

**Do I Dare to Know Myself as a River?
A Pilgrimage Inquiry into
Motherlines and Embodiment**

**by
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Abstract

In this dissertation, I explore my journey to bodily inhabiting in the context of personal and intergenerational fear and loss. Over eight years, I undertook practices of singing, walking, dancing, poetic and narrative writing, historical research, and ancestral sojourns as inspiriting embodied inquiries (Aoki, 2005; Snowber, 2016). The inquiries described here are psychic and physical pilgrimages towards a bodily sense of home. I pursue this inquiry as a woman of European descent living as a settler in North America/Turtle Island, specifically in unceded Coast Salish territories (the Lower Mainland of British Columbia).

In exploring bodily inhabiting, I track arcs of my somatic experiences and constrictions in poetry and narrative, evoking possible traces of early life as well as prenatal and intergenerational memory. I sing songs from my mother, and excavate narratives of my maternal lineage as well as other female ancestors through lyrical writing and historical research, informed by Lowinsky's theory of Motherlines (1990, 1992) and Ettinger's theory of the matrixial (2004, 2006a, 2006b).

I trace moments and practices of earth-based encounter, including singing at the Burrard Inlet (also known as səliłwət) in Coast Salish territories (Vancouver) and walks in ancestral places and sacred sites in Ireland, France, and Germany, delving into how interactions between my body and the land evoke memory and offer teachings around bodily inhabiting and relationality.

I explore embodiment as an intersubjective phenomenon, drawing on the works of feminist theorists, somatic practitioners and psychologists, Indigenous scholars, phenomenological scholars, and arts-based researchers. Informed and inspired by various performative and embodied approaches, this pilgrimage of storying walks and dances in in-between spaces and thin places where ways of being in inquiry spiral with one another.

Drawing on inner imagery and my lived relationship with specific waters, I trace my journey towards living in the river flow of embodied consciousness in the context of encounters with echoing historical traces-- what may be water-memories from womb, infancy, intergenerational, collective, and primordial echoes. Throughout this work, I explore how creative, somatic, and earth-based practices can be pathways to reverberating histories, disruptive knowledges, and inspirited bodily presence.

Keywords: pilgrimage; Motherlines; matrixial; somatics; earth-based connection; embodiment

Dedication

In honour of my maternal grandmother, Margaret Sly Hutto.

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Note: All photos are taken by author.

Prelude: Motherlines, Fire, and Ashes

I am going to tell you a story—actually, more than one. A non-linear pilgrimage of sorts, that will take you from ancestors through Motherlines to me sitting here with you; from Toronto and New York to Berkeley and Vancouver, from lovers, to poems, to singing on the shores of the Burrard Inlet (whose other name is səliilwət). Pull up a chair, have a cup of tea. That's right, and feel free to put your feet up. Don't be shy in getting comfortable, dear listeners. The fireplace twinkles between us. I will begin.

For many years since I was young, I have had a recurring image that lived in my consciousness. Not exactly a daydream or a nighttime dream, this imagery has floated in my awareness beyond language:

I see one elder woman in a forest. I sense she is my ancestor. She stands with a younger woman of the same lineage. When I look in the palm of the older one's hand, I see a burning substance. What is being passed I don't quite know; the burning material looks like ashes that are still aglow. Under cover of the forest next to a tree, successively in each generation, the elder woman is passing this scorching substance to the next woman in the lineage. This fiery material is almost unbearable to hold. But passing it between generations in absolute secret is a necessity, almost like a lifeline. The message seems to be that we must keep holding that burning substance, keeping it aglow in our hands, passing it secretly, while never speaking of it or acknowledging it.

Periodically, this image surfaced in my awareness: these women were passing fire and ashes in secret, burning their hands. My connection with my maternal lineage was mostly absent. Yet there were echoes of stories, of strange, muted vibrations of pain that had taken hold in my awareness around that lineage. As I grew into womahood, I missed the stories of women I had never known. I longed to pass this fire in a way that didn't scorch us but kept us warm.

In her work on the Motherline, Lowinsky (1990, 1992) explores the role of internal and external journeying to encounter the echoes of the women who came before us, about which we may know little: "What does it mean for modern women to speak in the

mother tongue, to honor the richness of the Motherline, to hear the voices of the lost women in our souls?" (1992, p. 38).

Lowinsky (1990, 1992) suggests that through practices which allow us to see with our inner eye into hidden parts of ourselves that we reconnect with these lost voices. Through deepening into the unknown edge of our embodied experiences and acknowledging the unheard parts of ourselves, she suggests, we begin to further excavate our relationship with traces of forgotten ancestral stories that may lurk in shadow realms as part of our psyches and even in our cells.

For Lowinsky, the Motherline is an interconnected consciousness woven and passed among lineages of mothers and daughters that can pulse in us through time and space: "Imagine a cord of connection tied over generations. Like weaving or knitting, each line is tied to other lines to create a complex, richly textured cloth connecting the past to the future" (Lowinsky, 1990, p. 140). My own recurring and sometimes disturbing image of the women secretly passing fire and ashes, burning their hands silently without speaking, touched a longing in me to unearth and recreate a stronger sense of a Motherline lineage in my life.

This dissertation is my second major project to focus on exploring embodiment and Motherlines, though I didn't use the language of "Motherlines" in my first inquiry. I embarked on the first iteration when I wrote a master's thesis almost twenty years ago. In my M.A. thesis (Richardson, 2005), I drew on stories and written artifacts related to my activist father along with story fragments and embodied writing related to my mother and maternal grandmother. Through my thesis writing, specifically in the threads about my mother and grandmother, I was seeking what was still nameless to me, but I would now call a relationship with a Motherline lineage (Lowinsky, 1990, 1992) as well as the matrixial (Ettinger, 2004, 2006a, 2006b). This inquiry into excavating and co-emerging in these territories of embodiment and Motherlines has turned out to be some of the most profound work of my life.

Let's take a moment to look at the hearth: the fire is just getting going. Do you see how the sparks are dancing at our feet? In a moment, I am going to begin my tale. But before I start, you might want to notice how you are feeling. Relaxed, agitated, hopeful, bored, in pain? This story tells of my unearthing of somatic herstories in

transformative ways; and as part of that unearthing, I will also narrate how I got quite destabilized for a time. I invite you to notice how it is for you to hear a story about disorientation and shaky openings to the vast unknown.

I am telling you this story—in part—to share about my learning to swim through unmooring oceanic encounter into a wider, potentially more generative realm of being. I notice as I delve into this material, I like to look out now and again on a vast swath of sky or water, if possible, or to breathe down into my belly. I invite you to do that or whatever calls to your particular body as you read/listen.

Here we go.

Chapter 1.

Introduction: Pilgrimage Paths

My skin like soil
body exhales
blood pumping
cosmos' breath
I swim, walk as/with multiple incarnations
in dialogue with earth
a ribald orchestra
echoing
home

Body Stories

How do I inhabit my body? This body that sits now typing on the computer in a chilly attic room on a clear autumn day. An ever-evolving physical form. A repository of memory. A symphony of encounters. This animal body.

In this inquiry, I explore my journey into deeper bodily inhabiting. Over the last eight years, I undertook practices of singing, walking, dancing, and journeys to local and ancestral lands as inspiring processes of embodied inquiry (Aoki, 2005; Snowber, 2016). As part of my exploration, I have inquired into my relationship with my maternal ancestors, traces of older womb and ancestral (un)memory, and the earth. My dissertation dances with the question of how creative, somatic, and earth-based practices connect me further with embodied histories and enlivened presence in the context of personal and intergenerational fear and pain.

The intriguing invitation of embodied awareness became a focus when I was a teenager. At age 17, I was practicing a Shakespeare monologue in front of a theatre class during my first term at college. The guest teacher John was trained in a somatic approach called the Alexander Technique. With permission, he gently touched my chin, raising it slightly higher. I broke into unexpected tears. He looked at me carefully and

observed that the way I held my chin and neck expressed a message: “Someone has told you that you couldn’t be powerful.” I felt a flicker of recognition when hearing his words, yet how could he tell that from the tilt of my neck? And why had I been overcome with sadness in response to this slight push upwards on my chin? I was too overwhelmed to fully make sense of this incident, but over the years, his words would reverberate.

After this experience, I began to perceive that my body’s movements, tensions, and withholdings held subtle knowledges. As my theatre teacher John had implied, there were old imprints shaping my bodily expression and patterns. Through learning to pay attention to my body, I could further understand my body’s language.

Embodied insights continued to emerge. The summer following this experience in the theatre class, I spent three months as an apprentice in a summer theatre in Vermont. Living in the Green Mountains was idyllic and soothing. I roomed with the theatre crew in a communal house next to a rolling nature preserve and got a role in the first show of the season. Sometimes, under the stage lights, I was in sparking dialogic flow between myself as my character “Bonnie” and the audience, animated with an alive and electric presence.

I did sound for the next show, switching cassette tapes while a fellow apprentice ran the lights in the hidden booth above the stage. Between cues, this fellow apprentice and I began a summer romance; it was one of my early explorations of sexual energy with someone else, even in small doses. In that mix of doing theatre in community, living close to the forest, and the beginning of sexual exploration in relationship, I dropped into my hips and contact with the earth. I was *here*. I had no learned spiritual belief system, yet I felt my spirit—which I sensed had been partially floating elsewhere—downloaded sensually into my body. I experienced a sense of newly arriving on earth, and it was glorious.

Inhabiting my body opened me to the beauty of the living present: the trees in the Green Mountain forest, the old playhouse’s scent of wood, the rain-touched air, and the hush of expectant breath in the theatre’s darkness. I felt a presence threaded through everything, including my own flesh. My pores were a subtle portal to the cosmos, and I experienced a pulsating energy in my hips. This rich and raucous flow

compelled me to begin writing poetry for the first time. Lorde describes the “erotic” as “creative energy empowered” (1984, p. 55), and my writing surged forth from an awakening of that energy.

I had channelled characters since I began acting as a small child. I spent my childhood making up elaborate shows with friends. I performed in storytelling contests, plays, and then later, in scenes and productions at my performing arts high school in Manhattan. After my senior play in which I played an eighty-year-old woman, the director’s wife told me she didn’t understand how a seventeen-year-old could know so much about being an old woman.

Yet that summer in Vermont, I experienced the sense of newly inhabiting my body and opening a channel, not solely to become a character on stage, but to become more fully myself in my offstage life. As I landed further in my body, I expanded into a new range of feelings and sensations, which brought me into greater contact with life. Artist scholar Celeste Snowber writes of the power of eros in connection with the natural world and the body:

...the power of water running down the mountains, and the sensuous language of the colours in the landscape, we are connected to the landscape of our bodies. The natural world is humming with the sounds and sights of eros, just as immersion in our daily lives can be an opera of unfolding beauty. (2016, p. 27)

Snowber’s description resonates with the experience that opened for me that summer in Vermont.

At the same time, the summer wasn’t all bliss. I hated how the director treated a talented older actress in the cast. I would sit in the wings, watching and learning from this actress’s subtle, powerful performances. Yet during rehearsals, the director embarrassed her repeatedly. His behaviour seemed cruel, and it was painful for me to see this woman need to accept this treatment to be a “professional” and keep her position.

Meanwhile, I was so caught up with nerves around performing that I stopped eating much during the show’s run. One day, I went to the hospital with what I thought were severe stomach cramps. It turned out I had menstrual pain beyond what I had ever experienced. This intense pain continued to come monthly during my young adult life.

Coming-into-embodied-awareness did not make the world or the social relations around me perfect or alleviate my pain. But I was more present to life's unfolding in me and around me. In awakening to the erotic (Lorde, 1984), I was roused out of numbness to a deeper felt contact with the world, which highlighted the nature of oppressive conditions and gave me increased energy to direct my life force towards integrity and beauty.

My experience in Vermont of arriving in my body was a touchstone, a time-stamped period of transformation around which I later understood my life's epochs: "before landing in my body" and "after landing in my body." Yet despite the powerful learning and transformation of those times, as the summer turned to fall and life moved on, I was not always "in" or consciously in touch with my embodied experience. I experienced the full range of the human condition, including depression in which I often floated away from my sensory experience, seeking relief and numbness. In addition, I loved thinking and daydreaming beyond my corporeal life to other worlds. These disembodied journeys to imaginal realms were not integrated into my embodied being or my community life. Like many others, I lived in a cultural context which often prioritized the mental realm, not embodied knowledge. I don't think I shared the learnings of coming-into-my-body with anyone.

I also had parts of my body which pain made it hard to fully inhabit. When I was seventeen, I went to my first routine gynecological appointment. When the nurse practitioner attempted to do the exam, my body contracted intensely, making it extremely difficult to insert a speculum. The nurse practitioner asked me somberly if "something" had happened to me. Why wasn't I letting her do the exam? I didn't know why. I just knew I (my body) was shaking, terrified, and in pain when she tried to touch me.

The exam unearthed a painful constriction in my body. It would be many years before I was able to have a pelvic exam or allow anything to enter my vagina without pain. These experiences affected my life day-to-day, prompting and compelling me to keep inquiring into what kinds of experiences my body was holding below my conscious awareness that made my body react in this way.

Each of the experiences shared above—the experience in the drama class, the summer in Vermont, and the pelvic exam—were challenges and invitations, calling forth the question of what it meant to further inhabit my body.

I share short narratives of these experiences of embodied awareness to evoke touchstones which pave the pathway for this dissertation. These stories elucidate what has inspired this inquiry around dwelling in my living, breathing body on earth in the context of the complexity, richness, and mysterious echoes of past histories and the emergent present. My dissertation process has been part of that urgent and lifelong walk, seeking to keep cultivating an inspirited home in my own body.

Embodying/Inspiring: Theory as Method

Curriculum studies scholar Ted Aoki describes inspiring as “a quality of body and soul intertwining in their fullness” (2005, p. 359). From this perspective, inspiring evokes a sense of embodied participation in a larger animating dance of life. For Aoki, inspiring involves experiencing oneself as a part of an interconnected cosmos: “The person experiences the world as a whole with the self included...” (2005, p. 361). Aoki suggests that inspiring can be akin to resonance between one’s body and enlivening vibrations, such as music. He draws on the example of figure skater Brian Orser: “When Orser said that when he skates well, he does not skate *to* music, he was saying he does not find music distanced from him; he *becomes* the music” (2005, p. 360).

In her conceptualization and articulation of Embodied Inquiry, Celeste Snowber connects inspirited living with the ongoing exploration of dwelling in our sensual lives. She advocates for truly slowing down into intuitive awareness and bodily practices: “Making a practice of listening to your imaginative, intuitive, and perceptive abilities activates the energy that lies dormant within your own pulsing body” (2016, p. 6).

As I explore in the following chapters, I approach my dissertation as a set of intertwining inquiries into body, spirit, and earth connections with an ongoing attention to somatic awareness. My dissertation is an inquiry into my own embodied stories in a web of ancestral histories, especially of my maternal ancestors, and earthen explorations. My inquiry centred on these questions: How can I inhabit my body more deeply even in the

context of personal and intergenerational pain, fear, and patterns of constriction? What supports the relationship between inspired being and bodily inhabiting?

My inquiry assumes there is such a phenomenon as spirit or “the invisible” which is interwoven with my experience of my body. Feminist theorist M. Jacqui Alexander (2006) believes it is through our bodies that we experience the touch of spirit or what she calls the Sacred. Alexander writes of the invisible realm which touches us through the impacts it leaves, like the wind’s marks on sand:

In the realm of the secular, the material is conceived of as tangible while the spiritual is either nonexistent or invisible. In the realm of the Sacred, however, the invisible constitutes its presence by a provocation of sorts, by provoking our attention. We see its effects, which enable us to know that it must be there. By perceiving what it does, we recognize its being and by what it does we learn what it is. (2006, p. 307-8)

Alexander (2006) further describes the connection between spirit work and the body; she notes that engagement with the Sacred is intrinsically linked with embodied action, describing “spiritual work as a type of body praxis” (p. 297).

I have long been fascinated and inspired by the call of deepened embodiment. Having experienced the inspired connection to my body which Aoki (2005), Snowber (2016), and Alexander (2006) evoke in their writing, I also have struggled to stay connected to my somatic experience. One way of describing my experience is that my spirit or my soul has sometimes felt too big for my body: my spirit’s wide river of perception, crossing time zones and dimensions, has overwhelmed my embodied capacity at times. Another way of understanding my tendencies towards bodily avoidance is that painful experiences led me to disassociate from my body, as is common for many people (Blackstone, 2018; van der Kolk, 2015). Despite embodied experiences of connection, I sometimes have felt separated from my body, as if important self-shards were floating in space without a clear pathway to bodily belonging on earth. This tendency is exacerbated and encouraged by a culture which tends to value mind over body (Lewis, 1999; Snowber, 2016). Thus, the complex nature of living as an embodied being has been a central inquiry throughout my life.

Dancer and anthropologist Eline Kieft (2022) explores embodiment as a process that can bring us into deeper alignment with our life force(s). She notes as living beings in bodies, we are always—on a literal level--embodied, but the process of embodiment

or inhabiting our bodies is about greater sensory awareness and a sense of agency rooted in the body:

Being in a body is prerequisite for shaping or creating anything else in life, and the more present we are in all layers of the body, the stronger our power is for positively manifesting things in life. Paradoxically, embodiment is both an effect of healing as well as the place where healing begins... (p. 78)

A number of somatic and transpersonal psychologists explore the nuances of body-spirit connection and ongoing dynamic process of inhabiting our shifting bodies in relation to our psyche, soul, and spirit. Somatic therapist and psychoanalyst Shinar Pinkas (2016) theorizes that the body and psyche have an important synergistic alliance, though the psyche may journey separately beyond the body. She posits the psyche is “sent out to voyage only to return and continuously reorganise in the body...” (2016, p. 208).

Pinkas works with the understanding that the body contains fragments of emotional and psychic memory. She describes part of her work as a therapist as: “collect[ing] fragments of psychic asteroids wandering in the room, collating them into an organised intelligence” (2016, p. 209). For Pinkas, relating with these asteroids or fragments in a relational and coherent way is a part of a dynamic, embodied process of healing and transformation.

Psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Ettinger (2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2011) theorizes how we may hold fragments and traces not only of our own emotional memory in our body-psyches, but those of our mothers, ancestors, and unknown others. Ettinger’s concept of the matrixial borderspace represents a channel of awareness that Ettinger believes forms during our prenatal experience and continues throughout our lives. Through this matrixial borderspace or channel, we have access to an interconnected web of unnamed presences beyond our individualized selves that can both haunt and illuminate our perceptions.

Intrigued by interconnections of bodies from mother to child and other forms of ricocheting intergenerational echoes, I draw on Ettinger’s work on the matrixial channel in this dissertation. I also have been inspired by the work of Métis scholar m.d. caroline lefevre (2017) which centres Indigenous cosmologies in conversation with Emmanuel

Levinas (1968, 1979, 1987), Luce Irigaray (1974, 1986) and other philosophers. lefebvre theorizes that our womb experience is our first intersubjective encounter—what she calls the *Ellemental*-- which shapes all future relationalities. Alongside Ettinger's and lefebvre's work, I employ the concept of Motherlines which Lowinsky (1990, 1992) understands as a cyclical and psychic weaving of interconnection in a lineage of interrelated women and perhaps even between networks of women's/feminine embodied consciousness beyond immediate ancestry.

In this dissertation, I explore glimpses of excavated matrixial fragments, Motherline stories, and my own embodied experiences in particular earth sites and “thin places,” a Celtic phrase for places that bridge the visible and invisible realms (MacEowen, 2007). These excavations are all part of my inquiry into inspired bodily inhabiting.

I want to acknowledge that my exploration of embodiment in the context of intergenerational women's stories is situated in my own identity and history as a cis woman. My experience exists alongside the embodied experiences of people with gender identities and expressions which don't fit the gender binary and have been marginalized and excluded by colonial frameworks (Lugones, 2007). The diversity of existence inherently includes a full spectrum of feminines, masculines, non-binary, and other gendered expressions. My own work is one voice within a larger context and conversation. As a cis woman, while I have experienced patriarchal oppression which I am grappling with here, I also have a different kind of privilege in that my gender identity matches the one I was assigned at birth. Trans women, trans men, and people with non-binary identities have journeys around inhabiting their bodies that are equally important of which I cannot claim knowledge or experience.

I use the word “feminine” in this dissertation at times as I explore embodiment and power. I understand the (a) feminine(s) not as a unitary concept, but as a multiplicity culturally and politically. There is diversity in what the (a) feminine(s) can be. Yet I find the word “feminine” important as the oppression and marginalization of the (a) feminine(s) has been woven into Western cultures and colonial contexts (Barton & Huebner, 2022; Ettinger, 2006a; Federici, 2004; Forster, 2019, lefebvre, 2017).

As I write autobiographically, I frame my exploration of the womb/pelvis connection as part of my journey of inhabiting my body as a cis woman who is interested in embodied power in my own being. The cis female body has historically been shamed and/or dominated in Western patriarchies as well as other patriarchal contexts. The shaming has affected generations of cis women, and this shaming also has affected non-binary, gender nonconforming, and trans people.

I want to acknowledge that, as a settler woman of European ancestry on Turtle Island (North America), I am exploring a journey of embodiment in a white body, a social category that historically and still privileges people of European descent. My hope is that the pursuit of embodied inquiry—including facing the complex colonial patriarchy that lives in my body and the collective culture—continues to move me to reclaim a different kind of embodied relational self. As I/we somatically unwind personal and intergenerational constrictions and habits of engagement, new pathways of liberatory listening and voicing can emerge. Cultivating another kind of self-in-relation can support embodying alternatives to the colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist systems which have betrayed all of us (to different degrees and with disparate levels of destructive impact). Somatic inquiry and the power of the erotic (Lorde, 1984) have the potential to open doors of perception, confront the status quo, and deepen solidarity across identities and experiences.

Inhabiting the Body in Research

There are multiple ways to speak about the body, to explore the body, write about the body, and to make sense of the body. I have been inspired by a legacy of feminist scholarship (Alexander, 2006; Anzaldúa, 1987; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015; Cixous, 1993; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Rich, 1978, 2006a, 2006b; Snowber, 2002, 2007, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2020) which embraces experiential, embodied, and inspired ways of knowing in the context of a dominant discourse which has often excluded these forms of knowledge. Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's writes: "We've been taught that the spirit is outside our bodies or above our heads somewhere up in the sky with God. We're supposed to forget that every cell in our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it" (1987, p. 58).

In addition to feminist theorists, I use a phenomenological approach, drawing on “Husserl's conviction that it was only in the freshness and immediacy of encounter that certain knowledge could reside” (Grumet, 2015, p. 51). I recognize bodily experience as partially constituted through collective and historical processes (Ahmed, 2006; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Sheets-Johnstone, 1994; Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014).

Through my own embodied research, I am inquiring into body-spirit connections as well as the residue of historical imprints and shaping: a kind of embodied history. Describing her application of embodied history in clinical social work practice, Frances La Barre writes:

the term 'embodied history' (La Barre and Frank, 2010) calls attention to patterns of action and emotion and their felt bodily sense that begin to take shape at birth, and remain a specific action repertoire that configures and reconfigures in various situations.” (2011, p. 184)

La Barre suggests that patterns of attachment, resistance, and emotional triggers can often be traced most effectively in a kinaesthetic way, noting: “Bodies are exacting and specific in communication” (2011, p. 188).

La Barre and others (Gendlin, 1982, 2012; Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014) trust the body as a source of implicit knowledge. Such trust is echoed in the field of somatics which explores bodily experience and expression. Fraleigh (1996) writes: “Through new phenomenology and somatic practices, we understand that the body is minded, besouled and spirited...” (p. 15) Unlike theoretical approaches that primarily focus on the analysis of social structures that discipline the body, somatics, and phenomenology start with the “lived body”:

Phenomenology and somatics begin in concern for the "life world," not accepting theories in advance, reducing superfluous noise so that the elusive essence of the phenomenon of attention may become clear... (Fraleigh, 1996, p. 18)

Yet, as I take this stance, I want to acknowledge that the marking of our bodies into a hierarchy of social categories impacts people in disparate ways, depending on the classifications in which we have been slotted. Thus, I recognize the value of philosophical approaches that analyze larger social processes in relation to the body: “processes by which the subject is marked, scarred, transformed, and written upon or constructed by the various regimes of institutional, discursive, and nondiscursive power

as a particular kind of body” (Grosz, 1995, p. 33). I see the significance of inquiring into discourses of power that mark and order our embodied experiences. Yet as Helen Marshall noted in 1999: “so much attention has been paid to the theoretical body and so little to ‘lived experiences as data’” (p. 64). Since (and before) Marshall wrote those words, scholars whose work embraces and celebrates the body have led the way in bringing the lived body further into academic discourse.

