viewer as a collaborator, asking: *How does our healing entwine?*

My experiences in all of the above confirm for me that thinking *through* relationships, making, and materials effectively grounds my academic pursuit in embodied practice, at the same time as it regulates my nervous system and balances my brain hemispheres. As such, I present a rigorous collection of study, experience, observation, analysis, and reflection directly shaped by my tangled journey with certain healing strategies. This very framework came to me in a dream,

wherein I was shown a messy line drawing bordered by crisp porcelain sticks, both recent art projects of mine. The words ‘work intuitively and build the framework around it’ came to me in this dream. And so I have written to centre my personal experiences and explorations, tackling my questions by reflecting on the creative and healing practices within my research-creation.

Some of these practices located deep emotion in my body. My stories will unfold as the thesis does, but I want to convey here the magnitude of learning that happened when I tuned into the distinct ways-of-knowing of my body-mind-spirit. This journey has demanded vulnerability and has admittedly been intimate and challenging. I am thankful to ritual for guiding me through. The ritual of drawing and embroidery, the ritual of writing, the ritual of community healing practices, the ritual of collaboration with plant medicine, sunlight, and water. The somatic ritual of practice, and somatic practice as ritual. Resmaa Menakam reminds us that calling something a practice means just that - one is practicing at something, and so it gets to be imperfect, fumbled, stopped and started again.⁵

In her seminal 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway necessitates the weaving of art with biology and activism, referring to this as ‘art-science activist worldings’.⁶ She notes the importance of such creative endeavours in “...figur[ing] out how, with each other, we can open up possibilities for what can still be”.⁷ With this in mind, my practice-led research

⁵ Resmaa Menakam. “Unlocking the Genius of Your Body.” Website Blog. *Dr Resmaa Somatic Abolitionism* (blog), December 18, 2020. <https://resmaa.com/2020/12/18/unlocking-the-genius-of-your-body/>.

⁶ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373780>. 296: 76

⁷ Moira Weigel, “Feminist Cyborg Scholar Donna Haraway: ‘The Disorder of Our Era Isn’t Necessary.’” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2019, sec. Feminism, <https://www.theguardian.com/>

considers emergent possibilities beyond the one-eyed, dystopic narrative that continues to both define and shape the Anthropocene.⁸ I appreciate the emphasis on practice as research, as used in the British and Australian framing of research-creation,⁹ because I operate from the understanding of practice as a necessary, imperfect and embodied manner of working through ideas again and again. My academic and creative research is a form of practice in finding out how strategies of embodiment intersect with planetary health. And while I aim to steer clear of overly hopeful and sentimental notions of ‘healing’, like Haraway I strongly believe the practice of actively re-imagining our collective future, and therefore the nature of healing, is essential to its manifestation.

While there is little question in my mind that we are in an emergency, I am thankful for the many incredible thinkers helping us navigate this time. “Inside the word emergency is emerge; from an emergency new things come forth,” wrote author and activist Rebecca Solnit in her excellent monograph *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*.¹⁰ When asked about cultivating hope and resilience for the future, the inimitable Vandana Shiva answered with a reflection on seeds: “one has to move beyond egocentrism...beyond anthropocentrism. That is what depletes us, makes us arrogant...the whole idea of exhaustion comes because we have lived in oil and fossil fuels for so long, that those resources get exhausted and they create exhaustion

⁸ David J Kahane, “Kim Tallbear, “A Sharpening of the Already Present: Settler Apocalypse 2020.””, YouTube, 2022. <https://youtu.be/eO14od9mITa>. In this video talk, Tallbear references how the Anthropocene is colonial settler-made that unconsciously prioritizes dystopian narrative above all else

⁹ Linda Candy. “Practice Based Research: A Guide.” Creativity & Cognition Studios, November 2006. <https://www.creativityandcognition.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/PBR-Guide-1.1-2006.pdf>.

¹⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2004), 184: 127

for the planet. Whereas the seed constantly evolves, renews, it creates new diversity....”¹¹

Scholar, environment and food sovereignty activist, writer, eco-feminist, Shiva’s wise and generative futurism is born from collaboration with and learning from the intelligence of the natural world.

This brings me to plants and the medicine they have provided for my research-creation journey. They want me to tell you who was present, so I will name them here. In the textile works I collaborated mainly with Motherwort, because of her work with mothers, the female reproductive system and the heart (Leonurus Cardiac = Lionheart).¹² I am accompanied by two other plants who support heart-work, Rose and Hawthorn, who bring their bodies, colour and scent to some of my artworks. A few more plants say hello through my writing, because they have been present on so many of my walks and time spent outdoors, and so are kin. You will meet them along the way.

Among other tenets, in their co-authored essay titled *Toward a Process Seed Bank: What Research-Creation Can Do*, Erin Manning (philosopher, professor, visual artist, and dancer) and Brian Massumi (philosopher and social theorist) introduce the Techniques of Relation, which I understand to be cross-disciplinary elements that move across and through each other in practice-led research to produce a “co-causal thirdness of exploration that can be generative of new modes

¹¹ Amisha Ghadali, “Vandana Shiva on Biodiversity Farming, Seed Libraries and Universal Law.” In *All That We Are*. (Podcast) Accessed August 3, 2024. <https://thefutureisbeautiful.libsyn.com/vandana-shiva-on-biodiversity-farming-seed-libraries-and-universal-law-e211>.

¹² Kira Merrick. “Motherwort Benefits + Recipe.” Website. Herbal Academy, August 25, 2021. <https://theherbalacademy.com/blog/motherwort-benefits/>.

of practice and inquiry.”¹³ For me, research-creation as a collaborative event¹⁴ harkens to artist Lindsay Dobbin’s relational notion of listening as a form of reciprocity. I choose to work within this third space of exploration because I understand it to be that emergent, relational moment of being-in-listening, from which new questions and understandings are brought to light.

In my case, part of my process comes from acknowledging the layers that make it up - there is what I think of as the primary research layer that lays ground for the next - but these are much less binary than they sound. Instead, like the threads of my embroidery’s fronts and backs, these layers are entangled, relational in their becomings.¹⁵ In fact, through research-creation methodology I notice the blurry line between what I consider to be the artwork and what is its precursor - ritual, dreamwork, plant-medicine, walking, mothering, embroidery, sacred object, sacred space, gesture, marks on paper, text. This brings me to reflect on the unique practice of American artist Meinrad Craighead,¹⁶ whose mysticism, ritual, dreamwork, painting and print-making practice were deeply entwined, and have influenced my approach.

Returning to Manning and Massumi’s essay, I want to highlight three questions they ask:

“How does this practice open up this question of experience? How does this practice invest in

¹³ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, “Toward a Process Seed Bank: What Research-Creation Can Do.” *Media-N. Journal of the New Media Caucus*. Accessed July 12, 2023. <http://median.newmediacaucus.org/research-creation-explorations/toward-a-process-seed-bank-what-research-creation-can-do/>.

¹⁴ Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuck, “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and “Family Resemblances”.”; Sarah E. Truman, *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation* Collaboration is a subtext in both of these sources, where research-creation is often seen as co-creation between various players, human and non-human, and includes the act of creating itself, to bring forward previously unknown results.

¹⁵ Carlson H Coogler and Kelly W. Guyotte, “Backs and Fronts: Stitching Thread and Thought Through Manning, Methodology, and Art”. *Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology* 13 (3). 2022. <https://doi.org/10.7577/term.5137>.

¹⁶ Meinrad Craighead, “Meinrad Craighead.” Accessed November 15, 2024, <https://meinradcraighead.com>.

opening up the texture of this concept, in movement? How does this tendency, in this practice, move thought (in practice) to its limit?”¹⁷ These questions are compelling to me, and answers come through the ritual of practice and the practice of ritual. I am certain that for me, art making is a proprioceptive, pre-verbal, sensory experience. One of my creative goals in this thesis was to let go of fixed notions about what the finished product might be, instead attuning to “the product [in] the process, and in the process the product”,¹⁸ thus moving “the process towards a practice still to be defined”.¹⁹

Artists-authors-scholars of research-creation Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman capture the essence of this space and event when they write: “[I]t’s hard to see things clearly in the middle. The middle can’t be known in advance of research. You have to be “in it,” situated and responsive. You are not there to report on what you find or what you seek, but to activate thought. To agitate it.”²⁰

In all of this, I am also applying my studies in Indigenous research methodologies,^{21 22} which I have undertaken to gain insight into ways of gathering and making research ethically when working with the knowledge Indigenous communities share. In addition to helping me

¹⁷ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, “Toward a Process Seed Bank”

¹⁸ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, “Toward a Process Seed Bank”

¹⁹ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, “Toward a Process Seed Bank”

²⁰ Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman, *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: WalkingLab*. (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2019), 178: 206

²¹ Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, Second Edition. (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 328

²² Sweeney Windchief and Timothy San Pedro, eds. *Applying Indigenous Research Methods Storying with Peoples and Communities*. New York: Routledge, 2019, 194

speak with respect about how and whom I am learning from in these communities, there are also a few key points that have guided me on a personal level in how to move forward with my research: 1) ethical research means bringing your ancestry to the table, 2) your research must bring something helpful back to your community, and 3) that for many Indigenous communities, research is storytelling, is dance, is reconnecting with your past, with the land, with prayer and song. There is a give-and-take here that holds within it the co-creative collaboration of research-creation; furthermore, it strengthens my conviction in acknowledging all layers of my research.

How does decolonizing work through my research-creation process? How do I locate myself and my privilege? Decolonizing my academic and creative pursuits begins in reweaving my personal history with a reclaiming of the body-mind and the sacred, and with a validation of the rigour of sensory and experiential knowledge. Hawaiian epistemologist Manulani Alulu Meyer teaches that the word Aloha means “the intelligence with which we meet life”,²³ when she explains that Indigenous Hawaiian knowledge-making comes at the site of experience, something inherently based on embodied reciprocity-in-relationship.

Bayo Akolmolfe echoes this when he says “How you move through the world makes the world and makes knowledge. Knowledge is not a stable objective thing at the end of a rigorous scientific exercise. Knowledge is how we meet the world and how the world meets us in return.”²⁴ And finally, Dr. Jim Garrison finds this in his cross-readings of Karen Barad and Buddhism, writing on the subject of materiality and creation: “Means and ends, process and product, are

²³ *Hawaiian Epistemology: Meyer, Dr. Manulani Aluli*. Streaming video. Vimeo: Kohala Centre, 2009. <https://vimeo.com/7910477>.

²⁴ Ayana Young, “Dr. Bayo Akomolfe on Coming Alive to Other Senses.” For The Wild, n.d. <https://forthewild.world/listen/dr-bayo-akomolafe-on-coming-alive-to-other-senses-300>.

entangled and co-constituting. Knowledge and the means of knowledge arise and cease together.”²⁵

As a European settler, part of this responsibility lies in addressing my own broken past - from personal to ancestral, and recognizing how this shows up through my body - in pain, illness, in how I hold and manifest stress, and importantly, in how I choose to connect or disconnect to the world. Resmaa Menakem speaks eloquently about the necessary role the body plays in recognizing, feeling, and holding what he calls ‘white-body supremacy’.²⁶ For a person to be in touch with this presence in their body means to both acknowledge and stay with the discomfort of this position. This practice is a part of Menakem’s Somatic Abolitionism work, a “living, embodied anti-racist practice and cultural building - a way of being in the world. It is a return to the age-old wisdom of human bodies respecting, honoring, and resonating with other human bodies.”²⁷ I incorporate these ideas and approach my work with curiosity, asking - *what is alive inside of me, and how is it helping or harming me?*

²⁵ Jim Garrison. “Buddhism, Barad, and Materialism.” *Symploke* 29, no. 1 (2021): 475–91. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1353/sym.2021.0024>.

²⁶ Menakem, Resmaa. “What Somatic Abolitionism Does.” Dr. Resmaa Somatic Abolitionism. Accessed December 5, 2020. [https:// www.resmaa.com/movement](https://www.resmaa.com/movement).

²⁷ Menakem, Resmaa. “What Somatic Abolitionism Does.” Dr. Resmaa Somatic Abolitionism. Accessed December 5, 2020. [https:// www.resmaa.com/movement](https://www.resmaa.com/movement).



Meinrad Craighead, Mother and Daughter

Image sourced on artist's website; no date, dimensions or media available ²⁸

5.2 Fields of Belonging: Writing and Storytelling as Method

In my artwork and reflective writing, I engage in a practice termed autoethnography as a critical and anti-colonial method of locating myself within the above research, namely as a cis-woman, mother, and able-bodied settler of mixed European heritage living on Turtle Island.

According to scholars Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner, autoethnography is a

²⁸ Meinrad Craighead. "About Meinrad Craighead." Accessed September 5, 2024. <https://meinradcraighead.com/about/>.

method that strives to understand broader cultural experiences through analysis of personal narrative. As such, it is a method that “is both process and product”²⁹ which aligns well with research-creation and FNM theories outlined in this paper. The power of self-representation is key in my analysis of how personal wellness interconnects with collective and planetary and the role our bodies play in these relationships. Furthermore, the stories I share as a woman and mother on a healing-justice path are important to tell precisely because they challenge the violent suppression of feminine (and non-male, non-white) ways-of-knowing that, I argue, has brought us to the point of planetary collapse.

In their introduction to *Telling Truths: Storying Motherhood*, editors Sheena Wilson and Diana Davidson discuss how writing that explores personal, lived realities of motherhood is a form of resistance that “complicate[s] and break[s] open”³⁰ patriarchal narratives of woman and mother. To write motherhood is to both expose and create new potentialities for ourselves and others, “to create knowledge - to know themselves...to record their mother-knowledge and mother-experiences...to share this knowledge with women across time and space....[to] contribute to writing away our absence.”³¹ The editors also note that to write of mothering is to extend one’s territory of being into a wider identity that includes work, activism, and complex relationships beyond the blurry edges of mother and child.³²

²⁹ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview.” *FQS Forum Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (January 2011). <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>.

³⁰ Sheena Wilson and Diana Davidson, eds. *Telling Truths: Storying Motherhood*. (Ontario, Canada: Demeter Press, 2014), 325; 4

³¹ Sheena Wilson and Diana Davidson, *Telling Truths: Storying Motherhood*, 3-4

³² Sheena Wilson and Diana Davidson, *Telling Truths: Storying Motherhood*, 4

Mother stories are woven throughout my thesis. This is something I recognized only when I stepped back to analyze the project as a whole - and there it was - from sharing my own experiences to finding mother stories in local plant medicine and global health disparities, and in acknowledging that all of life is mothered by the planet we live on. And yet, I should not have been surprised to find this theme. Over my decades of climate and social justice advocacy, I have many times observed that the crises we collectively face seem directly linked to the suppression of mothers, from individual, to collective and planetary.

Recognizing this, I celebrate and centre the mother-knowledge in my stories. To mother radically is to grow deep roots, spreading them widely underground. It is to steward and care-give, protect, guide and nourish, provide haven, have courage, make mistakes, have boundaries, and carry matrilineal tales both harmful and empowering. It is not just about the other, but it is always in relation. In my thesis, mothering grows wild and is cultivated, it resonates with past, present and future, and importantly, it is in practice at all times (read: never perfect, never complete). As a practice-led researcher, this perspective makes sense to me and the embodied work about collective wellness that is my Master's project.

I have also used creative writing and poetic inquiry within my research methodology. In so doing, metaphor and imagination are employed as other ways-of-knowing, to think and problem-solve outside the 'academic writing' box. This generates what writers Linda T Parsons and Lisa Pinkerton call a "a synergy of knowing",³³ that can come only when a situation is viewed through both academic and poetic perspectives. The crux of my thesis argument - that how we think about

³³ Linda T Parsons and Lisa Pinkerton, "Poetry and Prose as Methodology: A Synergy of Knowing." *Methodological Innovations* 15, no. 2 (April 19, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20597991221087150>.

who and *what* we are matters greatly to collective wellness - deserves this poetic licence. This is because the idea of who and what we are goes beyond linear thinking. This mapping, as I explain in my thesis, is a kind of creative problem-solving that engages multiplicity and dimensionality.

So I want to explain here that where my writing refers to myself and my body, you will see the terms I, self, body, body-mind, and body-mind-spirit. Sometimes I separate the body from my thinking self - as if we are two or more collaborating beings. Other times I feel and speak from my 'self' as a whole being, composed of ancestral stories and millions of microscopic beings in collaboration. Indeed, as epigenetic and exposome science now know, our ancestry and memory are archived in the visceral and energetic layers of our body-mind-spirit. "There is nothing singular about us.", write Drs Rupa Marya and Raj Patel.³⁴ This whole self is a multiverse, a multitude, a complex ecology of interdependence, and it is from this place that I write and move and act.

As discussed earlier, Buddhist descriptions of form are that of impermanence, where the "momentary phenomena" of atoms and molecules come together and part again. This is not empty matter, for within its very architecture is deep wisdom, meaning and function. To recognize existence alongside fleetingness is to recognize our emergence, and that within our body-mind-spirits is potential for new stories and with that, new life: "...a living system is a regenerative system," says physicist and author Fritjof Capra in an interview with author-

³⁴ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*. New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2021. p. 23

"We evolved as systems within systems. There is nothing singular about us."

designer-educator Daniel Christian Wahl, “That’s the very definition of life.”³⁵

I am, We are, all of this and more. I have found this embodied multiplicity helpful in thinking about how we fit together as individuals within living systems, and how these systems work together (= how you and I work together) to create conditions of care and mutual flourishing or conditions of harm and destruction. We can see these systems of interdependence repeat on micro and macro scales, from the bacteria, soil and insects to human bodies and human-made systems. In many ways I am You, We are Them, They are Us. Together, we move mountains.

When we realize *who* and *what* we are, we can see that entire fields of being and belonging intersect in our relationships with each other. Psychologist and anti-oppression coach Leah Manaema teaches that when we speak with another person, we should remember that we are also speaking with their ancestors, their community, and a culmination of stories and responsibilities that surround this person. For Manaema, this approach is about an ethics of collectivism, and a “deep desire to get free for the rest of our lives and down our bloodlines and get the land back to sovereign people, so that we can take really good care of our planet and ensure all of our collective survival, as all of our ancestors have fought for, long before we were here.”³⁶

I hope this makes clear that the creative practice of constellating the self, the I, is essential to rethinking the body and embodiment in my thesis project, where connections begin in the

³⁵ Daniel Christian Wahl. “‘Living Systems Are Regenerative Systems’ (Part 2 of 3) Conversation between Fritjof Capra and Daniel Wahl, Feb. 2020.” Website. Medium, February 23, 2020. <https://medium.com/activate-the-future/living-systems-are-regenerative-systems-part-2-of-3-d1a55cf11834>.

³⁶ Leah Menaema (@co_cu1tur3), “Open Sourcery from the Body of Work Tiriki Onus and I Are Currently Working on. Posting Here for Communities of Resistance.” Instagram Reel, April 2024. https://www.instagram.com/co_cu1tur3/reel/C5-mL_nR63v/.

personal and extend into the community and outward to planetary. It plays an important role in breaking through colonial worldviews that separate individual humans and cultures from each other as well as from other species and the land. “Neuroscience...is finally catching up to what many of our ancestors already knew,” Manaema goes on to explain, “which is that our nervous systems, our connectivity, they expand beyond our skin. Our brains are a social organ. We are so deeply connected to each other...and colonialism and settler-colonialism disappear the depths of those connections and insist that we live as individuals.”³⁷ These constellations, what Manaema refers to as Fields of Belonging, acknowledge the relational wisdom (found across traditional cultures) that allows us to break through *I and other*, traversing borders and building solidarity toward liberatory change for all.

