I BEGIN WITH the above quotes by Donald J. Trump and Erin Manning to illustrate an important paradox around touch; touch can be both a violation of another (grabbing, coercing, objectifying) and an act which co-creates a space of tenderness between living beings. The extent to which touch is violent has much to do with how the one doing the touching conceives of self and other. Touching another nonviolently requires that a toucher listen to and recognize an other who can never be fully known or fixed in place. For Donald Trump, there is no reciprocity of being touched himself in the process of touching another, only the possibility of taking what he feels is rightfully his to take. He is not other. To him, the “pussies” in question are not full, animate selves with singular life and agency, but are attached to humans willing and available to be dominated. Subject touches object. When circulated within colonial logic, power and dominance are fortified through touch, whether it is consensual or not. The words and actions of Donald Trump as well as the
The rise of the #metoo movement serve to highlight how white male masculinity is attributed full personhood status that asserts its collective dominance upon others perceived to be of lesser rank. The colonial ranking system is insidious and can take any form: brown man over brown woman, white woman over brown woman, adult over child, wealthy over poor, human over animal, and so on. While we all deserve full agency and sovereignty, asserting full personhood within this logic leaves colonial personhood intact, perpetuating ever-shifting hierarchies. In this article, I redefine the act of touch not as a solution to violence, but as a portal for expanding beyond colonially constructed traps of self and other.

What follows is an offering from my particular vantage point as a body-worker and cultural studies scholar. I became a massage therapist twenty-five years ago after dropping out of a graduate program in anthropology. Touching others made sense, while studying others felt wrong. While I eventually turned my gaze back onto my own culture, touch became the vehicle for a sensory kind of knowing that I initially thought had nothing to do with critical scholarship. Until recently I was employed at a residential center for trauma and addiction where my job was to touch people in acute suffering. I was often asked if I needed to protect myself from other people’s pain, and many clients would apologize for themselves, as if pain were something to hide. All I knew was that my practice was not to “heal” another, but to meet what was felt yet not easily spoken. Touch became a vehicle for experiencing another in a way that was similar to my meditation practice; if fully located within the present moment, time gives way to lived motion. Pain ceases belonging to anyone; it becomes empty. Sometimes emotions and memories trapped in the body reach out to be shaken off. Sometimes memories play like a movie, or emotions like rage, grief, or joy shake the body. Sometimes people feel themselves hovering just outside their bodies, and sometimes the dead come to visit. My job is not to make meaning or protect myself from what happens. My work is to stay tender and awake in the face of whatever is animated within the act of touch.

What it means to touch and be touched as a challenge to colonial consciousness is the subject of this essay. Colonial consciousness—including where it comes from and how it moves—will be deconstructed, while the act of touch as a decolonial act will be simultaneously animated. I use the word “animate” in this essay to give multidimensional life and vitality to concepts we may take for granted. Instead of providing a resolution to the problem of colonial consciousness, I aim to animate touch as method, as a vehicle for embodying ourselves within interconnected ecosystems larger than we might currently imagine. In this essay, I will alternate between speaking the language of touch and the language of critique as a possible route for softening intertwined tangles of
colonial consciousness as they act upon our bodies and ecosystems. Ultimately, what matters is not just the intention behind touch, but the consciousness activated between toucher and touched. This space, rich with a felt sense not considered real within the Western philosophical tradition, threatens the roots of what Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh call “Western ontological totalitarianism”: ways in which Eurocentric modes of perception shape modern life through the logic of the five senses. Since this embodied logic is so tightly baked into Western bodies, please bear with me as I attempt to unravel what Anibel Quijano calls coloniality, or the ways 500 years of Eurocentric logic continue to order our senses and global power structures, limiting our imagination for how we might sustain life on the planet.

I have learned two important things from twenty-five years of bodywork practice. First, healing a wound requires that a source of wounding be clearly seen, even if it is painful to look. Second, trying to “fix” or banish a wound will cause it to tighten. While any wound must be cleaned to heal, the consciousness that touches the wound cannot exhibit the same confusion as the wound itself. For example, demonstrating a clear argument often means exerting moral superiority over the ideas and experiences of others, perpetuating a “knower” and a “known,” or a subject/object relationship. What I am proposing is a radical shift in the ways we treat ourselves and each other through training our minds to be spacious enough to touch what is incommensurable and cannot be fully known or fixed in place. Through embodying the act of tender witnessing, touch reaches toward intimacy, away from the solid ground of “knowing.” Touch becomes a vehicle for feeling and speaking our way into consciousness in which life itself is the point.