Following Anzaldúa (1987), Anzaldúa and Keating (2015), Fraleigh (1996, 2015), Sheets-Johnstone (1994, 2011), and Snowber (1998, 2002, 2007, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2020), I have pursued an inquiry based on tracing lived, corporeal experience: a somatic phenomenological exploration that acknowledges embodiment as an intersubjective phenomenon. In concert with my own embodied exploration, I draw on the works of feminist theorists, somatic theorists and psychologists, Indigenous scholars, phenomenological scholars, anthropologists, and arts-based researchers.

Interlude: Embodied Writing (February 2018)

My body feels heavy. There is a slight clawing in my throat, a bit of dread in my shoulders and chest. A sense of wanting to leap out of my body and attach myself to some sort of lightness in the currents of air.

I take a breath. I remember that last night, as I walked home from the bus stop at 10:30 pm, I had a sense of dropping into an emergent, spontaneous awareness. In the midst of recent feelings of disconnection, I felt a consciousness of home in my body on earth, including last night’s rain-soaked street buzzing with late-night cars and sparsed with trees. I felt the ground under my feet, meeting me with each step. Clop, clop, clop. The earth. Wonder dawned.

I notice my body now at the cafe, touching into this awareness. I feel my chest full of life, swinging breezily. I breathe again, sensing some clear line of knowing, buoyed with sparking memories of people, particularly women, who risk telling the truth. My heels drop down, letting go energetically into what is below. My feet receive the ground’s support: a sense of earth in the busy cafe. I tell myself: Remember this feeling.

Slowing Down into Scholarship

About fifteen years ago, I had a profound series of inner shifts which I write about in this dissertation. As part of reckoning and re-orienting in the wake of those changes, I embarked on a new path, which involved slowing down. I was fortunate that this change

in pace was and is—for periods—possible. I went on meandering walks, had more periods of rest and “doing nothing,” and spent more time with other humans in listening and reflective modes. I understood unhurriedness as an avenue to find what was underneath confusing experiences and buzz of anxiety: to encounter shy or fearful parts of myself which eluded a faster-paced life. Slowness connected me to more subtle, soul-connected worlds.

Snowber (2016) emphasizes how lying down on the earth and other slow bodily practices support a sense of being nurtured and held by life: “When the body slows, it gives you a chance to really feel your feet rooted on the earth, to experience a sense of being grounded. When you feel your roots, you can fly” (2016, p. 12). This kind of grounding—of being held and anchored on the earth—was and is part of what I was seeking. Slowing down allowed me to attend differently to my own experience. Even if parts of me wanted to fly, these etheric parts also needed a kite string to tether them to the earth. Slowness nurtured the ongoing development of a kite string that allowed me to stay connected to my body and to the earth, even amid great uncertainty.

In both researching and living this dissertation inquiry, an emphasis on slowness has continued to be important. This approach doesn’t mean going slow in every moment but rather maintaining a connection to the capacity to slow down. As Behrisch writes (2021): “Slow comes from within our bodies; it has seasons and reasons that reason cannot know. It’s disruptive and immeasurable” (p. 667). In this vein, I have been inspired by the Slow scholarship movement, which resonates with the pace and orientation of my inquiry.

The Slow scholarship movement, as articulated by Mountz et al. (2015), is an academic feminist movement which supports individual and collective alternatives to the metric-based life and the exorbitant pressures of the neoliberal university. Several co-authors of the article by Mountz et al. (2015) mention writing projects they abandoned due to the emotionally complex nature of that work. These writing projects needed more time, which the narrow constraints of their schedules didn’t allow.

Writing more slowly can sometimes feel impossible in the context of the pressure to deliver numerous, rapid-fire outputs in the university. Yet academics and writers need to slow down to delve into intellectually and emotionally dense inquiries. This kind of

writing is akin to a journey through the brambles, stopping to navigate thorny and overgrown places, which takes a great amount of care, focus, and often, the cultivation of bravery. Slow scholarship advocates both individual and collective forms of organizing and action to advocate and support a university world where we “help buffer each other from unrealistic and counterproductive norms that have become standard expectations” (Mountz et al., 2015, pp. 1253-1254). This movement advocates for institutional backing of invisible, emotional, and/or collective work. Slow scholarship acknowledges the necessity of relational and cooperative engagement in sustaining and supporting our endeavours.

A slower place has allowed me to attend to a more conscious, reciprocal relationship with the larger panoply of ancestral, more-than-human, and communal human relations to which I belong. This reciprocal support nourishes my writing. Alongside this communal support, a slower approach fosters a deepened self-accompaniment which gives me a spaciousness to notice my own footprints and the brushing of sharp, verdant branches against my skin as I walk and write through these brambles. I have found a needed salve in a slower rhythm of writing and being. I am grateful for a graduate program and committee which has supported a dissertation inquiry in which my cocooned work has gradually metamorphosed and grown ready to emerge.

Pilgrimage as Inquiry

A journey or more specifically, a pilgrimage to/towards embodiment, frames the arc of this dissertation: a seeking of bodily connection through sensing, walking, moving, and singing in an iterative journey. Tracking my senses has offered guidance on the non-linear pilgrimage trail. In my intentional walk to/towards bodily inhabiting, my outer movements are intrinsically interwoven with inner learnings and shifts.

The act of pilgrimage is often defined as a ritualized journey to a sacred place (Chambers, 2003; Harpur, 2016). The idea of pilgrimage resonates with my experience of seeking inspired embodiment as an ongoing journey, enacted through intentional awareness, movement, and ritual (Coleman & Eade, 2004; Turner & Turner, 1978; Valters Paintner, 2015). A sense of bodily home is intertwined with earth connection and belonging. My autobiographical narratives discuss how I embarked on a spiritual and

physical journey of grounding into my body and earth connection in the face of disorientation. The Latin root for pilgrim “*peregrin-um*” means “one that comes from foreign parts, a stranger”, implying one who is not at home (Chambers, 2003, para 1). I was journeying with a sense of being in (partial) exile from my body and seeking embodied return.

Anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner (1978) theorize (Christian) pilgrimage as a practice where ordinary people can experience new realities through the practice of leaving their everyday lives to journey towards a sacred site. The Turners make a strong link between pilgrimage and encountering the borderland or liminal space of transformation and even death. Pilgrimage has ancient pre-Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Indigenous forms (Chambers, 2003; Coleman & Elsner, 1995; Harpur, 2016; Nolan, 1983) and Coleman and Elsner (1995) note that the practice of pilgrimage in the major world religions sometimes appropriated earlier, local practices of journeying to sacred sites.

My acts of pilgrimage have not been grounded specifically in a religious tradition, but rather emotional, physical, and spiritual journeys towards bodily home, anchored in earth connection. My pilgrimage has included sojourns to sacred and ancestral sites in Ireland, France, and Germany; I have also made repeated visits to green spaces and bodies of water near my home in Coast Salish territories (the Lower Mainland of British Columbia) on my pilgrimage trail.

While pilgrimage is often focused on reaching a specific destination, the journey is also a central focus (Coleman & Eade, 2004; Maddrell & Scriven, 2016). Harpur (2016) observes some historical and current-day pilgrimages have involved open-ended sojourns with no clear destination, affirming the centrality of the journey in these endeavours. Long pilgrimage walks often expose the human body to the elements, prompting the pilgrim to shed everyday habits and layers of familiarity that might shield the pilgrim in other situations (Russell, 2004). Chambers (2003) who undertook a walking pilgrimage to Lac St. Anne highlights the corporeal rigour of the journey. While the physically demanding nature of such a pilgrimage can put the pilgrim at risk of pain or exposure, a rigorous journey can also foster a tender vulnerability and present-moment awareness. Pilgrimage can tear away protective mechanisms, making the pilgrim more available to transformative possibilities of perceiving and living with

reverence in daily life. Chambers emphasizes the value of movement itself in the sacred endeavour: “I didn’t know that every step, ‘every move is a prayer’” (2003, para 30).

In her book, *Moving-With & Moving-Through Homelands, Languages & Memory: An Arts-Based Walkography*, Alexandra Lasczik Cutcher (2018) returns to Europe to walk in the footsteps of her parents, Hungarian immigrants who came to Australia. Her “walkography” documents her walk through landscapes of public memory in modern-day Europe as well as tracking the travel advisories, border controls, and security alerts which characterize the charged immigration and refugee situation in Europe.

As the daughter of refugees who now has the freedom of travel, Lasczik Cutcher (2018) notes the significance of her ability to walk through her parents’ homelands. Being forced to journey because one is driven out of one’s home by violence is different than the journey of the pilgrim, who leaves his or her home on a chosen quest, though this quest may be sparked by unexpected events or longings. Lasczik Cutcher’s journey evokes some of the tropes of pilgrimage as she undertakes the journey in response to her father’s death at a liminal period in her life, seeking meaning and learning through her encounters with places of historical and ancestral significance. Lasczik Cutcher discusses the visceral nature of walking and explores her journey through photography and poetry in addition to narrative writing. Similar to Lasczik Cutcher and pilgrimage scholars Bailey and Kington (2020), walking has been a critical component of and intertwined with my pilgrimage inquiry.

I walk almost daily in my neighbourhood in Coast Salish territories (Vancouver and more recently, New Westminster, BC), often making my way to green spaces and specifically to the local waters to sing and meditate. In addition, walking to and in sacred sites has been central to my sojourns in ancestral places. Some of my narratives in this dissertation depict specific walks I took; the physical act and metaphor of walking shows up in several poems. Springgay and Truman (2018) write: “As you amble to your destination you are still writing. You are writing in movement” (p.133). Walking informs my embodied thinking and writing. The consistent practice of my footsteps meeting the ground has forged (and still forges) a rhythmic incubator for visceral, emerging insights.

While pilgrimage does not always imply physical transit, especially with the advent of internet pilgrimages and a greater focus on inner journeys (Coleman & Eade,

2004; Harpur, 2016), Harpur argues that all pilgrimage involves a kind of motion, whether inner or outer: "...inner pilgrimage, like its external counterpart, still implies *movement*—towards a new spiritual state of being" (2016, p. 7). The process of transformative movement is at the heart of pilgrimage, whether in physical or spiritual terms.

Celtic theologian John O'Donohue understands life itself as a pilgrimage, including our journeys to incarnation on earth from what he perceives as the spirit realm. Drawing on Celtic cosmologies, O' Donohue (1999) highlights the journey from pre-conception to birth as a pilgrimage:

There was some ancient pre-conscious sense of belonging alive in you which already felt enough connection with the mother to start on this dangerous path. Nothing remained the same. All the changes happened in the blind darkness, and the transition to each new stage entailed such complete transformation. The depth and poignancy of your hunger to belong can be traced to this forgotten journey between the worlds. (p. 22)

O'Donohue refers to crossing a spirit-body threshold from one realm to another and then evolving in the dark, articulating the risk, hunger, and longing in this journey of embodied becoming.

O'Donohue's concept of the incarnational pilgrimage resonates with my own journeys with/towards embodiment explored in this dissertation. A major thread of this inquiry involves an exploration of travelling between void and form in iterative cycles. I am tracing a "sacred metamorphosis" (Harpur, 2016, p.7) which has been supported—though is not solely defined—by physical sojourns as well as other somatic and reflective practices. Alongside walks and physical pilgrimages, my journey has also included singing, dance, poetry writing, touch-based somatic inquiry, and other practices as pathways to exploring inspirited bodily inhabiting on earth. My inquiry as pilgrimage reflects on journeys where the inner sojourn and the physical journey intersect, diverge, and integrate in evolving ways.

Body, Earth, and Darkness

I walk towards my own voice (2020)

I walk towards my own voice
feet tender
eyes bright
 I hear it calling
from outside
among trees
by the small waterfall
by the stone near the edge

And from inside
my own chest
buried
snaking
luminescent
 hungry
clawing
 murmurings
now the surge of the sky's strike
 lightning bright
 a falling star
 on a comet's night
watch for it now in my throat
a pulsating mass of sorrow
so dark with tunneled light
 that it sings

My voice is brought forth through earth encounters, reverberating, hidden in nonverbal embodied communication, struggling to emerge. In connection with earth and body, the dark comes up at the end of the above poem. My walk towards my voice blends imagery of earth and body, leading to a place in my throat “so dark with tunneled light that it sings.” Finding voice is interwoven with bodily inhabiting; my experience of finding voice as a woman is a complex walk in the dark in the context of the historical erasure and discouragement of women’s speech and open expression (Beard, 2015, 2017), which I touch on in later chapters.

Finding voice as a woman, seeking bodily inhabiting on the earth, and encountering the dark intersect in my inquiry. Womanhood, body, earth, darkness. Some linguists theorize an etymological connection between *matter* and *mother* and the Latin word *mater*, which is also the root for a Latin word, *materia*, meaning tree trunk or the source of wood (Watkins, 2000). Yet the body, earth, darkness, and the associated feminine(s) have frequently not been culturally valued as a *source*; instead, the dark-body-earth-feminine have often been denigrated in Western contexts, at least in much of recorded memory (Abram, 2011; lefevre, 2017). David Abram discusses the prevalent idea that:

Whatever is good must have its source in the above, the ethereal, while whatever is dense, dark and downward must be avoided at all cost. The earth is death and decay, as opposed to the fundament of new life” (2011, p. 303).

We hear these negative associations in our language around darkness today. The dark is usually not positive: a dark mood, a dark day, the Dark Ages. The word denigrate (which I just used above) reflects this phenomenon; the etymological root of *denigrate* means “to blacken,” reflecting a belief that to darken something is to make it lesser (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa notes: “Darkness, my night, is identified with the negative, base and evil forces—the masculine order casting its dual shadow...which are identified with darkskinned people” (1987, p. 49). Anzaldúa makes the direct connection between darkness and the masculine’s shadow: the feminine(s). She also observes the negative framing of darkness and its connection to racism against Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Colour. As Anzaldúa (1987) observes, the Western patriarchal devaluation of darkness, body, and earth is interlocked with colonialism and racism (Forster, 2019; Gilligan & Richards, 2008; Hill Collins, 2000).¹

¹It is important to note that not all cultures identify the earth and chthonic with women and the feminine(s), and there can be a danger with oversimplifying identification of feminine(s) as connected with the earth, the womb, and the body (as is similarly true with racialized tropes which associate Indigenous and Black people with the earth in stereotypical ways) (Tate, 2015). There are many complexities in discussing diverse women’s experiences, the feminine(s), and the connection with the earth and embodiment. Vastly different constructions of gender exist cross-culturally along with diverse understandings of womanhood and feminine(s) across time. Colonial gender categories are interconnected with constructions of race (Hill Collins, 2000; Lugones, 2007). However, in a cultural context that still often denigrates the feminine(s), devalues women,

Especially in the context of these histories, a conscious inquiry into relating with the dark, earth, body, and the feminine(s) can challenge limiting and oppressive norms around what is brought to voice, opening possibilities of speaking, writing, and moving.

Darkness can mean what is concealed or hidden, excluded. Darkness embodies the unknown and disorientation. Darkness can mean mystery. Darkness can suggest invisibility, erasure, what is suppressed. Darkness embraces emotions like grief, rage, and anger. Darkness can mean mourning (Galland, 2007). Darkness can evoke the void: a place of pure emptiness (Rich, 1979). In astronomy and physics, current scientific estimates theorize that “dark energy” and “dark matter” make up approximately 95% of the universe while known matter makes up less than 5% (NASA, 2012). Little is known about dark matter and dark energy; their prevalence in the universe suggests much beyond our understanding of visible/understood phenomena.

In a Sumerian myth which is at least 5000 years old, Inanna is a Queen and a Goddess who voluntarily descends to the dark Underworld to attend the funeral of her brother-in-law (Hartley, 2020). Inanna’s journey to the Underworld involves being stripped of layers of clothing at each of the seven gates, leaving her exposed. After a harrowing descent and the threat of being permanently trapped below, Inanna eventually finds her way to the Upperworld, and a new deal is struck in which Inanna’s consort and his sister take turns in the Underworld, allowing the cycle of seasons and of death and rebirth to continue. This renegotiated agreement emerging from Inanna’s descent fosters a renewed balance in the world between the cycles of light and the dark, and between the Upperworld and the Underworld. The story of Inanna suggests a complex relationship with journeying into darkness/death and the possibility of renewal (Hartley, 2020).

In her article *Writing with the Dark*, Walsh (2000) poetically depicts her encounters with Inanna, who urges Walsh:

listen to me you are just
protecting yourself let

and exhibit strong signs of Enlightenment-based disconnection from the body and sentient earth, I believe that exploring a relationship between body, earth, and darkness with an awareness of their association with the feminine(s) is a generative pathway of inquiry.

go she says and I am fighting
eyes closed fingers stuck in ears and
I don't want to go let go stand naked
looking into the eyes of
my sister my self (2000, p. 1)

Walsh presences the tension between a calling to descend into the body/self and the fear of becoming naked and vulnerable in that descent. Referencing her study of poststructural feminist theorists Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigiray, and feminist theologians Christ and Chung, Walsh explores how women finding new language to write in/to/with darkness is interconnected with creative and “spiritual journey[s]” (Walsh, 2000, p. 3). Like Walsh, I, too, have lived the connection between spiritual sojourning and facing the vulnerability of darkness.

French feminist theorist and writer Helene Cixous (1993) describes her creative writing process as a walk towards a dark place. She discusses the entry into darkness as entering what she calls a “good, desirable hell” (p. 118). Cixous articulates her writing journey as travelling downwards into a place in the body:

Somewhere in the depths of my heart, which is deeper than I think.
Somewhere in my stomach, my womb, and if you have not got a womb—
then it is somewhere “else.” You must climb down in order to go in the
direction of that place. (1993, p. 118)

While Cixous describes the creative journey as bodily, she also portrays the sojourn as through “our own marshes, our own mud” (1993, p. 119), making the link between body and earth. Cixous believes that this muddy, somatic excavation is where our most precious creative discoveries lie. However, she observes the journey is culturally discouraged, noting that creative inquiries which explore our own depths can provoke fear of being excluded. Nevertheless, Cixous advocates embodied journeys through our fear of the dark to what is underneath. In going through the inner mud, she argues, we move through our conditioning into something that is more real and breathing with life.

My dissertation has been a pilgrimage towards the body and earth and frequently a walk through the darkness (despite my sometimes-fear of this journey). In addition to the dark as a metaphor, feeling my way in the dark also reflects aspects of my lived, sensory experience. I have remarkably bad physical vision (the exception being certain

states of open relaxation where my vision expands). Lacking in strong physical sight, I am often drawn to closing my eyes, and feeling/sensing the world in non-visual ways. Kinaesthetic and inner perception are my dominant senses, and this, too, has shaped my affinity with darkness.

In the womb and in early infancy, we can't see very well, but our kinaesthetic senses are feeling the world around us. As someone who has inquired into the incarnational journey from spirit to womb to birth, life in the prenatal dark, including the role of kinaesthetic senses, has particularly intrigued me. I have had transformative, porous moments of opening in the natural world when walking or exploring the environment in the dark. I have also had encounters with discomfiting psychic darkness which I touch on in this dissertation.

This affinity with nonvisual senses has led me to seek out practices based in other modes of awareness. Many years ago, I found the practice of Focusing, which gave language to something I did naturally. Focusing (Gendlin, 1982, 2012) attends to the bodily felt sense, a pre-reflective form of somatic and imaginative awareness, often accessed through simple inner noticing. For instance, if I attune to my body right now, I notice a tingling vibration in my throat and an awareness of my shoulder blades and the backs of my upper arms. If I attend to those sensations, I notice a heaviness and an eager rushing quality like fast-moving water, as I excitedly try to articulate my ideas in my time for my deadline, which feels like a hungry river. I breathe out a sigh of relief as I put imagery and language to this experience. If I keep attending to these felt senses, I may find out what the hungry river wants, which may show up in other imagery or sensations, leading to new insights and bodily shifts (Gendlin, 1982).

According to philosopher and psychologist Gene Gendlin's theory (1982, 2012), the felt sense is often subtle, but when we pay close open attention to its unfolding, the felt sense offers a trail towards deepened understanding and body-based awareness. Accessing the felt sense often involves an inner meditation, but it can also be tracked through movement, art, and other expressive forms. The felt sense may come through sensations and/or in inner imagery. Awareness of the felt sense can also emerge

spontaneously. Focusing is a process of consciously following the felt sense, excavating deeper insights (Gendlin, 1982).²

Though I don't formally research the practice of Focusing here, the concept of the felt sense has been a key navigational tool in my pilgrimage towards bodily inhabiting that is interwoven throughout this dissertation. Focusing is a practice that resonates with feeling my way through the dark metaphorically and kinaesthetically informed by a felt sense and an inner sight.

Somatics and Somatic Psychology

Gendlin (1982, 2012) and other body-attuned psychotherapists (Stanek, 2014; Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014; van der Kolk, 2015) emphasize how bodily-led processes can guide us to healing paths and generative inner shifts. From these perspectives, our bodies are not machines to program but portals to expanded consciousness if we can create safe harbours to investigate our somatic-intuitive-imaginative experiences.

My engagement in the broader fields of somatics and somatic psychology for over fifteen years has informed how I have approached my inquiry into bodily inhabiting both directly and indirectly (Blackstone, 2018; Fraleigh, 1996, 2015; Gendlin, 1982, 2012; Hartley, 2020; Johnson, 2013; Kain & Terrell, 2018; Kalef, 2014, 2017; Kieft, 2022; Koch, 2019; Levine, 2010; Peyton, 2017; Prengel, 2010; Raffo, 2022; Rothschild, 2000; Turcotte, 2012; Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014). I have been inspired and informed by the expansive scholarship that connects somatics and spiritualities, evidenced in the book *Spiritual Herstories: Call of the Soul in Dance Research* (Williamson & Sellers-Young, 2020).

² Gendlin always clarified that he did not invent Focusing, but instead, theorized a process that humans already do. Through research in the 1950s on what distinguished people who made meaningful progress in therapy from those who didn't, he found that many who had successful therapy experiences used elements of Focusing, i.e. following the felt sense in some way and going to the edge of their language capacities to what they didn't yet know (this involved a lot of stopping, pausing, slowing down, "ummm" and trying out words to see if they felt right). These people who had all these pauses as opposed to relying on already pre-set narratives appeared to benefit more from the therapeutic process, with more emergent insights that impacted their lives (Gendlin 1964, 1982; Klein et al, 1986).

Somatic inquiry is versatile, supporting the exploration of a wide range of experiences, challenging, intimate, and relational. Somatic awareness has increasingly been recognized as a critical dimension of healing in the wake of traumatic experience. Intrusive thoughts, sensations, dreams, imagery, and memory fragments as well as patterns of bodily disconnection can be features of trauma (Caruth, 1995; Levine, 2010) which Gilmore describes as “the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury and harm” (2001, p. 6). As I explore embodiment, I draw selectively on theorists who engage with the concept of trauma. In particular, Ettinger (2002, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2011), Judith Blackstone (2018), Peter Levine (2010), Sarah Peyton (2017), Babette Rothschild (2000), Dörte Stanek (2014), and Shirley Turcotte (Prenzel, 2010; Turcotte, 2012a, 2012b; Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014) have offered perspectives on trauma that inform my inquiry.