5.3 Mapping my Field of Belonging: Dreamwork as Method and Data

This was a slightly difficult section to write, because I am truly still learning how to listen and work with the language of dream and intuition, and therefore also learning how to quantify this as data. As I did my research for this thesis, it became clear to me that I could not write about the intelligence of my body, and the language my body speaks, without including how dreams and intuition have played important roles in my research-creation. It seems my thinking was still siloed in terms of what could be considered acceptable, or ‘real’ body data, versus what we might reductively term ‘the imagination’.

Beyond helping me to map out my field of belonging, the story below relates the important

³⁷ Leah Menaema (@co_cu1tur3), “Open Sourcery from the Body of Work Tiriki Onus and I Are Currently Working on.”

work that dreams do in our lives, in telling our stories through metaphor, giving us hints and sometimes overt information about our world, and in helping others, including the ancestors, to speak to us. Along with intuition and synchronicity, I now understand dreams as part of a wider connective tissue, what dream worker and author Toko Pa Turner calls the “underlying dynamism of the cosmos”, and the “relational dialogue...between physical and non-physical, between seen and unseen”.³⁸

For two years I have attended a small monthly gathering for women entering or going through menopause. The group is headed by an eighty-year-old woman elder, who guides us through various ceremony, ritual, energy and plant medicine work. Because of my Irish heritage, an attendee - now a friend - asked me during a conversation on ancestry if I knew of the island called Grosse Île, situated in the St Lawrence River off the coast of Quebec. From 1832 - 1937, Grosse Île - also known as Quarantine Island - was the first stop for hundreds of thousands of immigrants coming by boat into Canada. Anyone on the boat who was showing signs of illness - largely cholera or typhus - was quarantined on the island.³⁹

The brutal potato famine of Ireland in the 1840s, brought on by British colonialism, led nearly two million people to leave Ireland for North America, with about 100,000 Irish immigrants passing through Grosse Île. Ship fever, or typhus, reduced these numbers significantly, with over 5,000 Irish buried at sea, and a further 5,424 dead and buried in mass

³⁸ Ayana Young, “Toko Pa Turner on Dreams of Belonging.” In *For The Wild*, Podcast, Episode 342, Accessed September 27, 2024. <https://forthewild.world/listen/toko-pa-turner-on-dreams-of-belonging-342>.

³⁹Don Cummings and Serge Occhietti. “Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site.” The Canadian Encyclopedia, February 7, 2006. [https:// www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/la-grosse-ile](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/la-grosse-ile).

graves on the island. Despite the efforts at quarantine, typhus made it into Canada, and a further 6,000 Irish were buried in mass unmarked graves at the port of Montreal in Pointe-Sainte-Charles.⁴⁰ 12 years later, workers building the Victoria Bridge uncovered the remains of many of these Irish victims. Because many of the workers were Irish and perhaps even survivors, they understood the significance of what they had found, hauling a large black river stone out of the water to create a monument to the Irish that still stands today.⁴¹

I had not heard of this island, nor the story of immigration that passed through it and the port of Montreal. But my friend's story instantly brought back a dream I had many years ago, which I will relate here: I was on a ferryboat in the ocean that eventually let me off at a verdant island small enough to be walkable. After stepping off the boat, I followed a path up a hill to a grey stone ruins whose wall I walked along, trailing my hand on the worn, rounded stones. Around this wall and beyond was the rounded green tip of the island stretched out in front of me, where stood a large, grey stone Celtic cross overlooking the ocean. I distinctly remember the feel of this dream, the worn rock on my hands, and the close-up view of Celtic knots that wound the circle of the cross. This dream always represented Ireland to me, but the story of Grosse Île changed my mind. *That's exactly it - said my friend - you take a ferry to get to Grosse Île, and there is a big Celtic cross on the tip of the island, just as you've described.*

She went on to recount a related story of the black stone monument in Pointe Sainte Charles, also a history I had not known. As she described the scene, another dream came back to

⁴⁰ Don Cummings and Serge Occhietti. "Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site."

⁴¹ Fergus Keyes. "History of the Black Rock." Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation, December 17, 2021. <https://montrealirishmonument.com/2021/12/17/history-of-the-black-rock/>.

me: I sat embroidering on a bench at the mouth of a wide bay with a small mountain in the distance, and a big black stone at the entrance of the road that led to this mountain. An older woman came up to me in this dream, white hair cut short. She was curt and direct when she took my hand, mid-stitch, and said - *let me show you how to do that properly.*



Painting of Black Rock monument, taken from the webpage “History of the Black Rock.” on the website for Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation. No data given with image.

Although I am not certain, it is likely my ancestors passed through Grosse Isle. My great-great-grandmother and grandfather went on to be lighthouse keepers on les Iles de Madeleine, and their line moved on to Cape Breton, Montreal, Massachusetts, and other parts of North America. Perhaps my ancestors spoke to me through these dreams, telling me their story of coming to these lands, and wanting me to learn more. Perhaps they lost a loved one at these ports; it’s almost certain their immigration story was not an easy one. I can’t help but wonder if my seemingly random choice to move from Vancouver to Montreal was more guided than I know.

For the sake of ease, we could say my blood is mostly Northern European. I am grown from a mixed bag of soils and my ancestry is linked to the seas, with my people crossing on boats and plane from Ireland, England, Northern Italy, France and the Ukraine, to land at various points along the eastern shores of Canada. They came at different times and for different reasons - some under duress of famine and colonialism happening in their own lands, some fleeing poverty, and at least one time for love; all moving toward new life on unknown (and unknowingly stolen) lands.

I was born here, on the part of Turtle Island known as Canada. My bare feet first touched soil in Treaty Seven territory, the home of the Métis Nation of Alberta - what the Blackfoot called Moh'kins'tsis, Wîchîspa to the Stoney Naked, and Guts'ists'i to the Tsuut'ina nation.⁴² These lands held me as I learned to walk and run, and nurtured my love for dry heat and wide open skies with mountains on the horizon. After fourteen years away from Ontario, when I turned ten, my parents moved back across the country to be closer to family. The upside of this was that my siblings and I gained access to another set of grandparents (my Italian grandmother lived with us in Calgary), a large collection of cousins, aunts, uncles, and family sing-alongs into the late hours.

I have, in my half-century of life, been privileged enough to have lived in three other territories since Calgary, Alberta: Toronto (lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnaabeg, the Chippewa, Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples), Vancouver (lands of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations), and Montreal (lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka

⁴² University of Calgary. "Treaty 7 and Land Acknowledgements for Settlers: Part 1." Website/Blog, June 21, 2021. <https://ucalgary.ca/news/treaty-7-and-land-acknowledgements-settlers-part-1>.

Nation).⁴³ It was not until adulthood that I learned of the original land names and the peoples who steward them.

Of my ancestral field, three lineages - Italian, Irish, and English - were tangible in the food and drink we consumed, our ways of being together, and the songs we sang. My Italian grandmother lived with us for much of my childhood, and I grew up immersed in a cross-cultural environment of languages, sayings, songs, beliefs and foods that fused to create my own burgeoning identity as a Canadian. I have unwittingly dreamt most often of Ireland, before I ever visited, and have had the least to do with Ukraine, a country newly revealed in my family line.

I have come to understand that through their immigration to the new world, my Irish and Italian ancestors, along with other early immigrants, unwittingly perpetuated cycles of settler colonial oppression and white supremacy. I have learned that this is because their navigation of European-settler racial hierarchy demanded assimilation and whiteness, most often at the cost of solidarity with other marginalized groups and sometimes their own cultural uniqueness. This also affected and continues to affect how earlier immigrants treat/ed later waves of migrants, in a vicious cycle of racism and superiority,^{44 45} in what a friend calls pulling up the drawbridge once you've safely crossed. Patrick Wolfe, a prominent scholar on settler colonialism writes: "Settler-

⁴³ CAUT, "Guide to Acknowledging First Peoples & Traditional Territory." Accessed July 4, 2024. <https://www.caut.ca/content/guide-acknowledging-first-peoples-traditional-territory>.

⁴⁴ James R Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City*. Penguin History of American Life. (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 400; Pages 4-6 Barrett talks about the early Irish immigrant experience in relation to whiteness

⁴⁵ Brent Staples, "How Italians Became White." *New York Times*, October 12, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/12/opinion/columbus-day-italian-american-racism.html>.

colonialism is a structure, not an event.”⁴⁶ In this way, an architecture is created that perpetuates a logic that whiteness and privilege are desirable, at the expense and erasure of black, brown, Indigenous and otherwise marginalized peoples and their cultures.

I belong to these people, as they belong to me. And there is more too, in my field of belonging, as I will explain below.

5.4 Soft Knowledge: Textile as Method

My grandmother is Italian, or Italian-Canadian, my mother’s mother. She is first generation, born in Guelph, Ontario to North Italian immigrant parents. My Nonna, whose body I claim as my own, in whose womb I came into being as one of the millions of seeds of potential in my own mother’s developing ovaries. We are like that, as humans, nested into each other. And as those born with female biology, we can draw a continuous line through our matrilineage, leading us to imagine how our grandmother’s tears and joys might have imprinted on us; the thrum of our grandmother’s heartbeat lying closely alongside our mother’s, giving shape to our eventual form. “Los ovaries” are the place of deep knowing and story for women, writes Clarissa Pinkola Estes in her well-loved book *Women Who Run With The Wolves*.⁴⁷ In the myths Estes tells, they are organs of creative potential, holding stories of our lineage, our ancestors and their wisdom.

Nonna quit school and started working at 9 years old, in reaction to being told she was stupid by her elementary school teacher. Her ability to figure out the mathematics of complex

⁴⁶ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (n.d.): 387–409. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1080/14623520601056240>.

⁴⁷ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, PhD, *Women Who Run With The Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992). 584; 32

knitting and crochet patterns and create her own is alone a testament to her mind. Growing up to Italian immigrants during the Depression, Nonna was nothing if not resourceful - saving everything from cleaned styrofoam meat trays to cutouts of her name and address from envelopes - becoming a hoarder as she aged. My love of collections and objects was partially born here, especially in thinking about what is considered valuable, and how and where memory is stored.

Materials, process and artifact link immediately with memory and narrative, something I am well-acquainted with through my work as an art conservator and textile artist. As I was told in art school, (and often derisively), textiles remind us of the domestic and the hand-made, and they speak directly to our bodies because our bodies are intimately familiar with the feel of them. They are our second skin. We know them well.

I come from women who knit, crocheted and sewed clothing, re-covered furniture, made pillows, blankets, quilts, curtains, dolls, and doll's clothes; women who knew and collected textiles. My lineage of hand-making things with textiles comes directly from here, and I think of this work as part of my matrilineal language. We would take outings to fabric stores - my mother, aunt, grandmother, sister and myself - walking aisles lined with bolts and bolts of colour and texture, weight and shimmer and weave. The possibilities were endless. We'd run our palms along the bolts as we walked, talking about what-ifs, ooohing and ahing in amazement at the beauty and weirdness on display.

My mother and father were brought up with frugality and resourcefulness, both of them taught to conserve everything of potential use and to fix things again and again before throwing them out. This value-system extended naturally into how my siblings and I were brought up.

Everything was fixed many times before buying something new.

Living in an intergenerational household also meant I watched my mother and Nonna make things with textiles all the time, never idle in any case. My grandmother's hands held needles and string whenever she was sitting down - she knit, crocheted, embroidered, and sewed not just to create objects that functioned in the world, but also to keep time with her brain. These values and the approach to materiality comes through my hands, in my metier as an art conservator and my art practice with previously used textiles.

Much like our bodies, I consider textiles to be a kind of soft intelligence. How their weight ripples and falls; the way they fold, buckle, pile up; how they cover and hold; suffocate and breathe. How they unfurl and speak with the wind. Textiles embody a soft knowing that juxtaposes the hard angles of the human-built world. They remind us that vulnerability and strength do co-exist and in fact, support each other well. And, textiles remind us intimately of our bodies, not in the least because they interface everything in our lives that happens at our physical boundaries - as clothing, as comfort, as bandage, swaddling and shroud, and more. Speaking through the language of textiles connects me to the powerful wisdom of soft intelligence alive in the materials themselves, and my matrilineal lines.

5.5 Green Lineage: Plant Knowledge as Method

Like many others throughout history, my journey with plants began in childhood trailing my mother as she worked with them in the garden and the house, talking to them when we passed them in the parks. With an impressive knowledge of plants by name, my mother's hands were always in the soil, and her house continues to have plants at every window. Wherever we would

walk, my mother would acknowledge the plants and greet them by name, loving the feel and sound of the Latin on her tongue.

It has been a tender spot for me over the last year to hold the memories for my mother, when they elude her, of these once familiar names. *What was that one again Emilie? The one with the greyish leaves and pink flowers?* she might ask me when I visit. *Rose Campion* I would say, eventually writing it on a slip of paper and putting it on the fridge for her, my chest welling because this loss of familiar knowledge, if nothing else, is a sure sign of the changes to the body that aging can bring.

I have learned herbalism from good friends, professional naturopaths and herbalists, and through so many wonderful books, videos, and webinars by North American and European herbalists including Rosemary Gladstar,⁴⁸ Susan Weed,⁴⁹ Lucy Jones,⁵⁰ and Rosalee de la Forêt.⁵¹ I have studied in depth under Michael Vertoli at the Living Earth School of Herbalism,⁵² and Dr Aviva Romm through her two year course titled Herbal Medicine for Women.⁵³ I continue to work in-person with non-Indigenous elder Liddy Flewwelling who teaches plant spirit medicine

⁴⁸ Rosemary Gladstar's The Science & Art of Herbalism. "Meet Rosemary." Website. Accessed December 2, 2024. <https://scienceandartofherbalism.com>.

⁴⁹ Susun Weed, "Natural Health, Herbal Medicine and Spirit Healing the Wise Woman Way." Website. Accessed December 2, 2024. <http://www.susunweed.com>.

⁵⁰ Myrobalan Clinic, "Meet Lucy." Website, Accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.myrobalanclinic.com/meet-lucy>.

⁵¹ Rosalee de la Forêt, "From Terminal Illness to Bestselling Author." Website, Herbs with Rosalee, n.d. <https://www.herbalremediesadvice.org/rosalee-de-la-foret.html>.

⁵² Living Earth School of Herbalism, "About Living Earth School." Website, Accessed December 2, 2024. <https://www.livingearthschool.ca/about.html>.

⁵³ Aviva Romm MD, "Herbal Medicine for Women." Website, Accessed December 2, 2024. <https://avivaromm.com/courses/herbal-medicine-for-women/>.

and energy healing.⁵⁴ And of course, I continue to listen and learn most deeply from the plants themselves. My research-creation work honours these plants, and in the next chapter about my thesis artworks, I describe and celebrate the specific plants that have inspired and nourished this research.



Lychnis coronaria (Rose Campion). Image taken from the website Gardenia. No photo credits given.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Earth Medicine: The Healing Power of Nature. "About Liddy Flewwelling." Website. Accessed December 2, 2024. <https://liddyflewwelling.com>.

⁵⁵ Gardenia. "Lychnis Coronary (Rose Campion)." Website. Accessed September 23, 2024. <https://www.gardenia.net/plant/lychnis-coronaria-rose-campion>.

Chapter Six: Exploring My Artworks

This chapter is dedicated to the artworks I am creating for this thesis. All of the images in this chapter are taken by myself. These six works are composed of drawing, embroidery and cyanotype on large cotton and wool textiles, accompanied by botanical medicines in the form of a dye and dried plant parts. This section presents images of in-process and final artworks (close to complete at the time of this writing), along with related story and discussion detailing how the works came to be, what I gleaned in the process of their making, scholars, writers, artists and healers whose work links to mine, and reflections on the original sub-questions I ask at the beginning of this written thesis, being:

What is embodiment?

What is body intelligence and how do we attune to it?

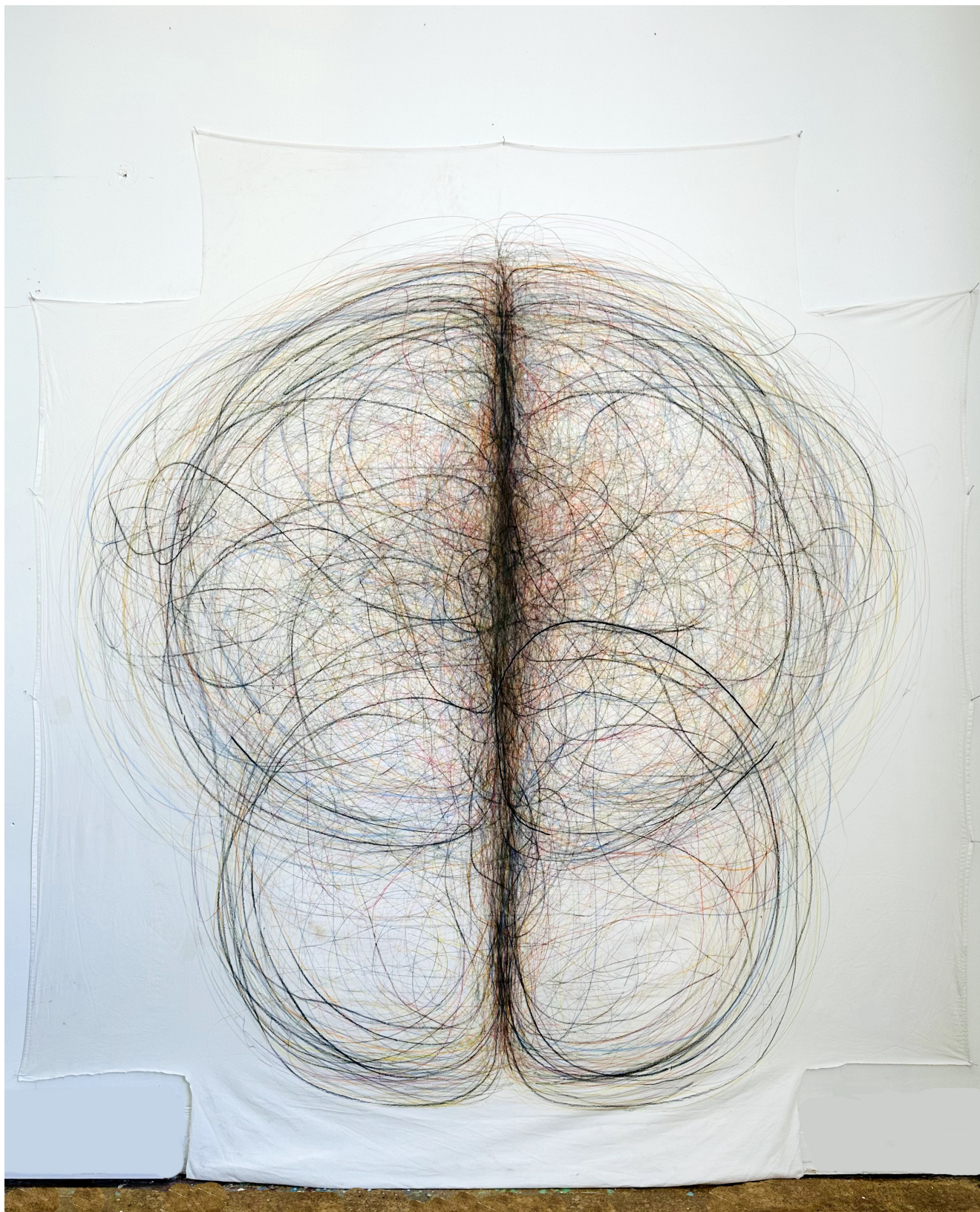
What does it mean to heal?