Touching the Roots of Colonial Consciousness

“In the colonized way we think we say that women who are brown are women of color, and white skin make white people, but we’re not talking about that. We’re talking about how colonized we are in our own consciousness. We all have 500 years of colonization under our skin, and how do we deal with that? This whole notion of healing is colonized, too. We have to undo that first before we can even imagine something else.”

Sylvia Ledesma

Within Western epistemologies, touch is considered to be one of our five senses. The word “haptic” comes from the Greek word haptēstai, “to touch,” and is related to the word “tactile,” or that which is perceived through touch. However, what can be perceived through touch exceeds what we think can be perceived
through a framework in which our senses always refer back to a singular, finite self which has been culturally defined and constructed. In Carolyn Merchant’s ecofeminist classic, The Death of Nature, she traces the history of how ecological awareness, or sensory awareness that sees itself as inexorably bound to the whole of life, was systematically dominated by the male European elite to justify exploitation of labor and mining of the earth. This logic, rooted in cultural values of the European Enlightenment tradition, stipulated that the natural world, a category which included women and Indigenous peoples around the world, could be essentialized as nature, whose natural bounty existed to serve mankind. While this logic had already been under construction for hundreds of years, Enlightenment philosophies during the Scientific Revolution helped garner public support for mining, colonization, and capitalism by creating hierarchies of being to order gender and racial norms. These hierarchies defined who was considered human and worthy of protection and rights, instrumentalizing slavery, subordination, and exploitation of labor and natural resources. This history shaped modern capitalism and still orders modern conditions.

While this is a simplified version of Merchant’s argument for the purposes of this short essay, the problem I aim to expose is how the legacy of Eurocentric embodiments continues to order modern life and limit our imaginations. Logic of “self” perpetuates what Aníbel Quijano calls coloniality, a binding of our bodies, economic practices, and institutions in ways that collude with colonial agreements on what it means to exist as a rational, logical human. Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh argue that the totalizing logic of coloniality emerged between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and has remained intact through the logic of self and other. The creation of knowledge as a relationship in which a subject can “know” another (an object), created a hierarchy of being that made the world an “extended object of European knowledge.” This hierarchy between knower and known continues to dominate the globe, in which capitalist ventures work with philanthropy, governments, and international institutions to reproduce a global, capitalist “hydra,” extracting life, labor, and resources to maintain colonial dominance. In the sections below, I’ll show how this dangerous logic is unwittingly reinforced through therapeutic practices and policies that enforce individualism, a colonial construct that limits how we know and experience what lies beyond our own skin. Without the capacity to feel kinship with all of life, we return again and again to our own self-interest, bound within colonial logic and institutions.

* * *
There is a young immunologist in the room who tried and failed to take her life. She is blonde and tall and thin. She doesn’t want to exist.

You have the group sit and relax with their breath. You ask them to notice how they are relating to the breath.

The young woman says, “My relationship to my breath is fine as long as I don’t feel anything.”

Afterwards she says, “When I was in college, I studied acupuncture and traditional healing and thought about the relationship between plants and herbs and people. But I got trained out of that way of thinking in my PhD program, and now we’re creating all sorts of superbugs. Unless we start thinking in terms of ecosystems, we’re toast.”

You look at each other for a long moment before the young woman turns away to put on her shoes.

* * *

The above vignette illustrates a desperate need to heal the grief that lives in our bones—that we are killing life through colluding with colonial consciousness—but cannot see our way out. Here, two paradigms collide: the knowledge of traditional healing and the knowledge of modern science. For this young scientist, breathing with the tangled knot feels like more than she can bear, more than any of us should bear. Conceding to breathe, to continue to exist, means facing existential questions many of us may be asking. What is mine to do when facing the depth of grief? Is it possible to imagine surrendering privilege, in solidarity with decolonial embodiments, ancestral histories, and the knowledge that our survival is connected to the survival of the whole? Or, as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson asks, “What if no one colluded with colonialism?”

Personally, touch is the sense I return to because it is direct and immediate when I don’t know what else to do. This is especially true when the shame of my settler status or inherited privilege leaves me no place to ethically stand. Touch bypasses thoughts and judgments about what is acceptable or not acceptable, real or unreal, in order to rest tenderly with things as they are. And yet, reckoning with colonial embodiment is part of what we must do if we are to confront what is killing all of us. For the sake of transparency, I am the descendant of both a Surinamese slave and her Dutch “owner.” The fact that my great-grandmother was born in Puerto Rico and could pass as white means I have inherited a multigenerational history of chosen whiteness that denies its roots in slavery. While I have been doing the ongoing work of weeding colonial
bias from my own path, knowing where to step next has always been unclear because this body exists on land, and what it means to inhabit a settler body with white privilege is still an ongoing inquiry.