Leading traumatologist Bessel van der Kolk’s book entitled *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015) highlights how the body holds traumatic memory that the mind does not consciously retain. Therapist Dörte Stanek discusses how traumatic experience, especially when cut off from expression or acknowledgment, continues to shape embodied experience:

...over time, the body’s nonverbal stories become habituated and thus part of inseparable identity. In other words, traumatic memory is embodied, continuously recreating the past trauma in the present. (2014, p. 98)

Stanek, van der Kolk, and other somatic therapists (Levine, 2010; Rothschild, 2000; Turcotte, 2012a, 2012b) recognize that working with the body may be essential to addressing trauma. As I explore inhabiting my body, encountering possible fragments and traces of trauma has become part of the pilgrimage path.

Indigenous Philosophies and Teachings

First Nations, Métis, and Indigenous teachings have shaped my conceptions and lived experience of working with inspired embodiment. I give thanks to Gregory Cajete (1994), Apela Colorado (2013, 2021), Vine Deloria (Deloria, Foehner, & Scinta, 1999; Deloria, 2003), Joy Harjo (2012), Lyla June Johnston (2019), Vicki Kelly (2010, 2020), Carolyn Kenny (1989, 2014), Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), Manulani Aluli Meyer (2003, 2008) and Shirley Turcotte (2012a, 2012b; Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014). Without these

teachers and bodies of scholarship, my work would look very different and perhaps would not have been possible at all.

Métis therapist and teacher Shirley Turcotte's understandings of earth-based and intergenerational relating have informed my thinking and being (Prenzel, 2010; Turcotte, 2012a, 2012b; Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014). Turcotte developed a particular form of Focusing which weaves Western psychology and Indigenous knowledge systems. The work Turcotte developed is called Indigenous Focusing-Oriented Therapy (IFOT, also called Focusing-Oriented Therapy with Complex Trauma and Aboriginal Focusing-Oriented Therapy). IFOT has an interconnected and communal view of the body-self and conceptualizes a relationship with land-bases as critical to healing, particularly for Indigenous peoples (Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014). While IFOT prioritizes work with Indigenous peoples, IFOT practitioners have also used this framework to work with people of other cultural groups, acknowledging the interconnectedness of the body to ancestors and earth as a shared human experience (Prenzel, 2010). However, Turcotte notes that those who are not immersed in Indigenous or collective identities may hold less of an interconnected sensibility and may conceive of our experiences as primarily individual (Prenzel, 2010).

Turcotte advocates working with trauma survivors and in general, with therapy clients, within a framework of animate interconnection with the earth (Turcotte, 2012b). She frames Focusing sessions as ceremonies. Studying IFOT with guidance from Turcotte provided an early teaching for me about the role of conscious and consensual earth connection in nurturing a pathway to greater bodily inhabiting. In an IFOT understanding, the earth can receive emotional energies which are psychically overwhelming for individual humans, provided we have the consent of the earth (Turcotte, 2012a). Though my dissertation is not focused specifically on IFOT, Turcotte's work has informed my understandings of body and land-based interconnectedness and her teachings have shaped my embodied learning profoundly.

My sojourn has partially focused on subtle, etheric dimensions of journeying into the body which intersect with a nexus of spiritual wonderings, historical inquiries, and political questions. As I tracked my own spiritual opening and disorientation, I explored patriarchal legacies which have influenced my relationship with embodiment. As I progressed on my pilgrimage of bodily inhabiting, the unresolved reality of my (our)

existence as settler(s) on unceded Indigenous lands came further into view. As I cultivate my own permission to exist on earth and to inhabit my body fully, do I have the right to exist in my body on the earth in this place if the land was stolen by my ancestors and this theft remains unrectified? As embodiment is inherently intertwined with earth connection in my understanding, this question becomes an important one for someone seeking the ethical reclaiming of embodiment on earth as a settler in North America/Turtle Island.

Several scholar-teachers have served as guides in navigating this dimension of embodied earth-seeking. In particular, the work of Oneida/Gaul scholar and teacher Apela Colorado (2013, 2021), Potawatomi scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), and Anishinaabe/Métis scholar teacher Vicki Kelly (2020) has been especially influential in my inquiry into relating with my own embodied history as a European-American settler woman and my current inhabiting of unceded Indigenous lands.

Colorado (2013, 2021) encourages all people to learn about their ancestral connections as part of larger decolonizing endeavours. In Colorado's understanding (2013, 2021), finding a relationship with ancestral places, cultural stories, mythological teachings, and intergenerational collective histories can guide settler peoples to operate from a more relational consciousness. Colorado believes these ancestral/land reconnections can support more ethical, dialogic ways of being on Turtle Island that offer a needed alternative to colonial frameworks that promote European superiority and separation from the earth. Settlers' relationship-building with historically rooted and land-connected identities is a pre-condition, in Colorado's view, for any form of generative engagement with Indigenous peoples (Colorado, 2013, 2021).

Potawatomi botanist and teacher Robin Wall Kimmerer's book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) offers helpful and important teachings around questions of responsibility and belonging here for settlers in North America/Turtle Island. Kimmerer's work carefully delineates a vision of living in sacred reverence and willingness to take action to protect the land on which we live without claiming as settlers that we are "native" to this land in the same way Indigenous peoples are. For Kimmerer, this distinction is important. She urges settlers to develop a deeper reciprocity with the land we inhabit, noting that settlers often haven't built a strong relationship with the earth here on Turtle Island, which shows up in an alienated disregard for the land.

Drawing on her training as a botanist, Kimmerer proposes that settlers become “naturalized” in our adopted lands, drawing on the model of the Plantain plant, which seeks “to coexist with others around the dooryard, to heal wounds” (2013, p. 214). Becoming “naturalized” as settlers involves deepening into respect and engaged care for the lands which we inhabit and learning to relate from a greater interdependent consciousness and responsibility. Furthermore, in learning to relate with the land with sacred awareness, we may experience the land’s animate presence and even love, Kimmerer suggests. Kimmerer’s work has been a touchstone in my journey towards bodily inhabiting as a settler woman on Turtle Island.

Kimmerer’s perspective has intersections with the teachings of Anishinaabe/Métis Professor Dr. Vicki Kelly, who taught a graduate class on Indigenous Education at SFU in which I participated in 2016. Dr. Kelly urged us to focus on building a relationship with our multiple historical and present ecologies, whether as Indigenous peoples or as settler peoples to these lands (personal communication, spring/summer 2016). Dr. Kelly’s class and teachings affirmed early in my journey the value of beginning to develop earth-centered embodied practices on the lands on which I lived in a more conscious way. Dr. Kelly’s more recent writing (2020) articulates some of the ethics and practices she lives by which she offered to students in her teaching when I took her course in 2016. Kelly notes: “the ethics of relationality that are implicit in Indigenous scholarship are not donned like a cloak” (p. 151), emphasizing how these ethics must be practiced consistently in a daily way. According to Kelly, these ethics of relationality connected to Indigenous approaches to living:

offer a unique possibility to contemporary Indigenous Communities as well as the wider community, especially those who have a deep interest in the Indigenous paradigm, the epistemology, ontology, and hermeneutic of walking Indigenously in the Academy. (2020, p. 151)

Dr. Kelly’s class supported me to explore ethics of relationality from an Indigenous perspective as a non-Indigenous person who could also learn from these teachings. The encouragement to connect further with these ethics and with the land helped me nurture a powerful practice of singing at the water that I continue to practice on and off to this day. Undertaking this practice in the context of Dr. Kelly’s class informed subsequent inquiries into earth-based connection, deepening my focus on relating with the land on which I walk through song, ritual, and movement.

These scholar-teachers, Colorado (2013, 2012), Kimmerer (2013), and Kelly (2010, 2020) among others helped me understand that coming into a deeper relationship with the land, stories, and Indigenous peoples' current teachings and realities is one dimension of what is needed to challenge colonial paradigms and practices, though this deepened relationality is certainly not the whole journey towards reconciliation, justice, and transformation that is required.

I have grappled with my historical ignorance of Indigenous names, stories, and histories on the lands on which I have lived. I am aware that, in some of the stories I tell in this dissertation, I do not acknowledge the Indigenous land names for places (for the most part) until my journey takes me to Coast Salish territories where I currently live. This lapse has troubled me. Yet after attempting to add those names to prior parts of the story by footnoting them in unsatisfactory ways, I have come to believe that the narrative traces the shifts in my embodied capacity to meet the land in a more consistent way which dovetails with a more holistic engagement with the land's Indigenous names and stories, which is ongoing.

My capacity for a dialogical land relationship gradually grew in Tsleil-waututh, Musqueam, Squamish, Qayqayt, Kwantlen, and other Coast Salish territories through my engagement here, supported by human and more-than-human teachers, and through the ancestral journeys I undertook elsewhere during the time that I have lived on these lands. I am allowing the narrative to reflect that uncomfortable truth. In the stories that follow, I have decided to include the Indigenous places names at points in the story when I had actually learned at least some of their contexts and can share those in my writing.

In this introduction, though, I want to name that in addition to the Indigenous contexts I mention in the following narratives, I have also lived and been held by the lands of the Lenape (New York), the Western Abenaki (Vermont), the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat peoples, and other First Nations (Toronto), and the Ohlone (Berkeley, California), among other places. I tell stories about inhabiting these places in my dissertation, without offering a land acknowledgement in the stories I share. In the future, I would like to bring more awareness to learning Indigenous names, histories, and stories of lands on which I have resided (and which I still love) in a heart-connected way.

Entering into Inquiry

My pilgrimage into body and earth connection has drawn on a bricolage of practices and methodologies that are largely informed by arts-based research and have an autobiographical component. I have followed my feet, sometimes in circles, seeking practices and approaches that allow room for listening in the dark. Drawing on various performative and embodied approaches, I have swirled and spiraled in the in-between spaces of a variety of practices, methodologies, and ways of being in inquiry.

I have been inspired by Education scholars Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo and their scholarship in *Life Writing and Literary Métissage* (2009) which describes their autobiographical writing as “echolocation” (p. 3):

...we are seeking to locate ourselves in a rapidly growing network of contexts, including family, neighbourhood, community, profession, school and society, by sending out resonances from one embodied and personal location to other embodied personal and public locations. (p. 4)

In my autobiographical inquiries, which Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) describe as life writing, I am seeking to sing/dance/write stories in a way that allows resonances: an evoking of my readers’ experiences in a call and response as part of a diverse chorus of meaning-making.

My pilgrimage to ancestral lands and into my own body, and then creatively writing about these inner/outer sojourns has allowed me to unearth “possible worlds” (Bruner, 1986). Writing has been a pathway of research and discovery in my pilgrimage. Autobiographical writer Hampl notes:

It still comes a shock to realize that I don’t write about what I know, but in order to find out what I know. Is it possible to convey the enormous degree of blankness, confusion, hunch, and uncertainty lurking in the act of writing? (1999, p. 27)

Writing autobiographical narrative is an uncertain and selective process of composing ourselves out of many competing, varied impulses, fragments, and threads (Hampl, 1999; Metta, 2010). Ciarán Benson writes in *The Cultural Psychology of Self* (2001) that humans generally draw on available cultural repertoires to carve out our own stories in a culturally intelligible way. At the same time, the process of autobiographical

writing offers us the chance to make conscious choices in framing our narratives. Anzaldúa describes how writing offers the possibility of creating alternate life stories beyond narratives we may have summarily and unconsciously adopted:

I believe that it is through narrative that you come to understand and know your self and make sense of the world. Through narrative you formulate your identities by unconsciously locating yourself in social narratives not of your own making. Your culture gives you your identity story, pero en un buscado rompimiento con la tradición you create an alternative identity story.” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015, p. 6)

Autobiographical writing can allow us to interpret our lives in new ways and to challenge ingrained cultural narratives, according to Anzaldúa. Feminist scholarship has been a central force in legitimizing autobiographical narrative and poetry as valid forms of knowledge production (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). Yet for women, the act of focusing on our stories can still be a counter-hegemonic one. Metta writes: “Writing women’s lives and women’s self-writings challenge the fundamental hegemonic discourses and assumptions of selfhood, identity, and gender by positioning women at the centre of narratives and knowledge-making” (2010, p. 29).

A particular approach within autobiographical writing that informs my work is the practice of Ethnoautobiography which calls for an autobiographical inquiry into our personal, cultural, and ancestral stories as a decolonizing endeavour (Colorado, 2013; Kremer & Jackson-Paton, 2013). This approach encourages a collective and historically grounded sense of identity exploration: a storying of ourselves in a web of interconnectedness informed by relationship with ancestors, myths, historical movements and forces, and land-based relationships (Kremer & Jackson-Paton, 2013). As Colorado writes in the foreword to the book, *Ethnoautobiography*: “Once we know who we are we can contribute to the ceremony of life” (Colorado, 2013, p. xxi). Colorado suggests that learning our cultural, ancestral, and mythological stories allows all people to access wisdom and sacred, participatory, and relational ways of interacting with other humans and the earth.

While Ethnoautobiography draws on research and autobiographical writing, it also invites dreams, visions, and ceremonial processes as valid forms of knowing. Ethnoautobiography has an inherently political dimension, seeking to challenge colonial scripts which encourage disconnection and obscure histories of colonization and

oppression. Ethnoautobiography is “a call for all people and peoples to engage anew with the thorny, complicated issues of personal and cultural identity, and how it relates to our relationships with other people and the places we live” (Kremer & Jackson-Paton, 2013, p xxv). Ethnoautobiography may draw on creative forms such as poetry and performative writing in representation (Kremer & Jackson-Paton, 2013).

I have been influenced by Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa’s approach (1987) to autobiographical-historical narrative, *Autohistoria-teoría*, which makes explicit the connections between spirit and body through poetry, storytelling, and mythological and historical inquiry. Ethnoautobiography and *Autohistoria-teoría* offer models of life writing that actively encourage the inclusion of otherworldly and spiritually-connected experiences along with an examination of cultural/political histories in which we are embedded. Though my dissertation is not strictly an Ethnoautobiography or an *Autohistoria-teoría*, my work has been inspired by these approaches.

I have been informed by the practice of Poetic Inquiry (Cole, Thomas, & Stewart, 2012; Faulkner, 2019; Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009) which draws on poetry in research to elucidate the human experience. Neilsen Glenn (2012) also centres the poetic in research through her conceptualization of lyric inquiry which features poetry and other forms of lyrical prose writing: “...inquiry that both recognizes and welcomes the lyric impulse and the singing of the self” (2012, p. 18). And I do sing. Neilsen Glenn highlights strengths that lyric inquiry offers, including conveying meaning through rhythm and playing with form. The scholarship of those who walked before me inspires me to embrace the poet within me and to draw on poetic writing in my dissertation.

Poetry offers a particular way to walk close to the edge of the unspeakable. As Lorri Neilsen Glenn observes, poetry: “cuts deep to the bone, makes vivid the flesh and sounds of the world and the pilgrimages of the mind and heart” (2012, p. 19). Writing poetically about my experiences “keep[s] embodied experiencing alive in the midst of language (Gendlin, 1992)” (Butler-Kisber, 2012, p. 182)

My dissertation journey has affinities with song: a vibratory process of echoes, resonance, and reverberations. As music therapist and poetic researcher Mary Rykov notes, poetry is “the most musical of literary forms” (2012, p. 292). Writing poetry is particularly good at allowing the resonance and rhythm of self-accompaniment in

intimate terrain. According to poet-scholar Carl Leggo (2019), poetry “invites us to slow down and linger with stories and rhythms and silence and possibilities” (2019, p. 39). I invite readers to slow down into possibilities through poetry and other lyric writing I offer in this dissertation.

Embodied Inquiry is an approach to research which has supported my pilgrimage towards bodily inhabiting. Developed by dancer-poet-scholar Celeste Snowber, Embodied Inquiry “integrate[s] the body as a place of inquiry and dance as deeply connected to the bodysoul” (2017, p. 132). Embodied Inquiry invites researchers to listen to their sensing bodies in our research and writing. Snowber emphasizes that an ethic of embodied listening is central to the practice of Embodied Inquiry. Embodied listening involves bringing our attention to our bodily sensing and perceptions: “The entire body hears. I listen to the light as I feel its softness on my skin” (Snowber, 2016, p. 55).

Embodied Inquiry underscores the value of movement as inquiry. Regular physical practices such as dance and walking are understood as sources of insight and understanding. Snowber notes the same insight cannot be accessed in a “frozen or immobilized” state of compressed stillness (2016, p. 5):

Listening to our body data and information is a place of coming to know ourselves in ways we might not have thought possible. These body data are not static; they are connected to the kinetic aliveness within us, moving, breathing, and pulsing” (2017, p. 256).

Language—now frequently a written medium—originated in oral cultures when it was a lived, present-time expression in and through the body, accompanied by tone and bodily gesture (Snowber, 2016). Snowber advocates a return to writing that lives out language’s capacity for embodied expression. Drawing on poetry’s potential to access embodied experience, Embodied Inquiry often evokes poetic and lyric writing in the representation of research. Snowber writes: “Here my sinews, bones and flesh were formed in a language resonant with bone reality, breaking open the page and blood was transformed to ink (Snowber & Wiebe 2009)” (2017, p. 132).

The practice of Performative Inquiry (Fels, 1998, 2014, 2015, 2019) likewise informs my research repertoire. Two of the chapters in this dissertation (both on singing) were particularly informed by the practice of Performative Inquiry, which encourages researchers to welcome and embrace open-ended questions, interruptions, resistances

that emerge through Performative Inquiry, exploring what unfolds in improvisational play and through writing in reflection:

The catalyst for inquiry may be a question, an event, a theme, a feeling, a piece of poetry: a phenomenon which we explore through questions: What if? What matters? What happens? So what? These questions are not separate from the action but embodied within the action-interaction of performance. (Fels, 1998, p. 4)

Fels points to the multi-dimensional, non-linear nature of this kind of work: “the fragments, moments, interruptions within which and through intersection Performative Inquiry may be realized and recognized” (1998, p. 4). This approach to research has allowed me to follow wonderings in organic ways.

Performative Inquiry specifically highlights “stop moments” or “tugs on the sleeve” that emerge in the process of inquiry (Fels, 1998, 2014, 2015, 2019). Fels describes the stop moment as “a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity” (2014, p. 107). Building on Applebaum’s articulation of the stop moment (1995), Fels describes the stop as “a moment of possible learning within which choice of action, so often invisible, becomes visible and is recognized” (2015, p. 152). Noticing stop moments can support slowing down to notice new insights, disturbances in our patterns of thinking-feeling, and shifts in perspective.

In her discussion of Performative Inquiry, Fels shares the importance of narrative writing and poetry to evoke what emerges from the stop: “Notably, in our documenting and writing of stop moments, we turn to metaphors and narrative as we seek to clarify, to enlighten, to embolden what one hopes to share in understanding...” (2019, p. 247). Fels engages in performative writing to evoke meaning and emergent questions/not-knowing: “I call on the skills of my writing as narrator and poet to re(play) the rememberings, representings of my fellow participants that shape the unfolding of our journey/landscape” (1998, p. 34).

Another approach that has inspired me in this dissertation is trance-based inquiry, developed by Barbara Bickel (2011, 2020), which she describes as “a form of active or process meditation and visioning, a waking-dream- state, or a practice of active imagination where one can journey to other realities through an altered state of consciousness” (2011, p. 9). As part of my dissertation inquiry, I have undertaken

intentional trance explorations that involve meditation and visualisation. I also share imagery that emerged from spontaneous waking dream or light trance states; these symbols and visuals gesture to significant themes and emergent knowings. Bickel notes: “Within the waking- dream-state of trance, time and space become fluid, non-linear, and physical restrictions and barriers dissolve” (2011, p. 9).

While trance experiences are often accessed without being “in” our bodies (and perhaps can be escape valves when we aren’t at home in our bodies), the bodily embrace of these experiences allows them to land fully and become transformative, allowing us to birth new physical and soul possibilities. Embodied presence gives our numinous encounters their expressive and relational power on earth. Through engaging in trances, and acting on what emerges from these inquiries, I have been exploring how to allow a deeper connection between etheric spiritual perception and earthly life.

Living Inquiry developed by Karen Meyer (2006, 2010, 2012) has also shaped my approach. Living Inquiry focuses on a careful exploration into everyday and ordinary happenings of life, highlighting the intimate nature of inquiry (Meyer, 2012). In her graduate course, Living Inquiry, Meyer focused on the themes of place, language, time, and self/other as starting places for everyday reflection (Meyer, 2010). These themes were explored through the method of field notes, which Meyer describes as “sketches” (2010, p. 88). These sketches can take a variety of artistic forms. Meyer’s practice of making field notes is a crafting process done carefully with poetic ear over time:

They [field notes] aren’t journal writings or free writings. I don’t write them every day. I craft and polish them over many days. I listen to them in rough form, take out anything superfluous, and hold onto only what matters, what is the essence, what is poetic (2012, p. 112).

My dissertation uses a version of field notes in two different chapters to encapsulate curated snapshots of experiences. In addition, the concept of the poetic notation of everyday life as advocated by Meyer has influenced the underlying ethos of my work.

Inspired and guided by ways of being in inquiry offered by Ethnoautobiography, Autohistoria-teoría, Poetic Inquiry, Embodied Inquiry, Performative Inquiry, Trance-Based Inquiry, and Living Inquiry, my dissertation centres embodied life writing, poetic writing, and field notes. I evoke resonances and evolving possibilities through

linguaging the world(s) that emerge. My arts-based renderings resound with wonderings, questions, visions, and possibilities.

As a final note about representation, I have chosen to frame this dissertation as a story told to you, my listeners, sitting together near a fireplace. While this dissertation is also written, I invite you to imagine it as being told to you verbally, as we sit physically together near the hearth. Why? For one, parts of this work emerged initially as an oral performance and presentation, as I shared some of what later became chapters in graduate classes, primed by my background in theatre and storytelling.

In addition, a hearth-based oral storytelling context reflects the intimate, often unrecorded subject matter of this dissertation. This is the way women have often told stories—informally, while cooking, or doing other tasks, or around the fire at night—and going back far enough, oral storytelling is threaded through traditions cross-culturally. Calling on these storytelling antecedents, I ask you to join me at the hearth.

Chapter 2.

Vibrations and Vastness

Now, as you warm your feet by the hearth, my dear listeners, I invite you to travel with me back to the early 2000s. The place is Toronto, Ontario. Imagine a soft-spoken young woman, one eye squinted against the August sun, marching along the pavement, looking for an apartment to rent. Sweating, she sees a sign in a window, on a street lush with trees, makes a deal to rent an apartment on Rusholme Road where she will live for two momentous years until she is almost thirty.

I was that young woman in Toronto. I welcome you to my first story of a wild and powerful breaking open in me, sparked by writing and love, which launched me into a spiraling pilgrimage towards a new possibility of home.

At age 27, I moved to Toronto to attend a master's program in Adult Education and Community Development, leaving my young activist life in Seattle. I didn't expect to love Toronto as a city, but I did. Toronto reminded me of the New York City of my childhood, but with a greener, more open, Canadian feel. I remember walking down the street on my first visit there before starting graduate school, the sun warm on my face. An inner sense told me that this place would unlock a kind of transformative potential if I were willing to accept the offer.

After moving into my apartment on Rusholme Road in late summer 2003, I began attending graduate classes at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and getting to know my new city. Soon, I fell in love with the red brick buildings, the swooping green trees, and the lapping lake. I adored Dufferin Grove Park and riding the streetcar to the Beaches. I also fell in love with particular people.

After taking a year of classes, I embarked on writing an autobiographical thesis, based in scrawls of insight I had been recording for the first year of the program. In my thesis work, I was interested in untold histories and how they are passed through the body. Among other impulses, I was driven by my long-held image of a lineage of women passing burning ashes in an obscure forest.

As part of my thesis work, I explored newspaper articles and documents tracing my father's stories as a blacklisted socialist activist and organizer in New York State. Alongside this inquiry, I gathered story fragments about my mother's and grandmother's lives and used embodied writing to trace my own experiences in relation to my implicit wonderings about my grandmother's and my mother's mostly untold stories (Richardson, 2005).

I tracked bodily senses and fragments of information around possible histories of loss, abuse, and erasure in my maternal lineage of which I would never fully know the story. This felt important. I explored what it meant to deepen my connection to my own body in the context of those unmetabolized stories (Stanek, 2014). What did it mean to reclaim bodily connection in the context of intergenerational trauma as well as wisdom, both known and unknown?