6.1 Drawing on Cloth: Bodies of Energy

Image description: A large textile, white, worn. 9 by 8 feet, held taut on the wall with thin white nails along all sewn edges. Corners cut out, left unfinished, so that the piece is almost like a cross with a wide centre line and limbs of narrow width. Small media and oil stains. The image fills much of the textile; is made of lines swirling, reaching up and dipping down, snaking wide and looped around, meeting in the middle again and again; so that the centre area is thick and darkened, almost black, layered with tracings of having passed through. There is a body contained here, a body that gestures and moves both away from, and towards, a centre line.



In-process image, Energy Bodies, 2023



Energy Bodies, charcoal, chalk pastel, oil media, graphite, coloured pencil on cotton,
H 274.5 x W 215.0 cm, 2024

Pin up a large piece of textile onto the wall. Pick the drawing materials you want to use - one for each hand, you'll be drawing with both at the same time. Breathe in, drop the shoulders, listen to the music, move your arms. Try to remember your breath. Go as slow or fast as you want. Notice what feels good, and what doesn't. Don't worry if emotions come up. Noticing, listening, seeing, feeling and moving is a part of this work. Try to keep moving, keep mark-making. Listen to the sound of the chalk (pastel, pencil, paintbrush) as it moves across the fabric. Listen to your breath. Watch. Move. Breath. Repeat.

As soon as I pick up the drawing tools - I feel a sense of relief come over me. It's not complete relief, but a part of me senses a different space opening up. I raise my arms and stand close to the sheet hanging on the wall because it feels good. It is intimate, warm along my torso. Sometimes my mind will say *I don't know what to do....What now?* but I move past this thought, circling my arms or repeating gestures up and out and down and in, along my centre.



This artwork, titled *Energy Bodies*, traces core and subtle energy flows. Using bilateral drawing techniques, I drew it with two hands simultaneously. According to art therapist Shauna Kaendo, engaging in bilateral drawing:

...creates a space to allow for integration ...of all of the things we're learning, unlearning, feeling, experiencing, avoiding, holding. This process (& practice) challenges narratives of what it is to be productive, to make art... and what it can look like to TAKE CARE... This kind of practice speaks to the parts of our brain that don't use words. It soothes the parts of us that feel threat ... that want to defend, run away, collapse.¹

This kind of practice is a useful tool for living in a fraught world. In order to 'move' my thinking effectively while I created this thesis, I found a need to balance the slow stitch-work of my embroidery practice, the stasis of writing, and the heaviness of the daily news with something more freely gestural. This is where bilateral drawing came in. Rhythmic and as fast or slow-moving as needed, this stimulating, embodied art therapy technique is an effective interruption to linear, analytical thinking and stuffed-up emotions. Art therapist and author Cornelia Elbrecht describes its use in trauma-based care as follows "...bilateral drawing is effective not only as a method of self-regulation and a grounding technique but also to initiate the literal process of "moving" the body and mind forward...to an action-oriented and self-empowered focus".²

Standing with my body at the centre of the textile, extending my arms outward and bringing them tightly in along the centre; I built the topography in layers, revisiting the work many times over several months and seasons, tracing presence and emotional terrain with no analysis

¹ Shauna Kaendo. "Hey Shauna Art Therapy Bilateral Drawing Club." Website. Hey Shauna Art Therapy. Accessed September 3, 2024. [https:// heyshauna.com/bilateral-drawing-club/](https://heyshauna.com/bilateral-drawing-club/).

² Cornelia Elbrecht. *Healing Trauma with Guided Drawing: A Sensorimotor Art Therapy Approach to Bilateral Body Mapping*. Berkely, California: North Atlantic Press, 2018, 344; 43

required, because the gestural point is to keep moving. Keep breathing. Tracing colours across the whole space, I am brought into rhythm, movement and a sort of creative harmony with myself and the space around me. In doing this, I gesture beyond my physical body, into a place where subtle energy resonates and flows.

Somewhat ironically, it was during a virtual gathering in the pandemic that I first tried bilateral drawing in the form of group art-therapy, and it took hold of me instantly, rooting itself into my current art practice and thesis. The workshop was run by art therapist Shauna Kaendo, who was located in Victoria, BC, Canada, with participants from Oregon, Wisconsin, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Nova Scotia, Austria and Hong Kong. We were a global group of strangers, all of us experiencing pandemic fallout, all of us looking to create and connect with ourselves and others.

I arrived at this workshop feeling both excited and tired. I had been online most of the morning and was fatigued from being in front of the screen so much; something that was heightened by pandemic isolation. My excitement was directly related to a growing, deep need for slowness in my life, as well as for making art - so this workshop seemed like a great opportunity to be guided in both areas. I noticed the fatigue of meeting online was complicated by striving to be in community through the screen vs in-person, and for this reason I had a feeling of just wanting to crawl through the laptop to be with the other participants.

This experience taught me about community art-making as healing. Online workshops like this one, especially during the pandemic, reminded me of writer Sophie Strand's notion that we are all living in a mutually constituted manner, something she calls "a participatory looping

experience of intimacy”,³ recognizing that we are constantly in relationship whether or not we want to be. Even though we were physically apart, women in these workshops breathed and moved together, spoke with and witnessed each other, and gestured with pigment and water toward a more deliberate way of being.

As I shared with the group later, when we began the process of slow mark-making, my mind started to freak out. I felt a tightness take hold in my chest, and my mind started racing with thoughts such as ‘Ahh! I don’t know how to do this!’, and ‘maybe I should ask if I’m doing it right!’. I found that going slow, especially at the beginning, opened up the chance for my domineering analytical mind to step in and be loud - bossing me around, trying to get it perfect. When I started to reckon with this by going even slower, I felt I had entered into a dance. We weren’t asked to be perfect or free of discomfort, instead instructed to just notice and be alert to our sensations and feelings. At times the music went faster than I liked and I had to work to stay slow. We were reminded to breathe - and so my breath became rhythm and tempo for my brush and pencil movements.

Bilateral drawing attunes us to the innate flow of energy that lives through and within our bodies. Traditional cultures across the planet have charted human energetic systems such as chakras, energy meridians, and the subtle bodies, and healing modalities that work with these systems have existed for millennia. These concepts are found in ancient Hindu texts that inform the Ayurvedic tradition, as well as Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Indigenous traditions from North America, to name a few. Here, the physical is wholly interrelated and interdependent with

³ Ayana Young, “SOPHIE STRAND on Myths as Maps.” In *For The Wild*, episode 312, Accessed December 2022, <https://forthewild.world/listen/sophie-strand-on-myths-as-maps-312>.

energetic, emotional, mental, and spiritual layers to create a whole/holistic picture of life on Earth.

In the 3000 year old system of traditional Indian medicine called Ayurveda, the Nadis and Doshas are fundamental concepts of energy systems that interrelate to maintain balance and wellness in the body. Nadi means ‘flow’ or ‘current’, and approximately 72,000 of these channels move subtle energy throughout the body. Interestingly there are both invisible nadis (Yoga nadis) and visible (Gross nadis), the latter including the nerves, muscles cardiovascular and lymphatic vessels.^{4 5} Traditional Chinese Medicine, a modality over 2000 years old, works with channels called meridians that direct energy through “the human organic system”, composed of “five organs, the liver, heart, pancreas (including spleen), lung, and kidney, which correspond to wood-, fire-, earth-, metal-, and water-type, respectively.”⁶ Intertwined in the body-mapping of TCM is a cultural cosmology called the Five Elements Theory that explains the universe as composed of five fundamental elements (as listed above) whose interactions are mutual and cyclical in nature. Through this concept, everything “matter and even spirit” can be classified and understood through form, colour, phase and relationship to one another, including the human body.⁷

TCM, Ayurveda, traditional Tibetan medicine, and ancient Mayans recognize energy systems

⁴ Ashram Yoga. “Working with the Chakras and Nadis in Yoga.” Website. Accessed July 20, 2024. <https://www.ashramyoga.com>.

⁵ Cindi Dale, *The Subtle Body: An Encyclopedia of Your Energetic Anatomy*. (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True Inc, 2009), 487: 272-280

⁶ SunKu Chung, Seongwon Cha, Seo-Young Lee, Jung-Hyun Park, and Siwoo Lee, “The Five Elements of the Cell.” *Integrative Medicine Research* 6, no. 4 (October 18, 2017): 452–56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.imr.2017.10.002>.

⁷ SunKu Chung et al., “The Five Elements of the Cell.”

and key energy centres in our bodies, called chakras. Related to the Sanskrit word meaning ‘wheel of light’, most knowledges map chakras at the primary branchings of the nervous system, and understand them to both collect and transmit subtle and concrete energy.⁸ Although not necessarily mapped over the body, the ancient Jewish Kabbala’s Tree of Life has a similar structure, in depicting “the flow of energy from the infinite source (“above”) to the finite expression/manifestation (“below”)”.⁹

Expanding from the body into cosmos, the Tsalagi (Cherokee) peoples in North America understand the Earth as a “network of meridians, grids and connections” that is mirrored in the physical body of humans.¹⁰ They too have key energy centres, but understand them as systems of sound and harmonics that resonate with different parts of the body. Venerable Dhyani Ywahoo, Tsalagi elder and Buddhist teacher, shares that her ancestral lineage was established 2,860 years ago, and traces its origin to the Pleiades star system, also called the Seven Dancers.¹¹ There are other traditions, such as Hawaiian and Anishinaabe, that also have creation stories emerging from the same seven stars.^{12 13}

There are many complexities here that a more in-depth study could parse out. For the purposes of my thesis, I want to make evident that how the universe is viewed determines our

⁸ Cindi Dale, *The Subtle Body: An Encyclopedia of Your Energetic Anatomy*.

⁹ David Sanders, “Introduction to the Tree of Life by David Sanders.” Kabbalah Experience, Website, Accessed September 27, 2024, <https://kabbalahexperience.com/introduction-to-the-tree-of-life/>.

¹⁰ Cindi Dale, *The Subtle Body: An Encyclopedia of Your Energetic Anatomy*. 292-296

¹¹ Dhyani Ywahoo, *Voices of Our Ancestors Cherokee Teachings from the Wisdom Fire*. (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 1987), 312: Introduction

¹² *Manu Aluli Meyer on Epistemology*. YouTube, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmJJi1iBdzc>.

¹³ Michael Wassegijig Price, “Anishinaabe Star Knowledge.” Revolving Sky, Website, Accessed September 20, 2024. <https://revolvingsky.com/>.

understanding of the nature and matter of life itself, including who we are as humans within a vastly larger system. I will say this in many ways throughout my thesis: how we think about *who* and *what we are*, as humans, matters greatly. As I see it, a healthy cosmology provides a home, with directions for how to get there and how to keep it well-maintained, together.

I want to return now to my original research questions, about the role embodiment plays in the connection between personal, collective, and planetary wellness. What I learned from the practice of bilateral drawing has to do with creating space for the body to lead the way, and finding inner rhythm and resonance through the body when given this space. This is a form of embodiment that is rooted in turning down the conscious, thinking brain in favour of movement, breath and intuitive, abstract gesture - all forms of body intelligence. Something amazing happens for me here where I enter into a dance of sorts, with my analytical brain gradually giving way to trust in my body's innate capacity to know where to go, and what to do.

Being in the flow with mindful breath, rhythmic movement and repeated abstract gestures is, for me, an act of coming into resonance - something I believe to be a necessary component of healing. This resonance can happen within ourselves, as it does for me when I practice bilateral drawing on my own, and also with others, as in the virtual bilateral drawing class.

In his podcast episode titled *On Resonance: Caves, Hooves, Hearts, Harps...and the Birth of Culture*, host Joshua Schrei explores the phenomena of resonance as a fundamental, harmonic and connective tissue that binds together both human and non-human life. "Resonance bridges the intermedial space between us and the community and the cosmos which is of itself resonance." says Schrei. Resonance is a kind of entrainment with an other, and often with a

plurality, “through uttered word, chanted verse, sung song, danced step, felt breath”¹⁴

Like bilateral drawing, resonance is alive, sensual, a feeling of harmony, a possible antidote to stuckness and fear. Resonance is present in pioneering art therapist Pat B Allen’s description of embodied image-making as a process of intuition and trust: “I trust the process of image making so thoroughly as being the voice of inner wisdom that even fear is tolerable, as an aspect of something larger. The larger something I refer to as the river, it turns out, is life itself.”¹⁵ It is what Jungian analyst James Hillman might mean when he writes: “A vital, sensitive aesthetic sense is the means by which the human soul finds...reunion...intimacy with the world.”¹⁶ And I am reminded of the Tsalagi concept of the “five sounds that rose from nothingness” channelling tones and harmonies through organs that “resonate”.¹⁷

In bilateral drawing I discovered a form of embodied art-making. I have learned that through our sensing, resonant body we come to recognize not only ourselves, but also ourselves in the other (human or non-human), and in so doing, come into greater connection and harmony with something larger than ourselves. My work of research-creation, *Energy Bodies*, is a self portrait that reaches toward the celestial. Through this drawing I re-imagine my body and my self through a different kind of sensing and way-of-knowing.

As I have touched on, traditional knowledge systems from around the world understand that

¹⁴ Joshua Schrei. “On Resonance, Caves Hooves, Hearts, Harps...and the Birth of Culture.” *The Emerald*, Accessed November 2021, <https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/the-emerald/>

¹⁵ Pat B. Allen. *Art Is A Way Of Knowing: A Guide to Self-Knowledge and Spiritual Fulfillment through Creativity*. Boulder, Colorado: Shambala Press, 1995, 224: 191

¹⁶ James Hillman. *Blue Fire: Selected Writings by James Hillman*. Edited by Thomas Moore. Toronto, Canada: HarperCollins Canada, 1997, 336: 290

¹⁷ Cindi Dale, *The Subtle Body: An Encyclopedia of Your Energetic Anatomy*.

all of life is made of energy; energy flows through and connects individual and collective bodies throughout the natural world. Our energies touch and feel each other, reach out and move away. This thesis work traces the contours of my interior and exterior self as fluid, connected, motion-filled, intelligent abstraction. It is intended to hang in celebration of this wonder.

6.2 Cyanotypes on Cloth: Embodying the Weedy Politics of Plants

We need to reseed ourselves as humans...every single one of our bodies holds living memory of our ancestors coming into agreements with plants and animals...covenants that our ancestors...wove themselves into with plants...they said, ‘we’ll give up a little bit of our wildness’ and the plant said, ‘we’ll give up little of our wildness’, and we would come together in this beautiful co-creation...that we would promise to take care of each other¹⁸

Mohawk seed keeper Rowen White

As a decades-long student of North American plant medicine, the role of plants is essential in my thesis practice linking body intelligence to planetary health. For me, plants are sentient non-human beings with whom I exchange an intelligence rooted in my body, coming through all of my senses. This is something traditional cultures know well, and it is often the case that the plants themselves are attributed to coming forward with their medicine, rather than the human seeking it out. In her book *Medicines to Help Us: Traditional Métis Plant Use*, Métis artist and activist Christie Belcourt notes, “When you hear Elders speak about plants they will sometimes

¹⁸ Prentis Hemphill. “S2 Episode 6 with Rowen White.” Finding Our Way Podcast. Accessed February 15, 2023. www.findingourwaypodcast.com.

say that they received their “medicine” through a dream, a vision, or by fasting, or sometimes it is said that they plant itself “talks” to them and will tell the Elder what it is good for.”¹⁹

When my learnings in plant identification and medicine-making came into collaboration with my practice-led thesis research, I felt called to work with one plant in particular - Motherwort. Or perhaps it was Motherwort who chose me. With the aid of sun, water, and time, we (Motherwort and I) created three large cyanotypes. I left one image unadorned, to another added embroidery and appliqué to tell a story of sentience and being human/humble, and on the third, I laid out elements from complementary plant medicines to create an altar for the heart. I feel strongly about leaving the cyanotypes largely untouched, imagining them as large banners for the country of Motherwort and her people.



Motherwort’s Latin name is *Leonurus Cardia*, meaning Lion-hearted. Vigorous and beautiful, this herb (wort) is traditionally used to support those born in a female body, those who mother (hence its common name) and is a primary plant for the heart. The medicine this plant carries shows us that mothering is intimately related to strength-of-heart.

Motherwort is wonderful for grief, for calming and nourishing the heart, and for the anxiety and fatigue that mothering can bring. It is a tonic for supporting hormonal fluxes from puberty through menopause. It gently calms and nourishes us

¹⁹ Christie Belcourt. *Medicines to Help Us: Traditional Métis Plant Use*. Saskatoon, SK: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2007, 80: 4

through and out of burnout.²⁰ Tincture is easiest, but it can also be taken in teas although bitter.

This bitterness and the prickles on late harvest flowers make me think about the pain and discomfort that can accompany both mothering and being mothered - whether or not one has children of one's own. At the same time, bitterness and prickles speak to the necessity for discernment and boundaries, and how we can get better at these qualities as we age. The prickles remind me also of the tenderness of the human heart, and how boundaries can often become over-protection for the softness inside.

Being rhizomatic means this plant's roots grow down and outward in a non-linear, decentralized and widespread fashion. Motherwort takes up space, grows wild in alleys and fence-side as much as in proper garden beds. It is an example of how lineages of mothering can and do work in our world.

Due both to its tenacity and to our general ignorance about bioregional plant medicines in North America, Motherwort is often considered an invasive weed. Likewise, the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual load carried by mothers is devalued, feared and exploited under supremacist human systems. In our world, this especially means that non-white mothers face higher rates of maternal death and overall weathering.²¹ It means their lives and those of their children are seen as less important.

Becoming a later-in-life mother was a wake-up call for me. Until then I had not fully recognized the profound work women around me were doing on the daily - my sisters, cousins,

²⁰ Herbal Academy. "Example Monograph: Motherwort." Accessed November 15, 2024. <https://theherbalacademy.com/motherwort-monograph/>

²¹ Arline T. Geronimus. *Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society*. Chico, California: AK Press, 2023. <https://www.akpress.org/weathering.html>.

friends, my mother, aunties, grandmothers. I believe Motherwort chose to work with me, as much as I chose to work with her. Together, we are shining light onto the gift of mothering and the mothers that surround us, especially those whose lives are in danger, including our Earth.