After ten years teaching in a tribal college in New Mexico, the confusion I felt inhabiting a settler body drove me back to graduate school in American Studies. In the process of writing my dissertation, in which I sought to explore border crossings with more-than-human worlds (ancestors, plants, etc.), I felt trapped within a scholarly language that limited embodied possibilities for what was actually happening, or what could be possible. While critique is a powerful naming tool, I kept finding myself reinforcing a trap of embodiment that felt constrained and limited by terms of agreement that separated me from what I knew in my hands and heart. I agonized over writing a dissertation that wouldn’t package healing consciousness for consumption or produce one more ethnography guilty of othering. Sylvia Ledesma, a beloved maestra and mujer medicina in Albuquerque I studied with, told me that I couldn’t write a decolonial dissertation from a colonized mind and said this to me:

“So how is this paper going to serve you and humanity, the human race? Because you are a part of this, not separate. How is it going to serve the earth, preserve the water, the fire, the wind, those elements that we are made of that are also right here, part of this universe, so how’s it going to serve that?”

Necessarily, the subject of inquiry became that which stood in the way of decolonial consciousness and embodiment. The subject could not be “me,” nor those with traditional healing knowledge I interviewed as part of my research. In order to animate a larger, relational field, I had to confront spoken and unspoken rules, especially those bound within mind and body, human and non-human binaries, as to what experiences count as “real” or valuable. The felt sense in Western scholarship is typically seen as suspect, to be suspended in favor of objective knowledge. Within this logic, explorations of healing spaces are typically presented ethnographically, as a set of shared beliefs and geographies, typically trapping healing perception within Western philosophical frameworks. Healing becomes the province of an ethnic other to be recorded and ethnographically trapped: the Amazonian shaman, the Mestiza curandera, the witch doctor. Confined within the logic of coloniality, perceptual knowledge of healing is limited to what is considered “rational,” confining academics to write about, rather than from, perception that expands beyond the five senses.

Scholarship that animates through touch must necessarily challenge either/or frameworks that relate to critique and embodiment, humanities and science,
self and other. Rather than trying to prove the validity of healing touch within Western scientific or ethnographic frameworks, I’m interested in ways that sensory kinship provides a vehicle for creating knowledge together. The definition of the word “praxis” I’m reaching for draws upon Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh’s work in *On Decoloniality*. Essentially, unlearning Western academic thinking means engaging the world as a thinker-doer in a spiral, non-linear fashion.\(^{15}\) As an ethnographer, I believe the purpose of recording experience is not to “recognize” experience as legitimate, but to invite our senses to traverse colonially constructed borders that limit what we perceive and how.

**Touching the Tangle of Neoliberal Therapeutics**

While sensing, feeling, and touching that which can’t be directly seen or known has always been within the province of traditional healing, it is not unique or particular only to certain ethnically categorized groups of people, even though healing practices draw upon particular traditions, places, stories, and histories. Instead, cultural specifics are what make healing perception “historically dense,”\(^ {16}\) shaped by a person’s specific relationship to culture, land, community, and ancestral legacies. It is simultaneously specific and transpersonal as it interacts with time and space that are not neutral, but socially constructed, lived, and embedded in the flesh.

While this perceptual sense has a long history in non-Western cultures, the closest theories I can find in Western neuroscience are studies of “interoception,” activated through mindful awareness of one’s internal body processes. Interoception, when theorized as an additional sense, is the experience of perception that filters through the felt experience of the body. More specifically, interoception refers to “the body-to-brain axis of sensation concerning the state of the internal body and its visceral organs.”\(^ {17}\) Interoception differs from exteroception, using our five senses (hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling) to understand the world, and differs as well from proprioception, or awareness of the body in space. If I focus my attention on my hands, I can feel pulsing, tingling, and warmth. If I pay attention to the felt sense of my body, I know when I am hungry, thirsty, angry, sad, cold, or feeling lonely. If I can stay attentive and attuned to these sensations, I can stay present and tender to my own embodied experience. In other words, interoception is not direct sense perception per se, but the awareness of sense perception. Within a state of homeostasis, interoception is typically a pleasant experience. I can feel my breath, my heartbeat, my hands and feet, and know that all is well. This can be contrasted with a state of threat or injury, when the amygdala, or reptilian
brain, activates a signal that fires countless neural pathways affecting the musculoskeletal and nervous systems.