During this time, I began an intimate relationship. The first night I spent with my new partner, I felt my body arc-ing into a new formation of cells, responding to her profound attunement. I experienced a new sense of being met, beyond what I had ever experienced. After years of pain and constriction, my body spontaneously opened, vibrating with subterranean light; I could feel other shifts occurring, too. Alongside my thesis writing, I delved into writing poetry.

Writing viscerally about embodied memory alongside my new relationship initiated a transformative process. An urgent and exquisite flow of life force streamed through my body and my life. But the flow was wildly expansive beyond what I knew how to navigate.

When I close my eyes now, I can feel the river flow of awareness of those days. As I worked away at my cobalt blue desk in my sun-streaked apartment on Rusholme Road, I more than once had the thought: *This way of writing and living is how I want to live the rest of my life*. Even when difficult, the writing process was fulfilling and, at times, joyful, as I followed trails of aliveness in my body.

In my downtime from the writing process, I biked around the city among the red brick buildings and the green trees. I also spent a lot of time with my girlfriend. Closing my eyes now, I remember us dancing to the band, *The Be Good Tanyas*, in a sock-

footed slow dance on the bright wooden floors of my apartment with the fire door open, the two of us laughing in the mid-afternoon Ontario light.

While the emergent flow of awareness-joy was beautiful, it was also unnerving. As my body (and thus, I) relaxed with my partner, I sometimes broke down into unexplained tears. In a poem I wrote during that period in 2005, I explored how these tears reflected a melting inside me connected to memory that I didn't understand consciously but experienced in my body. The poem ends with these lines:

My sobs are
a seeping-through
of water-memory
wet with the knowledge
of how water hardens heavy

into rock
and how
kneeling dirty
at stone embankments
with warm hands, patient feet
close cradling
can yield remembered currents
whispering

river-secrets.

(Richardson, August 2005, personal journal)

Part of my inner world was melting from rock to water. My writing into embodied explorations of personal and intergenerational stories, the support of my graduate program, my enjoyment of Toronto, and my partner's presence were all unfolding me further into a fullness of being. As I unfurled, I was stretching beyond what was familiar.

Rivers and then oceans flowed in my inner imagery. In addition to moments of beauty, I also was glimpsing a spacious abyss. This abyss scared me. I spent as much time as I could sitting on the beach at Lake Ontario, watching the lapping water, which comforted me in its watery movements.

Meanwhile, the flow continued in my daily writing as I wrote about my grandmother and my mother, and my own difficult and joyful experiences of embodiment. Here is an excerpt from that writing:

The summer I find such flow on the dance floor, I write my mother a letter about how I loved going dancing. In a phone conversation, my mother seems struck by this enthusiasm for dancing that I have expressed. She tells me that my grandmother, too, said that when she was young, she loved to dance.

“I never saw her dance,” my mother tells me on the phone. “I could never quite imagine it.” Savoring this clue, this tiny piece of a story, I try to imagine my grandmother, whom I barely remember, as a young woman, dancing.

But there are other images that fill my mind. There is a picture of her, an older woman. She sits in a wicker chair, her face distant, smoking a cigarette in the sunlight, the fullness of her legs exposed in the warm sun. In the picture, I sense that armored, disembodied realm of being that was so familiar to me as a child when I would come upon my mother resting, her face faraway. I imagine my grandmother, taking a drag off her cigarette, pulling into her lungs breath that is numbed and peaceful, shot through with nicotine and the soothing absence of unmet desire. (Richardson, 2005, pp. 32-33)

My grandmother was an intelligent, mostly quiet, and obedient girl in a family which favoured the boys. Her father ruled with an iron fist and her mother was quite cold, I have been told.

As a young woman in the 1930s, my grandmother acted boldly. She refused to follow her father’s expectations that she stay at home in East Aurora, New York (a suburb of Buffalo) and become a teacher. Instead, in her early 20s, she moved to the bohemian neighbourhood of Greenwich Village in New York City, made a group of friends, and worked. Perhaps the Village was one place that she went dancing.

But when her family essentially forbade a marriage to her boyfriend who was from India (presumably due to racism), my grandmother ended up choosing instead a family-sanctioned marriage to my grandfather and becoming a housewife in the suburbs of New York. In my M.A. thesis, I describe how my mother remembered a not-infrequent scene of my grandfather berating and belittling my grandmother for a mistake she made. My grandmother never spoke back (Richardson, 2005).

I was collating fragments of memory as I tracked my own bodily experiences and fragments of stories that lived in my consciousness. Weaving threads of my mother's and grandmother's and my own stories into an emergent tapestry of writing was powerful. Yet the writing process was emotionally painstaking, and the river inside me was hitting river rocks and eddies.

In another part of my M.A. thesis inquiry, I wrote about the possible overlap of spiritual experience and traumatic disassociation. My writing describes a long-ago dialogue between my mother and my grandmother which my mother had relayed to me when I was doing research for my thesis. In this conversation, my eight-year-old mother told my grandmother about a spiritual experience my mother had had (a very uncommon topic to discuss between them or between my mother and myself). My grandmother uncharacteristically responded by describing an experience of floating above her body, observing herself from above, which she had had as a teenager: a kind of mystical experience. In my thesis, I discuss how floating-above-the-body experiences are pursued intentionally by some spiritual practitioners; and I also examine how out-of-body experiences are described by people who have disassociated for other reasons. I draw on the work of several trauma survivor writers (Culbertson, 1995; Lewis, 1987) who explore the brilliant capacity of traumatized people to access safety and spiritual support by journeying out of their bodies (Richardson, 2005). I have no real information to further understand my grandmother's (or mother's) experiences. I don't know what prompted my grandmother's journey, but I describe my wonder at "this small hint of my grandmother's and my mother's legacies of voyaging that I somehow know have been passed to me" (2005, p. 77).

As I wrote that Toronto spring and summer in 2005, a quiet inner voice told me it would be wise to extend my studies another term. Time would allow me to pace my writing process. But the costs to extend my program as an international graduate student were high; I couldn't justify a large loan sum to stay in school for another term. Thus, I rushed to complete my program by the end of the summer.

One day, I took the long, beautiful streetcar ride out to the Beaches, and sat in the sand looking out on Lake Ontario. I sensed that I need deep grounding to support these new movements of energy and life force moving through me, yet I didn't know how to root in my own embodied centre to meet the unknown. I had the urge to keep opening

to this joyful and expansive process of flow. Yet around me and inside me, life was shifting rapidly.

My two best friends with whom I had moved to Toronto from the U.S. graduated and left Canada that summer. Back in New York, my father's long illness had left my mother as a caregiver. My girlfriend's family did not fully welcome our queer relationship. I knew I would be confronting issues of visa, work, and stability as a non-citizen in Canada if I stayed.

I was committed to continuing to understand and deepen a relationship with my family: my Motherline quest had prompted my writing. As I sat on the beach one day, I thought again of my grandmother about whom I was writing and who had died many years before. She was born and raised in New York State, not so far from the land I was sitting on, but across the border, near Buffalo. My gaze lifted to look across the Lake to the other side of the border. I felt somehow my roots and loyalty were still with her, despite a sense of loss that pervaded my sense of her. I was afraid of abandoning my family and my history in the U.S. if I stayed in Toronto. At some core level, I was afraid of being profoundly alone.

As I neared the end of my program in Toronto, images emerged in my consciousness. One vision was of my partner and myself alone on a vast beach: the sky endless, the ocean infinite, and the empty white sand stretched on forever. In the image, we were facing each other at a distance and throwing a coloured ball back and forth. Perhaps the ball was our relationship or perhaps it was a knowing we shared: a spark of vivid colour in this open landscape. Like two people on a remote island in the middle of the ocean, we were the only ones able to meet each other here, throwing and catching this tiny, coloured object amid the immensity of space. Even then, there was a gaping distance between us in this territory.

I had another vision, too: of a tidal wave coming towards me. In this inner image, I was on a beach alone and one of my feet was chained deep in the sand beneath me. I couldn't escape. I watched the huge wave coming closer, powerless to get out of the way. A sense of fear began to pervade my system. I was opening to something immense, primordial, and oceanic, but I was also caught and frozen on the beach.

These images evoked an opening to a vast awareness which didn't fit into the world I knew. This opening was profoundly beautiful; but the contact with this vastness was untethering and threatened to lead me to an unfamiliar world. My partner was also going through her own challenges. I wished there were a teacher or community that we trusted to offer guidance through these expansive waters. But I didn't have full language or clarity for what I was experiencing or a sense of how to meet this experience. The world around me was primarily focused on concerns like career success, making enough money, having babies, and sometimes alternately, political organizing and mobilization for justice. I was interested in these things, too; yet I was being pulled towards invisible experiences that vibrated, evoking an unseen, unverifiable world that called to me.

I arranged for my thesis to be bound in red leather so it could officially be delivered to the university library in a matter of weeks. As I prepared to release this writing into the world, I looked at my future with uncertainty. Was I going to stay in Toronto? I sensed I needed a clear, solid, and anchoring relationship with the earth beneath my feet. I loved my partner, and I loved Toronto; I wanted to stay. I relished the everyday swish of spruce and maple trees on the streets, and the vibrancy of the city. Yet I was struggling with rooting on the land enough to feel safe. Was it the busyness of the city? The lack of access to the ocean? The sense of being, at some level, a foreigner, if only from across the border? Was it the spectre of floating maternal histories from the land just adjacent to Toronto, calling to me further?

I just knew that my life energy traveled down into the soil in Toronto only so far. Then this moving flow ricocheted, almost like a boomerang, and fragmented.

After a weekend trip to the U.S. to visit friends, I returned to Toronto late one August night. Waking up in my Canadian apartment and heading out onto the sweltering city streets, I abruptly had a sense of being in exile, far away from what I knew as safety and belonging. I was dissolving. I could feel myself moving further and further away from what I knew as home. My relationship with the land couldn't hold me in what was happening.

My survival instincts kicked in. I tearfully told my partner that when my program ended, I needed to go back home to the U.S., to my family. She cried, too. I think she

was sad, but also relieved. Over time, I did leave and go back to New York. My partner and I parted ways with a great deal of care and gentleness. In returning to New York, I sought the place of my birth and family, hoping those old sensory memories washing through me would support a primal bodily rooting in my earliest experience of soil. Yet I couldn't completely shut down to the vast awareness that I had experienced. I had been changed by flows and waves I did not yet know how to navigate.

Pausing. Almost twenty years later now, the memory of this time expands my chest with breath. I can feel that hopeful summer heat on my skin, and a pulsing life force coming forward. I remember dancing sock-footed in the August afternoon light. If only this magical opening that catapulted me into another world could have gone a bit slower, I think now. Yet maybe such slowness was impossible, I argue with myself. Maybe the undammed river had to rush forward in colossal waves. Perhaps there was no other way, despite the loss it brought.

Missing Pangaea

Back in New York, I had the sense of being a large body that belonged unified across continents; but I was not large enough to occupy multiple land masses at once. On a symbolic level, despite my attempt to escape, a tidal wave hit. I met the watery deeps, oceanic, and a strange sense of disorientation.

I felt stranded by the oceanic experience, longing for a centering sense of earth. Like Pangaea, I missed my interconnected whole landmass of a body, fragmented into continents, and ruptured by tectonic plates of yearning.

Though some of the familiar rhythms of New York comforted me, intense imagery continued to show up in my psyche. I cried every day in deep sobs from my belly, harder than I had ever cried. The crying sometimes felt like a needed release of old dammed-up water. But in this state, I felt too exposed to the world. After an encounter with an unfriendly inner/outer darkness which overwhelmed me on the New York subway, I shut down further, freezing while I tried to function "normally" in the world.

I got a job as an oral history facilitator for a radio project and attempted to continue forward with life, focused on arts and oral history in community-building. However, I couldn't operate as I had before.

Pausing again. I hesitate to remember those days back in New York in an embodied way. They are fuzzy to me, buried and ungraspable in many ways. I associate that time with navigating darkness and numbness, even though I am sure there was also light.

Like Hartley (2020) who describes her harrowing, prolonged journey into what she calls the “Underworld,” through which she painstakingly found her way to eventual integration, I entered a difficult and fragile realm from which there is no real turning back (however much I tried). I had to find my way through this “realm of soul, a psychological terrain that is terrifying to encounter and devastating to inhabit for any length of time” (Hartley, 2020, p. 35).

In years since, I have found reading Hartley’s chapter (2020) on her experience, *Woman, Body, Earth, and Spirit*, profoundly helpful and illuminating because it resonates with some aspects of my own experience, which I have rarely heard described with this level of nuance and depth by someone else who has journeyed in similar waters.

In representing her sojourn, Hartley (2020) draws on the myth of the Sumerian goddess Inanna, who descends into the Underworld. Inanna eventually emerges from the Underworld and renegotiates an agreement of balance that brings cyclical renewal to the world. Evoking Inanna, Hartley describes an experience of destabilization which felt like she was “falling – through the depths of the earth-womb-Underworld, and beyond, out into empty space” (p. 36). She experienced this as being catapulted to somewhere “before even conception – back to the Bardo (Sogyal Rinpoche 1992: 103, 287) between death and rebirth” (p. 36). Elements of her description are familiar to me. In attempting to understand this intense experience, Hartley was initially confused as to whether this was a spiritual experience, the awakening of early infant trauma, or both:

Through staying present to what was actually happening, rather than resorting too quickly to narrative or explanation, I have come to recognize that infant trauma and energetic phenomena can express through the same pathways of movement, gesture and sound, so that one might sometimes be a gateway to the other (Adler 1999a: 185; Hartley 2001: 72–73; 2015: 307).” (2020, p. 39)

Hartley had already done a great deal of therapy when her journey into the Underworld occurred. Her descent was activated after the surfacing of primal losses in her very early life in the context of a psychotherapy training program which drew on the

forceful use of active imagination and guided imagery (2020, p. 35). Hartley believes these methods as they were applied in the program pushed her to re-experience her past too quickly, without the proper pacing, receptivity, and inner-directed integration (p. 35).³ Yet she also suggests that a part of her chose to make this Underworld journey, drawn by its potent healing and learning possibilities.

Hartley spent five years in this Underworld state until one day her perception shifted: she was able to return to her body, having more deeply excavated Underworld soul parts. Hartley has gone on to be a leading teacher of Bodymind Centering, drawing on the fruits of this harrowing time to expand her life and work in the field of somatics. As Hartley notes: “The gifts recovered there [in this kind of Underworld journey] may include embodied knowledge, wisdom and initiation into paths of healing or the creative arts” (2020, p. 40).

I find Hartley’s term, Underworld, helpful in describing my shadowy entry into a strange realm during this period. Like Hartley, my journey into the Underworld was facilitated by an embodied investigation of past histories: in my case, my inquiry took place through autobiographical writing. Writing my thesis was alchemizing, and I developed certain resources and connections during that period which have never left me. I see this period of writing in Toronto as a time of rich opening. Simultaneously, I believe the speed of the process (despite the caution of my inner voice) and then not feeling enough of a landing place after birthing my thesis may have contributed to my descending more quickly and deeply into the Underworld than I would have consciously chosen.

My Underworld experience was not quite as intense as Hartley’s in that I did manage to work for most of it. I tried to function “normally,” but I was navigating shadow experiences which shaped my day-to-day life for many years. I dropped into a consciousness that was unbounded and affected by moving waves of energy. This

³ Hartley writes about working with very early traumatic experience: “When psychotherapeutic methods seek to effect change in the somatic or symbolic structures around which the personality has formed, great care must be taken to do this at a pace the client can integrate. When touching upon traumatic memory, excessive or inappropriate intervention can lead to the collapse of psychological structures and mental breakdown: for example, methods that are overly proactive when receptivity is needed, or that guide when allowing a client’s process to unfold from within is required, can cause harm. In recent decades much has been learnt about the safe practice of psychotherapy, particularly in the field of somatic trauma therapy informed by neuroscience (see, e.g. Rothschild 2000).” (2020, p. 35: footnote 1).

included a majestic moment-to-moment awareness that stirred up fast-moving, traumatizing energies and sometimes, the sense of being in-between worlds.

From the perspective of today as I write, I hold this paradox of my entry into the Underworld: at one level, I didn't choose this journey, and, on another level, I deeply chose this journey through oceanic encounter, darkness, and what these territories continue to teach me.

The Company of Trees and the Sea

After moving back to New York from Toronto, I regularly frequented Prospect Park, the large park in Brooklyn near my apartment. In the park, I could breathe again: my lungs were taking in more oxygen from the trees there which I desperately needed. There was a duck pond in the park. The trees were beautiful as they changed colours in the seasons. I imagined being able to pitch a tent among the trees. If I could wake up each morning in the park, I thought, I could find my way through these intense and overwhelming waves of sensation and flows of imagery.

My first remembered encounter with beauty was with a tree in Prospect Park many years before on a 6th grade science field trip. On that field trip, I was sitting on the poky autumn grass among a group of fidgeting students. My mind began to wander. The teacher's voice receded in my awareness and I was gazing at the park around me. It was then that I saw the tall and regal tree in front of me. Crowned with golden and orange leaves, it was majestic and had the most striking presence: glowing. As a child who spent most of her time in internal reverie and dramatic play in city apartments, this direct encounter with natural animacy sparked a sense of awe. In these moments of seeing the tree, there was an experience of contact with the world in a different way, one that opened me to a life force with which I was in relationship. It was a life force that was both literally grounded in the earth, and which also emanated an animate beauty which transported me across a threshold of seeing/feeling (Tippett, 2008). I hadn't moved an inch on the grass on which I was sitting but seeing the tree in this way opened me to another world of belonging.

These moments of perception can live in us profoundly. They are of a different kind of time. Of course, after my encounter with the tree, I went on with my life. But

somewhere in my being, the memory of the tree lived in me. These moments of feeling the tree's beauty planted in me a love and deep admiration for trees. In years to come, I frequently experienced trees I encountered as guides: beings who beautifully stood their ground on earth amidst great risk at times, offering their presence.⁴

After moving back to New York from Toronto, I often went to the park to walk among the trees on wind-whipping autumn and winter days. I also took subway trips to Brighton Beach in the dead of winter, riding the F train to the end of line. As I stood on the sand looking at the waves, the saltwater mixed with the breeze washed through me. I took healing breaths of release which freed my body and spirit for these hours.

Still, I needed more to anchor me. I needed human support. And I longed for room for wild movement. The colour red figured strongly in visions that comforted me. I pictured myself in a red dress and I had images of dancing and moving among trees in this red dress: unrestrained, rhythmic motion and earth-stained feet in a communal human context of witnessing and clarity. I felt these big energetic waves needed a full circuit to allow them to flow, so I didn't short-circuit further. Yet I was terrified of letting too much energy move through because I had already been blasted, running waves of potent energy I didn't yet know how to handle, except by shutting down.

I doubted my impulses to seek spiritual support because I did not feel inner permission to receive such assistance. I had heard messages all my life that openly discussing the spiritual or invisible realm was seriously flakey and deluded; only the material world mattered. Could I still belong in the atheist, activist world I had come from if I stepped further into fully acknowledging other dimensions of existence and how important they were to my day-to-day experience? Even if I could find support, I was also afraid of choosing the wrong guidance and being taken any further on ethereal journeys out of my body.

⁴ Irish-Canadian scientist Diana Beresford-Kroger discusses the potency of the connections between humans and trees. From an Irish Celtic perspective, she notes: "trees are sentient beings" (2019, p. 80). Mothaibreacht is the Irish word for the perception of tree vibrational waves Beresford-Kroger writes: "It is possible that mothaibreacht is an ancient expression of a concept that is relatively new to science: infrasound or "silent" sound. These are sounds that are pitched below the range of human hearing, which travel great distances by means of long, loping waves... And these waves have been measured as they emanate from large trees. Children can sometimes hear these sounds..." (2019, p. 80-81)

My search for therapy with no health insurance finally resulted in sessions with an intern therapist and Zen Buddhist, Laura, in a charming stone church building in Greenwich Village in Manhattan. I loved pulling open the big old doors and walking through the courtyard to enter the inner sanctuary building and climbing the stairs to the upstairs room. There, I could sense Laura's genuine listening presence. I felt moments of sacred attention.

Walking through the streets of Greenwich Village, I remembered, too, how my grandparents had met in the vibrant, artistic Village neighbourhood in the 1930s when they both were residents there before moving to the suburbs. I felt raw and sometimes hopeful, visiting Laura in the stone church in the Village. I rode the D train there, the air electric with subway performers, perfume, and collective sweat. After three months, Laura told me our therapy would need to end because her internship had ended. I didn't have the heart or money to try to find a therapist again for a while.

Earlier in my life, I was someone who had taken intuitive leaps and risks. But now I was in fast-moving river without the right boat or raft. I did not have the right tools or support for this river, even though part of me longed to ride the current. Yet how could I work skillfully with this wild, potent river flow safely?

Since an anchor wasn't present in me and I couldn't access one I trusted around me, I shut down. Part of this was just a nervous system response to overwhelm, but part of it was a conscious decision. The decision meant I was consciously choosing not to go towards what I most longed for. What I most loved activated frightening inner imagery, which threw me into states of panic. I sensed I needed to fold in on myself in present time and excavate to the heart of what could be deeply grounding for me so that eventually I could unfurl again.

Most of my resources were channelled to reckoning with my inner experience. I was embarrassed and disoriented at how I was unable to offer the same support to my friends, family, and activist organizations or access the same confidence that I had before. My old ways of grounding were no longer effective, and in some ways, I had to start over, fundamentally relearning the ins and outs of being on earth in this new version of self.

I had a long-term vision then: an image of digging down to the roots, to a core place of support, digging in small steps that my overwhelmed body and psyche could tolerate. I needed to dig down so deep into the earth under the roots that were sickly or weakened to a source that was vibrantly strong and nourishing. I did not know how long it would take or if I would get there, but in this period, still caught profoundly between worlds and either frozen or overwhelmed with sensation, I had a sense the process needed to be very slow.

In the years since that time, my life became a colossal experiment in what it could mean to begin to rediscover those roots in my body consciousness and in my individual/communal life. The inquiries described in this dissertation were part of a psychic and physical journey towards a rooting which felt necessary to survival and navigation of the complex inner (and outer) worlds I found myself in. I longed to find and grow my roots enough to anchor deep in the earth, and even the bottom of the sea.

Towards this body (this sea)

I am walking to you
in the gravity of softness
circling
no rush

I am walking to you
not one step closer
than you inhabit
a smooth striation
of beat
glacial

I am walking to you
no question
simply walking
submersed
in your call
sonorous
susurrations
in sync
with
swelling
felling
of a tree branch
swift
over
coursing
writhing
water
I am walking
clearly
sieving
rain

for each drop
of your
base blood

I sing softly

in each step

oceanic

slow

I emerge

from the shape

of

water

Chapter 3.

Encounters with Darkness and the Matrixial

Cradled deeply,
life echoes through me
soft as flame
fierce as rain
gently the place is a circle
 which deep tracks me
 into cushioning unmemory
of breaking thunder

Wild and dissonant imagery and overwhelming emotions flooded me in Toronto and subsequently in New York. I searched for anchors to hold and make sense of what was happening. The vast consciousness I had encountered vibrated in the crevices and peripheries of my awareness ongoingly, howling like the wild wind outside a rickety mountain cabin. This consciousness seeped through unsealed doorways and sang its vastness, rattling my inner walls. It vibrated with emptiness as well as expansive fullness.

This experiential encounter with vast consciousness was powerful, and I became destabilized when I opened to it fully. I was too exposed when I opened emotionally and energetically, but shutting down deprived me of my capacity for presence. It was as if, metaphorically, my foot was still chained to the beach as the tidal wave rolled in, like in one of the visions I had in Toronto. I couldn't find or allow a full circuit of a balanced energetic flow that moved through in a full cycle. Parts of me felt trapped and disjointed, then overwhelmed with the flood of high-intensity voltage without enough grounding. I was missing a visceral sense of being anchored on earth. So, I battened down the hatches of my inner world, drawing on my capacity to freeze like an ice stream in winter. The freeze slowed the overwhelm. Aspects of my experience I couldn't bear to feel at the time were preserved on ice. From there, I regrouped.