Equally, we uphold the ways of the heart and heart-led leadership. Lion-heart is courageous and brave. We are speaking out about how stigma, trauma, repression, and oppression take up residence in the body, manifesting as physical ailments or disease. Finally, we are reminding everyone that humans and plants have a relationship that has co-evolved over thousands of years: indeed, plants are the original medicine.

Herbalists like to say that plants will grow where their medicine is needed. Although I consciously planted Motherwort in my community garden, she also grows wild throughout Montreal. My mother's own garden has a corner lined with self-seeded Motherwort, growing tall as my son by summer's end. The plants I worked with were ethically foraged in the urban neighbourhoods around my home, as well as being grown and harvested in my small community garden plot, a dynamic 10 x 10-foot space I have been working with for seven years.

Plant fibre artist Alice Fox's practice is resonant for me in its ties to the land and in her creative experiments with the materials she grows and harvests: "My work is intimately linked with my allotment plot. Here, I have been exploring the variety of found, grown and gathered materials for several years".²² Further on I will write more about how my community garden has offered me a hands-on relationship with plants, soil and a small piece of land, year after year - a boon for an urban apartment dweller like myself. This, in addition to the opportunity to work

²² Holly Ingram, "Alice Fox: From Conception to Creation." Textile Artist, Website, Accessed September 12 2023, <https://www.textileartist.org/alice-fox-from-conception-to-creation/>.

alongside others from my community in a beautiful, abundant and nourishing outdoor environment.

Although I knew I wanted to make large cyanotypes using plants, I was not sure of composition or final product. I had done many experiments on paper, and through Concordia University was fortunate to work with a community embroidery project created on large cyanotypes made with plants from the St Lawrence River.²³ The more clear I became about focusing on Motherwort alone, as through an herbalist lens, the more certain I was about keeping the final works simple and letting the plant speak for themselves.²⁴

Botanical cyanotypes have a long history and a decidedly female beginning. British amateur botanist and photographer Anna Atkins (1799–1871) was a pioneer in the use of cyanotype impressions to document botanical specimens. She self-published and even hand-wrote much of her first publication of over 400 plates, titled *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* (1843). It is also the first book created that used photographs to illustrate the text. In 1853, she published *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Flowering Plants and Ferns*, which is widely considered to be her most successful book. During these decades Atkins was prolific and rigorous, creating approximately 6,000 prints. Even so, and although eminent botanists and scientists consulted her images in the 1800's, Atkins name was uncoupled from her works over time, evidence of the

²³ Learning With The St. Lawrence. "Public Outreach: The Rivers Threads." Website. Accessed December 2, 2024. [https:// learningwiththestlawrence.ca/projects/rivers-threads/](https://learningwiththestlawrence.ca/projects/rivers-threads/).

²⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer. Nature Needs a New Pronoun: To Stop the Age of Extinction, Let's Start by Ditching "It". *yes! Magazine*. March 30, 2015. <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/together-earth/2015/03/30/alternative-grammar-a-new-language-of-kinship>.

Robin Wall Kimmerer proposes new pronouns for plants and animals that recognize them as family. Rooted in the Anishinaabe word Bemaadiziiaaki, for 'beings of the living Earth', Kimmerer suggests ki and kin, and they and them as opposed to 'it'.

navigation she had to do as a female and amateur, in a male-dominated field. It wasn't until the 19th century that her work was rediscovered and given a proper place in history.^{25 26}

I like to think of cyanotypes as a form of documentary photography. As an interdisciplinary artist and art conservator, I consistently use photographic documentation as a foundational manner of encounter and relationship-building with the object, situation, or persons I am curious about. It is one of the ways I get to know something or someone. Like the art of writing condition reports about artifacts and art objects, documentary photography is a technical skill that requires a kind of narrative eye, and in many ways it is about recording evidence. I appreciate Atkin's simple, crisp prints for the fine details they capture.

I stayed with this minimal treatment in my cyanotypes, although instead of a single element like a leaf, I presented the plant in its fullness, stems, leaves, flowers - a rich blue and white and ghostly gathering of motherwort. The prints I created are evidence of plant bodies pressed against prepared cotton, whose fibres held the condensation from the plants as they wilted under the warm sun. In the images left behind the motherwort is captured in a fleeting aliveness, having been picked hours before.

In the first cyanotype, presented as the Frontispiece to this written thesis, a thick bunch of Motherwort is surrounded by a deep blue that is pocked and lined with whitish imperfections from folds and water droplets; some leaves are clear and others seemingly float back as though in water, lighter blue, only slightly visible. In all the images, but this one especially, I wanted to present Motherwort as I encounter her - a huge and wild bouquet, a fullness and togetherness that takes

²⁵ Annemarie Iker. "Anna Atkins British, 1799 - 1871." Website. MoMA, 2020. <https://www.moma.org/artists/231>.

²⁶ Ashira Morris. "Navigating Boundaries in the Photography of Anna Atkins." Website. Lady Science, 2021. <https://www.ladyscience.com/features/a5ph8kpc7hapatcebg5tcc2a7jfzg8>.

up space. A wild offering of medicine and collaboration.

The second banner is peopled; small figures move through the plants and there are eyes in the foliage looking out at us, the viewers. The humans are arcing, grasping, falling, together and alone. They are us, small and humble. A single luna moth rises in the upper right corner, and coiled in the bottom left under the plants is the ouroboros snake eating its tail. The stunning luna moth lives only one week in its winged state; the snake has long symbolized rebirth through the shedding of old ways. This cyanotype, then, became about darkness and light and the cycles of destruction and new life on Earth. This banner honours the spirit of motherwort and the natural world as an enveloping, sentient aliveness of which we humans are merely a part. Some appliqued elements are dyed with motherwort and the medicinal ink I made from motherwort and rose.

The third cyanotype captured the plant surrounding my body, with the round halo from a rock placed in each direction (North, East, South, West/Head, Side, Feet, Side). This cyanotype was made last, when the plant was losing steam. I laid on my back in the waning afternoon sun and placed the stems, leaves and flowers around me - but I rose before the actual form of my body was imprinted. When I later hung the dried cyanotype on the wall, I left the large white area at the bottom to flow onto the floor, acting as an altar, on which I present hawthorn thorns and berries and the fragrant dye I created from motherwort and rose petals. Another time, when I exhibited this work for a conference I was presenting at in Alberta, I used the altar to lay out rosehips, rocks, tree leaves and branches I had collected that day on a guided walk with Indigenous land teachers.



Motherwort Banner: Darkness and Rebirth, cotton, linen, motherwort and rose ink, cyanotype on cotton, H 213.0 x W 152.0 cm, 2024. Details below





In-process image - laying Motherwort on the treated cyanotype fabric in the sun, 2023



In-process image - cyanotypes drying on the laundry line, 2023



Motherwort Banner: Altar, cyanotype on cotton, hawthorn berries and thorns, motherwort and rose ink, H 305.0 x W 138.0 cm, 2024

Following the creation of the cyanotypes, I collected the wilted leaves, flowers and smaller stems with the intention of using the whole plant to make plant dye and possibly a twine to weave with. After several unsuccessful experiments trying to make twine, I quickly put this idea aside. I found the fibres to be too short and difficult to twist strongly enough together. In preparation for the dying, I scoured and alum-mortared yards of white cotton in my kitchen and hung the (now yellowed) fabric to dry in the bathroom and the shaded part of my back porch. Piled leaves and flowers into a stock pot, added filtered water, warmed...colour seeping...added the fabric....only to realize the lighter motherwort colouring worked neither on the yellowed cotton nor the smaller pieces of white fabric I also tried.

Thankfully, motherwort grows in abundance around me, and as the seasons changed I took some time to reconsider my plans before moving forward. The following spring, inspired by the plant inks of Toronto's Jason Logan,²⁷ I decided to try my hand at ink-making. Simmering leaves and flowers in water, this time concentrating the plant:water solution and adding vinegar, sea-salt and gum arabic preservatives. The first batch of leaves gave me a light yellow colour, the second batch of flowers, leaves and stems (as in a tea blend) resulted in a red-orange tint. However, both still lacked the intensity I was hoping for.

These difficulties forced me to revisit just what kinds of medicine I was trying to make in this thesis, and why. When I slowed down and considered my approach to medicine-making within the context of embodiment and collective wellness, I heard the thrum of one organ and one need in particular - that is, the heart.

Along with so much else, we need good heart medicine for this time on Earth - for the

²⁷ *The Colour of Ink*. Video, Documentary. National Film Board of Canada, 2022. <https://www.nfb.ca/film/the-colour-of-ink/>.

hearts of every one of us, our communities and our planet. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) grief is held in the lungs, but it is most certainly felt in the heaviness and brokenness of the heart. TCM links the heart to joy and considers joy to be one of seven original emotions that can cause illness if imbalanced = too much joy can be as harmful as too little.²⁸

Joy can be strangely painful and truly awesome all at the same time. Joy is a beacon of light I am determined not to live without. Is joy proportional to other emotions or can it stand on its own? In light of all that is collectively unfolding in our world, I wonder how to actively choose joy as we move forward in uncertainty, and how to let joy flow through in balance. The more I learn about personal embodiment and collective health, the more I think this balance begins somewhere in the cradle of deep self-acceptance...shadows and light...grief, anger, happiness and joy. Full spectrum love.

Rose essence is said to open our hearts to love and to heal hearts from grief, sadness and depression. Rose “instills a deeper connection to ourselves, our spirit, and to the world around us.”²⁹ Several studies have shown roses to have a positive effect on the physical as well as the emotional heart.³⁰ The rose’s “scent, their physical beauty, and their medicine fluidly address our physical and emotional health, making it a wonderful medicine for the whole heart.” writes herbalist Rosalee de la Forêt.³¹ I personally wear rose as a preferred scent - it instantly embraces

²⁸ Sarah Vanbuskirk. “How Emotions and Organs Are Connected in Traditional Chinese Medicine.” Website. VeryWell Mind, October 25, 2024. <https://www.verywellmind.com/emotions-in-traditional-chinese-medicine-88196>.

²⁹ Liz Neves, *Northeast Medicinal Plants: Identify, Harvest, and Use 111 Wild Herbs for Health and Wellness*, (Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 2020), 416: 301

³⁰ Safieh Mohebitabar, Mahboobeh Shirazi, Sodabeh Bioos, Roja Rahimi, Farhad Malekshahi, and Fatemeh Nejatbakhsh. “Therapeutic Efficacy of Rose Oil: A Comprehensive Review of Clinical Evidence.” *Avicenna Journal of Phytomedicine* 7, no. 3 (May 2017): 206–13.

³¹ Rosalee de la Forêt, *Alchemy of Herbs: Transform Everyday Ingredients into Foods and Remedies That Heal*. (New York: Hay House LLC, 2017), 384: 320

and calms me.

The Hawthorn leaves, flowers, berries and thorns are known widely for their medicinal properties in strengthening the heart. Mount Sinai website states “both animal and human studies suggest hawthorn increases coronary artery blood flow, improves circulation, and lowers blood pressure.”³² From physical to energetic matters, hawthorn is an ally, helping us to “navigate liminal spaces, establish healthy boundaries, and process pain and loss, especially in matters of the heart.”³³ writes herbalist Liz Neves. Referencing the doctrine of signatures,³⁴ Neves points out that “thorns, or plant parts that can prick you and make you bleed, are a signature for applications in the blood and heart.”³⁵

Botanical medicine-making is a skill I have been slowly learning over the last several years, and it is increasingly something I love to do. Often, several plants are combined depending on what ailment is being treated and how this work can be supported in the body. When one plant is used alone in a medicinal treatment, this is called a Simple.³⁶

Into the dye pot went dried rose petals and rose hips, motherwort leaves, flowers and stem tops. Instantly the dye turned deeper pink, then blood-red, and the smell of roses filled my kitchen. My brother sent me thorns and berries from the Hawthorn tree that grows in the forest

³² Mount Sinai. “Hawthorn.” Website. Accessed December 2, 2024. <https://www.mountsinai.org/health-library/herb/hawthorn>.

³³ Liz Neves, *Northeast Medicinal Plants*; 301

³⁴ Wikipedia. “Doctrine of Signatures,” Accessed January 20, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctrine_of_signatures.

³⁵ Liz Neves, *Northeast Medicinal Plants*; 301

³⁶ Heather Wood Buzzard. “One Herb at a Time: Simpling Herbs vs. Herbal Formulas.” Website. Red Moon Herbs, April 27, 2020. <https://redmoonherbs.com/>.

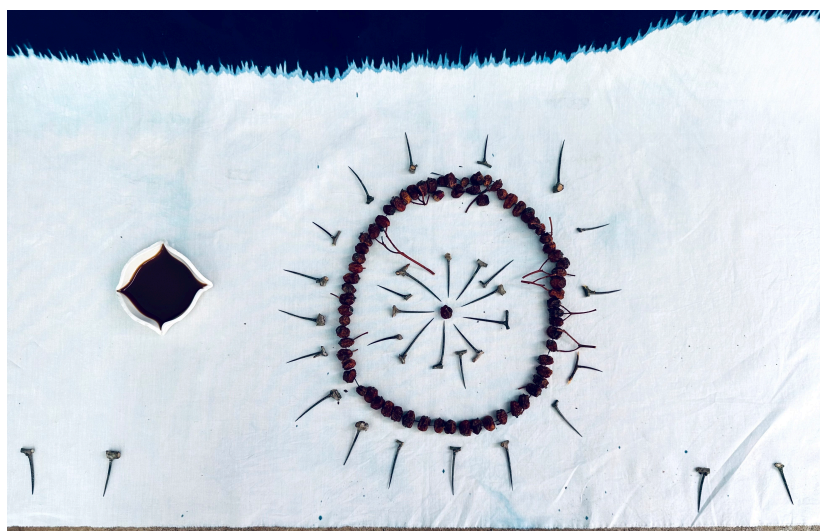
beside his cabin, up north in Ontario. Rose and hawthorn join motherwort in their affinity for the heart, and I chose these three medicines to use as a trio, creating a medicinal plant dye, and adorning one of the cyanotypes with the protective and nourishing qualities of both ink and dried hawthorn berries and thorns.



In-process image of Motherwort, glycerin, salt, vinegar - ingredients for plant dye, 2023



In-process image of Motherwort and Rose plant dye, Hawthorn berries and thorns, 2024



Motherwort Banner: Altar, detail of motherwort and rose ink, dried hawthorn berries and thorns

Community gardens, illness, medicine and healing with/in the toxic effluent of capital-colonialism is the subject of Stacey Ann Langwick's long and excellent essay titled *A Politics of Habitability: Plants, Healing and Sovereignty in a Toxic World*, written about the medicinal gardens project of the African NGO TRMEGA.³⁷ Created for and by peoples living with HIV and AIDS, these medicinal gardens are on lands that suffer the same extractive colonial oppression as the people do. Troubling the very real state of growing and healing within toxic systems, this project and Langwick's writing about it highlight the politics of living-with-toxicity and the power of renewal in community and compost:

For TRMEGA, gardens - organic, cultivated without chemical pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, full of therapeutic plants, spreading from one to another and growing up around homes and schools - are remedy and relation, resource and momentum. They constitute the very material of individual, institutional, and community extension. Gardens offer a response to the attenuation of life; their answer is a thickening, a density, a multiplicity that one might experience at times...as lushness.³⁸

Langwick's essay and the healing garden project it discusses were a turning point for me in this Master's research, in that I discovered myself and my focus on plant medicine and collective healing anew. The lens of community-as-healing, and the politics of plant/food as medicine and living-with toxicity is in line with Donna Haraway's staying with the trouble, speaking of a way forward that is generative, imaginative and rooted in a reality most of us cannot escape.

The TRMEGA gardens and Langwick's reflections bring to mind the work of prolific author and thinker Sophie Strand, who writes, "As we seek to imagine ways to become ecologically embodied and environmentally aware, let us not forget to ask the bodies that know best what it is

³⁷ Stacey Ann Langwick. "A Politics of Habitability: Plants, Healing, and Sovereignty in a Toxic World." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 3 (2018). <https://journal.culanth.org>.

³⁸ Stacey Ann Langwick, "A Politics of Habitability: Plants, Healing, and Sovereignty in a Toxic World."

to be an ecosystem.”³⁹ The essay this quote is taken from examines how living with degenerative disease can contain wisdom for how to live on a planet in crisis. Another excerpt: “The disabled and sick bodies that know best what it may feel like to be a polluted river, a clear-cut forest, a pesticide-addled population of honeybees....It is to the neurodivergent, the chronically ill, the disabled, the terminally ill, the survivors who we must turn for information on how to come into relationship with beings and landscapes that are intimate with harm and impairment.”⁴⁰

As is the teaching of most herbalists I have learned from, Langwick’s writings touch on the importance of choosing one plant to come into relationship with, and getting to know the nuances and essence of this plant as in a new friendship or lovership. There is medicine in this, too. She goes on to tie this idea and that of community gardens into a bigger constellation of ways-of-being together that are alternative to power-over dynamics:

More evocative is the invitation to take in a plant and attune to its transformative potential. This is not a nostalgia for tradition but a call for memory, for a remembering that relations between plants, people, and place have not always been as they are, that they were reorganized through colonialism and continue to be stabilized through large-scale (plantation) agriculture. *Liveliness might be found by inserting the body into alternative economies of people and plants.*⁴¹ (emphasis mine)

The politics of plants, weeds, compost and human-garden relations as they intersect with the legacy of colonial-capitalism is as true in urban centres as it is in rural farmers fields. Many years ago, as new members of our urban community garden, my co-gardener and I quickly

³⁹ Sophie Strand, “Making Kin with Disability.” From Make Me Good Soil, Substack, Website, January 12, 2024. <https://sophiestrand.substack.com/p/making-kin-with-disability>.

⁴⁰ Sophie Strand, “Making Kin with Disability.”

⁴¹ Stacey Ann Langwick, “A Politics of Habitability: Plants, Healing, and Sovereignty in a Toxic World.”

learned that city rules made it ‘illegal’ to plant more than 25% of the garden with herbals, while simultaneously asking gardeners to weed out all ‘nuisance’ plants - specifically identifying plants of good medicinal value such as purslane, motherwort, plantain, and skullcap. We soon reclaimed the maximum amount allowed for medicinal plants, emphasizing bio-regional and naturalized ones, and seeded more in the ‘wild’ gardens along the fences. In addition to motherwort, our garden grew skullcap, lemon balm, sweetgrass, yarrow, tulsi, plantain, and echinacea, among other food-designated plants, which are also medicinal, as any good food is. As a manner of seeding our knowledge into the community, we held information sessions and built relationships with fellow gardeners about the incredible abundance of medicine that grows in these gardens.

Community gardens as privilege; folk herbalism as a politic of relations and healing.

As an apprentice to the natural world and plants in particular, I am constantly humbled by their ancient, complex, and far-reaching natures. To be humble is to be respectful, to resist one’s own self-importance. The words human and humble are both rooted in the Latin word *humus*, meaning Earth.⁴² We are of the Earth. This is good news for many reasons, the most basic one being that we are home here on Earth - we belong here. To quote Joanna Macy, “To be alive in this beautiful, self-organizing universe - to participate in the dance of life with senses to perceive it, lungs that breathe it, organs that draw nourishment from it - is a wonder beyond words.”⁴³

But the soil my ancestors dug into and lived on is not the same soil we have today. By

⁴² “Humus (n.).” In *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/humus>.