Interception has been gaining traction in Western science over the past several years, and is more often referred to as “mindfulness.” Antonio Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens* is a recent Western scientific challenge to Descartes’s argument that thought produces reality, and that reality produces a rational, knowing, individual self. He argues that Descartes’s dictum, “I think, therefore I am,” is fundamentally flawed in that it does not acknowledge that thought itself is already constructed and conditioned. Damasio’s focus on the body, on the directly felt sense, challenges the primacy of our five senses as a benchmark for understanding reality. Damasio’s work theorizes his clinical observation that pain sensation and pain affect (emotion) are separate neurological processes. In other words, while pain and emotion are often linked together as a singular, monolithic and inexpressible experience of *pain*, they can be decoupled through the act of conscious witnessing. If an organism develops the capacity to witness direct experiences of pain and emotion, witnessing creates space to “feel” feelings as well as the direct, physical experience of pain itself, creating a gap between sensation and affect. Further, Damasio argues, this witness consciousness provides a direct challenge to the stability of a concrete and knowable “self.” In other words, that paradox of witnessing—through directly experiencing the felt sense of the body—directly challenges liberal humanist notions of a separate, individual self. Pain ceases to be something that is “mine,” or owned, but a physical experience that shifts, morphs, and provides a window into the felt reality that the self is similarly multiple, shifting, and plastic.

Over the past twenty years, increased interest in awareness of the felt sense has given rise to fields such as somatics and mindfulness as legitimate therapeutic modalities. I fully support movement in this direction. However, there is something important to be reckoned with when we yoke Western science to traditionally Eastern practices. While awareness of the felt sense has gained traction through the popularization of mindfulness, when these practices are divorced from context, they can be secularized and adapted to fit any circumstance, ignoring plurality of history and meaning. Within decontextualized, secular models, mindfulness can be just another tool for emotional management and survival within violent social fields. Mindfulness is taught in treatment facilities, corporations, prisons, and public schools, where it is used to help people manage their nervous systems within toxic and unhealthy environments. Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), is taught to snipers in the military, and to financiers in Davos. In many ways, practices that help people suffer less are a good thing, though without critiquing the conditions...
producing structural suffering, opportunities are limited for challenging colonality and the violence it causes.

An important paradox to face is that while we may have moments of existing beside ourselves through contemplative practice, our bodies are tangled within what Lauren Berlant calls the “cruel optimism” of neoliberal life. As a tendril of the colonial hydra, neoliberalism is a set of moral and economic values and practices permeating American life. It is the individual who must bear the burden of stress associated with economic insecurity and who alone is responsible for the self-care needed to survive this state of affairs. Neoliberal citizenship means taking on responsibility for oneself in order not to burden others or the state: depression, anxiety, illness, motherhood, and old age are one’s personal responsibility. This cultural obsession with self-responsibility signals a retreat from collective caregiving to the individual, and circulates through laws, therapies, and policies that center individual responsibility and self-management.

Since neoliberalism is not just a set of economic practices, but a set of collective agreements that govern our institutions and bodies, the more this logic has been naturalized, the more tightly we become entangled in its net.

William Connolly argues that neoliberalism thrives in a cultural climate of self-responsibility, while simultaneously diminishing conditions for flourishing. He writes, “neoliberal ideology inflates the self-organizing power of markets by implicitly deflating the self-organizing powers and creative capacity of all other systems.” In other words, through marrying the free market with a free and ahistorical “self,” power can be consolidated in the hands of the few while the majority focus on self-management, self-discipline, and self-care, each shoring their island against increasingly precarious and arbitrary material conditions. If we are focused on well-being as a technique for surviving colonial violence, we may miss the ways that our actions decrease opportunities for flourishing.

For example, when therapeutics become “evidence-based,” proven through science to do the things they claim to do, they can be commodified and sold, along with regulation of who can teach and practice, how things are done, and how much to charge. Mindfulness has become big business in the United States, although throughout Asia such knowledge is offered for dana, the Pali word for generosity. Who can offer these teachings, and under what conditions, becomes less about depth of knowledge gained over time, and more about expensive certificates and state-sanctioned trainings regulated under licensing boards.
During the break, sitting outside on the sunny patio, you meet a man in his sixties. He tells you he is one of the original authors of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. He says to you that there needs to be a gate-keeping function for who can teach mindfulness, and that a license to practice therapy should be the minimum requirement.

He says this to you, a bodyworker who teaches mindfulness. You so passionately disagree with him that you forget to be polite, patient, or mindful. You can barely contain your frustration, and you can see this makes him more certain that you are proving his point. A young man sitting next to you tells the man he uses his textbook in his classroom at the University of Illinois. He is rewarded with a copy of the man’s book.

You feel a vague sense of shame within your strong, clear “no!” You wonder if this is because you were raised to be a nice white woman.