I remained almost completely emotionally shut down until I got through an intensive job commitment, which involved being on the road with an oral history project

and working constantly. I then committed to a new era of a slowness. I sensed that it was only through slowness that I could learn to navigate vast and oceanic experiences without drowning.

In time, I moved from New York City to a small room in a shared house in a tree-lined neighbourhood in Berkeley, California, not too far from a nature preserve. I took long walks in my neighbourhood each day. I remember languid and meditative strolls past gardens of red, orange, and purple flowers as well as long loops on the foggy streets and on trails that warned of cougars. I also swam at the local YWCA regularly, immersing in the soft clarity of water.

While in Berkeley, I sought out practitioners and practices that helped me to build capacity to rediscover presence in my body. In careful doses, I began to focus on a deep tracking and sense-making process. Over time, I strengthened my own ability to tolerate more intense sensation. My experiences as a teenager of landing so joyfully in my body had taught me embodiment was an intrinsic gift. Even though I frequently felt disconnected from my somatic experience due to overwhelm, I sought to find my way back to my body in the context of the vastness and disorienting darkness I had experienced.

In Berkeley, I learned the power of laying on the floor and being held by the ground, especially when I had recurring experiences of internal spinning. The incidents of internal spinning had a dislodging, disorienting quality as if there was nothing that would ground me or support me. Sometimes the felt sense of spinning was accompanied by images of hurtling through the milky way. The most soothing action I found was lying directly face down, my body pressing into the ground below. The floor met my body. My belly would often involuntarily take a big heaving breath of release, cradled by the ground.

In shared spaces with support and on my own, I explored many somatic and emotional experiences like I did with the spinning. Tracking sensations and images helped with listening to my body's whispers of impulses and stories, which was an important part of the process of unfolding insights (Gendlin, 1982; Levine, 2010; Rothschild, 2000). Body-tracking includes noticing the patterns expressed through the

body: somatic micro-impulses of movement, sometimes in response to stressors in life or when remembering a certain time of life/event (Levine, 2010).

In this somatic tracking, I noticed a frequent impulse to assert physical protection over my space and my body. Yet, in following these impulses for self-protection, I would hit a block: I would find my arms frozen in mid-air, then lifeless, collapsed, unable to take up the space of my body with confidence or trust. This somatic re-enactment of my arms being frozen, unable to inhabit my body fully, correlated with emotions of frequent overwhelm. I understood this repeated immobility as at least partially rooted in past experiences I didn't fully understand.

Tracing outlines of possible narratives that matched the body sensations and impulses was helpful in meaning-making. Over years, I unearthed more outside information to accompany felt narratives about my experiences which helped situate my bodily patterns as a part of a larger, ricocheting web. There was complexity, nuance, and uncertainty to tracing stories about bodily impulses and reactions. Not any one story explained all my experiences. Sometimes I felt my experiences didn't need to be explained and in fact, couldn't be. Yet some narratives felt supportive when named, providing touchstones.⁵

Writing (Un)memory

My writing in Toronto had been born out of a fierce calling for reconnection with my own family, particularly my maternal ancestors. Through writing, I unearthed unmetabolized experiences; I wrote in ways which felt resonant yet which I didn't cognitively understand. For instance, my thesis began with these lines:

Underground, in the depths of my body and the world, there is a place I know. I have always felt its presence most acutely in the cave-like atmosphere of my parents' house, but this presence vibrates underneath everything, unspeakable. It can be sharp, like shards of glass. Yet it is full of breath, if you know how to breathe there. I learned long ago to guard this moon-sacred isolation in my body, to pay careful homage to this wild knowing. (Richardson, 2005, p. 6)

⁵ I pieced together possible embodied narratives over many years of inquiry. I only share some of those possible narratives in this dissertation.

What was this presence that vibrated? Why did it feel like shards of glass? What was significant about the cave-like atmosphere of my parents' house? Why did this awareness need such sacred and careful holding?

Womb Traces

Years later, after my tumultuous emergence into new territories, the womb came to the foreground as one place of inquiry. I received inner and outer prodding to examine my prenatal experience.

Ten years after I left Toronto, after I had sensed into my early experience in other ways, my mother told me this story: in her third trimester of pregnancy, she fell into a vicious, life-altering depression. Depression was not a new experience for her, but this was quite severe. An unplanned pregnancy, my mother's family and personal history, larger patriarchal social conditions, hormonal shifts, and the dark winter season may have all contributed to the intensity of her experience.⁶ My mother said her extreme depression lasted from her third trimester when she left her job until I was about five or six months old when the intensity of the state lifted to some degree. In the midst of that intense depression, she gave birth to me in a very fast, natural labour.

As she told me this story, I wondered if there were traces of both my mother's personal and our shared intergenerational experiences as we (as mother-to-be and intrauterine being) encountered in the darkness of a Brooklyn winter: threads of unspoken pain and fear along with a heavy isolation. This depression was in no way my mother's fault. It was an unchosen convergence of hormonal and likely personal, intergenerational, and cultural echoes that moved through her during that time, perhaps for good reason, as she faced the isolating reality of motherhood in her situation.

⁶ Many women experience prenatal and postnatal depression as well as complex feelings about motherhood (Chodorow, 2003; Lacunza & Martinez-Cengotitabengoa, 2014). My mother endured these feelings alone with little support from family and community. She lived in a 1970s U.S. context which did not commonly acknowledge or support people with prenatal or postnatal disturbances. Prenatal depression was even less acknowledged than postnatal depression; likely, this failure of attention was influenced by expectations and stereotypes of the glowing pregnant woman fulfilling her female destiny (Lacunza & Martinez-Cengotitabengoa, 2014).

With compassion and curiosity, I do wonder about the impact of this early experience on me. Did the challenges of this womb and early infant period plant the seeds of unfinished business and prompt my adult re-exploration of the learnings, fears, and gifts of those early times? Did the expansive untethered spaces I encountered and the experiences of darkness that emerged in my psyche in Toronto and New York relate—at least in part—to re-experiencing traces of early (un)memory? Did this pre-conscious womb and early infant experience of deep depression shape my recurring sense of tentativeness with being fully on earth? Did the fastness of the labour itself get mirrored in the speedy, ecstatic, and heady push of my writing in Toronto which ended with a sense that there was nowhere to truly land?

At the same time, another set of questions emerged about the potential impact of these early times. Did my prenatal and perinatal experience marshal and bring close my connection with liminal realms that have nurtured me throughout my life? Did these primal events co-create my sense of belonging with invisible relationalities I could channel for connection and support amidst loneliness or fear? Did these experiences cultivate my familiarity with loving, unseen interrelationships as a source of sustenance?

Hartley (2020) locates one trigger experience that led to her fall into the Underworld: her investigation of destabilizing early life losses through intense guided imagery catapulting her back into infant states and even further into womb and possibly pre-existence. She notes an intersection between reliving traces of early (un)memory and spiritual/energetic experience. Similarly, I experienced traces of the void, darkness, overwhelming sensation, and ecstatic, transsubjective connections.

As I explored the field of pre- and perinatal studies for this dissertation, I began to realize the increasingly documented impact of womb and early infant experiences hormonally and psychologically (Gray et al, 2017; Kellerman, 2014; Taouk & Schulkin, 2016).⁷ In addition, I was intrigued by the theorists who explore the connection between

⁷ In their article, Transgenerational transmission of pregestational and prenatal experience: Maternal adversity, enrichment, and underlying epigenetic and environmental mechanisms, Taouk and Schulkin (2016) document numerous studies around maternal stress during pregnancy: “It is currently well understood that prenatal adversity can have long-term behavioral, neurobiological and psychological consequences for infants as well as mother–infant interactions postpartum” (p. 594). Increasingly, there is a scientific recognition of the impact of maternal experience on progeny in the womb (Gray et al., 2017; Kellermann, 2013).

the prenatal/infant, intergenerational, and even more archaic/primordial realms of experience (Ettinger, 2006a; Kalef, 2014; lefebvre, 2017). I began to further recognize the womb and early infancy as both a site of potential trauma and a rich body-spirit threshold.

The importance of prenatal, birth, and early infant experiences and their emotional and spiritual impacts is recognized by many Indigenous teachings. Rebecka Tabobondung describes traditional understandings of pregnancy and birth in Anishinabek communities based on her interviews with several knowledge-keepers: “According to Faith, the ‘child is learning right from conception and the child is hearing everything that is going on outside and so that’s why you treat it and its mother in a good way’” (2017, p. 137).

In her doctoral dissertation in the Philosophy of Education, *shamanic historical consciousness: retu(r)ning to the Ellemental as an indigenous education*, Métis scholar m.d. caroline lefebvre (2017) discusses the intra-uterine space as the site of humans' first immersion in the intersubjectivity of life, in what she calls the *Ellemental*. Drawing on Indigenous frameworks in dialogue with philosophers Levinas (1969, 1978, 1987) and Luce Irigaray (1974, 1986) among others, lefebvre argues the womb is the original context where our connection with the relationality of being originates: “Therefore, what I am implying is that the proto-ethical o/Other relationality stems from the *Ellemental*—our initial inter-uterine experience...” (p. 113).

Part of lefebvre's conception is the way the *Ellemental* can hold the presence of “ghosts” or what she calls “o/Others” (a word she has coined to refer to otherworldly presences as well as the Other, a common term in philosophy for one who is not the self). lefebvre starts her own dissertation inquiry from her position as the child born after the death of her brother, what she calls “a replacement child” who was always aware of the absent presence of her brother or the “o/Other” (lefebvre, 2017, p. xv). She cites the biological evidence of chimera (biologically distinct cells with different DNA from the host individual) being present in mothers from fetuses and in subsequent children carried in the womb from their previous siblings. lefebvre also draws on the evidence of “vanishing twins” whose genetically distinct cells and DNA may exist in the body of the host sibling who survived and sometimes absorbs cells of the twin who vanished. She indicates that

there are literally the absent traces of “o/Others” persisting with us even at a biological level.

Like lefebvre, psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Ettinger views the womb time as a potent period of immersion in a complex transsubjectivity that informs who we are (2002, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2011). According to Ettinger, this template continues as a symbolic channel of our experience for the rest of our lives. Ettinger calls this channel of experience the matrixial (2006a). She understands the matrixial as a particular symphony or web of resonances, co-subjectivities, and distance-in-proximities that make up our identities beyond our individualized “phallic” self (2006a). Ettinger (2011) believes the matrixial channel or borderspace includes many traces, including intergenerational as well as other imprints.

Ettinger’s early work explored eruptions of what she perceived as traumatic prenatal memory fragments in relation to what was being understood as psychosis (Johnson, 2006).⁸ Ettinger emphasized that naming and signification for intrauterine memory traces that may erupt into consciousness is vital. Yet Ettinger notes these kinds of traces have historically had “no symbolic access whatsoever in a culture that takes them for non-sense” (2006a, p. 142).

Increasingly, pre- and perinatal psychology is offering evidence that we hold implicit memory of our womb experiences, and that these experiences affect us (Kalef, 2014; 2017; Kellermann, 2013; McCarty, 2009; Taouk & Schulkin. 2016). Reflecting on my experiences, I now perceive the flood of emotions and consciousness that emerged in Toronto (and intensified in New York and continued in Berkeley) as likely prompted by the surfacing of prenatal and infant traces, intergenerational fragments, and possible echoes of primordial consciousness. I refer to the presence of what is unremembered yet elusively present as (un)memory. This flood of (un)memories was challenging at the time. Yet the flow was also generative, touching a potential of a profound interconnectedness.

⁸ Ettinger et al. suggest that traumatic changes to the fetus can result from such things as: 'the mother's attitude towards the fetus during pregnancy, extraordinary noise or bodily injury, diseases which harm the mother or the fetus, traumatic events such as general anesthesia of the mother or the fetus for the purpose of an operation' (ibid.: 47)" (as quoted in Johnson, 2006, p. 3).

Both lefebvre (2017) and Ettinger (2002, 2004, 2006a) make references to the way the threshold/womb space is a passageway of more than the personal dimension of prenatal experience. The matrixial borderspace is a joining, differentiating, and co-emergence of many forces. Ettinger speaks of the traces of memory in the matrixial space and how these traces are not “entirely personal” and carry “enormous traumatic weight” of the world (2002, p. 168). lefebvre suggests that the intra-uterine space is a cauldron of influences from various realms, not based in a linear time: “the inter-uterine spaces are reservoirs where the histories of the o/Other reside—the link between the living and the obscured, (distant), or ancestral Other” (p. 122). She further highlights her understanding that “the inter-uterine space is the marinade that contains their traces...” (p. 122). In both Ettinger’s and lefebvre’s theorizing, the womb space is understood to be a place that is “steeped” (lefebvre, 2017) in overlapping worlds of time, memory and relationality of unseen presences, ancestral Others, and psychic encounters.⁹

Ettinger emphasizes the matrixial and its many traces of experience cannot be easily accessed in our everyday conscious lives (2006a). Ettinger’s and lefebvre’s work suggests the need for spaces to accompany these kinds of experiences in a larger Western world and psychological context that has largely foreclosed on them. Yet giving language to this experience within an individualized model of self is not what Ettinger or lefebvre are after.

In her work exploring Ettinger’s matrixial, Johnson writes: “the matrix as a symbol potentially undoes the cultural foreclosure of the feminine” (2006, p. 31), pointing to the larger cultural challenge to that Ettinger’s theory is offering to an individualized self. The womb experience is a template for the matrix, but the matrixial is a symbolic channel of transsubjectivity that extends beyond prenatal experience. The symbolic nature of this sphere reflects a way of being and knowing that is often marginalized: a kind of

⁹ Both lefebvre (2017) and Ettinger (2004) are careful to delineate that validating the existence of prenatal experience should not justify the essentializing or coercion of women’s (and I would add other womb-holders’) bodies. Ettinger (2004) begins by articulating her work is not a statement in support of external control of women’s reproductive choices, writing: “The phallic imaginary mistakenly posits the prenatal infant as a separate entity with a separate desire, so that anybody may make a claim to protecting it against the mother’s desire. I emphasize that the feminine-matrixial configuration supports a woman’s full responseability [this is Ettinger’s spelling connected to a concept in her work] for any event occurring with-in her own not-One corpo-reality and trans-subjectivity and disqualifies phallic regulations of them” (p. 75).

receptivity to interrelationship and joined yet distant subjectivities and their interrelated crypts threaded throughout our lives (Ettinger, 2006a; Bickel, 2020).

Ettinger (2004, 2006a, 2006b) highlights the cultural wounds inherent in disowning such a significant channel of awareness. She asserts that disregarding the matrixial channel has impacted our ability in Western cultures to have language for as well as cognizance of ways of relating which are part of a rich, multitudinous fabric of existence. Ettinger notes: “The matrixial processes continue to form, inform, ‘exform’ and transform us throughout life, though the matrixial space-time is usually foreclosed or infolded inside more phallic dimensions and ignored” (2006a, p. 220). Her work suggests that without opening vulnerably through noncognitive approaches to our inherent transsubjectivity (for which the womb experience is a template), we miss important pathways of our relational and embodied existence. When we ignore the matrixial, we exclude a set of experiences of what Ettinger understands as a channel of a disowned feminine, which lives in us all, regardless of gender (Ettinger, 2006a).

For Ettinger, the matrixial channel exists, whether we allow it consciously or not: “The Thing struggles unsuccessfully for memory but finds only momentary relief in symptomatic repetitions. The Event appears furtively in transference relationships but makes no sense” (2006a, p. 163). Thus, practices such as creative inquiry (artworking in Ettinger’s language), embodied inquiry, and ritual become essential to fruitfully work with this matrixial borderspace, not just personally, but also in larger dialogic cultural and collective processes: “In artwork, the encapsulation partially cracked open, the thing is transformed, masked yet unbearably naked, appears and is traced for the first time” (Ettinger, 2006a, p. 163).

Distinct yet akin to Ettinger’s exploration of the matrixial and lefebvre’s *Ellemental*, Hartley (2020) understands her infant-womb-spiritual Underworld journey as part of an encounter with what she calls “the deep feminine, or the ground of being” (p. 40). Hartley’s articulation of a deep feminine/ground of being reflects a moving, dynamic threshold between spirit and matter in constant flux and cycles of life, death, and renewal. Hartley suggests that her own journey in this terrain deepened her capacity for embodiment and cultivated her awareness of “wounds in the feminine within each of us” (p. 40). I understand Hartley’s reference to these feminine wounds as gesturing to experiences associated with chaotic flux, cycles of life and death and the vulnerability of

earthly existence, which have all been negatively linked with the feminine and with women in Western contexts as well as some other cultural milieus (Griffin, 1978; Largen, 2022; lefebvre, 2017; Thanissara, 2015). Though not synonymous, Hartley's deep feminine/ground of being, Ettinger's matrixial, and lefebvre's *Ellemental* each reference realms of embodied knowledge associated with the feminine(s) that have frequently been marginalized, discounted, and even reviled.

When I wrote intuitively about my own embodied memory and intergenerational Motherlines stories in Toronto, I opened floodgates of perception and (un)remembrance, leading to destabilizing encounters with vastness, prompting me to seek protection through further etheric flight. I believe that in touching such (un)memory, certain unspoken womb memory-traces and transsubjective knowledges came to the forefront. These (un) remembrances may have included early experiences of the movements between spirit and body as well as perhaps the embodied imprints of others who came before me, interwoven with my own embodied (un)memory.

After a period of intense overwhelm, I slowly re-sought a grounded descent into my inspirited body informed by these encounters and threads of knowing, which eventually led to doctoral studies and my life in Vancouver. This dissertation, a pilgrimage of storying, has become a tracking of creative inquiries and multi-dimensional journeys in the changing, rooted, intimate, transsubjective, blossoming ground of embodied existence as a woman on earth, opening to disowned feminine-associated realms (Ettinger, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Hartley, 2020; lefebvre, 2017).

Four Poems

Winds

what am I afraid to say?
what am I afraid to know?
I try to keep one foot in the world of the rational so you can understand me
I try to keep one foot in this world of the sensical so I can belong
I scramble to remember my concreteness
like a building that can feel its own brick and mortar
there can be a spinning into forgetting
do I look to you to guide me? Why do I need such guidance?
a frame, a container
like his words on my pelvis, holding me,
making me real
maybe I have nothing to say

what about silences?

arational spaces (Bickel, 2020)
listening into silences
infinitesimal silences
that aren't trying to push through
not trying to prove anything

I find myself floating away on an ethereal wind
that blows me out of this body
off this earth
floating austere
I feel a tingling under my ribs, in my solar plexus
what allows me to stay here with you?
oh, yes, the earth calls me—
the earth I came for, a forgotten love
yet I need this vast expanse of sky
the milky way rushes on
I rush with it, too.
forgetting swirls
with journeying
blends into
a wider (windier) view of self

a bird soars by the window now.

Dancing on Air

Floating is easier than hyperventilating
I hover lightly
channeling my grandmothers' magic

In another time and place,
Grandma floats high
later she will smell of cigarettes,
here she is young, still smells of air

Her spirit light
humming
above a flat, meaningless body on the bed below

That's not me down there, she says.

I am all the way up here
like a bird
like a dancing bird

lighting up
the sky

Rent

Rent is due today and I'm thirsty
blankets a tangle of red blue white
 across the bed
black denim jeans
 a postage stamp at the corner
heat sucks the tired curtains to the windows
 the breeze plays, exposes their white bellies
too many details scatter the floor: the papers wild, forgotten
silken blue underwear teases, keys,
 loose change, the endless receipts
I remember a rat on the tracks in New York City
 scouting so industriously,
its long sharp tail

I'm still thirsty
 swerving
I imagine
dropping my shoulders
dropping my heart out of my throat
to the soft white sheets

letting it thump and tumble through
to the center of my hips
 shimmying ridges
flesh plump and forgotten
my belly corridor
 a deserted alley
where I paid rent
 for years
 but never slept.

Chanting Edge of Winter Light

Shantied in a small room
I sit on a bed, breathing in, breathing out
hands quiet, cold with prayer
I read of work
think of you
with your Protestant work ethic
bread-baking pudding handed jolly
deft and rosy-cheeked

A roaring menace of light
tinkering and tottering in kitchens
on wordpads
agenda in hand
like a boxspring bed
with a bounce

you dance through snowdrifts
anchoring snow angels
at angular rhythms
soaring with intention

I sip slowly
beads of sweat
sinking into my tea
safe with green trees swaying
through the window

I cook at an electric stove
orange circles of glow
in an old farm kitchen in the city
drafts of the rainy season
teasing my wrists

I share you with the wind
in my savoring remembrance
I am not greedy
I never wanted all that flame
only patches of
candles flickering in a church

perched on a solitary pew
at a rainswept Wednesday evening
Taizé service ¹⁰

you eye the stained glass
shattered with a hundred country details
the sweet mow of grass
old familiar signs

I am just a visitor here
but I glow with the illumined altar
and the reverberating monks
so warm,
sparse
with the chanting edge
of winter
light.

¹⁰ Emerging from a monastic community in France, Taizé is a form of ecumenical worship service which promotes reconciliation between Christian traditions.

Chapter 4.

Singing Motherlines

Now, my dear listeners, my story arrives in more recent times. This next set of tales—this chapter and onwards—explore a new set of inquiries into bodily inhabiting and contact with Motherlines.

I came back to Canada as a PhD student (this time in Vancouver) after ten years of slow somatic tending and oral history work in the U.S. I returned because there was a part of me in limbo; to move through this limbo, I had a sense that I needed to complete what I started ten years before with my M.A. thesis in Toronto.

I was ready to re-centre this inquiry around embodiment and Motherline echoes once again. Still afraid of the undamming the flow, I was also hungry to let this inquiry take me back towards the magical aliveness of the river.

As I share about this more recent round of inquiries that constitute the second part of the pilgrimage path of this dissertation, I use the present tense because though this PhD journey has lasted eight years, I consider this the work of the present.

One night, during the first year of my PhD program in Vancouver, I am up late, huddled in my pajamas. I have my first Urinary Tract Infection, which commonly and disproportionately happens for women after having sex. As I am sitting in the lonely silence of my sleeping house, breathing through the pain, what helps me is to sing. And the song that comes to me is a song my mother taught me long ago. When I sing this song, I don't hurt, and singing this melody connects me to being held by my mother, to the sweet, simple power of vibration moving through my body.

The song that I sing is about a woman who had sex and then ended up fallen and rejected by society:

It was late in the evening, the gang was all leaving
O'Leary was closing the bar
When he turned and he said to a lady in red
Get out you can't stay here no more
She shed a sad tear in her bucket of beer

As she thought of the cold night ahead
When a gentleman handsome
Stepped over the transom
And these are the words that he said:
Her mother never taught her
The things a young girl should know
About the ways of college men, the way they come and go (mostly go)
Now age has taken her beauty and sin has left its sad scar
So, remember your mothers and sisters, boys,
And let her sleep under the bar
With all the mugs.

The message of this old ditty is not one that my rational mind and feminist ethics would endorse, except in an ironic way. Yet this song resides in my body. In painful aloneness, the melody emerges, allowing me to access the comfort of my own voice in the present moment. The song's topic also speaks to my predicament and the nagging question: "Why is my body reacting this way to having pleasure? What did I do wrong?"

And so, in singing this song at 2 am on the cold tile of my bathroom floor, I feel a resonance—partly an ironic resonance—at the song's subject matter of women and sexuality. Yet there is also an undercurrent of visceral fear that, in fact, I have done something wrong. And the legacy of my mother's song coming through my own throat, and the warm power of presence accompanies me in these moments. I feel less alone.

I recover after that night of spontaneous singing. But a new inquiry blossoms. This inquiry is rooted in two questions: what if I sang these songs from my mother again? And what if I give myself permission to sing regularly—to bring forward my own voice through these songs? A new path of exploring embodiment through singing unfurls.

Over a month in 2016, I reach out to several friends and ask them if I can sing to them: on video chat, in person, in a random moment in the car—some of these events are planned and some are more impromptu. Each holds its own vulnerability and aliveness. My inquiry doesn't map a linear path. I simply ask myself this question and through the asking, I am inviting an inquiry to unfold.