⁴³ Joanna Macy & Her Work. “Joanna Macy.” Accessed November 28, 2024. <https://www.joannamacy.net/main#work>.

2050, The Soil Conservation Council of Canada states that 9 billion people will require healthy soil to live, and yet colonization's extreme resource extraction, pollution and mismanagement of our natural world have caused a serious global decline in soil health.⁴⁴ Soil health is directly related to the well-being of life on Earth. Research now unequivocally shows that the microbial health of our soil is linked to that of our digestive systems.⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ Furthermore, vast amounts of evidence now link poor digestive health to everything from depression, dementia, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, thyroid dysfunction, autism, and more, with marginalized communities affected in notably higher numbers.⁴⁷ ⁴⁸ ⁴⁹

In her work with the medicinal gardens for HIV and AIDS survivors that is TRMEGA, Langwick delves into the relationship between the 'toxic effluent' of capitalism, both as pollution in the lands and waters, as well as in our socio-economic systems through marginalization, racism and poverty. Langwick notes there is revolution when community comes together to cultivate the soil for food and plant medicine.⁵⁰ The toxicity therein does not disappear but is transmuted through working together toward healing outside of capitalist and colonial systems; in

⁴⁴ Soil Conservation Council of Canada. "Soil Conservation Council of Canada." Website, n.d. <https://soilcc.ca>.

⁴⁵ Heirbert Hirt, "Healthy Soils for Healthy Plants for Healthy Humans: How Beneficial Microbes in the Soil, Food and Gut Are Interconnected and How Agriculture Can Contribute to Human Health." *EMBO Reports*, July 31, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.15252/embr.202051069>.

⁴⁶ Winfried E.H. Blum, Sophie Zechmeister-Boltenstern, and Katharina M. Keiblinger. "Does Soil Contribute to the Human Gut Microbiome?" *Microorganisms* 2019 7, no. 9 (August 23, 2019): 287. <https://doi.org/10.3390/microorganisms7090287>.

⁴⁷ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*. (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2021), 496

⁴⁸ "Gut & Immunity." Aviva Romm MD, Website, Accessed December 2, 2024. <https://avivaromm.com/category/gut-immunity/>.

⁴⁹ Heirbert Hirt, "Healthy Soils for Healthy Plants for Healthy Humans"

⁵⁰ Stacey Ann Langwick, "A Politics of Habitability: Plants, Healing, and Sovereignty in a Toxic World."

turn, restitching and renewing relationships to self, each other and to the lands and waters that nourish our bodies.

In a CBC podcast interview with Sheila Roberts, Innu author, director and co-founder of the Quebec branch of Idle No More, Melissa Mollen Dupuis tells us there is no word for landscape in Innu-aiman because to refer to the landscape as a separate entity would mean it is outside of the people, a concept that does not exist in their understanding of who they are.⁵¹ Our health food stores are full of supplements and organic foods, capsules and powders - but ultimately these are bandaids that don't address the root causes I outline in this thesis. When I listen to Dupuis' teaching and reflect on the gardens of TRMEGA, I understand that to be in good health is to re-member ourselves back into the ecosystems we are a part of, perhaps in radically alternative ways, and that it is something we must actively work towards, together.

These Motherwort cyanotypes and the medicinal dye and adornments that I created with Rose and Hawthorn are small acts of my own re-membering. Among other things, I learned about the generosity plants can offer us when we enter into collaboration with them. My learnings were deeply sensory, happening through scent, colour, lessons around fugitivity, the brightness of UV sun rays, and the mutable character of water as it washes away soluble iron salts to reveal image and acts as carrier for blood-coloured botanical dye. My hands tenderly moved with the prickles and thorns of the plants I harvested, and carefully strung small bright red berries. Encircling all of this is a teaching about trust. In my case, it is trusting that an embodied (fully sensing, attuned) relationship with the plants that grow around me can teach me about mothering and alternative

⁵¹ Sheila Rogers, "How We Are the Medicine Aims to Help Indigenous Youth Navigate Life's Challenges, Remembering the Legacy of Darrel J. McLeod, and More." *CBC Listen On Demand: The Next Chapter*, Accessed September 28, 2024. <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-67-the-next-chapter>.

ways of being together, about growing outside the box, making sense through making art, and that medicine grows everywhere.

6.3 Embroideries on Cloth: Stitching Grief into Song and Seed

Let Go

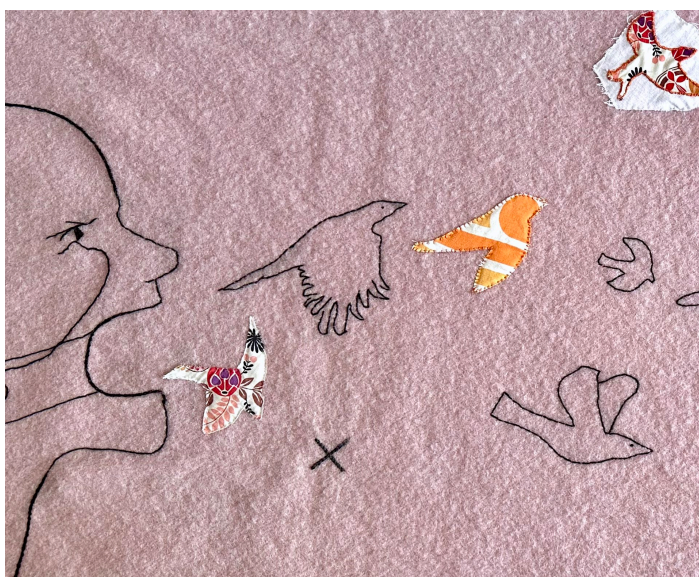
It doesn't matter
if you thought it might be
something other than it is.
Matters only
that we find the notes
for this very song,
the one that's being sung.

One morning when I was still recovering from burnout, I stood tentatively beside my bed doing stretches. A late-winter morning light filled the room. I couldn't walk very far yet, but it had been a couple of months now and the accumulated rest was starting to have good effect. As I raised my arms above my head and slowly bent over toward my toes a crystal clear voice sounded in my mind, and it said "You're not sick Emilie, you're sad".

Grief. Grief, and rage too. This is the unexpected journey that emerged for me when I finally turned toward my body and listened. This turning wasn't voluntary, though. It happened under duress, when my constant movement stopped and I was forced only to rest. All of a sudden there was silence, and I could hear. This section presents the two embroideries I created for this thesis around the theme of grief.



Singing the Ancestors, cotton, linen, silk embroidery and polyester applique on wool, H122.0 x W 167.64 cm, 2024. Details below



Embroidery 1: Singing the Ancestors

Image description: This large embroidered drawing is created from cotton, silk and linen threads on a reclaimed wool blanket. The blanket is faded pink, edges raw and undulations throughout from being worn and washed over years. There are patches of irregularities in colour and texture.

Most of the image is line-drawn with various embroidery stitches in black cotton threads. In the left half of the blanket the side profile of a large face emerges from several sweeping lines into the centre of the blanket; mouth wide in a yell or scream, cheeks stretched, eye open. Flying out of the mouth of the large face are birds of all sorts. Many are backstitch line drawings in black thread, with several others being patched on in appliqué of white and flowered fabrics. Below the figure in the bottom left corner are four smaller profiles of faceless heads also screaming in the same direction - three of them created from orange synthetic fabric, appliquéd with a simple stitch around the edges in orange silk thread; the fourth a black line-drawing in chain and back-stitch depicting a face with mouth and eye opened in horror, dripping a tear.

I lay the wool blanket out on the floor, its undulations impossible to flatten - a result of being felted from washing many times over the years. I like its imperfections, it shows it has had a life with other bodies before mine. Its surface is scratchy, nubby and warm on my bare feet. I stand in its centre and mark an X, raising the smoking bundle of dried rosemary and juniper above me as I open a prayer to welcome in my ancestors. I turn to the North, the East, South and West, speaking my thanks to each direction, following what I have been taught by my elders. More X's are marked in the corners, one for each direction. A map of prayer and ritual.

The story of this embroidery begins a long time ago. Further back than my own birth. The stories are more than just mine but they have concentrated in my body, my being, so that is where I start my telling.

When I was a child becoming a teenager, I began to stop myself from crying. Whenever the welling started up inside of me, I would mentally go into my chest and dam it up. Imagining that it was raining inside, I would feel and even visualize visceral sheets of tears running down the inside wall of my torso like a waterfall; my body holding this cascade, swallowing sadness. I did this regularly without ever considering why. A self-developed coping method that was undeniably and unconsciously done to ensure I was loved. An imitation of familial stoicism. I had/have internalized a belief that only certain feelings are acceptable and learned to negotiate others that seemed messy and unlovable.

Many years later as I recovered from burnout, a friend and student of yoga therapy offered to try some simple stretches with me. She suggested gentle movements and supported me while I was doing them. As I laid my body along a pillow, stretching my limbs out, unbidden memories of my son's difficult birth and his troubled first few weeks of life came back to me.

I had not been expecting this. During the birth I feared my own death in a rather disembodied way, feeling more concern for my unborn baby's life than my own. Afterwards, thrust into new motherhood, I had not looked back. It was only now, 4 years later, on enforced rest from a mysterious illness, that I had time to process the difficult emotions I lived through and disassociated from during my son's birth. This was a small but significant step forward in expressing and reconnecting with difficult experiences my body was holding.

As a trauma therapist, Dr. Gabor Maté works with the damaging consequences that can result from repressing emotions like fear, anger and sadness. Maté writes and speaks about how emotional and psychological factors can impact the immune system when not expressed or processed properly, potentially leading to disease, mental health crises and chronic illness. His work emphasizes the intrinsic connection between mind, body, and spirit, and places emotional wellness in a high position in the treatment of disease. Keeping in mind the enormous complexity in the trauma that people carry, Mate puts it simply when he writes: “Emotions that are suppressed do not disappear, they manifest in the body as illness.”⁵² and “The body has its own wisdom and knows what it needs to heal.”⁵³

It has taken me years, and many hours of work to develop language and reciprocity around how my body speaks and what is being said. My deep dive into this work eventually led me into the growing field of somatic experiencing therapy, pioneered by Dr. Peter Levine. In these sessions my body is always centred in the conversation, with my therapist asking questions like *Why are you holding your stomach when you talk about that - describe what's happening in that area*, or, *I notice you're getting emotional - where do you feel that in your body?* and, addressing my difficult feelings, *What happens in your body if you just let yourself feel the way you feel?* With a firm dedication to the intelligence of the body, this therapy encourages a radical acceptance of what is and follows threads that the body presents.

The feeling of what is can be difficult to get to. Sometimes it is like radio static for me, as I

⁵² Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress*. Toronto, Ontario: Vintage Canada, 2003, 320; 115

⁵³ Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress*; 43

have told my therapist. Author, speaker, and yoga teacher Matthew Sanford refers to this as the silence within our mind-body relationship.⁵⁴ Often encountered as a ‘wall’, he maintains this silence is textured with intelligence and spirit if we can only practice dropping into it and patiently listening or feeling around for what is there. Moving with and into the quiet is necessary, so that “you can start hearing that [it] isn’t just a brick wall,”⁵⁵ that in fact, there is connection, there is a sound and a story to be told. This leaning-in has taught him how to live well in a partially paralyzed body, the result of a traffic accident at thirteen years old that was fatal to his father and sister. Through the slow, somatic practice of breath and yoga movement, Sanford tuned into the nuanced language of his mind-body relationship.

Emotional suppression is often coupled with physical disassociation that works to hide difficult situations away from the light, in effect asking the body to carry the load. According to Sanford, silence lives in this gap, especially so in rupture that can accompany trauma. While disassociation is something we all do to some extent, in these cases it is more extreme and the body alone is often left to absorb and hold traumatic experience without resolution, living under this weight until reconnection is made. “I took advantage of my body...by leaving my body to absorb all the trauma that it did.” says Sanford, “One of the lessons I learned is, it was my body that kept me living. Your body, for as long as it possibly can, will be faithful to living. That’s what it does. Despite the fact that there’s decay that comes with it...it’s moving towards living for as long as it possibly can.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Krista Tippet. “Matthew Sanford The Body’s Grace.” *On Being with Krista Tippet*, Podcast, Produced by On Being Studios. Accessed August 2, 2024. <https://onbeing.org/programs/matthew-sanford-the-body-s-grace-2023/>.

⁵⁵ Krista Tippet, “Matthew Sanford The Body’s Grace.”

⁵⁶ Krista Tippet, “Matthew Sanford The Body’s Grace.”

One day recently, my somatic therapist asked me if I would like to yell. *Oh, no thanks*, I replied. It might be good to try, she encouraged gently, and it won't bother the neighbours....they know what I do and besides the walls are well-insulated. I paused and imagined doing the action. *Yeah, no*. I smiled to calm myself. Not going to happen, I said to myself silently.

Several weeks later I stood across the room from my therapist. She lives in a classic Montreal walk-up, and her office is in the big double room at the front, where there was at least 15 feet between us. There is scant furnishing - a nice sofa, an arm chair, a Persian rug, a couple of lamps and a small side table with tissues. A big soft box at the other end with some pillows and large stuffed batons for hitting without damage. White walls. A big window.

My heart was in my throat as I tried to steady my breathing. After many sessions and more nudges of encouragement I had agreed to try her suggestion, although I was totally dubious. Many times I opened my mouth and tried and failed to elicit *any sound*. I almost gave up. Then the word *courage* took hold of my mind. I had to, in a sense, stand up for myself. I readied myself and stepped into it. The sound that ripped out of me stunned me with its ferocity. A primal scream more than a yell, it just kept coming and coming and coming like a wind, emptying me until I was bent forward, spent and shaken.

In that exact moment I learned that my body was holding a kind of sacred rage that was bigger than me. I truly felt something grateful and ancestral rush through me in that scream, and forward even, into generations waiting to be born. This rage and grief is born from deep injustices of the past, carried by blood and relationship forward, at times triggered by injustice in the present. Yelled into the compost heap to nourish rather than poison a future.

The scream moved something in me, and equally, it has not been easy for me to repeat, at least not yet - but I have learned to never say never. I recalled afterward *The Path of Practice: A Woman's Book of Ayurvedic Healing*, a book by Ayurvedic teacher Maya Tiwari that emphasizes the deep relationship between ancestral memory, roots, and identity, and our capacity to nurture and heal ourselves when we turn toward these connections. Tiwari relates her personal story of healing from aggressive, stage four cancer - the turnaround coming through various Ayurvedic principles of food and meditation, and centrally, through turning toward her ancestors and their painful experiences under colonization and displacement, as well as their rich histories of living well through food, spiritual practice and union with the rhythms of the natural world. Of the ancestors, Tiwari writes, "...they want their stories to be heard...and when we do not pay attention, when we turn away because the hurt is deep, the stories painful, we become disconnected and illness comes in."⁵⁷

When I yelled - screamed - I was surprised to find that it was with the breath of others too - most notably, ancestors. I had not expected them here, in *this* room, even though I had been actively looking for them. Elsewhere in my life I had been getting to know my family tree, histories, and lineages, talking with my parents and grandmother about this, and doing related psychological and ritual work to reconnect with ancestry. My search was born of curiosity about what my genetic ancestors knew and lived, and a desire to know what systemic beliefs and hidden ways-of-knowing are alive inside of me. We carry our ancestors in our genes; their experiences spoken through our bodies in what modern science calls epigenetic inheritance, a somewhat

⁵⁷ Bri Maya Tiwari, *The Path of Practice A Woman's Book of Ayurvedic Healing*. (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 2001), 432:

controversial yet critical discussion in Western biomedicine.⁵⁸

Some of what I am learning is through cultural lineages not of my own - to which I am grateful. Most notably is the practice of yoga movement, breath, and meditations from Ayurvedic traditions, and healing practices from Indigenous elders and traditions of North America/Turtle Island. However I am also finding elders and scholars who work within my own broken lineage - in this case, Irish elders like Druid and psychologist Eimear Burke⁵⁹ and well-known climate change advocate, author, botanist, medical biochemist Deborah Beresford-Kroeger⁶⁰ on Druidic philosophies of Ireland especially as it relates to the care of nature, and author Sharon Blackie,⁶¹ a psychologist and mythologist specializing in the folklore of ancient Britain and Ireland as it relates to women and the current environmental crisis.

Indigenous belief systems, including those of the Irish and British Isles, value ancestry as a vital part of their web of connectivity, essential to wellness and healing. “There wasn’t a native culture since time immemorial that didn’t subscribe to the laws of nature, as far as ancestors go”, says Maya Tiwari.⁶² In many cases, ancestors extend beyond DNA to include other community members, “animals, trees, and even the mountains...this entire panoply of connections.”⁶³ Maintaining connection with the ancestors and their wisdom provides not only a link to the past,

⁵⁸ Meenu Ghai and Farzeen Kader. “A Review on Epigenetic Inheritance of Experiences in Humans.” *Biochemical Genetics* 60 (November 18, 2021): 1107–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10528-021-10155-7>.

⁵⁹ Eimear Burke, “Eimear Burke: Druid and Seanchaí.” Kilkenny Druidry, Website, Accessed October 18, 2024. <https://www.kilkennydruidry.com/about-eimear.html>.

⁶⁰ “About Diana.” Diana Beresford Kroeger: Global Forest Revival, Website. Accessed October 7, 2024. <https://dianaberesford-kroeger.com/about-diana/>.

⁶¹ “Sharon Blackie.” Sharon Blackie, Website, Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://sharonblackie.net>.

⁶² *Ancestral Healing ~ A Live Webinar W/Maya Tiwari*. YouTube, Accessed August 13, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCzwqD3k3QQ>.

⁶³ *Ancestral Healing ~ A Live Webinar W/Maya Tiwari*

but also support for the present, and guidance for the future. Ancestral wisdom and the spirit of ancestors are valued as medicine, with disconnection bringing illness.

In the chronic diaspora of modern life, honouring the ancestors of the territories we have settled on is also important. “Every country and kingdom having their topical spirits or powers assisting and governing them, the Scottish seer being banished to America, being a stranger there as well to the invisible and visible inhabitants...he could not have...the several visions and predictions which were wont granted to him by those acquaintances and favourites in his own country.” wrote Scottish clergyman Robert Kirk in his 1691 hand-written book titled *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*.⁶⁴ In reflecting on Krik’s words from hundreds of years ago, I understand that land was seen as a source of insight and extra-sensory abilities. And, I also think about the importance of forming connections to blood ancestors and local *genus loci*, wherever we live - which means forming relationships to the spirits of place, both nature and the local dead.⁶⁵ In this way we widen our concept of self, community, and collective wellness.

In these times, the ancestors are asking us to bear witness to darkness. To understand that we are born out of darkness, and that it lives within and all around us, all the time. We are being pleaded with to turn toward this darkness in ourselves, to honour and hold it in equanimity with the light we have been so conditioned to look for. We must shine it forward, this balance between darkness and light, in all that we do. Osho Zenju writes, “Our work is not only healing the woundedness but walking with monsters until the monsters lose their teeth and therefore their

⁶⁴ Jenna Ehlinger, trans. “The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies, Pg 49-58.” Website Blog. Enchanted: Magic and Marvels in Pre-Modern Europe. Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://blogs.uoregon.edu/enchanted/the-secret-commonwealth-of-elves-fauns-and-fairies/pages-49-58/>.