There is a paradox to be reckoned with here: secularized therapeutic practices can, and often do, reinforce traps of neoliberal selfhood when yoked to profit and regulation. The issue is not the practices themselves, but the consciousness and political context in which they are deployed. The danger is that, in regulating and commodifying evidence-based help or healing, we can unwittingly disempower Indigenous and local webs of care, displacing efforts to freely care for each other as the central task. At least for now, traditional healers in New Mexico are allowed to practice under the “Unlicensed Practitioner Act,” which requires them to prominently display the fact that they are unlicensed to protect consumers. This is a profound dishonoring of wisdom gained through long and difficult trainings with elders, wisdom which—in New Mexico—is traditionally offered for donation, not a set fee.

In Therapeutic Nations, Dian Million argues that the function of state-provided therapies is to produce self-governing subjects who do not challenge the economic and political goals of the state. If one primary political and economic goal of neoliberalism is to maintain control of land and resources for exploitation, growth, and gain, it makes sense to produce self-governing subjects. Self-governing subjects are also consumers who will then reap “rewards” from private property ownership with narratives that promise fulfillment through individuation from others. Million argues that therapeutic and humanitarian
discourses serve the purpose of offering (empty) self-determination to the already colonized.  

Deploying the term “trauma” in Indigenous communities locates Native people within a historical narrative that assumes traumatic violence lies in the past, as something to be healed and forgiven. By providing psychological treatments, the state assumes a benevolent role, treating traumatic injury with discourses and tools which exonerate the ways that ongoing colonial relationships reproduce psychic and physical trauma. Here, self-determination, empowerment, and “healing” become linked to a form of selfhood that necessarily depends upon forgetting violence in order to occupy an ahistorical, multicultural present in which the individual aligns itself with capitalism and neoliberal values based in ownership and self-responsibility. Janis Jenkins and Thomas Csordas’s recent book, *Troubled in the Land of Enchantment*, untangles how neoliberal morality and stigma permeate the mental health system in New Mexico. They tracked narratives of young people prior to trauma/addiction treatment and after, recording ways that narratives of trauma changed after interaction with judicial and health care systems. One example is of a young girl whose initial personal narrative was one of “being Zuni,” who had “bad things happen to [her],” but that shifted to being a girl who has “fucked up [her] life” after therapeutic treatment.  

While critiquing ways that Western therapies and frameworks reproduce coloniality through promoting neoliberal value systems is important, it cannot be the sole end. In order for a colonial “self” to imagine alternatives for existence, it needs something better and richer to sustain itself. As an alternative, in the following section, I will flesh out touch through the lens of decolonial literature and theory. The felt experience of interbeing has always been a vital part of decolonial knowledge production in Chicana and Indigenous feminisms, feminist science studies, and Black studies. One term to consider is what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call “hapticality”—shared, felt experiences that exceed the limits of individual selfhood, language, and linear notions of time and space. The embodiment of hapticality is a lived space in which the pleasures of feeling with and for trump self-interest and self-preservation.  

The lack of concrete definition for hapticality is intentional; it is a word that defies concrete definition in favor of what can be felt and lived. If you are a meditation practitioner, you may be familiar with the experience of dislocating thoughts and mental constructs that shape and order “knowing.” In this next section, my words are an invitation for the reader to enter a space of lived motion that feels with the violence of history and this historical moment as you experience dislocation from a cohesive sense of self. While the adjective
“haptic” means “related to the sense of touch,” hapticality is a place between worlds and words; a vehicle not confined by colonial grammatical structures.

Hapticality, or Love

Hapticality, the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment, the feel that what is to come is here. Hapticality, the capacity to feel though others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you, this feel of the shipped is not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land, a totem. Or perhaps we could say these are now recomposed in the wake of the shipped. To feel others is unmediated, immediately social, amongst us, our thing, and even when we recompose religion, it comes from us, and even when we recompose race, we do it as race women and men. Refused these things, we first refuse them, in the contained, amongst the contained, lying together in the ship, the boxcar, the prison, the hostel. Skin, against epidermalisation, senses touching. Thrown together touching each other we were denied all sentiment, denied all the things that were supposed to produce sentiment, family, nation, language, religion, place, home. Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other.29

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney

I include this passage here from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s The Undercommons as an entry point for considering ways those denied humanity (here, human beings on a slave ship) organized and survived colonial violence through hapticality. Here, hapticality operates as a place of both refusal (of colonial personhood) and assent (feeling with and for each other). The slave ship becomes less metaphor than a vehicle we are invited to board in present time. Hapticality, through the touch of each other, provides a safe passage away from collusion with colonial constructs of time and space toward the feel that what is to come is here. Hapticality is a space in which lived motion refuses collective agreements that define who is a person, what it means to be a person, how to be a person. Instead, dispossessed, affective selves—denied true humanity—live within, between and among bodies, refusing terms of a liberal humanist “self” that is whole, settled, unified.