I gravitate to singing because it creates a bridge between the ethereal world and my somatic life. Fraleigh describes how “the notion of ethereality is sometimes ascribed to otherworldly or even ghostly qualities” (2015, p. 4). I feel connected to the ethereal realm. Singing, drawing on breath, supports my movement between the ethereal and the sensuous body in a way that is grounding and joyful.

I am also drawn to singing these specific songs due to the possibility of feeling a primal melodic memory of my mother. Indigenous writer and musician Joy Harjo (Mvskoke/Creek) describes the power of song in her own coming into this incarnation as her mother’s daughter: “My mother’s singing attracted me to her road in this world. It is her song that lit my attention as I listened in the ancestor realm” (2012, p. 18). Harjo describes how “the music was a startling bridge between familiar and strange lands” (p. 18). I am drawn to singing my mother’s songs because I am still seeking a vibrating cloak of remembrance which settles me further into my body. Singing emerges as a bridge between embodied practice and my re-emerging inquiry into Motherline echoes.

Exploring the songs my mother gave me, and how they animate me, gives me breath and music to abide with pain, to express, and to connect. Margaret Christakos’s work (2016) has been helpful for me in her use of vibrational metaphors in exploring Motherline connections. Christakos draws on Lowinsky’s concept of Motherlines (1990, 1992) to explore her relationships with female ancestors as well as her relationship with her daughter in her book of etudes. Christakos describes:

... how we as women think of seeing ourselves appear in the world, not solo, but enmeshed in each other’s overlapping appearances, creating for and with each other a kind of choral “coming”, a kind of rippling into presence, and of imagining both a past and a future that connects us. (2016, p. 18)

Christakos’ description of a “choral ‘coming’” that is “rippling into presence” uses sonic metaphor to suggest a not fully separated or individualized subjectivity, but one of echoes and overlaps. In my inquiry, I find singing my mother’s songs echoes me into a kind of “overlapping appearance,” a literal choral resonance with my mother’s voice: a co-arising.

Martin Prechtel describes how it is our mother’s heartbeat that we live and grow by from our earliest existence until our own small heartbeat also develops, trilling at a

much faster pace than our mother's. These syncopated rhythms are part of the inherent music of life in the womb: "This ongoing counter-rhythm is our first song" (p. 12). Prechtel believes that the loss of this song at birth when we exit the womb is a great loss for each of us. He also proposes that it is this primal experience of the rhythm of the mother's heartbeat alongside our own which informs the ongoing development and growth in life. "You can't develop at any stage of life until you can syncopate to the overriding rhythm" (p. 12). To syncopate means to develop the capacity to emphasize different notes than the ones on-beat, to work together with multiple scores. In this understanding, to syncopate with rhythm is to attune to the world around us and to find our relationship with our own music and beat—this ongoing counter-rhythm—which is intimately intertwined with our mother's rhythm, but also distinct.

As I sit down to write in my basement room in East Vancouver during this month-long intensive singing inquiry, I turn to poetic and lyrical writing which works in subtle, musical, and non-linear ways in a similar way to the nature of singing itself.

Singing my mother's songs

I remember singing with my mother at seven
It was one way we could connect
Otherwise, missing each other over and over again
Her Germanic and practical,
me, a fairy-like being filled with wonder and shock

But these songs she taught me in the blue Volkswagen bug
these songs sang us open to each other
for small snatches of time
captured in car rides and
then the Christmas carols
and the Star Spangled Banner

Even though my parents were atheists and socialists
and my father disapproved of singing such Christian songs and silly ditties
my mother shrugged and whispered the words to me
taught me anyway
showed me these ephemeral snapshots and tunes of her life
from before she moved to New York City
songs from Girl Scout Camp

from Baptist church
from her own mother
she taught me the ditties she knew
and we sang them together on car rides, on Christmas
when there would have just been awkward silence

The songs were an offering
and a sharing of presence
but some of them also encoded teachings
about the rules and dangers of being a
woman, who reveals her body, her voice,
or experiences pleasure

Though my mother likely sang them ironically,
the musical messages about the dangers
of free expression
echoed with sentiments I felt in other ways
through the embodied communication
of women in my family:
brilliant women
echoing with notes that trailed off into absence

I sensed a buried hope chest
a silencing of self
which took my mother's spirit
away from me

Yet my mother's musical expression through these songs
offered access to a rare sense of belonging
as our voices joined together on bumpy car rides
"Let's sing it again!" I would say
and we did.

The singing of these songs in the embodied present
somehow gives my mother back to me
through my own breath and voice
I am held through these songs
yet what is the price of being held and loved?

"A boy and a girl in a little canoe
And the moon is shining all around

As he plied his paddle, it didn't even make a sound
They talked and they talked till the moon went in
And he said you better kiss me or get out and swim.
So you know what to do in a little canoe
When the moon is shining all around"

At 18, when I taught this song to my dear friend,
we changed the words
as we walked together, arm in arm
finding a satisfying and somewhat violent third option
over kissing the boy
or getting out and swimming at his command:

"So you know what to do in a little canoe—
get up and beat him black and blue!
You know you wannuuuuuuuu!" we harmonized.

One drunken night my friend told me of violations
she had experienced in her own life
and swore that if she ever remembered that I knew this
she could never speak to me again
but during the day, we walked arm in arm, singing.

And now I still open to something old
when I sing these songs,
allowing it to taste the light

Some of the songs' corseted constrictions remain
yet the melodies rumble an aliveness in my veins
And I can sometimes roar into a new creative expression
The words can shift as I sing,
And in singing these songs,
I find there's a possibility of singing *through*
Reverberating archaic timbres
invokes fresh resonances

I am feeling *through*
a moving ache
shudder
blossoming

of sound
with memory

with now

And I encounter the risk
possibility
of freedom.

Singing my mother's songs offers a connection to joyful vibration and to worlds that can't be held in everyday language. Yet these songs—at least at first—can also reverberate with a certain oppressive model of womanhood and thus, a possible entrapment by older narratives. This contradiction reflects the complexity of encountering Motherlines. As Lowinsky writes:

We are all born of deeply wounded mothers, who, in turn, were born into a culture that feared and excoriated the feminine. The face of our mother, turned to us in rage or frustration, or away from us in deep depression, is the face of what women have suffered." (1992, p. 34)

Lowinsky explores how trauma and connection are refracted in this co-arising of women's subjectivity(ies), and how tracing of embodied legacies of our Motherlines can help us work meaningfully with this complex chorus.

In her poem, *The End of the Motherline*, Laura Apol (2021) describes sharing with her young daughter a set of Russian dolls which nest inside each other; she represents the dolls as grandmother to mother to daughter to her daughter. Her daughter challenges her representation of the identity of the dolls, making the biggest doll instead a representative of herself (the five-year-old daughter). Apol writes: "Matryoshka, Motherline— who can know which of us was the center, which the shell; who failed to protect; who would not be held" (2021, p. 33). The poem reflects how in the experience between this mother and daughter, there were confusing questions around who failed whom, touching on the terrain of fractured trust. Apol's poem evokes how mothers and daughters can fail to both protect and receive each other.

Singing my mother's songs becomes an embodied access point for me to grapple with discordant notes of longing, lapses in protection and presence, and profound love in relation to my mother and my maternal lineage.

As I sing and write, a question emerges: how can a shared “choral coming” (Christakos, 2016, p. 18) allow the cadences of each voice to emerge distinctly in relationship, like vibrant and unique parts of a diverse ensemble? For this to happen, each voice must be supported from a belly-deep, diaphragmatic breath, unstifled.

Or using another metaphor, how can each woman in a Motherline lineage—part of a shared tree—emerge as unique, burgeoning branches, offering our own fruit? Each branch must be able to access nourishment through the roots, animating its life force.

If a supported blossoming is what I am seeking, how can I allow the visceral pleasure of my body and voice to flow amidst legacies of external and internal suppression of full-throated female voice and fruitful power?

Singing songs with messages about the dangers or constraints of women’s sexuality and embodied freedom offers an invigorating paradox of re-encounter with comforting melodies, intergenerational patriarchal messages, maternal resonance and dissonance, and my own moving life force. *Singing through* suggests something being opened up and moving through the body: an embodied flow supported by a conscious weaving of vibrating notes between past and present. I connect with living vibration and the lineage imbued in the songs, sung through my own throat, refracting my mother’s beautiful voice, but also my own. Sometimes I have changed the words, moving the language into the shape of my own mouth and my own convictions.

Sometimes, I choose to sing outside, in public places, like the park, knowing I am contravening what is expected. In certain patriarchal contexts, public singing by women is forbidden; such embodied voicing may open pathways of pleasure as well as being heard. Singing is an access point to pulsing currents, which can transmit older words, but also can challenge inscribed patterns through a visceral encounter with the present.

Permission to Sing

I can’t control
how the vibrational space moves between us
when I sing
And yet I do sing

and there is a joy that erupts from my own center,
notes come out fiercely or quavering
full of light
a pure force immerses
 while a part of me wonders
 how is this for them?
 (Maybe I didn't hit that note right)
vibration moves through my throat
cascades into a warmth that can rock me, soothe me
empty me out
expand me into closer contact with you
 perhaps
 or does it?
Or perhaps you will sing me
into your warmth, your presence, your coldness, your light
and perhaps we can sing each other into something nameless
something alive and rising

When I ask the question “What if I gave myself permission to sing?”, I am exploring the relational nature of singing over the course of my “what if” inquiry, and how the act of song amplifies, resonates, and risks connection and exposure. Singing includes moments of insecurity and moments of letting the vibration move through me and express into the space between me and another. Can I accept myself as I am singing in this moment? Can I bear my own imperfect notes? Can I enjoy my voice when I am feeling pleasure, even if others are not feeling the same way and I am afraid that difference will make me stand out, vulnerably, as a target?

In her memoir, *Recollections of My Nonexistence*, Rebecca Solnit (2020) explores her struggle when she was young to know and express her own voice in the face of patriarchal expectations. Solnit delves into the lack of permission that women have historically had to exist as independent humans beyond the roles and services we offer others. Solnit continues: “one of the struggles I engaged in when I was young was whether my own body was under my jurisdiction or somebody else’s, anybody else’s, everybody else’s, whether I controlled its borders...” (2020, p. 77).

If our bodies will just be used for others’ gain, then inhabiting our bodies fully (with our spirits) may not be wise, safe, or even possible. Giving myself permission to

sing is about permission to exist, take up space, be fully alive in my body, and to expect to be heard despite the generations of women before me who may not have felt permission to exist and express on their own terms. I also must face my own enculturation into molding myself to disappear, as Solnit (2020) discusses, and silencing my own voice under the threat of humiliation and censure that women have often experienced (and still experience) for using their voices powerfully (Beard, 2015, 2017). Solnit writes in the context of her own learned nonexistence as a young woman who faced sexual harassment and other threats to her safety:

What would it be like to feel that you have that right to be there, where *there* is nothing more or less than the space you inhabit? What does it feel like to own some space and feel like it's yours all the way down to your deepest reflexes and emotions? (2020, p. 76-77)

Permission to Sing (and this whole dissertation) explores the territory that Solnit's question is pointing to: how do I freely inhabit my voice, body, and space as a woman? In the poem and ongoingly in my life, I risk opening to deeper and perhaps wilder forces of feeling and being alive through singing and other practices. In *Permission to Sing*, I describe a "pure force" that moves through me which inherently "rocks me, soothes me, empties me out..." This state of connection has parallels with what Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014) refer to as the flow state which can emerge when "individuals are fully involved in the present moment" (p. 239). These authors observe: "When in flow, the individual operates at full capacity (cf de Charms 1968; Deci 1975; White 1959). It is a state of dynamic equilibrium" (p. 240). The state of flow is supported by absorption in the now. Here is a wider access to being.

Yet while I love this experience of "pure force," I wonder: can I be safe here in the fullness of my voice? Will opening to this flow lead to a rupture in connection or a precarious vulnerability? In the poem, this moment of not-knowing serves as a turning point and reflects an unresolved element. In my life, the fear of existing too fully—of opening to the full force of my voice and not being met there or worse, risking disconnection or censure—can interrupt the flow of the river, resulting in eddies of self-doubt. Even though the poem returns to a path of joyful interconnection through song, I wonder: how often in my life do I stop singing too soon out of a fear of being exposed in my own melody?

An embrace of joyful encounter lives alongside my fear of exposure. The poem ends with the possibility of a singing each other into “something alive and rising.” This possibility evokes a deeply intersubjective space that is happening all the time beyond our cognitive and conscious minds, an echoing resonance, as we call each other into being. My draw to this intersubjective call and response lives alongside my questions of how to unabashedly inhabit my body-voice.

My inquiry leads to a spiraling kind of learning and non-linear realizations. As my journey continues, I explore multiple ways of bringing my voice and vibration further into relationship with the external/internal landscapes which I inhabit.

Chapter 5.

Singing at the Burrard Inlet/səlilw̓ət



Figure 5-1. View of the Burrard Inlet/səlilw̓ət, July 2016

In the same year that I begin singing my mother's songs again, I initiate another vocal practice: singing at the Burrard Inlet on the border of the Salish Sea, near my apartment in Hastings Sunrise, Vancouver, on the unceded territories of the Tsleil-waututh, Musqueam, and Squamish peoples. SFU professor Dr. Vicki Kelly (Anishinaabe/Métis), in whose class I initiate my inquiry of singing at the Inlet encourages deep learning from the land and an exploration of the ecologies we inhabit. I am grateful for the invitation in Vicki's class to find a practice which connects us relationally with local places.¹¹

¹¹ Another version of this chapter was published as follows: L.R. Richardson (2019). Singing at the Burrard Inlet: An inquiry into the reverberations of sounding in the natural world. In T. Strong-

I am drawn to the water, specifically the Burrard Inlet down the hill, echoing my pull to beaches of Lake Ontario during my days in Toronto. Looking out at water affirms and reminds me of my visions of an inner river and oceanic echoes. I love walking to the little park at the Inlet where the earth, sky, and water meet.

During my first years in Vancouver, I struggle with finding an appropriate and stable rental home. I am especially grateful for moments of settling my body here in this small park space, which overlooks the lively waves and North Shore mountains, flanked by a bridge between East Vancouver and North Vancouver. Singing at the water allows me to feel the spaciousness of reality, my feet on the soft earth, looking out at the movement of waves and the stretching of the sky. This little park is where I feel most at home. I know this place as the Burrard Inlet and later learn its original Tseil-Waututh name is səliłwət (Bill Reid Centre, n.d.).

After singing my mother's songs again, I want to continue to experience singing as a bridge in connecting etheric and embodied realms. My joy in vocalizing leads the way. I am especially drawn to singing outside, offering my voice to the Inlet/səliłwət, the mountains, the trees, and the birds who fly nearby. I enjoy how air is inhaled from the atmosphere, moved into the body through the vocal cords, and transformed into resonant embodied sound, which is again released into the environment.

My singing at the Inlet/səliłwət is fueled by a "What if?" questions (Fels, 2012). I ask myself "What would happen if I sang at the water a few times a week?" As part of the practice, I sing for a period of time ranging from fifteen minutes to an hour, and then I sit on a bench and write.

Kelly (2020) discusses the power of reverberating sound in connecting with the natural world: "It is in the reaching, in the tuning, in the resounding or singing with creation that we come to know on multiple levels of experience..." (2020, p. 151). Singing at the water becomes another practice of bringing my voice into relationship with the matrixial field, found in intergenerational connections and other ricocheting human

Wilson, C. Ehret, D. Lewkowich, & S. Chang-Kredl (Eds.), *Provoking Curriculum Encounters Across Educational Experience: New Engagements with the Curriculum Theory Archive*. Routledge.

interactions, but also recognized in the resonances/dissonances in/with the more-than-human world on earth.

In my sojourns to the water, I am often seeking rest, company, and solace. Frequently, I arrive at the water, jaw locked, shoulders tense, and calcified from requirements of daily life. I often resist singing, but as I let the sound escape my lips and watch the glint of the blue waves, my body shape changes, softening into a different perspective.

Today as my voice joins the air and the water, the birds flapping and soaring in flight, I notice how I feel their flight differently when I am singing. I realize how singing here, adding my own intimate vibration to the place, is a form of radical participation in the world. It is a felt experience of not holding back my own teeming life force but being-in-flux-pours-open-in-a-constantly-moving-inter-aliveness. There is a dynamic system that flows through all of us—the trees, water, birds, and my own body and sound. And I sensually and viscerally feel the truth of this when I sing. (Writing adapted from field journal notes, May 8, 2016).

In my singing practice at the Inlet/səlilwət, I find over time that I naturally open my senses beyond where I normally contain them. My vision and hearing expand, and I begin to feel into the environment more deeply. I can feel or imagine deeply what it is like to be a bird in flight with a white belly sailing through the air. Here is a porous, intersubjective, and (often) joyful opening in contrast to the open consciousness that has provoked terror at other points in my life. In the vibrating aliveness of the natural world, my capacity to resonate can echo outwards and be met in a cascade of responses and play by the waves, the birds, the trees, and the air.

During my time of singing at the water, it occurs to me at certain points that the natural world is having way more fun than I am in my everyday life. In opening my voice to this place, I open to this field of buoyancy and play. Play invites joy and a kind of lightness and movement amid thoughts or memories that could otherwise weigh me down cognitively; play helps me enter a zone of constant shifting, of surprises, of pleasure, of embodied fluidity and transitions, of full-throated openness to the plurality of the universe.

World as Womb

Over the years of my dissertation journey in Vancouver, I have sought a return to the encounter which had haunted and shut me down after I wrote my master's thesis. Those expansive experiences during my time in Toronto and New York included contact with an immense, almost Zen-like spaciousness along with other beautiful and confusing experiences. A scarcity of self-accompaniment and communal support inhibited me from landing in my body in this spaciousness. In this dissertation period, supported by deeper cosmological, spiritual, emotional, and relational foundations, I have been walking through the threshold that these expansive and initially terrifying encounters were offering.

The singing practice at the water—guided by Vicki's instructions to develop a relationship with our local ecologies—is a turning point in developing an earth-centered practice which brings ethereal parts of me into relationship with the soil and the water. The practice develops a learning ground for building trust with the earth as teacher and nurturer. This relationship with earth and the more-than-human world tends to overwhelm the openings of consciousness I have previously evoked for me. In returning again and again to sing, walk, and write at the water, I witness my connections and disconnections from trusting the earth and embodiment. Singing at the water as a practice offers glimpses of a satisfying emplacement on earth along with facilitating new insights into my fears around grounding.

One day, I look out at wide, flat expanse of water, with the ships coming in, and the trucks roaring by (this is an industrial part of the Inlet) and sing softly, standing next to the empty swing set on the mud-wet earth. In my singing is also a deep listening to my body and to the environment. And in this listening, a thought-intuition emerges: *Keep your energy flowing like you are doing right now in this vibrating sound.* I have a sense that this is a message especially for that part of me that freezes and contracts.

The next day, I go again to the water. I feel such joy in being there. All of me is present, as I sing and watch the v-shaped flocks and hear the calling of gulls. At some point, I put my attention on my feet, pelvis, hips, belly with an interest in grounding further, inviting a feeling of being anchored and welcome on earth. In doing this, suddenly I feel confined, less fully connected to an expanse of all-that-is. Then soon

after, a crow flies lower than usual, right at me. Quickly, I feel a fear of a violent attack overtake me: fear of the natural world, of these embodied creatures around me.

I get up and move my body as I stand on the banks, overlooking the water, and begin to sing. This helps the energy keep moving. In movement and sound, I meet the full resonant responsiveness of the water, the birds, the trees (and even the trains and the trucks are part of this meeting). I call forth and there is a sense of being responded to there—not with the neutral, dead space of asphalt—but with the symphony of this life.

Walking one day near the water, I consider how everything is the womb. We are in the womb on earth, held by the forces of gravity and cradled on this planet in the cosmos. The womb must feel a bit like the ocean in its rhythmic watery rocking. Energetically the womb vibrates with an expanded consciousness of creation, like this vast seascape at the Inlet/səlilwət.

Ettinger (2006a) believes it is non-cognitive processes of art and ritual that allow us to fruitfully work with the matrixial borderspace. Singing at the water allows a dance in/with the matrixial, unfurling my connection with the more-than-human world.

Today I bring my audio recorder to the water.

After a while, I stand up with my recorder, singing near the trees. After a couple of minutes, one crow flies over to the tree close to me, then another, then another, till finally there are five. I have never seen so many crows land this close to me before and stay. I sing to them, and they caw back.

A dialogue of sound ensues, almost as in a dream, but also achingly real: these black winged beings, singing together with cawing conversation and bright abandon and me, singing back. They fly nearer at points, landing on lower branches on the tree, and my voice becomes louder and louder, singing to them. I don't care anymore about the people not very far away hearing me.

The crows and I make a temporary symphony together. I find myself wanting these singing beings to stay forever, but eventually the moment passes. And when it is over, they fly away one by one. Alone again in the park, I feel grateful for their coming. (Writing based on field journal notes, July 2016)

Connecting with the crows reminds me and affirms a sense of inter-aliveness with these bird beings who come to sing with me. My experiences at the water create a generative space to let the echoes of the past wash through and be witnessed and at times, transmuted in the context of the rich, teeming aliveness of what is. Sensing the natural world's buoyancy supports life-giving movement.

When singing at the water, my whole being has more capacity to find expansion and deeper relationship with the world. Simultaneously, there is always a risk in embracing porousness: while the experience is potentially connective and a source of meaning-making, there is a chance that it can evoke personal and collective pain I don't yet know how to bear or witness. Sometimes singing reveals deep sadness. At times, my resistance to feeling my emotions restricts my desire to spend time singing at the water, even after I have experienced its generative possibilities.

Today at the water, I start to cry. I cry for me, for my mother, my grandmother. For K, who tells me this morning about her endometriosis in addition to the fibromyalgia and the chronic fatigue. Her womb in pain. I cry for the Inlet, too, and the pollution of its waters.

...But after an hour here, singing and writing and crying, too, I feel my breath in connection with the green leaves, glittering gold, my notes tingling with vibration and touching their tips. (Writing based on field journal notes, June 2016)

The willingness to keep embracing interconnected beauty is inseparable from feeling aspects of ricocheting pain. One reason the matrixial borderspace is also hard to welcome is because of the painful resonances the matrixial can evoke; these kinds of resonances can be weighty and overwhelming.

The artist, healer, and/or ritualist may enter the realm of the matrixial and "become an open channel for both self and other" (Bickel, 2020, p. 7; Ettinger, 2006a) beyond individualized conceptions of self and beyond linear conceptions of time. To open to this kind of awareness requires a certain vulnerability and receptivity to intimacy with dynamic and unpredictable processes. Unlike the more individualized, "phallic" subject position, the matrixial borderspace is a channel where we are more vulnerably open and affected. Bickel notes that: "In accepting the gift of entry into matrixial

borderspace(s) we open to the conjoined joy and grief of human fragility in copoiesis” (2020, p. 145).

Yet choosing to align with the earth through song and attention opens a pathway for me in allowing the depth of the beauty and the pain to be held together. My most profound fear in facing overwhelm is being alone. Attuning with the earth offers a pathway to greater accompaniment and interconnectedness (Turcotte, 2012a, 2012b). The practice of singing at the water highlights the importance for me of consistent, visceral earth connection in resonating in/with the ground of being (Hartley, 2020).

Singing at the water begins a kind of “earth apprenticeship” (Lilburn, 2017, p. 205), specifically in the form of ritual or ceremony, enacted through repetition, in this place by the water. In coming back and circling round to the same spot and practices, there is an unfolding and spiraling of depth in my relationships with that ecology over time, to the water, trees, and the animals I meet and witness and even the shipping crates at the industrial Inlet.

Pryer discusses the transformative power of ritual, which uses both repetition and attentional practices to “invite the anima loci to congregate and unite” (2011, p. 78). She points out that such ritual processes have a life energy of their own that cannot be fully regulated:

Taking place in liminal space-time, at the margins of the everyday, at what the ancient Celts called “thin places”, the processes of ritual have a somewhat anarchic, chaotic quality. To an extent, the outcome of the ritual is beyond the participant’s control.” (p. 79)

Similar to ritual, an improvisational singing practice in nature can be chaotic and doesn’t always have a concrete outcome. Such a practice can be deemed a waste of time towards achieving linear goals in modern Western worldviews.