⁶⁵ Sarah Lawless (@banefolk). “I’m All about Ancestor Work This Winter.” Instagram. Instagram Post. Accessed December 3, 2024. https://www.instagram.com/banefolk/p/C191QVjL4hC/?img_index=1. I am reflecting on and paraphrasing some of Sarah Lawless’ post about ancestors and Robert Kirk’s text.

grip on us.”⁶⁶

The work of embroidering this scream was a reflection not just of my experience in the room with my therapist that day. When I prepared the blanket in my studio, calling in the directions and my ancestors, later picking up needle and thread to begin stitching, I was also channeling my horror at the wild fires, floods, genocides and ecocides - the great human-made catastrophes unfolding around us. To slowly stitch out my horror felt cathartic, and I also felt supported as I added in my ancestors too. I saw that the scream could also be a song, and that the teachings of my ancestors could take flight on my voice.



Singing the Ancestors, 2024, Detail

⁶⁶ Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *Opening To Darkness*. Boulder, (Colorado: Sounds True, 2023), 223: 45

Embroidery 2: Grief Seeds

Image description: A fine-lined drawing created in variously hand-stitched black cotton threads on a background composed of several white textiles, machine-sewn into a single canvas. These pieced-together textiles are linen and cottons. They are all variously worn from previous use, with several losses, resulting in smaller holes in areas. Some areas of wear are embroidered in varying stitches with green or turquoise coloured threads. A somewhat abstracted, disembodied face looks at us. The mouth and eyes are turned downwards in heavy despair. Arms raise up, circling the head with the hands stretched toward each other on the right side. Falling from these hands are small seeds, embroidered in green, pink, yellow and light- brown coloured threads. These are generative seeds that take root and sprout when emotions and psychological upset is expressed and released.

This second embroidery in the Grief duo began as a drawing, in pencil on paper, during a time when my son was deeply troubled and refusing to attend elementary school. One day I suggested that he and I draw our feelings. As a part of my research-creation practice I had been taking art-therapy classes and experimenting with how it felt to let things be ‘ugly’ in effort to more closely express raw emotions. I drew the face quickly, without thinking, and was satisfied with the desperation and sadness that stared out at me from the page.



Grief's Seeds, cotton, linen, silk on cotton and linen, H 122.0 x W 131.0 cm, 2024

At this time I felt caught between the needs and desires of institutions versus those of our small family and my son. I was being given lots of recommendations and advice from doctors, therapists, his teachers, special care workers, the principal, and social workers; not to mention friends, fellow parents, and my family. Anxious and overwhelmed, my son, his father, and I were stuck in a vicious circle of mind and body response to each other and to inner and outer expectations around what ‘normal’ behaviour was supposed to look like. Feelings like shame and guilt surfaced, alongside sadness and anger. Within the lockdown atmosphere of the global pandemic, I felt isolated not only because of social distancing measures, but also because the particular situation unfolding in our home removed us from community, family, and friends in several other deeply nuanced ways.

It happened naturally that my Master’s research around body intelligence and language intersected with the crisis we were having. When I took a step back and allowed myself to listen and respect the language my son’s body was speaking - overwhelm, incapacity - and his response to it - anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, self-loathing - I was able to advocate for him in a way that, while incorporating the advice we were given, recognized the fundamental need for a whole-family nervous-system reset. It took great fortitude on my part to find ways to help my son, and our family, outside of, and in addition to, what was being offered by mainstream educational and medical establishments.

In this way, we made choices that worked as much as possible in reciprocity with principles of body-mind connection. This was sometimes framed as “giving in” to my son. He was often told by doctors and teachers that he should ‘be strong’ and ‘try harder’. I explained to the various

experts that my son *was* trying hard and showing enormous resiliency, every single day that he attended school while hating being there with his whole body.

In the spirit of ‘getting lost’ as a way of finding new ground beyond our binary culture of ‘normal’ vs ‘not normal’, I have come to embrace Bayo Akomolfe’s notion of an ‘autistic politics’, developed from his experiences with parenting a son with autism:

An autistic politics reframes disability as the dis/human signals of dis-assembly and incapacitation streaming through culture. Instead of being something to fix, to get rid of, the dis/human becomes a zig-zagging cartography disrupting the colonial linearity of progress, calling into question the assumptions we make about the human body and human subjectivity. It enshrines the promise that in losing our way, straying away from the marked tarmacs of the conventional, we might find ourselves in different, surprising places.⁶⁷

Such a politics offers byways and cracks in what seem to be solid truths about how things are. Many modern illnesses and ways-of-being such as neurodiversity do not fit comfortably into a box and cannot quite be ‘fixed’ to achieve this. The same goes for what is often termed the polycrisis (cite) that we face globally. I am reminded of systems thinker Nora Bateson’s suggestion that in becoming fluid territories engaged in mutual learning, we can “re-contextualize that which has come before us and reset the horizon.”⁶⁸

A year or two after this art-making session with my son, I search for a piece of fabric to transfer this drawing into embroidery. Sadness still chokes my throat; memory and feeling held deeply in my chest, lungs, stomach, heart. A sense of urgency, of wanting to get it down, and in

⁶⁷ Báýò Akómoláfé. “Astray, Awkwardly: An Autistic Politics.” Website Blog. Báýò Akómoláfé, August 16, 2022. <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/astay-awkwardly-an-autistic-politics>.

⁶⁸ Nora Bateson. “People Need People.” Website Blog. Medium, March 29, 2022. <https://norabateson.medium.com/finding-a-way-warmly-6b8169142795>. At the end of the essay, Bateson writes: “The map is not fluid, the territory is. Nourishing flexibility that we do not yet know we will need is at the core of this work.”

this way send out a healing prayer. This time, I am also thinking about rising temperatures and wildfires burning out of control, the collapsing natural world, and my son's uncertain future. I unfold a textile pieced together from scrap linens and cotton, white, stained and worn, the surface textures moving between soft and rough. Reminiscent of dishcloths and bedsheets, faded curtains, nightshirt, flour sack - this feels like the right context for my drawing. I smooth it out in front of me on the big wooden table and lightly drop the black thread onto its surface, tracing out the drawing - tracing out my grief - tacking it down for good measure.

I embroidered my drawing of the grief-stricken face onto a cloth I made of worn fragments, slowly adding arms that stretched up, over and toward each other. Open hands let loose a variety of coloured seeds, dropping down to root and grow again. I had been listening to Mohawk seed keeper Rowen White speak about grief, memory, and rematriation as they connect to seeds. "The wisdom of the seed is that they're so small. So you can just start small. You can just start with one seed or two seeds and they'll continue to help grow us into good humans that can nourish and sustain and...be that...example of the innate abundance or generosity of the Earth."⁶⁹

As I stitch, I exhale. Time passes more slowly and my emotions and racing mind find a place to rest as my hands pull thread. Artist Richard McVetis' words resonate with me here, when he describes hand embroidery as a process that is "slow, methodical, restores a sense of order and informs a more profound comprehension and connection to the world..."⁷⁰ Each seed added turns my thoughts toward hope, each stitch an active choice to move forward in some way, even if it's unclear what the future holds.

⁶⁹ Prentis Hemphill. "S2 Episode 6 with Rowen White." Finding Our Way Podcast. Accessed February 15, 2023. www.findingourwaypodcast.com.

⁷⁰ Textile Curator. "Richard McVetis." Website. Accessed December 2, 2023. <https://www.textilecurator.com/>.

Thinking about my research-creation as ‘grief work’ has been helped by the work of Joanna Macy. She is an early proponent of the power of reconnecting with grief as a way to shift our relationships with other living beings, and the Earth herself. During the Vietnam war, Macy recognized that people could be brought into a different kind of activism through realizing the landscape of their feelings in connection to the issue. What Macy found was that underneath feelings like anger, depression, and despair lies a deeper emotion - that of grief. For Macy, grief work has a transformative power to shift “despair and apathy into constructive, collaborative action”.⁷¹

This is a kind of somatic work that entails unearthing emotions related to overwhelming events from personal to collective; events that may seem entirely beyond our influence. And it takes me full circle to the questions I ask in my thesis, summarized well in this sub-question:

How are embodiment, body intelligence and healing entwined?

Through my illness (burnout) I was forced into an intensely slowed down time, and introduced to gentle somatic work. This was one of the first times in my adult life that I heard my body speak to me. This experience greatly informed the research-creation process of this Masters, where I continued to explore themes of grief through reading, writing, somatic therapy, and eventually through creating two embroidered drawings of these experiences. I learned that my body’s intelligence speaks to me through signs like emotional, mental and even physical unwellness. Sometimes, even through clear words, if I am slowing down enough to listen. And when I do listen, and respond in a way that is caring, I can gain clearer understanding of my

⁷¹ Joanna Macy & Her Work. “Joanna Macy.” Accessed November 28, 2024. <https://www.joannamacy.net/main#work>.

outside life and the relationships within it. When I expressed the difficult feelings, whether through a scream or writing and drawing them out, these emotions and their narratives were physically and emotionally expressed from my body, leading me to feel less burdened, more energetic, in essence, better.

6.4 Research-Creation Journal

One day, in the middle of my final thesis year, I had a breakthrough in conversation with my peers. I had expressed a feeling of being stuck with the making. I told them I had been approaching my studio with dread, feeling a heavy stickiness all too familiar to me. Having them share their thoughts about research-creation helped me recognize that something big was getting lost in the work I was attempting to accomplish.

The very personal aspect of this Masters project deals with my healing journey through embodiment practices like somatic therapy, ceremony and ritual, plant medicine, embroidery, and bilateral drawing. What I hadn't realized, though, was that I was approaching my creative practices with the same tight mindset that I was trying to undo in the rest of my life. I was striving rather than playing, demanding perfection and clear answers from the artworks, rather than allowing them to be part of the practice of practice. My stuckness was, in fact, relational.

In her well-loved book titled *Healing Wise*, controversial green witch and early pioneer of Western Herbalism Susan Weed outlines three traditions of healing: The Scientific (fixing the machine), Heroic (elimination and purification) and Wise Woman (digestion, integration)

tradition. She explains that these approaches encompass values and beliefs that manifest in intention and are found across human systems, from health to education to politics. What's more, an herbalist can practice with a heroic mindset ("saviour, circular path of rules, punishment, and purification = Trust me"), and an MD may practice with the wise woman mindset, following a spiral path, encouraging nourishment, self-love and trusting one's intuition.⁷²

When I recognized how much my unconscious mindset was affecting my art practice, I saw that I was living in two worlds. I may write circles around the subject of body intelligence, embodiment and trusting inner cues, but, in practice - what this Master's thesis is all about - I got stuck intellectualizing, analyzing, and trying to fix something (the Science and Heroic way) rather than playing, trusting my body and intuition, and moving with the flow.

For me, making art has always been a necessary way of making sense of my feelings and observations about the world. At the same time, sitting on my shoulder is a little person with a big voice who is very concerned about getting it right and making it palatable for others, whatever *it* is. Growing up I often got frustrated that my drawings weren't good enough (for my expectations rather than others!). I was afraid to ask questions, feeling I should somehow know already. Later on, in art school, I found myself shrinking my intellect and sensitive passion for making to accommodate studio critiques that demanded answers before I had words for them. On one level, I was open to critique and loved to have these conversations. On another, exploring making in a public manner, when it was something I had always done privately, and finding the words to explain my intentions felt like feeding a beast with two heads.

⁷² Susun S. Weed, *Healing Wise*. Wise Women Herbal. (Woodstock, New York: Ash Tree Publishing, 1989); 295: 5-71

Maturity and a level of flexibility and openness are required for this, and it is something I grew into even though I still struggled with my art practice as a whole. I wanted to share this reflection in this thesis, because it had dogged me throughout the art process, where my academic writing often took precedent over the making. I like to be clear and concise and I tool my writing deeply. However, in the studio I often feel less sure and more apt to doubt myself. I returned to school to do this Masters in particular, because I wanted to get back to making art about the things I was thinking about. My breakthrough came when I realized that art for me is at its core, an embodied practice. The artworks I created during this thesis are a beginning; there is much more I want to do.

Chapter Seven: Observations on Healing and the Body

This is the last chapter before my conclusion and one that needs writing before I bring this thesis to a close. To do this, let's go back to the primary question in my thesis: *How does the intelligence of our bodies intersect with planetary wellness?* As I engaged in my research-creation process, a somewhat urgent query surfaced alongside this primary question, having to do with redefining how we in the 'West' generally understand our bodies (and, therefore our selves), and, relatedly, the concept of healing itself. From microbiotic to territorial and even cosmological networks, from fields of being to fields of energy, I have explored the perspective that our bodies act as relational conduits for our experiences, composed of physical and energetic matter that keep us grounded on this planet and in connection with other living beings, both human and beyond human, through our senses. These explorations have led me to believe that we are emergent beings, impermanent and always changing in relation to our environment. Although much of this has been touched on in my discussions about making my artworks, this chapter summarizes what I have learned about the human body, with the aim of redefining and extending our borders into wider networks of shared intelligence.

7.1 Redefining our Bodies

Just Enough

Soil for legs
 Axe for hands
 Flower for eyes
 Bird for ears
 Mushrooms for nose
 Smile for mouth
 Songs for lungs
 Sweat for skin
 Wind for mind
 - Nanao Sakaki

I love the way this poem by Nanao Sakaki breathes space into our conception of what a body is. More than anything, the body represented here is in total reciprocity with the aliveness it shares life with. There is a wild ethic of gratitude that says: I am in all of these expressions of life and they are in me.

While not formally Buddhist, many of the teachings inform my life and work, especially around concepts of dynamic, intra-active aliveness. His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama gives a simple explanation of the body as “...momentary phenomena [composed of] elements that are actually dynamic processes that arise and cease in each moment.”¹ Métis painter and activist Christie Belcourt explains the dots she uses to create her paintings similarly: “The dots themselves, although designed to represent “beads,” suggest by their circular shape the cycle of life. But more than that, the dots are a way for me to try to represent the sheer expanse and mystery of life from molecules to universes. Nothing is touching, and yet the piece is somehow

¹ The Dalai Lama and Ven. Thubten Chodron. “An Unbroken Sequence: The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron on Subtle Impermanence.” *Tricycle*, January 16, 2022.

whole.”² Referencing French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh, author and scholar of gender and body ethics, Margrit Shildrick’s 2018 conception of embodiment also has relevance here: “the re-membering of the body...as...something leaky, fluid, always dependent on other bodies, and through this always in a process of becoming and unbecoming”.³

In my bilateral artwork, titled *Energy Bodies*, the intuitive lines I made traced out my body as a system and conduit of energy. My edges are redrawn here in wide circular gestures that flow from a central core. To accompany this drawing, I presented cosmologies from several traditional cultures whose perspectives understand the human being as a part of a larger energetic web of life.

My three Motherwort banners are intimate examples of how collaboration between the wisdom of human and plant bodies can create medicine, showing how our bodies have co-evolved with plant bodies for millennia. I found that our roots as humans are tied together with that of the plant world. Through this work, I explored alternative, healing economies based in the nourishment of plants and community gardens, even in urban centres. These are systems-of-care that honour human:plant:community entanglements as necessary for mutual wellness.

In the two Grief embroideries, I stitched out stories and unseen loads that my body was/is carrying. In creating these works and the accompanying research, I learned that our bodies are an intersection where ancestry and future generations meet with the present. We hold stories and

² Christie Belcourt and Starhawk. “Building a New World in the Shell of the Old to Face the Climate Crisis: Between Transition, Resilience and Resistance.” Webinar, The Center for Research on Innovations and Social Transformations (CRITS), November 12, 2020. <http://innovationsocialeusp.ca/en/event/building-a-new-world-in-the-shell-of-the-old-to-face-the-climate-crisis-between-transition-resilience-and-resistance>.

³ Margrit Shildrick. “Re/Membering the Body.” In *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, 165–74. (Springer International Publishing, 2018). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62140-1_14.

teachings in our being - patterns whose ripples resonate into time in a multi-dimensional way. I also learned that the power of letting difficult things move through us exists here, in the present, through attunement and reciprocity with the language our bodies speak.

As mammals, human bodies are first and foremost animal bodies. In fact, 192 of 229 Nobel Prizes awarded for Physiology or Medicine are directly dependent on animal research;⁴ mice share approximately 99% of human DNA, and all animals across the board have the same organs and organ systems.⁵ As much as it may upset some humans to know, it is clear there are more similarities than differences between human and non-human animal bodies. When we get sick or become elderly, when we give birth, are newborn, have sex, menstruate, play, and feel big emotions, we are reminded of our animal selves. When our basic needs betray our dependence on others, and our gestures are determined by satisfying those needs, the inescapable truth of our animality is brought home.

We should be honoured to be included in this grouping! Non-human animals perform feats that continue to confound modern humans no matter our ‘technological’ advances. The mass migration of starlings, monarchs, whales and salmon are all examples of animal behaviour that researchers remain unable to explain. Cultural and geo-philosopher David Abrams asks us to consider for a moment the idea that animals - humans included - share an intrinsic and “felt rapport” between our bodies “and the breathing Earth...this huge curved expanse, roiling with air

⁴ “Nobel-Winning Animal Research Leads to Huge Breakthroughs in Science and Medicine.” Foundation for Biomedical Research, Website, Accessed December 3, 2024. <https://fbresearch.org/medical-advances/nobel-prizes>.

⁵ “The Animal Model Biological Similarity of Humans and Other Animals.” Speaking of Research, Website, Accessed December 3, 2024. <https://speakingofresearch.com/facts/the-animal-model/>.

currents and rippling with electromagnetic pulses.”⁶ Such a re-imagining is necessary and urgent if we are to have a healthy future with our planet.

Our interior life is vastly interconnected and more than human too. As the work of Lynn Margulis points out, human organisms are holobionts, created from abundant communities of intelligent species working in symbiotic relationships toward homeostasis.⁷ Trillions of bacteria, viruses, fungi and enzymes inhabit various parts of our bodies. These microorganisms form our microbiome, which can be specific to body parts such as our gut, skin, or eyelashes, and which is also considered as a whole, as in the microbiome of our entire body. All animals and plants have microbiomes, “We are all of us walking communities of bacteria. The world shimmers, a pointillist landscape made of tiny living beings.”⁸ wrote Margulis. It is something to imagine this, and then to know that these intelligent beings are constantly sending out and receiving messages both inside and beyond our skin walls, all in effort to keep us alive.

My first introduction to the mapping of human body systems was through a large Grey’s Anatomy book that sat alongside family photo albums, novels, and my father’s medical physics textbooks in the family room. As children, my siblings and I would gingerly leaf through the tissue-thin pages that detailed and overlapped different bodily systems to present the human body as a whole. The particular smell and feel of the pages still live in me as a sense memory. I

⁶ David Abrams. “Wild Ethics and Participatory Science.” In *Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations*, Vol 01: Planet. (Libertyville, Illinois: Centre for Humans and Nature Press, 2021), 159: 59

⁷ “Holobiont.” In *Wikipedia*. Accessed October 15, 2023. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holobiont>.