This felt state exists far outside of Western therapeutic practices because the goal of wholeness no longer applies. Not only does hapticality challenge colonial notions of getting settled, of “making it” on settler terms, but life in the hold of the ship undermines all forms of bio- and geo-political manage-
ment: this feel of the shipped is not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land, a totem. By dislocating one’s body from all terms of coloniality—history as past, bodies bound by skin in present time, and private property ownership—hapticality becomes a lived feel that is simultaneously personal and vastly trans-personal, completely dislocated from bounded notions of place, home, and self: Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other.

Touch, though it is a “sentiment with its own interiority,” is not born of “self,” or “soul,” but connected to shared histories and ancestral experiences that are heard and felt. For example, soul music is an expression of lament for broken hapticality, created and enforced through slavery and forced separation from family, community, and land. Far from historical, these violences continue to live in the flesh through our DNA. Facing this pain cannot be done through historicizing or naming alone, nor does it involve forgetting the violence of history in order to move on and adapt. Instead, coming home, or fully embodying ourselves, becomes a process in which pain must be transmuted through a kind of sharing not bound by one’s skin: This is the feel that no individual can stand, and no state abide. The felt experience of sharing and embodying history becomes the field through which to forge connection and solidarity outside of colonial constructs of time, space, and “self.” It is not just the pain of this lifetime, but the felt acknowledgment of broken ancestral ties, geographies, and oppressions. The felt, living sense of history, then, becomes a crucial space for imagining self-hood beyond the confines of a body occupying a particular point in time. Instead of managing pain as personal trauma, as something to be “healed” in a lifetime, the felt sense of time stretches backward and forward, including ancestors and generations to come. From what vantage point, or what point in time, could we say that “healing” has been accomplished? And to what end?

Erin Manning’s *The Politics of Touch* considers how touch interrupts settler constructs of self in time and space, interrupts concrete boundaries between self and other, and undermines the myth of security. Manning argues that the problem of the body in Western scholarship and policy is that we treat it like a distinct agent. Naturalization of the body—marking it as gendered and racialized—renders bodies recognizable and assignable to territories. Nation states rely on these markings to govern citizens through a multicultural politics of difference: as long as people can be made “knowable” through the celebration of difference, they can be marked for inclusion while leaving colonial logic intact. Diversity and inclusion work, when couched within the logic of coloniality, can open pathways for more people to access the myth of the American
Dream, as long as a logic of “self” is left intact. Manning argues that a politics of touch opens the possibility for our bodies to imagine embodied agency capable of refusing notions of ourselves as singular and concrete. The spaces between us transform from objects of analysis to gestures of *becoming-in-relation*:

> "The body is never its-self: We have several bodies, none of them "selves" in terms of subjectivity. Touch as reaching toward already alerts us to the downfall of discourses of subjectivity: if my body is created through my movement toward you, there is no "self" to refer back to, only a proliferation of vectors that emerge through contact."  

Within this continuum, touch provides a strong challenge to dualistic knowledge production. What possibilities emerge for language and scholarship of feeling *with*, both recognizing and evading colonial technologies? Even the term “hapticality” is limited when attempting to access the *feeling* of pain since language has the power to separate experience, the actual feeling of pain, from the body. Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* argues that pain shatters language and the ability to speak. She argues that when pain does begin to speak, it tells a story, and yet, due to its inability to be grasped, it causes a split between one’s reality and the reality of others, making torture and structural violence effective tools of control. Violence, when it is inflicted by war, torture, or structurally through institutions, affects how individuals either speak or remain in silence. Sandra Soto suggests that the process of naming, defining, or using metaphors to “footnote the confounding manifold ways that our bodies, our work, our desires are relentlessly interpolated by inequivalent social processes” is equally a trap. Instead, she suggests listening to what is not said in order to ward off “ontological impoverishment,” or alienation from what we know in our bones.

Less a project of healing personal pain than of yoking woundedness across space, time, and language, hapticality as a ship, or vehicle, *densifies* the connection between past and present, self and other. While there is no “away” from colonial conditions, pain felt and shared forms a potential bridge. The focus becomes not the personal self in pain, but how pain continues to be inflicted by decontextualizing lived conditions. Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, argues that being and writing *in* the wake, from within the "continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding,” means inhabiting history in ways that do not see the past as the past, but as continuously unfolding within and around us. Here, the felt sense of history, of the ancestral continuing into the present, and the felt sense of responsibility for future generations, are a necessary corrective to individual selfhood. Being *in* something, within the constant unfolding of time as it interacts with history.
and an unknown future, becomes an act of care and repair. Through decen-
tering a knowing narrator as a hallmark of critical scholarship, other forms of
expression such as poetry, touch, and speculative fiction emerge as portals for
speaking our way into a decolonial otherwise.