Yet it is only in the repeated enactments of disciplined yet chaos-inviting practices such as singing at the water that I continue to build a relationship with the sea and other bodies of water, the trees, the birds, the soil, and the invisible supports which lurk in the natural world. Without consistent practice and an open invitation, the consciousness does not remain. Even when I return to practice, there are no guarantees of my immediate shifting into the experience of interconnectedness. Each time, my

outreach is uncertain; each time, my singing is a longing throat call pitched to the unknown.

Chapter 6.

Embodied Inquiries

As Pinkas (2016) notes, embodiment is not a permanent arrival, but an ongoing process of departure and return. One can seek a somatic landing place for the spirit, but the spirit may also journey to other realms. Yet the flow of spirit to body is shaped by a corporeal sense of home to which one can return in this time and place.

In the unfolding of this inquiry, I have explored what brings my spirit in deeper contact with the porous containment of my body. In the next section, I explore a craniosacral bodywork session which I experienced in May 2017 and inquire into this session's teachings around deepening embodiment. I examine how touch and intuitive sensing of possible body-stories supported an unwinding into deeper presence. In inquiring into this session, I explore understandings of the body in trauma work and the potentialities of matrixial echoes.

Intuitive Inquiry Bodywork

On the craniosacral bodywork table, M. touches and moves my neck and sacrum gently. Craniosacral therapy is a gentle form of bodywork based in the Osteopathic tradition developed by Andrew Still and then further developed by William Sutherland (Raffo, 2020). In describing the nature of craniosacral bodywork, craniosacral therapist Raffo writes: "Craniosacral work is a slow dance between what you don't know and what you perceive ..." (2022, p. 162).¹²

As I lie on M.'s bodywork table, we make room for unformed memory: fuzzy, felt, zings of possible insight. We are threading together an intuitive story, following my body's movements and releases. When the body trembles or shifts with touch or after she or I speak a possible story fragment, that is something to notice. We notice the subtlety of my body's response to words or physical contact. The body may be

¹² Renfrew (2015) and Raffo (2020, 2022) discuss how this form of bodywork was adapted from Shawnee bodywork practices and has similarities to Cherokee bodywork practices (Renfrew, 2015).

acknowledging something that the cells have been holding. The process invites curiosity, not-knowing, and openness.

Today, in the second session, my head shakes, and releases. I breathe through, a kind of fluid unfolding. M. shares her intuitive sense of a tiny body, perhaps in the womb or a very young infant. M. perceives the tiny body experiencing a hit of some kind. The source of the impact is not clear, but in M.'s intuitive perception through her hands, she perceives the impact of a hit, destabilizing my body's emerging organization.

On M.'s table, my body is unwinding the impact fluidly as opposed to in a jerky way, which M. suggests could be a memory from being in amniotic fluid. M.'s hands are supporting and allowing the unfolding of the pattern, unwinding it. She indicates that my body is slowly reorganizing itself. I have no idea what the story of this very early impact might be, but it matches a sense of being knocked out of my body very early in life, and parts of my spirit being lodged faraway in the cosmos.

"It has been hard for part of your system to coherently organize due to this old experience, but your body is shifting now," M. says.

As my body releases on M.'s table, I am getting to re-experience the healing salve of human presence and bodily unwinding, offering a new circuit of understanding and bodily flow. I don't have a full story of what caused this "hit" (was it a physical fall or impact my mother experienced? A hormonal hit from my mother's descent into depression? An intergenerational imprint of violence?) In the mysterious way of the pre-verbal and matrixial, I may never know. There is no need to uncover an exact cause and no need to blame my parents if an impact occurred, but M.'s naming of this embodied constriction in my head—and her intuitive sense about its source in the past—is helpful. This session supports my body in a more fluid integration between places in my body that had been disconnected.

Years later, a friend comments that after these sessions with M. (which continued periodically for a year after the one I describe), I appeared stronger and more settled to her. It is also in the process of these sessions that after two years of frequent moves, I find my first housing situation in Vancouver that offers a beginning semblance of stability.

Attuning to the Body's Cues

Dörte Sanek (2014) writes of the importance of following the body and the sequences of movement that unfold in somatic therapy: “The client follows any subtle impulse that the body offers, surrenders to involuntary movement and allows for emotions to arise” (2014, pp. 101-102). Many somatic healing approaches share an assumption that embodied traces of unconscious and implicit experiences can be excavated through the body and that traumatic symptoms can be potentially shifted through witnessing and responsive contact that attends to the body's cues and messages (Blackstone, 2018; Levine, 2010; Raffo, 2022; Rothschild, 2000; Stanek, 2014; Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014).

Bodily attending can happen through verbal conversation, silent presence, sounding, movement, and through touch-based processes (Johnson, 2013; Levine, 2010; Rothschild, 2000; Stanek, 2014). Attuned somatic noticing is believed to support the body to engage in its own process of unwinding (Levine, 2010). If followed and listened to, we may feel sensations, impulses, and emotions which don't fit in a clear, integrated narrative (Rothschild, 2000). When a person is overwhelmed in a traumatic way, different senses, emotions, and bodily memory fragments get disconnected from each other, stored in the implicit memory, and can intrude into people's lives as flashbacks and in other forms (Levine, 2010; Rothschild, 2000). In addition, in our earliest experience before around age three, memory is recorded implicitly as opposed to explicitly. Implicit memory doesn't have a time-stamped narrative which marks it as past. Both early memory and unprocessed traumatic memory may show up in the present without a story to contextualize them (Keren & Tyrano, 2009).

Tracking of impulses, sensations, emotions, and memory fragments can allow experiences held in our implicit memories to be witnessed and woven together into more coherent relationship with each other (Rothschild, 2000). Narratives that resonate with embodied experience can help register the experience, creating containment, and marking the experience as past. At the same time, some practitioner-theorists believe it may not always be necessary to articulate the whole experience in language for transformation to occur, but rather to support and accompany the bodily unwinding and integration process (Forde & Duvvury, 2021; Levine, 2010; Rothschild, 2000).

Somatic therapist Blackstone (2018) describes how bodily constrictions and disassociations form: “We pull away with our body and consciousness, from whatever is painful or overwhelming, and we constrict those parts of ourselves that are experiencing pain” (p. 13). One form of subtle bodywork, Aston Patterning, works with releasing the embodied constrictions and habits that interfere with more open and expanded awareness. Johnson describes the founder Judith Aston’s underlying theory:

Her formulation is an embodied version of a widely recognized transpersonal notion of presence, where inner conversations, with their floodings of memories and images, lose their power and a person is simply available for what is here now... (2013, p. 6)

While Aston’s approach is unique, her perspective on bodywork has resonances with other somatic approaches which advocate for attending to the body to unravel stuck patterns and open to a larger capacity for presence (Johnson, 2013; Kalef, 2014, 2017; Levine, 2010; Rothschild, 2000).

One essential element of the work I experienced with M. was embodied listening through touch and emotional attunement. Embodied listening is a nuanced form of attending that goes beyond what is perceived aurally; this kind of attention can happen kinaesthetically between two people through somatic bodywork. Fraleigh describes the nature of the bodywork taught in her own school, “...the bodyworker and the recipient are in a listening relationship through qualities of touch” (2015, p. Xxiv).

Armos (2020) describes listening this way: “Arguably, we listen with our whole bodies, not only with our ears, engaging and intertwining all our senses and modes of knowing (Snowber, 2016; Lipari, 2014; McRae, 2015)” (p. 7). Embodied listening can draw on multiple faculties to allow a deeper and more subtle perception. My own capacity for embodied listening has been strengthened by experiencing other embodied listeners who bring their own attuned presence to my experience (Peyton, 2017). Embodied listening is intertwined with the act of witnessing, which involves holding space for the fullness of an experience. Craniosacral bodyworker Susan Raffo observes: “Most of the time, particularly in biodynamic forms of craniosacral work, all I do is witness...” (2022, p. 162-163).

According to Blackstone (2018), one feature of trauma is that our bodies become numb or conversely, our embodied experience becomes overwhelming. In this way, the

world can feel either too distant or too close (or both): “Our constricted senses shrink the world. They separate us from the objects around us, but they also bring those objects closer to us than they really are” (p. 106). This closeness/separation can make it difficult to witness our own embodied experience at a clear distance. Skillful witnessing by others can allow overwhelm or numbness to be met with healing contact that offers both spaciousness and holding.

Walsh and Bai (2014) discuss the power of cultivating witness consciousness, a concept which derives from Buddhist practice. Witness consciousness fosters a space of equanimous presence that can hold the ebbs and flows of experiencing. Practices such as meditation, writing, therapy, bodywork, and other forms of warm relational connection (Peyton, 2017) can help cultivate and strengthen a “sturdy and non-reactive container” (Walsh & Bai, 2014, p. 26) in which one can witness highly charged emotional experiences in oneself and others.

Irish mythologies offer the image of the cauldron, which resonates with aspects of Walsh and Bai’s description (2014) of witness consciousness. The cauldron frequently appears in Celtic mythological narratives: “In these stories, the raw, unpalatable things are transformed during cooking, through the action of fire and water, into nourishing food” (Whelan, 2010, p. 130). A cauldron offers containment for bubbling soups and other liquids to cook. This allows unprocessed stews of experience to be simmered, big pieces melted into smaller pieces, renegotiated, and sometimes, metabolized.

For years, I couldn’t directly focus on certain past experiences, uncomfortable sensations, remembered images, or memory-traces because they were too frightening. Part of creating an effective cauldron has included a choice of when and how much to approach past experiences: approaching the stew at a rate that the body-psyche can handle (Levine, 2010; Raffo, 2022; Rothschild, 2000).

Through my craniosacral sessions with M., I experience witnessing through her touch, words, and non-verbal presence. Energetic shifts and a new sense of circuitry in my body unfolds slowly over time; an energetic vortex gets accessed, named, and accompanied. I am not fully clear what event(s) are being metabolized, but the bodywork impacts my lived experience all the same.

While this work has a powerful impact, my body continues to move in and out of constriction in cycles; this place in the back of my head can occasionally show up as a weak spot where the flow of life force gets caught in an eddy. Raffo (2022) notes that after initial breakthroughs in bodywork, recipients can still fall back into old patterns. The initial shifts offer a new template of bodily coherence. Sometimes, these new templates of easy flow remain in place. But often, embodied transformation happens in many iterative cycles, with frequent shifts back to old patterns to be revisited. Raffo writes about embodied work: “Shifting the soft tissues, the nonlinear aspects of the fluid self, shifting our habits and patterns: this is slow work...There is no map, there is just living” (2022, p. 167).

What we are holding in our bodies is complex. In Toronto, sparked by writing and my relationship, I experienced spontaneous openings in my pelvis after years of constriction and pain. Creatively writing from my body, including about unspoken Motherline lineage stories, as well as the further awakening of sexual and emotional openness appeared to launch me into whirling light, darkness, and oceanic encounter, which felt profoundly healing, but eventually was destabilizing. At the time, I had little context to place this experience. I later came to associate these river-rich and oceanic experiences—in part—with the matrixial border space, rife with archaic memory.

Physical therapist Tami Kent posits that our pelvic bowls hold energetic imprints of past experiences, and that healing pelvic imbalances can help nurture and heighten our creative capacities (Kent, 2011). Kent began as a traditional physical therapist in women’s health; over time, she evolved her own practice to work with the pelvis as a repository of subtle memory, with a focus on cis women’s health. She believes in a holistic approach to working with the pelvis. Her work uses visualizations, meditations, and rituals along with physical, muscular alignment processes to address the wounds and tension the pelvis may be holding. For Kent, the constrictions and flow in one’s

pelvis correspond with personal histories as well as ancestral patterns and the messaging one has absorbed about being female.¹³

My body and in particular, my connection with my pelvis, had opened in Toronto. But I had shut down again because I couldn't navigate this deluge at the time. Afterwards, I committed to a much slower and circuitous path of unearthing my relationship with my own embodiment.

Kent's work (2011) grew out of her professional interests, but also out of her personal experience. After a miscarriage, she deepened into her own womb exploration: "Grieving from my womb, I traveled down through the layers of storied emotions which had inadvertently blocked access to my root. I also realized the heft of the burdens I had carried as a woman...I lifted each stone in my body until I felt the sensation of bare dirt" (2011, p. 7). Kent's work offers a pathway to marginalized and subtle aspects of cis women's bodily experiences.¹⁴

Constrictions and pain may not be solely rooted in events from our own individual lives as Ettinger (2006a; 2011), Kent (2011), Raffo (2022), Stanek (2014), and Turcotte & Schiffer (2014) discuss. For instance, Stanek (2014) has inquired into the rape of German women by Russian forces at the end of World War Two and the embodied repercussions on descendants. When stories remain unspoken, Stanek argues, the impact of traumatic experiences are still transmitted to descendants:

The body is moved by a sensation but cannot assign meaning to the felt sense due to the missing words. The silence cuts off the meaning making process and leaves the body with a confusing truth or a visceral knowing, and the mind with unanswered questions. It is this body experience that is passed on intergenerationally. (2014, p. 97)

¹³ Panisch and Tam (2020) also propose the evidence of the prevalence of trauma among cis women with pelvic pain makes it vital to work holistically with that emotional pain in relation to pelvic bowl. Panisch and Tam analyzed over thirty studies of medical interventions in women's pelvic pain, showing that holistic interventions which include addressing past painful and sometimes, seemingly unrelated experiences (such as the deaths of loved ones as well as domestic violence) showed success in improving pelvic pain while some less holistic interventions did not. They document how holistic approaches that include addressing past trauma and emotional disturbance in relation to pelvic pain are still quite rare in the field (2020).

¹⁴Though focused on cis women, Kent's theories (2011) of pelvic/womb imprints can also be investigated and if resonant, adapted and applied by womb-holders who don't identify as women.

Somatic healing approaches help people contact and reckon with those embodied nonverbal fragments, integrating them into meaning-making through bodily-rooted language. When there are “gaps in the narrative” (Stanek, 2014, p. 97), somatic cues may even offer pathways to making sense of unspoken intergenerational experiences (Stanek, 2014).

The matrixial channel prompts an intrinsic process of “wit(h)nessing” of trauma that challenges discrete notions of self and other: “If you are opened to the matrixial horizon, you know that an individual might be unconsciously metamorphosing traces of the trauma of someone else” (Ettinger, 2011, p. 21). Ettinger points out how compassion and creativity in working with the traces in the matrixial field are vital: “We treat and can creatively transform these traces, or we can get stuck and start to look for a parent to blame” (2011, p. 25). Instead, Ettinger emphasizes the role of stepping into “responsibility” (p. 25) to and for traces which are not our own. She advocates cultivating the ability to “fragilize ourselves and still keep a certain awe and respect for the different non-I(s) that share our webs, for our others, known and unknown, who belong to different generations” (p. 25).

My interest is not simply in getting rid of traces of matrixial trauma to live in a neutral present, but rather to explore the richness of how transgenerational connections of the matrixial are evoked in resonance in healing and art-working processes. Ettinger, in her painting process in which the matrixial emerges, describes how she seeks:

to connect to its frequencies to such an extent that this resonance reaches the level of the archaic resonance in me. This archaic resonance is directly linked to past and missed future horizons that now edge the presentpresence: to a net of virtual strings. (2011, p. 19).

Thus, the presence is about an attunement to a web of elusive resonances, absences, and relationalities, notably what emerges in the “virtual and possible intersections with the Other and the Cosmos, and the time-space of intersection itself” (Ettinger, 2011, p. 18).

I have found that working somatically with past traumatic imprints and mysterious constrictions has allowed pleasurable bodily unwinding and fresh openings to the present over time. Yet, as Ettinger (2011) notes, the result is not a blank slate, but rather an evolving relationship with my own string of absent-present resonances and ancient

undercurrents. The threshold into (un)memory offers a spacious invitation into a wider consciousness.

Untangling the intricate knots held in the body through somatic work helps me cultivate pathways for a stronger channel for my life force through my body. Gentle bodily noticing, tracing of possible stories, and freeing of somatic vortexes through embodied listening and witnessing supports my capacity for following movements of life energy, which includes sediments of archaic flows, along with the river of the present.

Spiraling into Embodiment

Let me shape shift
curving
backbone
swirling
snake
animates
spiraling body
winding
thread
weaves
coils
unkempt
pleasure
fiery
forgotten
longing

A couple years into my PhD program in Vancouver, I perceive an inner image of spiraling, a movement inwards and outwards, a curling dance-like movement as central to this dissertation process. This kinaesthetic sense of spiraling centers me and enlivens me, feeling like a part of a magical trail of hopeful arrival into my body. Spiraling is different than the other circular movement of spinning which disorients me and which I worked with starting in my early thirties by resting my belly on the ground.

I wonder: how are spinning and spiraling different and similar? Can one morph into the other? Does spinning need to be discarded or is it an entry point into another kind of knowledge?

As I spend time with the spinning sensation, I feel it as a lightness of materiality. When spinning, I am both disoriented but also trying to touch base with many points at once: to manage connection and separation (being here and here and here and here) without being fully on the earth. In spinning and even in the sickness it can provoke, I avoid having to feel a painful sense of separation fully, yet I also remain ungrounded, somehow stuck in an in-between realm of being/non-being.

Now I bring my attention to spiraling, to the spirals moving in my body. The spirals take me into the earth, opening a pathway all the way into the centre of the planet: a kind of deepening and earthing encounter. The sense of the spiral is orienting, guiding me in my connection with cosmos, body, and earth.

Somatic educator Liz Koch perceives the spiral as “the most sophisticated and creative of nature’s biomorphic movements” (2019, p. 111). She notes the presence of spirals everywhere: in “...the curling of a leaf, caterpillar, spine, rivulet, embryo, horn, pinecone, hair follicle, and galaxy reveal expressions that we all share as living processes” (p. 29) Spiraling is also sometimes described as how the baby moves through the birthing process, turning its body to find its way through the birth canal (Koch, 2019).

The image of the spiral has helped me to navigate a non-linear path. As Dolores Whelan (2010) notes: “A spiral...is a circle that is not closed but continues to grow and expand out from that fixed point” (p. 91). The spiral offers a sense of spacious, circling movement in my inquiry through returning to the same inner questions about embodiment, which open into different layers of insight and orientation.

In her Underworld emotional/spiritual process, Hartley explains that for a time in her body-psyche, “the thread of the spiral had broken”, fracturing her connection between etheric and bodily realms (2020, p. 35). Her capacity to spiral in a way that integrated the vertical (spiritual/etheric) and horizontal (bodily/earthly) dimensions was lost. Hartley eventually found her way back through a mysterious spark of embodied reconnection and allowing the new to emerge (2020, p. 40).

During my experiences in Toronto and New York, I feared a break in the thread of the spiral between etheric realms and the earth. Slowing down along with embodied listening and many other practices which I explore in this dissertation helped me rediscover and deepen my relationship with that spiral, cultivating my versatility in the weaving of dimensions.

Attuned movement has offered one pathway to relink ethereal and bodily worlds. While the spiral can be a metaphor, spiraling is also an element of somatic movement. Koch (2019) describes how in one of her somatic inquiries that involved spiraling: “A vortex of longing drew me inwards until the curvatures of a scoliotic spine met with a grief so beyond my years it felt ancestral” (2019, p. 38).

Along with the unfurling of hidden emotions, spiraling can facilitate an organic wave of undulating energies through our bodies, mirroring the generative power of the spiral in nature. Koch (2019) notes that exploring fluid wave-like motions can be healing, dissolving old patterns and yielding somatic breakthroughs.

Dance Break

my chest caves exhaustion
I want to lie down
but I decide to take myself to Just Dance
where I can dance alone among people

I trudge to the bus,
sitting lodged in a hard seat
stream through the dark city

At the venue, the dimly lit room sparkles
people move wildly, meditatively
mostly silently
pulsing electronica

I walk on the dance floor, feet naked against wood
allowing my back to melt
a deep swinging bow
hips moving

concave chest spiked with fear
descending
grief

the swinging rhythm of my body
an opening

my heart, a burrowed animal,
trembling, thawing to
the beat of the music

harshness prickles sharply
through jaw and spine
my hips
dancing
the terror of opening

feet thump floor
sternum bucks
in air

I am growing bigger
wilder

pelvis circles
jaw howls
flood of heat
seeps my skin

hips pumping

the sound barrier breaks

my head-chest-hips-feet

encircled

in the sweat-glistened
touch

of audacious warmth
down to my baby toes

a full orbit of aliveness
greeted
in the undulations
of the
supple
night

To be open amidst fear is not an easy task. Snowber notes the importance of “an open stance” in our bodies to be able to receive wisdom and insight; this openness allows the possibility of “sniff[ing] out the beauty in the midst of terror” (2016, p. 58). I have found genuine openings happen in environments of permission and allowing through stops and starts—moments of touching into opening and then closing again—over years. Like a flower. Or a scared animal learning to trust over a lifetime.

That night I describe in the poem, in the welcoming space of Just Dance, I pursue an embodied inquiry that I might not be willing to make alone: my feet stamping, a raucousness of movement, circling of pelvis and exhaling sound in the company of other dancers who are immersed in their own rhythmic and swirling dances. A momentum builds to follow my body’s unfolding into other alivenesses.

A number of scholars explore healing and restorative possibilities of spiraling and circling movements. For example, Danica Anderson (2016), explores the role of movement and other creative practices in the context of trauma in the Balkans. Anderson points to theories of transgenerational impact of maternal fright (a translated term) and the use of circular and spiral rhythms and patterns as pathways to healing among mothers, including the kolo round dance.

The kolo is a very old dance, believed to be from the Mesolithic era, and its name means circle (Anderson, 2016). Movement practitioners from the Laban-Bartanieff tradition have mapped the rhythms of the kolo dance in relation to the recent neuroscience research about nervous system regulation by Dr. Stephen Porges, suggesting that the dance helps to regulate the nervous system (Anderson, 2016, para 55). Anderson's article theorizes that women's ancient cultural practices based in circles and spirals offer embodied codes for the bodies of traumatized women to re-regulate

themselves and in the case of pregnant women, to find regulation and support for the intrauterine beings they will birth into the world.

Can my own spiraling on a modern dance floor facilitate older regenerative knowledges? Dance scholar Amanda Williamson (2015) suggests this may be the case, drawing a link between modern somatic movement which often features spirals and undulations and ancient imagery. Williamson notes that Neolithic European artifacts are populated by images of the spiral, water, and the curving female body, which archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1982, 2001) theorized were part of a Neolithic European belief system that valued cyclical life processes of birth, death, and renewal.¹⁵

Along with Gimbutas' work, Williamson cites Sjöö and Mor (1991) who reference the ancient history of a female principle in earth's history and the theory that for more than two million years, earth creatures reproduced through parthenogenesis in an ancient womb-like ocean. Williamson makes a connection between symbols of the spiral and other Neolithic European imagery and the field of contemporary somatics: "Reflecting religious symbolism of womb, serpent, and primordial waters, movement inspired by fluid awareness gives the human body back to its cosmic-material-watery origins" (2015, p. 346). She suggests that the fluid and wave-like movement often explored in the field of somatics evokes archaic patterns, which resonate with earlier histories.

What opens in me as I spiral? What intrigues me about the scholarship of Anderson (2016) and Williamson (2015) is that these theorists posit access points through dance and somatic movement to ancient symbols and movements that work with spirals in healing and regenerative ways. Interestingly, both scholars' work touches

¹⁵ Gimbutas (1982, 2001) posited that these symbol systems along with other evidence found in Neolithic Europe were reflective of a goddess-worshipping religion that honoured the female body as sacred, which was later upended. Gimbutas was a highly respected leader in her field whose matristic theory of Old Europe challenged the accepted narrative of perennial patriarchy in the Neolithic era (Carta, 2022). Gimbutas used a multidisciplinary approach which was unconventional in archaeology, but Carta (2022) notes that Gimbutas' work was attacked far beyond that of (mostly) male colleagues who have pushed the boundaries of the discipline. The dismissiveness towards Gimbutas' work continues, but in recent years, Colin Renfrew, a major critic of one aspect of Gimbutas' theory (the Kurgan invasion), acknowledged that new DNA evidence proved Gimbutas was right—and he was wrong—about the invasion. Renfrew gave a lecture honouring her in 2017 (Carta, 2022; The Institute of Archaeomythology, 2017).

on questions and possible examples of how symbology and somatic practices can evoke traces of older (un)memory.