⁸ Jamie S. Foster and Margaret J. McFall-Ngai, “Introduction to the Special Issue in Honor of the Contributions of Lynn Margulis (1938–2011) Lynn Margulis: A 20th -Century Scientist and a Visionary of Biology.” *Symbiosis* 87 (August 13, 2022): 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13199-022-00867-8>.

marvelled at the nerve and blood circulatory systems, amazed at the way their fractal branches echoed trees and root systems of plants.

In the centuries that have passed since its inception, Western biomedicine has come to categorize 11 main systems in the human body: integumentary system, skeletal system, muscular system, lymphatic system, respiratory system, digestive system, nervous system, endocrine system, cardiovascular system, urinary system, and reproductive system.⁹ These categories are based on groups of organs, that together, perform specific functions defined in their naming. That this was what lived under the surface of my skin was absolutely stunning to imagine. The body mapped in these pages was complex and finite, edges defined and known.

When I first saw the layered silk embroideries of Canadian artist Ana Torma, I was instantly reminded of my early experience with Grey's Anatomy. Except here were full and partial figures interspersed with fragments of abstract drawings and “real and imagined vegetation, suggesting connectedness in an earthly microcosm”.¹⁰ Although quite the opposite, they reminded me of the graphics and layout on the near-transparent pages of the anatomy textbook. In approaching my thesis embroideries and theme, I kept these works in mind as inspiration.

⁹ Rod Brouhard, EMT-P. “The 11 Organ Systems of the Body and How They Work.” VeryWell Health, November 12, 2024. <https://www.verywellhealth.com/organ-system-1298691>.

¹⁰ Anna Torma, “A Garden Diary.” *Canadian Art*. Accessed November 12, 2024, <https://canadianart.ca/essays/anna-torma-a-garden-diary/>.



AnaTorma, Pedagogical Charts 1, hand-embroidered collage on linen fabric, silk thread, 143 x 116 cm, 2016. Collection of Michel L'Heureux. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.¹¹

¹¹ Earl Miller. "Ana Torma: Crossovers." Border Crossings, May 2021. <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/anna-torma>.

“With the rise of empirical philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” write David Howes and Constance Classen in their book *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses In Society*, “the focus of medicine changed from the human being as a microcosm of the universe, to the human being as an organic ‘machine’.”¹² This scientific and medical view of the human body as machine heightened the role of vision, above the other senses, in how the body (ill or well) was perceived. In turn, anatomical illustration was seen as second only to reality, a “literal visual truth” that “helped purify anatomy of its ‘messy’ tactile and olfactory associations”¹³, a perspective that became dominant in the Western biomedical approach.

Following this thinking, what is not (and cannot be) represented in textbooks like Grey’s Anatomy are the memories, experiences, feelings, intuitions, inherited traumas, and more - all that is held, carried, felt, and imagined through the senses, and therefore related to the body, but somehow different and challenging to give form to. And yet they are important to acknowledge when considering health. These accumulated exposures and experiences take up residence in the energies, waters and flesh of our bodies, minds and spirits. As David Abrams wrote, “the body is itself a kind of place - not a solid object but a terrain through which things pass, and in which they sometimes settle and sediment.”¹⁴

While we give weight to this concept through words like *carry* and *load*, the particular way these things take shape in our bodies is less easy to imagine, until acutely visible in disease. For me, Ana Torma’s Superlayer embroideries made visible these difficult, ephemeral forms as they

¹² David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society*. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 200; 55

¹³ David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society*.

¹⁴ David Abrams, “Wild Ethics and Participatory Science.”; 13

might co-exist within and around us. Her embroideries seemed a perfect antidote to the beautiful and antiseptic mapping in Grey's Anatomy, giving tactile presence to the layers of story and experience that we feel, but most often cannot see.

Redefining bodies must therefore include a redefinition of what is real. As with my burnout, bodies that are carrying loads difficult to 'see' often fall outside the proper data that Western science requires for diagnosis and treatment. "Illness has to have data to be real. Symptoms have to be symptoms of—." ¹⁵ writes Amba Sepie in her excellent essay on decolonizing medicine. The burnout I went through fell into this grey zone. I had serious symptoms, but according to the tests my Doctor gave me, nothing was wrong.

Psychosomatic illness is a misnomer in Westernized biomedicine; a paradox that presupposes a mind-body relation in a system that views these two as separate entities and treats them as such. ¹⁶ There are no mind *and* body *and* spirit doctors in this model of medicine. One must go to a psychologist, or one must go to a physician, and usually one must exit medicine altogether for matters of spirit. Somatic evidence is entered in one place, and 'mental' health concerns another.

¹⁵ Amba J. Sepie. "Impossible Illnesses: Decolonizing Psychosomatic Medicine." In *Reading the Psychosomatic in Medical and Popular Culture*, First. New York: Routledge, 2017; 3
DOI:10.1201/9781315515694.

¹⁶ Amba J. Sepie, "Impossible Illnesses: Decolonizing Psychosomatic Medicine."; 4
"The deception, then, is that the name itself, psychosomatic, is an invented classificatory device that no more belongs to the biomedical paradigm than the set of complaints to which it refers. By designation of the overarching cosmological predicates, it is ontologically impossible for any 'real' condition to be psychosomatic. An illness has to be transformed into either a mental, or a physical issue, to be classed as psychosomatic – it cannot be both as the cosmology does not allow for this. Psychosomatic illnesses cannot be entertained from the perspective of the worldview which has spawned the biomedical paradigm – there can be no such category according to this worldview."

Immunologist turned psychologist Brian Bloom writes “I no longer believe there is substantial justification for dividing illness and disease into one group that is ‘psychosomatic’ and another group in which we can legitimately ignore ‘mind’ factors.”¹⁷ Amba Sepie puts it succinctly: “The reduction of what are termed psychosomatic complaints to the two poles of body and mind are, at root, an outcome of a particular cosmology which is, plainly put, a set of ideas, agreed upon and reproduced across systems of thought and practice, although not the only ones from which we might choose.”¹⁸

Everyone suffers to some extent in this system, but women are most familiar with the dismissal of what is considered to be real, and not real data. Women in the Westernized world are experiencing burnout at epidemic rates, with Black, Brown and marginalized women at higher risk of weathering - deterioration and disease - and dismissal of symptoms within the medical system.¹⁹ As mentioned previously in this paper, Dr. Arline T. Geronimus developed the weathering hypothesis to describe the very real effects of “systemic oppression—including racism and classism—on the body.”²⁰ According to women’s health advocate Dr Aviva Romm, women are routinely shamed, blamed and responsabilized for their symptoms by a medical approach that is sorely lacking.²¹

¹⁷ Brian Bloom, *Meaning-Full Disease*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 215; 5

¹⁸ Amba J. Sepie. “Impossible Illnesses: Decolonizing Psychosomatic Medicine.” In *Reading the Psychosomatic in Medical and Popular Culture*, First ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017); 14, DOI:10.1201/9781315515694.

¹⁹ Aviva Romm, *Hormone Intelligence*. (San Francisco, California: HarperOne, 2021), 400
Chapter one of this book is dedicated to this topic.

²⁰ Arline T. Geronimus. *Weathering: The Extraordinary Stress of Ordinary Life in an Unjust Society*. Chico, California: AK Press, 2023. <https://www.akpress.org/weathering.html>. Quote taken from back cover.

²¹ Aviva Romm, *Hormone Intelligence*; 15

We can consider then, that our bodies are formed in relation to, and in collaboration with, species, territories and frequencies beyond our own borders, and, importantly, that these relationships are facilitated by a kind of resonance having to do with the simple technical definition of being a sound or vibration produced in one object that is caused by the sound or vibration in another.²² Throughout my research-creation studies and practices, I have found that this call-and-response is an inherent and core quality of life on Earth and that our bodies are built both from it and for it. Especially my bilateral drawing, but in reflection, I see that all of the work contains this thread, from the slow stitching of grief to the resonance of dreams and screams with ancestors, to intimate collaboration with plants to make medicine.

Turning toward our wider selves, we might then recognize the rising temperatures and unpredictable patterns as examples of our planet in inflammation. The polarization and unravelling of social contracts in our societies, the extreme racism and violence - all manifestations of illness and dis-ease in our collective bodies. “Health is an emergent phenomenon. There is a property that emerges when systems are in good harmony together.”²³ says Rupa Marya in a panel examining the practice of medicine during genocide.

In dominant Western culture, our bodies are machine-like, to be used, worked, pulled from and put to sleep, all toward being productive members of capitalist society. Some bodies are thought to be more important than others, one only needs to see the unhoused folks in their own neighbourhoods to see the truth of this. Animals, plants, land, water, our attention, relationships,

²² “Resonance.” In *Britannica*. Accessed December 3, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/resonance>.

²³ “Sacred Solidarity with Palestine: Sounds of SAND Second Year.” Sounds of SAND. Accessed December 2, 2024. <https://scienceandnonduality.com/audio/100-sacred-solidarity-with-palestine-sounds-of-sand-second-year/>.

thoughts, experiences, body data - in the capitalist model everything on Earth is commodified as something to make money from.

We must recognize this in ourselves. Observe where we connect with our bodies through a mindset of productivity and exploitation. Recognize moments when our natural qualities - willpower, creativity, empathy, energy - become resources for us to extract or monetize.

Likewise, we must notice where supremacy sits in our tissues, and where we turn it toward others. And we must look for these patterns in our relationships with each other, and the planet.

The deep work of this time begins with a re-imagining of who we are as humans on this planet, in this universe. We might feel more empowered to do this when we remember that how we move through the world, makes the world, and makes knowledge. This is because knowing is proprioceptive, sensed through our tissues and bones, as my research-creation practice has shown. Manulani Meyer says “Knowledge is how we meet the world and how the world meets us in return.”²⁴ We breathe in life that is gifted from the trees. What about this is not to be celebrated? How can we open up our knowing to make our world healthier?

7.2 Redefining Illness and Health

Everything, given time and nurturing, is moving toward balance and healing. The mushrooms that cleaned the land after nuclear trauma... the process of forest growth after a fire... the way our skin heals after a cut...stronger than before. Healing is organic, healing is our birthright.

— Lisa Thomas Adeyemo, cited in *Emergent Strategy* by Adrienne Marie Brown²⁵

²⁴ *Hawaiian Epistemology: Meyer, Dr. Manulani Aluli*. Streaming video. Vimeo: Kohala Centre, 2009. <https://vimeo.com/7910477>.

²⁵ adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change Shaping Worlds*, (California: AK Press, 2017), 124

Allostatic Load: the cumulative wear and tear on the body due to chronic stress and the physiological responses to it.²⁶

Exposome: “The sum of lifetime exposures to nongenetic drivers of health and illness, from conception to death...encompass[ing] chemical, social, psychological, ecological, political, and biological elements that determine whether aging cells will become drivers of chronic inflammation.”²⁷

Epigenetics: A relatively new field studying genes and the biological processes that affect them. It is closely related to ancestry and inherited trauma, because these experiences are coded into our ancestral genes and passed down intergenerationally.²⁸

In many ways, redefining something is an act of drawing new boundaries to highlight and define the relationships at play in this new dynamic. My research-creation embodiment practices have allowed me to understand that my boundaries extend beyond who I thought I was, and my accompanying studies and reflections have made it clear to me that, precisely because we are interconnected and interdependent beings at our core, personal disease and healing inevitably

²⁶ Jenny Guidi, Marcella Lucente, Nicoletta Sonino, and Giovanni A Fava, “Allostatic Load and Its Impact on Health: A Systematic Review.” *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 90, no. 1 (2021): 11–27. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000510696>.

²⁷ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*. (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2021), 32

²⁸ Miyako Rogers. “Epigenetics and Ancestry: How Our History Shapes Who We Are.” Website. Front Line Genomics, March 14, 2023. <https://frontlinegenomics.com/epigenetics-and-ancestry-how-our-history-shapes-who-we-are/>.

extend from and into collective.

This thesis treats the question of healing as a political, personal, environmental, collective, spiritual and cosmological event. I agree with Drs Rupa Marya and Raj Patel that our current approach to healing must expand, "...locating the causal origin of disease in the multidimensional spaces around and beyond the individual body - in histories, ecologies, narratives, and dynamics of power."²⁹ Equally, I acknowledge that medicines and ways of knowing related to healing come from many sources beyond the pharmacies and hospitals of the dominant Western medicine model. And lastly, this thesis stands with the many scholars, and somatic and medical activists like Marya and Patel, whose work centres a turn to embodied relationship and Indigenous wisdom as key to health and healing.

The Medicine Wheel philosophy from North American Indigenous traditions, while having regional differences, is an example of a wider, holistic approach. Physically constructed as a circle with four quadrants, four colours and four directions, it maps the four directions over the human being as "spirit (east), body (south), emotions (west) and the mind (north)", while at the same time being "a process (healing), a ceremony (sweats, sharing circles) and teachings (a code for living)³⁰. So it can be a place and at the same time an action and a presence."³¹ This explanation is taken from a paper written for *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* by Métis professor and writer Glen McCabe, who worked to centre traditional methods of healing and wellness for Indigenous peoples. In this model, we see that the human and their physicality never

²⁹ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*, 25

³⁰ it is from this quote that I found the subtitle for my thesis: a code for living

³¹ Glen McCabe, "Mind, Body, Emotions and Spirit: Reaching to the Ancestors for Healing." *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2008): 143–52. <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1080/09515070802066847>.

exists alone.

American herbalist Matthew Wood writes: “The origin of herbalism and medicine lie in the mythopoetic universe of the imagination”. It's helpful to look to the origins of modern medicine as well, where Greek physician Hippocrates of Cos’ (BCE 370) theory of the four humours provided the foundation for Western medicine - that the human body contained four liquids, black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood, whose balance or imbalance created wellness or disease. He is reported to have had knowledge of up to 400 medicinal plants and their uses and had categorized them according to cold, hot, dry and moist qualities.³² The German-Swiss physician and alchemist known as Paracelsus (1493-1541) theorized a “harmonic correspondence between the microcosm of the human being and the macrocosm of the entire universe”, holding that diseases were caused by entities he named as “the ideal, the spiritual, the natural, the poisonous and the planetary.”³³

Paracelsus is also credited with the origin of the Doctrine of Signatures which, although popularly considered to be pseudo-science today, looked for signs and pattern repetitions in the natural world to indicate healing potential.³⁴ In thinking through healing and the body, I compost and reuse some of these notions around patterns and micro to macro (and visa-versa) to imagine potent possibilities. In particular, I am reminded of Peter Levine and Pat McCabe’s (Woman Stands Shining) stories about releasing stuck patterns, possibly intergenerational, to promote healing in ourselves and beyond.

³² “Hippocrates.” In *Wikipedia*. Accessed September 15, 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippocrates>.

³³ “Paracelsus.” In *Wikipedia*. Accessed September 15, 2024. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paracelsus>.

³⁴ “Doctrine of Signatures.” In *Wikipedia*, n.d. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctrine_of_signatures.

As I hope that I have made clear, the illness and wounds I am talking about have less to do with exact description and more about context. A cut can come from a fluke bike accident, or it can come from abuse. Someone's illness may be a simple virus, but their susceptibility to getting sick - how often and how hard hit - may have to do with racism, sexism, classism, personal and intergenerational trauma, etc. Auto-immune disorders and other chronic diseases, addiction and mental health crises are all on the rise, in line with increased pollution of our air, waters and soil, the growing disparity between rich and poor, and disenfranchised, oppressed bodies (minds, spirits) everywhere.^{35 36}

In an interview about her new book *What it Takes to Heal: How Transforming Ourselves Can Change the World*, Prentis Hemphill stresses the need for re-imagining what our world can look like, and how we can live within it.³⁷ I re-imagine healing as a non-linear journey, in that to be healed is not necessarily to be fixed, at least not in the most permanent kind of way wherein we wipe our hands clean after a job well done. In my personal experiences of healing, there is no final day of completion - rather it is ongoing, relational, and layered.

I like Hemphill's description of healing as a "re-orientation" to ourselves, our environment, our relationships, and our world - a "process of being alive and having the room and the ritual to process what it means to be alive, to experience what it means..."³⁸ Prentis Hemphill's voice in the somatic justice movement is important. They were Healing Justice Director at Black Lives Matter

³⁵ Aviva Romm, *Hormone Intelligence*. San Francisco, California: HarperOne, 2021.

³⁶ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*.

³⁷ Prentis Hemphill. "Becoming the People with Adrienne and Prentis Hemphill." In *Becoming the People Podcast*, Accessed July 15, 2024. <https://endoftheworldshow.org/episodes/becoming-the-people-with-adrienne-and-prentis-hemphill>.

³⁸ Prentis Hemphill, "Becoming the People with Adrienne and Prentis Hemphill."

Global Network, led somatic teaching with the Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity group (BOLD), and eventually founded The Embodiment Institute, an organization dedicated to “chang[ing] the conversation, practice, and politics of healing” with the belief that “the healing necessary to fully reinhabit our own bodies and ecosystems is the healing that will ultimately transform oppressive systems.”³⁹

The luminous texts of Sophie Strand often centre the body and healing from a very personal perspective of living in a disabled body with a chronic degenerative disease. Strand defines the individualistic approach to healing as Healthism: “the preoccupation with personal health and personal responsibility for our own health, often at the detriment of understanding that health of one person is intimately tied and representative of a whole population. Illness, trauma and pain do not belong to an individual. They are a web that includes someone.”⁴⁰ Likewise, the work I am proposing involves holistic systems thinking and intergenerational timelines, and treats both visible and invisible scars on our body-mind-spirits and those of our communities and planet. In this light, I understand healing as an imperfect journey - an active site of interconnectivity that involves a re-memembering of self within community and planetary systems; a cosmological event that involves “living with/in an ecology of relationships.”⁴¹ Elsewhere on this topic, Strand writes: “For me, mycelium, are my personal answer. I may not have a “cure”. But, as many Indigenous cultures and older modes of medicine, have to show, healing doesn’t always happen in

³⁹ “Prentis Hemphill Co-Founder.” The Embodiment Institute, Website, Accessed December 1, 2024. [https:// www.theembodimentinstitute.org/staffbios/prentis](https://www.theembodimentinstitute.org/staffbios/prentis), Accessed July 2024.

⁴⁰ Sophie Strand. “The Body Is an Ecotone.” Substack/Make Me Good Soil, Website Blog, March 16, 2023. <https://sophiestrand.substack.com/p/the-body-is-an-ecotone>.

⁴¹ Sophie Strand, “The Body Is an Ecotone.”

the way you think it does. It happens through relationship – through tending something else.”⁴²

What a body needs to heal differs from person to person; similar to what one collective body needs to heal as compared to another. I cannot tell a person who has experienced complex trauma what they need to do to find healing, nor a community wading through difficult times, and this paper is not prescriptive in that way. “Any dirt road out of the wilderness of my body is so ridden with potholes it is undrivable,”⁴³ writes Billy-Ray Belcourt in his searing novel *A History of My Brief Body*. Belcourt’s writing on being a queer Indigenous man in Canada serves as a reminder of why healing paths are not singular or easy; there is no one-size-fits-all.