Poetry as Touch, or Speaking for the Dead

Veronica Golos’s *Rootwork* is a speculative poetic experiment that moves back
and forth through time, fleshing the ghostly body of Mary Day Brown as she
dialogues with her abolitionist husband John Brown and other historical fig-
ures of the abolitionist period—Frederick Douglass, Lucy Stone, and Sojour-
er Truth. “Rootwork” is another word for hoodoo, for a form of healing that
crosses worlds in order to seek balance and harmony. As part of a poetry project
with the Black Earth Institute, poets were asked to pick a date in September
and to see where it led them. Golos chose September 16th, the same day that
John Brown was hanged in 1857, after the Dred Scott decision inflamed racial
tensions. One of the most infamous Supreme Court decisions in U.S. history,
the court majority argued that all citizens of African descent—whether slave
or free—could not be U.S. citizens (because they were not “persons”) and that
a land owner’s property could not be taken away without due legal process.
Golos draws upon historical documents, letters, and journals, in order to bring
the voices “from those drowned, ghosts beneath the sea, from runaways, from
the land itself,” as a form of world-making that performs a “call and answer
between American History and Myself.” In other words, through embodying
and dialoguing with the ghosts of history, Golos explores her own unique van-
tage point as a white citizen occupying complex historical and social ecologies.
For Golos, political activism informs her poetry as an act of animating history
in present time.

Golos’s own social location as a self-identified white woman becomes si-
multaneously displaced and centralized as she feels into the words and histories
of Mary Day and John Brown, as well as of other abolitionists and slaves, and
explores what can be felt and said when feeling *with*, instead of on behalf of.
Her poetry shape-shifts in time, space, and voice as she speculates on what has
been lived and felt. For Golos, the subject of slavery becomes an entry point
for a speculative dialogue with ancestors, land, and ghosts to inform present
time. Her writing “self” is decentralized and moves between selves and voices.
In coming to know and understand Mary Day Brown—a white woman who
committed her life to ending slavery—Golos found herself increasingly inside
of her subject. As Golos moves back and forth through time, tracing Mary’s
days before and after John’s hanging, she records vignettes that fuel Mary’s rage and determination over the violence she sees around her:

*That day, my host called the boy inside & his father followed. “Sing, boy,” the host said. The boy began to sing all Christian hymns; after the first song, he was urged to a second; after the second to a third. The boy’s lips grew dry, we could see. His father turned to stone as the white man demanded another, and another, the boy swaying on his feet.*

Feeling history alive via the historical words of another becomes a defining feature of border-crossing between worlds, of coming to know and see more clearly the violence inflicted upon bodies that are not one’s own. Less an act of empathy than an act of critical mourning, Golos/Brown endeavors to illuminate history through the practice of hapticity, not only as it is felt between Golos and Brown, but as it expands to include the voices of other humans, ghosts, and land. The felt sense, or hapticity, as it crosses between human, spirit, and natural worlds, becomes a defining feature of coming to embody history in present time. Traditional slave canticles frame Golos’s original poetry, shifting attention away from Mary Day Brown’s body into a lived, shared space animating relationships between multiple, connected worlds:

*Just before day I feel them. Just before day I feel them. My sister, I feel them. My sister, I feel them. All night long I’ve been feeling them. Just before day I feel them. Just before day I feel them. The spirit, feel them. The spirit I feel them.*

One could certainly critique Golos for imagining herself inside bodies that are passed, bodies that may or may not share her skin color or experiences. One could argue that there can be no truth here of lived experience. It is simply a speculative experiment of the imaginary. She could be accused of misrepresentation or speaking for others. What interests me, here, however, are the ways that Golos’s speculative strategy of hapticity opens possibilities for writing that challenge materialist confines of colonial time, space, and self. Feeling with the ghosts of history becomes a necessary method for understanding the present moment, understanding how Golos’s current embodiment has been
co-constructed with histories of slavery. The goal is less self-understanding than an embodied, felt exploration of whiteness and patriarchy as they continue to travel through time and history. By assuming multiple locations and bodies, traveling through history as a nonlinear construct that moves backward and forward, Golos challenges embodiments constructed in this time, this space, this body. Bodies become living processes, animated in time and space.