Speaking of root causes and re-membering, Sophie Strand troubles the word diagnosis in her essay, *Texere-Diagnosis: Against Healing as Separation*. Wonderfully expanding both patient and diagnosis beyond their conceptual frameworks within colonial-capitalism, Strand writes

Diagnosis comes from the Greek roots ‘dia’ and ‘gignoskein’, meaning to obtain knowledge by separating it off from the rest of the world. Knowledge through separation, through rupture, through atomization... ‘analysis’ meaning to ‘unfasten’ ‘unmoor a ship’. A patient is isolated, unmoored. How can we possibly think we can understand any thing, being, ecosystem, pathology, uprooted, unmoored from its web of relationality?⁴⁴

On this same note, Drs Rupa Marya and Raj Patel write, “Without taking into account the myriad ways systemic injustice impacts the body, the standard medical narrative connecting the past, present and future falls short, lacking the explanatory power to address and change the

⁴² Sophie Strand. “Myth & Mycellium.” Substack/Make Me Good Soil, Website Blog, May 3, 2023. <https://sophiestrand.substack.com/p/the-body-is-an-ecotone>.

⁴³ Billy Rae Belcourt, *A History of My Brief Body*. (Penguin Canada, 2021), 192; 125

⁴⁴ Sophie Strand, “Texere-Diagnosis: Against Healing as Separation.” Substack/Make Me Good Soil, Website Blog, July 11, 2023. <https://sophiestrand.substack.com/p/texere-diagnosis>.

course of illness”⁴⁵

What I am pointing towards is that the body (and its entire field of being) holds information essential to healing. We cannot, in my opinion, attain flourishing, equilibrium, liberation, somatic and ecological justice, without turning toward and re-membering these fundamental relationships. This moves us toward a paradigm shift of cosmological order. And we need doctors, healers, therapists, elders and guides to teach us and hold space for this re-membering. Equally, we need our dreams and intuitions, the plants, animals and insects, the water, the air and each other - and a measure of courage to reconnect.

7.3 Healing as Justice

If you are living in silence
 With violence in your bones
 Sorrow in your marrow
 Blood running cold
 Heal I beg you
 Heal I beg you
 Heal I beg you
 Heal
 — Tanya Tagaq, *Split Tooth* ⁴⁶

As I got closer to tying together my research-creation with my original intentions, my relationship with the concept of planetary justice shifted to consider the word healing, or healing-justice as more appropriate. This perspective shows how truly interconnected wellness and disease can be, and makes clear to me how issues of individual, community and planetary

⁴⁵ Rupa Marya and Raj Patel, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*; 12

⁴⁶Tanya Tagaq. *Split Tooth*. Toronto, Ontario: Penguin Canada, 2019, 193; 151

wellness intersect and weave together throughout my practice-led research.

Latinx author, educator and former Canada Research Chair Vanessa Andreotti tells a story that illustrates the important difference between concepts of justice and healing. In the '90s and early 2000s, Andreotti was working with the World Social Forum, an alternative to the World Economic Forum made up of “non-governmental organizations, advocacy campaigns, and formal and informal social movements seeking international solidarity”.⁴⁷ While exploring concepts of root cause and justice, the movement was having significant difficulties finding consensus and solidarity. Andreotti took these questions to Indigenous communities she was working with, who were quick to point out the colonial roots inherent in the concept of justice. From their perspective, colonialism and capitalism are diseases that arise in the idea of separation between humans and nature, and have resulted in a kind of neurobiological impairment that skews all other actions and relationships. When asked what they would replace the word justice with, the Indigenous community introduced her to the word *cura*, meaning healing.⁴⁸

As Andreotti notes, the word healing may feel too soft and nebulous to imagine in contrast to the concept of achieving justice, which can bring a sharp punch of righteousness. Yet, if we sit for a moment with this shift in perspective, we might feel it in our bones. To heal is “to make sound or whole...to make well again, to restore to original integrity”.⁴⁹ It seems it can only happen when something is conforming to righteousness, “an ideal or just action”, as is included

⁴⁷ “World Social Forum.” In *Wikipedia*, n.d. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum.

⁴⁸ Jennifer England, “How to Bear the Weight of the World with Vanessa Andreotti.” In *The Tension of Emergence*, Podcast, Accessed May 30, 2024. <https://sparkcoaching.ca/how-to-bear-the-weight-of-the-world-with-vanessa-andreotti/>.

⁴⁹ “Heal.” In *Merriam Webster*, online dictionary, Accessed Dec 1, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heal>.

in the definition of justice.⁵⁰ Justice and healing are related, but justice diverges under human interpretation of morality and reliance on man-made systems of law. In this way human-created justice often stays as an abstraction, hard and ideal, serving semantics above living beings, where healing is a fluid and emergent occurrence belonging to the essential nature of nature itself.

In their 2021 paper *Indigenous Environmental Justice and Sustainability*, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Environmental Justice Deborah McGregor, and co-authors Stephen Whitaker and Mahisha Sritharan argue for a “distinct framework and set of logics”, based in Indigenous ontology “that recognizes the agency of non-human beings as well as the Earth itself.”⁵¹ The authors explicitly name the problematics inherent in a colonial system attempting to reframe itself from within: “call[ing] into question the legitimacy and applicability of global and nationstate political and legal mechanisms, as these same states and international governing bodies continue to fail Indigenous peoples around the world. Not only do current global, national and local systems of governance and law fail Indigenous peoples, they fail all life.”⁵²

These and many other resources uphold the fact that non-Western perspectives and systems

⁵⁰ “Justice.” In *Merriam Webster*. Accessed December 1, 2024. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/justice>.

⁵¹ McGregor, Deborah, Stephen Whitaker, and Mahisha Sritharan. “Indigenous Environmental Justice and Sustainability.” *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 43 (2020): 35–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2020.01.007>; 1

⁵² McGregor, Whitaker, and Sritharan, “Indigenous Environmental Justice and Sustainability.”

of belief are essential in considering collective justice and healing.^{53 54 55} In a keynote speech at the 2021 Bioneers conference, Indigenous educator and author Dr. Cutcha Rising Baldy spoke on radical futures as being necessarily decolonized, saying: “ We have been given the tools to radically imagine our futures... How can we speak things into being, together?”⁵⁶

Perhaps part of the answer to this question lies in accepting that we cannot know ourselves without having time to listen, make a mess and not know why. This same thinking goes for the entire path of healing, of which getting to know ourselves is a part. And this goes full circle to the tenets of research-creation methodology that I created this thesis through. Much of the journey is muddy and dark and relies on learning to trust our senses. Because our healing is entwined, it stands to reason that getting to know ourselves and learning to trust must happen on all levels, from personal to collective. And while the way forward won’t always be clear, we are going there together.

⁵³ Ana T. Amorim-Maia, Isabelle Anguelovski, Eric Chu, and James Connolly, “Intersectional Climate Justice: A Conceptual Pathway for Bridging Adaptation Planning, Transformative Action, and Social Equity.” *Urban Climate* 41 (January 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.uclim.2021.101053>.

⁵⁴ Gloria Snively, John Corsiglia, "Indigenous science: Proven, practical and timeless." *Knowing home: Braiding indigenous science with western science, book 1* (2016).

⁵⁵ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Andrew Salvador Mathews, and Nils Bubandt. “Patchy Anthropocene: Landscape Structure, Multispecies History, and the Retooling of Anthropology: An Introduction to Supplement 20.” *Current Anthropology* 60, no. S20 (June 2019). <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1086/703391>.

⁵⁶ Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy – Indigenous Voices for Decolonized Futures. YouTube, 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQfrQyb4yw4.

Chapter Eight: Concluding Thoughts

Q: How does the intelligence of our bodies intersect with planetary wellness?

In this thesis, I have presented a lot of knowledge, both new and (k)now(n),¹ that maps where our bodies and their incredible intelligence interconnect and overlap with that of the collective and the planet. I have attempted to show that disease and wellness are inherently relational and multi-dimensional because we are connected across time and species to our human and non-human kin. I have mapped out my personal history to critically locate myself in my thesis work and in this historical moment that so urgently asks us to redefine who we are so that we can think out how we might live well together in the future.

While I include modern Westernized science as a means of situating the dominant perspective on body and health, I also outline what I hope is a generative criticism of this model in the belief that change is possible. I'll say it again: individual health is intimately tied to community health and beyond, and, the concept of cosmology is embedded in this concept. How we see the world, matters. "The cosmos is within us," the astronomer Carl Sagan wrote, "We are made of star stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself."²

Through traditional scholarly research, personal narrative and embodiment practices, I have shown the human person and their body as fundamentally more than what meets the eye. Essential information about our bodies exists beyond Westernized medical knowledge, both in the wisdom

¹ Manulani A Meyer, "Holographic Epistemology: Native Common Sense." *China Media Research* 9, no. 2 (2013): 94–101.

² Robert Lea. "Are We Really Made of 'star Stuff' and What Does That Even Mean?" Website. Space, August 21, 2023. <https://www.space.com/we-are-made-of-star-stuff-meaning-truth>.

traditions of many cultures and in our innate abilities to attune to our own body's language. The work of this thesis suggests that our bodies contain a vastness in which experiences and stories settle, and also through which rivers of energy and intelligence flow. And, that the elements and trillions of lifeforms that make up our bodies are complex and beautiful antennae through which we can read and communicate with our world, backwards and forwards into time.

We are celestial, star maps, multiverses. You and I are *We, They, Them*.

Grief is an underlying theme in my work that I was not expecting to show up. However, I learned that grief lives in our bodies and that addressing it is essential to forging a better way forward. In particular, my two large embroidered drawings Ancestor Song and Grief Seeds are about the power of letting grief through, or “grief-letting” as singer, sound healer and author gina Breedlove calls it.³ Alongside other gifts, Breedlove works with people to embody the regenerative power of grief by feeling its depth, learning its story and honouring its wisdom to seed the future. My Motherwort textiles showcase *Lionurus Cardiaca*/Motherwort as a tonic for grief, fatigue and anxiety-stricken hearts. They honour those born in a female body and all those who mother, including the Earth herself. Motherwort's lion-hearted ways are complemented by Rose and Hawthorn, who also share their heart medicine in some of the textile works. This part of my research-creation also honours the weedy natures of plant politics and plant relations that teach us how mutual growth and transformation can look.

Alongside the grief is a generative joy and love, and a tenacious movement toward hope,

³ adrienne marie brown. “Witch School 26, Gina Breedlove.” How to Survive The End of the World. Accessed June 18, 2024. <https://endoftheworldshow.org/episodes/witch-school-26-gina-breedlove>.

possibly as a methodology of relationality and respons-ability.⁴ My large bilateral drawing titled *Energy Bodies* is a joyful and direct engagement with embodied art-making, one that halts analytical thinking and asks us to trust that our bodies know what to do. But all of the works contain direct engagement and the sense of joy, calm and relationality that accompanies process-led art practices like my own.

While engaged in this research-creation I was living through a pandemic, parenting a child experiencing a serious mental health crisis and caring for an ailing parent from afar. New family histories unfolded that reorganized my understanding of who I am and what stories my body holds. Many, many times I felt alone and in the dark about how to proceed with these situations, and how to tend to my needs while caring for loved ones.

I can now say that several years into recovery from burnout, I am on a deepening path of self-discovery and healing. My son now attends an alternative school, and we are learning how to listen to our bodies and interpret the messages into successful day-to-day living. I hope to take a trip to Grosse Isle next year to learn more about the Irish interned there, and perhaps the story of these ancestors and therefore my personal history will be enriched by this visit.

All of the somatic work I did in this thesis had me confront self-doubt, fear, and resistance to feeling what amounted to scary or even threatening emotions. I learned it wasn't just my feelings or stories that moved through my body, but that I carry those belonging to others as well. I learned that we are indeed porous. As I have stated previously in this paper, my thesis holds that true justice for all begins in honouring a sacred relationship with our bodies, and importantly, that

⁴ Vivienne Bozalek and Michalinos Zembylas, "Response-Ability." *Responsibility, Privileged Irresponsibility and Response-Ability: Higher Education, Coloniality and Ecological Damage*, 2023, 63–81. The authors give a good explanation of response-ability in the abstract for this paper.

this honouring can ripple out into other bodies we share life with. “The transformative process begins with your own truth to suffering,” says Zen priest, author and medicine woman Osho Zenju Earthlynn Manuel, adding “Our quest for well-being is not for us only, but for our families and communities that are in despair”.⁵

Throughout my work, I have attempted to show how taking responsibility and care at an intimate level is an essential part of connecting and healing for the whole, and how these activities hold the potential for shifting climate and social justice toward a paradigm of healing-justice that includes systems-of-care. Witnessing the growing strength of marginalized communities, and increasingly vast networks of grassroots climate and social justice organizations, I have seen that an effective community is forged through the openness, flexibility, mutual support and connectivity of its members. The same can be said of our bodies - we (and the beings that make us who we are) are healthy when we are adaptable, well-nourished, mutually supported and well-connected.

Mapping systems from the micro to the ‘whole’, as this thesis attempts to do, offers a sort of meta-view.⁶ Enacting this through my research, I am, for a moment at least, performing the role of super-generalist in a scholarly manner. This term is borrowed from evolutionary biology, and study within this discipline includes discovering the roles different species play in creating and

⁵ Zenju Earthlynn Manuel, *Opening To Darkness*. (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2023), 223; 45

⁶ The following three paragraphs are taken and lightly reworked from a paper written for a class title The Governance of Nature and the Nature of Governance, taught by Professor Katja Neves.

maintaining the mutualistic networks that underly an ecosystem's function and evolution.⁷

Species that have an average number of links and interdependencies with each other are termed generalists, and this is the majority of flora and fauna. There are a few species, however, that make connections above and beyond the average - networking and linking previously unconnected species and bringing information across new borders. It seems they provide the longer threads and glue that keeps the web intact. When their broad, life-sustaining connectivity declines, as is happening throughout the world due to the effects of climate change, then isolation, separation, and scarcity set in and the intricately woven eco-system(s) that depend on these important species begin to fall apart. These super-generalists, such as the honeybee, play a key role in the flourishing of an ecosystem precisely because they constellate the grand scheme of things.^{8 9}

Enacting a sort of bio-mimicry, I want to underline a regenerative idea that at this time of urgent global crisis, super-generalists on the human scale are needed to link across broad areas of human discipline. In so doing they emphasize and boost the inherent and necessary connectivity therein, toward a mutual flourishing. To quote again Dr Amba Sepie, "What should concern us all, in the present moment, is the creative transformation of planetary, community, and individual health, conceived of in the very broadest terms, and taken seriously: as if the seventh generation depended upon it. Such challenges require courage and, at the very minimum, open-mindedness

⁷ Paulo R. Guimarães Jr, Pedro Jordano, and John N. Thompson, "Evolution and Coevolution in Mutualistic Networks." *Ecology Letters* 14 (2011): 877–85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1461-0248.2011.01649.x>.

⁸ Paulo R. Guimarães Jr, Pedro Jordano, and John N. Thompson, "Evolution and Coevolution in Mutualistic Networks."

⁹ Rubén Darío Palacio, Carlos Valderrama-Ardila, and Gustavo H. Kattan, "Generalist Species Have a Central Role In a Highly Diverse Plant–Frugivore Network." *Biotropica: The Scientific Journal of the ATBC* 48, no. 3 (May 2016): 349–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/btp.12290>.

to a range of perhaps ‘previously un-thought’ possibilities.’”¹⁰

“The way out is the way in, and the way in is the way out,”¹¹ writes Osho Zenju Manuel. In her treatise *Opening to Darkness: Eight Gateways for Being with the Absence of Light in Unsettling Times*, she reminds us that we are born from and live with darkness daily. I agree with Manuel’s assertion that there has been a grand forgetting and turning away from darkness, and that in this we have not just forgotten our true natures, but have effectively cast the dark as something to be feared and escaped whenever possible.¹² We continue to chase it away with our screens and lights that fill in the night. In its extreme, this striving for light becomes white supremacy and racism, casting all who are dark or differently hued as trouble and/or unworthy.

To live and heal within our collective darkness, we must stay with the trouble of our own histories, our own darkneses, recognizing at the same time that they are not ours alone. In Zenju’s guidance that the only way through darkness, is through it - I recognize a similar truth about our bodies. Staying with the trouble begins in our sensory being, in the stories that our bodies hold, as well as those held in the lands and tides that grow us all. “What if your “sit spot” wasn’t in a forest or meadow?” asks Sophie Strand. “What if it was in the wild, feral ruins of your own body?”¹³

Facing the uncertainty of these times requires a kind of suppleness in how we embody relationship. And, importantly, it requires support. We cannot do this alone. “Nourishing flexibility that we do not yet know we will need is at the core of this work. People need to find their own way –

¹⁰ Sepie, Amba Jessida. “Tracing The Motherline: Earth Elders, Decolonising Worldview, and Planetary Futurity.” (PhD, University of Canterbury, 2018); 5-6, https://www.academia.edu/37319192/Tracing_the_Motherline_Earth_Elders_Decolonising_Worldview_and_Planetary_Futurity_pdf.

¹¹ Zenju Earthlyn Manuel. *Opening To Darkness*. Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2023, 223; 27

¹² Zenju Earthlyn Manuel. *Opening To Darkness*. Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2023, 223; 15-22

¹³ Sophie Strand. “Making Kin with Disability.” Newsletter. Substack/Make Me Good Soil, January 12, 2024. <https://sophiestrand.substack.com/p/making-kin-with-disability>.

together,” writes Nora Bateson in a wonderful re-examination of collectivity.¹⁴

We need each other and who we are is less defined than we might have assumed. Bacteria are our ancestors, mountains, plants, animals and elementals our community. We must recognize that we share each other's joy and pain, whether or not we want to, because we are fundamentally interconnected. “By bringing new collective perception to the most personal, everyday aspects of life,” Bateson writes, “...the glue of mutual contextual vitality” is made clear.¹⁵ “

This is the way forward then, to what American author and Indigenous worldview scholar Four Arrows calls “healing at the postcolonial fault line...to show that we might yet walk together down a particular path, and toward the revolution we so desperately need.”¹⁶ Body, self and other, healing and illness - these seemingly intimate spaces and transformations reverberate into the collective we share life with. Perhaps we have to allow ourselves to become less of an *I* and more of an emergent *we*, for the sake of all our relations.¹⁷

¹⁴ Nora Bateson. “People Need People.” Website Blog. Medium, March 29, 2022. <https://norabateson.medium.com/finding-a-way-warmly-6b8169142795>.

¹⁵ Nora Bateson, “People Need People.”

¹⁶ Sepie, “Tracing The Motherline: Earth Elders, Decolonising Worldview, and Planetary Futurity.” Quote by Four Arrows in Sepie, italics mine.

¹⁷ June Kaminski. “Theory: Interconnectedness.” Website. First Nations Pedagogy, 2013. <https://firstnationspedagogy.com/interconnection.html>.

I use this phrase with respect, in honour of the way of First Peoples in acknowledging the wide web of relationality we humans are a part of.

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