An example of Christina Sharpe’s “theory in the wake,” Golos looks back at violence occluded through histories of forgetting—an act that contradicts the white masculinist American narrative of Land of the Free, Home of the Brave. Golos evokes the Star-Spangled Banner to juxtapose nationalist songs with slave canticles, physically naming slave women on whose backs America was built. By focusing on the names and songs of women, Golos brings alive the legacy of women slaves, still so often excluded from histories and narratives of slavery:

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ghost code. america

Oh Say Can You See
O. Say. cn u c
O sway    ships

Desire, Hope, Henrietta Marie, Adelaide, Cora, Margaret
Scott, Sally, Whydah

Womenships slip by us
away in the waves    see sea   o can u
in the sea waves of limbs
```

Perhaps this form of poetry can better be considered the ancestral speculative, or a form of grieving that Donna Haraway might call the work of “Speakers for the Dead,” an important job in her imagined future. In her piece of speculative fiction, *The Camille Stories*, she imagines that Speakers for the Dead hold important positions as healers; not for individuals, but for “strengthening the healing that was gaining momentum across the earth” as a densifying of interconnected communities and ecosystems. Through the act of vital memory, through the work of mourning, the role of Speakers for the Dead is to “not forget the stink in the air from the burning of witches, not to forget the murders of human and non-human beings in the Great Catastrophes named the
Plantationocene, Anthropocene, and Capitalocene, to keen and mourn the dismembering of the world.”

Learning how to embody our way through grief, through the dismemberment of the world as we know it, is a central challenge for bodies conditioned by colonial consciousness. The challenge, or paradox, here is that embodiment does not present an end goal, only a vehicle by which we become continually undone. Through tenderly touching the unbearable, we become other, and other becomes self. Touch loosens our grip on “knowing,” animating a reality always in relation. Seen through this lens, touch becomes a portal to motion, an invitation to cultivate a space in which all beings that one is in relationship to—both alive and dead—can inform and shape worlds we wish to inhabit. My particular hope is that by reimagining ourselves within an always-in-motion universe, tenderly touching grief, dispossession and pain—we might feel empowered to practice singular acts of care for each other. Through expanding sensory capacities, we may begin to see moments of shock, trauma, or “falling apart” as opportunities for expanding multispecies collectivity, reimagining what it might mean to exist together on a rapidly changing planet.

Coda

You are giving a massage to a man from Eastern Oregon who is in treatment for crippling anxiety. During the first session, he tells you about his unionized health care plan. He tells you how happy he is to be taken care of by the union, and how hard he has worked, not like the lazy people who don’t want to work and take Medicaid.

You breathe. You are grateful for Medicaid.

When you approach his right hand, you notice he is wearing a ring with a fleur-de-lys, a flower used by the French to brand slaves in their colonies so there would be no mistaking who they belonged to.

You breathe.

You say, Tell me about your ring.

He says, I’m German and it’s a symbol of my heritage.

You breathe.

You will for your hands to soften. You keep softening, you keep softening. As you soften, he softens.

Underneath hardness is fear. As you soften together into the sensations of
fear, as he names how this fear lives in his body, tears roll down his face.

This man comes to see you next week and the ring is gone.

This man comes to see you every week for two months. He comes to every meditation class. He learns how to inhabit fear in his body, how to move it into the earth, how to look someone softly in the eyes.

When he leaves, he presents you with a painted stone. He has been painting many stones.

In the center is a man inside of a purple egg, his hands tenderly holding his heart.

Acknowledgments

This essay is dedicated to the following people who nurture hope through tirelessly cultivating systemic compassion: Lupe Salazar of Barrios Unidos, Sylvia Ledesma and the mujeres medicinas of the Kalupulli Izkalli, and the late Joe Jordan Bere- nis of Family of Woodstock and the Interfaith Homeless Shelter in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This piece was written for Skyler, my brave child navigating an uncertain world. May you remember that you are never alone.

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Notes

1. In a 2005 conversation with Billie Bush on Access Hollywood, Donald Trump describes his attempt to seduce a married woman and indicated he might start kissing a woman that he and Bush were about to meet.
5. Sylvia Ledesma, from a talk on Decolonial Healing at the Kalpulli Izkalli in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2017. Sylvia Ledesma is the founder of the Kalpulli Izkalli, a women’s healing collective, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is a Mujer Medicina, a ceremonial leader and Danzante of the Mexica-Conchera Tradicion, and Danzante de la Luna.
12. Sylvia Ledesma is a co-founder of the Kalpulli Izkalli, a women’s healing collective, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is a Mujer Medicina, a ceremonial leader and Danzante of the Mexica-Conchera Tradicion, and Danzante de la Luna.
13. Sylvia Ledesma, personal communication with the author.
23. In my training with Sylvia Ledesma, she told me never to charge the people, only institutions. She said, “How do you charge for healing, which doesn’t belong to anyone?”
29. Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
35. Sandra Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 6.
36. Sandra Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer*, 6.
46. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 166.
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