As I experienced when I spiraled under the pulsing lights at Just Dance, moving with focused attention can open thresholds of awareness. One of the most powerful aspects of my experience that night on the dance floor was an opening to a sense of lush and supportive invisible presence(s), as I became present to my embodied experience through stomping, circling, and spiraling in that dance.

I felt presence(s) there with me—in this case, in dancing play. This invisible communication felt familiar yet also new in the level of playful and loving contact in this dance. Kieft describes a mystical experience she had at age 17: “I became aware of a big presence around me. Sensing it consciously for the first time, I also realized that it had always been there” (2022, p. 97). My experience at Just Dance was one of a handful of significant embodied touchstone moments that further called me to attend a bridging of invisible and embodied realities. The expansion I felt while dancing was a spark inviting my tentative animal body into inhabiting presence, evoked by movement and being encircled with luscious awareness that was rich and accompanying.

Somatic Interlude

Perhaps, dear listeners, your body wants to move now. I welcome you to notice your own impulses to sway, dance, or just breathe.

Feel free to begin to move if that calls to you.

Or perhaps your body wants something else right now: a drink of water, a stretching of your neck, a deep breath, or the press of your fingers massaging the soles of your feet? Perhaps you simply want to sit back into your chair and look out the window at the changing sky.

These are moments of pause. What are your desires for movement and for rest?

I invite you to listen.

Chapter 7.

Seeking a Lineage: Searching for Jane O'Brian

My inquiry into Motherlines and embodiment has been an excavation through the cellular traces of embodied memory and land-based resonances, inspired by somatic cues, inner imagery, and historical inquiry. As I continue to recount my tale, I invite you to keep attending to your own bodily experience.

Below, dear listeners, I will share about two experiences of emergent imagery through bodywork and visualisation which informed my Motherlines inquiry. Then I will share another significant turning point in my pilgrimage, my first trip to Ireland, and the embodied learnings of that extraordinary journey.

Craniosacral Bodywork Session (May 2017)

Today on M.'s bodywork table, I am finding language to express an unformed sensing. There are flashes, a bit like bolts of mini-lightning that move through my body. We are sensing into stories of my female lineages. A flash of warmth moves on the edge of my skin as I sense an older time when my female ancestors' power was formidable and spiritually potent. I sense these Motherline ancestors offering ritual leadership. A flash comes: at some point, some in the lineage misused their power. There was a distortion of power and failure in integrity. I try saying this aloud. My body shivers and I take a breath. While I have long had an embodied sense of the patriarchal damage to legacies of women's power and voice, this acknowledgment of possible distorted use of power by some of my female ancestors leads me to take a breath. I feel a sadness, but also a relief to sense another possible source of fear my body has about holding power and authority.

Another flash comes about returning to this power with integrity: acknowledging its potency while being aware of the possible misuse of power. My body buzzes, there is relaxing in my neck. Though I don't know cognitively if this story is "true,"

my body is settling with this narrative. This imaginal storying-with-body process is guiding my meaning-making connected to values that matter to me today: deep integrity in holding power. (Writing based on journal entry, May 7, 2017)

Women's freedom and agency has often been associated with the evil force of the witch or temptress (Noddings, 1989; Noiva, Smith, & Farnell, 2015). In part due to a fear of women's power, women and gender non-conforming people have often been and still are targeted for behaviour that asserts agency in ways that challenge patriarchal expectations (Beard, 2015, 2017; Dundes, Buitelaar, & Streiff, 2019).

Yet while being aware of the real attacks on women's and gender non-conforming people's agency, my body also needs to acknowledge that women, too, can misuse power. As part of my interest in power with integrity, I have been drawn to find glimpses and even a felt sense of a lineage of women's power(s) rooted in integrity in which I can situate myself with trust.¹⁶

I continue to explore my connection with women's power with a focus on my female lineages. In January 2017, I participate in a guided visualisation in an online group which directs us to choose a path in an imaginary forest. An inner journey unfolds:

I am walking in the forest. A fork appears, and I have to choose a path. I stand for a moment, and then choose, knowing that I am choosing the path of the goddess. The forest scape is amazingly verdant as I walk. There are bright white flowers, so shining and magical and the sounds of the forest are vibrant, a deeper vibrancy than I know in my everyday life.

Next to the forest at a distance is a stretch of open land and there are men running with spears, doing an intricate dance. I am transfixed, lulled, and soothed by the artful movements of people, charging through air. Their movements are syncopated, rhythmic, and precise. I sense the ritual is for protection of the earth. I see a group of women and men nearby, talking and laughing. I notice one woman. She moves through the crowd with power and ease. She emanates an earthbound warmth. Smiling at someone, she stops to talk. Her body moves in

¹⁶ An article which includes revised parts of this chapter was published as: L.R. Richardson (2022), Motherlines, thin places, and somatic orientations: An embodied inquiry. *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities*, 9(1&2), 145–59, https://doi.org/10.1386/dmas_00039_1

sweeping, powerful gestures as she speaks. I realize that she is my ancestor. I feel an unfractured sense of belonging that warms my body, head to toe. I begin to walk towards her. (Writing based on journal entry, January 5, 2017)

During this visualisation, I see a woman who I sense is an ancestor who radiates a powerful, embodied ease. The image of this woman embedded in an interwoven community is one of my first felt senses of a Motherline connection in which my body fully relaxes. The image continues to steep in my psyche long after the visualisation is over. This woman is not in isolation or hidden in a secret forest but embedded in an interconnected community. Whether this image is “true” in a literal way is less important to me than the overarching felt sense it evokes.

Song Waters

Within the cell's cemented walls
threaded jewels
glinting inside the emptiness
can I bear to ride
the rolling go-cart
of desolation
to its core
vibrating destruction of rigid walls
over the edge of the bridge
Into the roiling
song waters
below?

The Seeking of My Irish Motherline

In my early thirties in Berkeley, I began a meditative practice of genealogy. I found Ancestry.com and created an account for my family. Here were census records, immigration records, photos, and other people's collections of family trees and stories. Just as some people enjoy relaxing over a crossword puzzle, or morning paper, I relaxed over a nice bout of genealogy research in the evenings.

When I followed the maternal ancestral line from mother to grandmother to great-grandmother and further back, I found Jane O'Brian, a U.S. woman of Irish ancestry.

She is my great-great-great-grandmother and my earliest known maternal-line foremother. I can find no female ancestors before her in this family line, though, of course, her mother and grandmothers precede her back in time, their names now unknown to me.

Jane O'Brian was born around 1806, likely in Ohio, the daughter of John O'Brian and an unknown mother. I do not know when the O'Brians came to the U.S. I only know that O'Brian is clearly an Irish name and one of Jane's children lists her mother as from "Ireland" in the census records (though based on other records, it is more likely that it was her parents or even her grandparents who were born in Ireland).

Jane married in Ohio in 1824 and died in Coldwater, Michigan in 1851 or 1854, in her mid-forties, the mother of nine living children and interred with a baby, probably her tenth child. Jane's death in Coldwater, Michigan appeared to destroy the family cohesion, with no mother to manage the house. A family historian writes: "The family home was then broken up, and the children scattered in different parts of this country" (Elivan, 2007).

The records show my direct ancestor, Emeretta, would have been ten or twelve when her mother Jane died. Jane's youngest child was around three. Jane's children must have missed her and each other. They were divided across thousands of miles, presumably to live with other relatives. Emeretta ended up in New York State, far from Coldwater, Michigan. In the records on Ancestry.com, I see how many of Jane's children named their own daughters Jane (though none of their sons appeared to be named after Jane's husband, Abram).

In turning towards my understanding of Motherlines, I must reckon with all forms of loss. In addition to patriarchal systems which impact the relationship between mothers and daughters, life's inherent impermanence can cause mother loss through sickness and death. Lowinsky notes: "The very image of female continuity and interrelatedness seems to evoke its absence, its loss, and the wounds we all feel in the feminine" (1990, p. 141).

Jane was the mother of Emeretta, who was the mother of Flora, who was the mother of Margaret, who was the mother of Nancy, who is my mother. It is Jane I return to in my imaginings.

In genealogical research, which I continue during my doctoral studies in Vancouver, I search for more clues about Jane's life. For Jane O'Brian's family and for many European settler peoples, immigration and settlement involved a profound leaving and then for some, a constant uprooting in the movement West.

Jane's father, John O'Brian, is recorded as coming to Hudson Township in Ohio in 1803. John O'Brian's family is then recorded as some of the first European settlers slightly further southwest of Hudson in a place named Johnson's Corners in Norton Township (originally home of the Shawnee/Kickapoo/Erie, then later the Iroquois) around 1814.¹⁷ A history of Summit County published in 1881 says of Norton Township: "No Indians remained in the township after 1812..." (1881, p. 582). This account does not say there were fewer Indigenous people in Ohio after 1812 because of a series of aggressive campaigns and broken treaties in current day Ohio for over fifty years before this point (Mancke, 2018).¹⁸

In her lifetime, Jane moved west with her husband and children further to East Liberty, Ohio (originally home of the Shawnee/Kickapoo/Erie, then later the Iroquois), and then onto Coldwater, Michigan (Potawatomi lands as well as perhaps the Ojibwe and Odawa).

Jane died in her forties in the 1850s—at about the age I am now. Sometimes when I sing, someone tells me that my voice has an Irish lilt to it. I don't know if that is true, but these comments always make me think of Jane O'Brian. Ireland is known for its

¹⁷ For centuries before colonization, the land in present-day Ohio appears to have been mainly the land of the Shawnee, the Kickapoo, and the Erie peoples (Mancke, 2018; Walton, 2020), but likely due to intergroup warfare escalated by struggles over the fur trade, this area had been mostly cleared of earlier inhabitants and was mainly a common hunting ground, largely controlled by the Iroquois (Mancke, 2018). As displacing colonial forces coalesced in the 1700s, various Indigenous groups repopulated Ohio Country (Mancke, 2018).

¹⁸ A series of often dishonest treaties such as the Fort Stanwix treaty (1885), the Fort MacIntosh Treaty, the Fort Harmar Treaty (1888), and Greenville treaty (1795) attempted to force Indigenous people in Ohio into a confined Northwest corner of Ohio land and eventually out of Ohio Country altogether (Walton, 2020). Yet it was also in Ohio Country where American settler armies would face some of their greatest defeats by Native American armies, including St. Clair's defeat in 1792 in the Northwest part of Ohio (Calloway, 2015). A major story of Ohio country in this period was of pan-Indigenous collaboration and ongoing resistance, including the development of pan-Indigenous Confederacy to collaborate and challenge the encroaching colonists (Mancke, 2018) It was in this region that Shawnee chief Tecumseh worked to organize a new Confederacy of Indigenous nations (Stockwell, 2015). In 1814, my settler ancestors in Ohio arrived onto land where there had been powerful campaigns of pan-Indigenous resistance and where there continue to be ongoing negotiations of power into the present day.

music, but what connection did Jane have to Irish songs? What did her voice sound like? Did she sing to her children? Were her eyes kind? How did her children bear her death and their own separation from each other? What did they each have to give up and what did they hold onto to survive?

And what was Jane and her children's relationship with the land they inhabited? Did Jane and her children meet Indigenous peoples in the lands the family settled? What was their relationship with Indigenous peoples they encountered or heard about on the lands they settled?

In seeking Jane, I hold the complex histories of her/my family's part in a process of colonization and simultaneously as my ancestor who calls me back to the earth, whom I need and want as a foremother. Her ungraspable image evokes a kind of aching for home and a Motherline into which I am interwoven and which I continue to weave.

Jane

a slab of granite gravestone
engraved with your name

Jane O'Brian Van Hyning

gleams on a website
your stone
on Potawatomi lands
now Coldwater, Michigan

I haven't been there
I don't know you, Jane
I don't know you at all
the lands on which you lived

only glimpses
of a warmth
in your heart
when I close my eyes

I wonder about

the tilt of your chin

the roughness of your hands
the cadence of your voice
the flicker of your smile

but I come up blank
I come up blank
I know no songs you sang
yet your absence
takes me into earth-seeking
dropping through dimensions
to find you

your lineage leads me to earth-falling
into something before memory

mud

a dream of earth

murky longing
plastered on my body

ochre soil
dirty
aching
warm

Landing on Irish Soil

My seeking of embodied-earth connection is nurtured by my acts of singing at the water in my current home in Coast Salish territories. In my search for bodily presence, earth, and Motherlines, I also have a whispering sense that Jane O'Brian's ancestral land, Ireland, might have special resonances and teachings for me.

Thus, when I see a conference advertised at the National University of Ireland in Galway on the topic of Motherlines during the second year of my PhD studies, I am determined to go. I know so little of Ireland: mostly images of bright green hillsides in photos and movies. I realize I have no idea where in Ireland Jane O'Brian's family was from. I want to weave a connection between traces of history and my relationship with the earth in the present. But with so little information, will turning towards the land of Ireland still be meaningful?

Basu (2004) raises valid concerns about romanticized connection with a “lost” ancestral homeland through travel in his study on roots-tourists to Scotland. He believes that these roots-tourists are projecting their identities onto the land, sometimes in troubling ways. In his interviews with his informants, he observes a longing for home motivating many roots-tourists:

For members of diasporic populations who feel uprooted or displaced, the quest for old country also constitutes a route to this ‘other’ place—the lost homeland, which in turn may be understood as the material metaphor for abstract sense of lost wholeness, integrity and identity. (2004, p. 156)

Basu suggests that roots-tourists/pilgrims to Scotland are, in fact, psychically merging with the places they identify as ancestral, drawing on these places as mirrors and sites of self in a way that may not always take in a complex relationality with the place and its multi-faceted history and present realities. I would agree there is a real risk in such seeking.

Yet while expressing concern about roots-tourists’ notions of Scotland as a “lost home” to be reclaimed, Basu simultaneously notes the powerful experiences of many of these travellers. According to Basu’s research, roots-tourists and pilgrims frequently report entering a kind of “liminal zone” where they experience “supernatural occurrences” which may include “feeling ancestral presences” (2004, p. 168). Basu observes that many roots-tourists appear to be substantially transformed by their journeys.

Basu raises important concerns about the re-appropriation of ancestral places as myopic “shrines to self” (2004, p. 168). At the same time, some scholars and writers—largely Indigenous, animist, and those informed by Indigenous thought—suggest there is a possibility of embodied memory resonances in ancestral land connections (Colorado, 2013, 2021; Deloria, 2003; Menzies, 2015; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006; Ybarra, 2019).

Patricia Monaghan shares what led her to journey and live periodically in Ireland, seeking to retrace her family's history. In a conversation with her mentor, Howard, a Tiguaamiut elder, asked her pointedly “Where are you from?” Due to Howard’s urging, Monaghan recognized the value of exploring “the places where my ancestors had walked, where my body understood the way time unfolded its seasons on the land, where people still spoke a language whose rhythms echoed in my own...” (2003, p.4).

The land of Ireland, Howard suggested, and Patricia realized, could provide a pathway to intergenerational body memory, land connection, and an ancestral language. I receive similar messages from writers, theorists, and teachers (Colorado, 2013; Deloria, 2003; Kremer & Jackson-Paton, 2013; June Johnston, 2019; Menzies, 2015; Snowber, 2020; Ybarra, 2019) which—along with my own intuitive nudges--propel me to visit Ireland.

I touch down in Ireland for the first time in July 2017, spending nine days in the country. Upon arrival, I frequently feel a sense of a raucous aliveness on the land. While I have an ancestral lineage connection, I am also aware how much more present mythological stories and practices of reverence in relation to the natural world appear to be in Ireland compared to my home culture. I find Irish sacred sites and their related tales are often known by the people I meet.

Irish-born scientist Beresford-Kroger discusses how the Celts “believed that the living world was filled with soul, from the water to the mountains, to the grass, to the wild animals and insects” (2019, p. 226). Exposure to older earth-centred Celtic Christian practices deeply shaped Beresford-Kroger’s childhood and teenage summers in Lisheens, County Cork in the mid-20th century. Irish theologian O’Donohue (1999; Tippett, 2008) also believes his own openness and receptivity to the aliveness of the land was in part due to Irish Celtic cultural understandings of the land’s animacy which were present in his small town in Connemara, Ireland.

In my daily life in North America, I have not regularly experienced a collective understanding of the land as animate, except in Indigenous-led ceremonies and earth-centered ritual spaces. David Abram (2011) suggests that in contexts where human-land relationships are not valued, human perceptual sensitivities may be seen solely as a burden. Abram’s experience was that his sensitivity (which overwhelmed him in his home context in the U.S.) allowed for navigating between the human and non-human worlds, a role that was respected and needed in the contexts in Bali and the villages of Nepal where he eventually lived. Abram proposes that a cultural context where the human-land relationship is valued offers generative pathways for humans’ deep capacities for sensitivity to other humans and to the more-than-human world.

Spiritual memoirist and anthropologist Ann Armbrecht who spent years living in Hedagna, Nepal, points to the power of learning to listen to the land, especially if we

have not been immersed in that way of being. She writes of modern contexts: “I began to think that perhaps it is not that our land no longer speaks, but that we do not have a concept...to alert us to the possibility that the land can speak....” (2008, p. 99).

With the echoes of Irish stories affirming the land’s animacy and my own ancestral connection to Ireland prompting deeper curiosity, my journey to Ireland is a step further into an inquiry of how the land can speak and my body can attune to earth-places. The Irish journey has a resonance because of my connection and longing for Jane O’Brian and her homeland. Yet the deepened focus on earth connection also has the potential to call forth other gifts. This journey prompts me to bring subtle energy awareness in a place rich with encouragement for human-earth communication.

Brigid’s Way Pilgrimage

The trip to Ireland is not particularly easy. I am quite sick with a headache and cold when I arrive in the West of Ireland into Shannon Airport, and I remain so for several days. Walking that land at the National University of Galway, through the green fields, I find myself flooded with grief. Is it my own personal grief, the grief of my response to the land and the feeling in that part of Ireland with its difficult histories, the land’s grief, ancestral grief, all of the above, or none of it? I don’t know.

A turning point comes when I present my short paper at the Motherlines conference which prompted my trip to Ireland. The autobiographical paper I share at the conference is my first written piece about Jane O’Brian. I feel a strong sense of presence in the room as I speak. After my presentation, people begin to gather around me. One woman tells me how the room grew warmer in tone as I shared my story of Jane O’Brian. Over coffee at the break and lunch, other women share their own stories of family disconnection, longing, and loss in their ancestral histories.

I have committed to join the last day of a community pilgrimage in the East of Ireland, so with some regret, I leave the conference a day early and take the train east towards Kildare. This decision to join the pilgrimage turns out to be a good one.

Brigid’s Way pilgrimage is focused on sites affiliated with Brigid of Kildare, a goddess and saint of Ireland. A full picture of the ancient Irish goddess Brigid is elusive, but according to Whelan (2010), Brigid embodies the “neart [Irish word] or life force, that

primal feminine energy that gives rise to all living beings” (p. 110). As an abbess and saint, Saint Brigid of Kildare is linked with a similar kind of abundance and generativity. February 1 is Saint Brigid’s Day and Imbolc, one of the four major pre-Christian festivals in the Irish calendar, which marks the beginning of spring and historically, the beginning of the farming season and the return of the light (Mikhailova, 2020).

The earlier goddess and Saint Brigid are also associated with the power of fire (Mikhailova, 2020; Whelan, 2010). For 700 years, the nuns of Kildare tended the sacred fire of Brigid; one of the nineteen sisters cared for the fire each night until each twentieth night when the fire was left alone for Saint Brigid to do the tending (Mikhailova, 2020; Whelan, 2010). After being extinguished hundreds of years before, the fire was relit in 2009 and is now tended by the sisters of the Solas Bhríde Hermitage, a centre dedicated to Saint Brigid in Kildare (Whelan, 2020).

The last day of the pilgrimage I join after the conference is a walk across green fields and small Irish roadways from Pollardstown Fen to Kildare, stopping at Saint Brigid’s well and Saint Brigid’s Fire and ending at the Solas Bhríde Hermitage. As the walk is about to start, I close my eyes and remember my friend Warren’s recent words in a workshop he led before I embarked on my trip, encouraging me to imagine meeting the people I need to meet and connecting with the places I need to encounter. Feeling that intention move through my body, I feel a rush of pleasure and open my eyes.

A woman approaches me. She is about my age with some streaks of grey in her hair and a jaunty, graceful walk. We say hello and I learn her name is Ursula. As we walk, Ursula tells me about her family. Ursula’s father’s family is from Kildare, but she tells me that her mother’s family comes from the West of Ireland in County Clare where there is more of a connection to traditional Irish culture, including the Irish language. Her mother’s family is from a town known for traditional Irish music. As soon as she speaks of her mother’s family, the thought flashes through my mind: *Is their name O’Brien?*¹⁹ I have never had this thought before, but something about her description of her mother’s family sparks this inquiry. A few seconds later, she says independently, “They are O’Briens.”

¹⁹ The name in Ireland is spelled O’Brien, but for my family in the U.S., it changed to O’Brian.

Later as we stop at one of the sites, we stand in a circle where people speak if they are moved to do so. One woman I haven't met speaks to the circle about the pain of families that have been torn apart through migration and violence; she speaks of the possibility of reconnection of family bonds. Later, at dinner, the woman who spoke of broken family bonds in the circle says she had no idea why she was moved to speak about this topic as it isn't directly related to anything in her own life, but when she speaks, she noticed Ursula and I both lit up in response to her words. Later, Ursula will visit me in Canada, and I will visit her again in Ireland.

After sharing with the group that I am hoping to make it to some of the sacred sites in County Meath, one of the other women, K., a bright-eyed woman in her 60s, generously offers to pick me up at the bus stop near her home in two days' time, and ferry me up to the Hill of Tara, which can't be reached without a car. I have been intrigued by the ancient passage tombs of County Meath, but I did not expect to be able to visit Tara.

Meeting the Hill of Tara

I know little about the Hill of Tara when I arrive. When we get out of the car, K. tells me to just take my time, and she will wait in the bookshop cafe for me and have "a cuppa tea." As I walk up from the cafe to the entry gate, my heart starts to grow brighter and my whole mood—which has been rather melancholy—begins to change dramatically.

I watch a short movie in the tourist shop about how the Hill of Tara had been a dedicated sacred site for millennia, with its ancient passage tombs and megaliths, and how the Hill was part of ritual ordeal undergone by the High King, whose coronation there at Hill included a sacred marriage with the land.²⁰ Then I head out ahead of the people on the official tour and walk towards the hill by myself. I walk up the hill alone, with no one else in sight.

²⁰ "The Hill of Tara is one of the four 'royal' sites from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age in Ireland and appears to have played an important role in ritual and ceremonial activity, more so than the other 'royal' sites; medieval literature suggests that Tara had a crucial role in the inauguration of Irish kings. Many of the monuments built on the Hill of Tara during the later prehistoric period respect or incorporate earlier monuments, suggesting a cultural memory of the importance of the Hill of Tara that lasted from the Neolithic to the Early Medieval Period" (McDonald, 2012, p. 56).

As I walk into the space of the sacred site, down the path, and up the green hill, I feel my backbone stretch and almost widen. An area in my chest begins to glow brightly and an unmistakable flow of awareness washes through me. I feel the land embracing me and communicating in that primal way of bodies, the way a mother or lover might hold you with intricate movements of love. This contact fills me with a brightness. The land then communicates a clear message to me, which touches me deeply and which I continue taking in years later. It is a message that ignites a deeper sense of who I am.

As part of the overall essence of this message from the land, I hear wordlessly in no uncertain, loving, fiery terms that it is my responsibility to show up fully in my body and in my own latent power. It is like a deep hug and absolute command from the earth to be fully alive. I feel the earth at Tara was communicating directly to me, welcoming me, and witnessing me. There is no distance in it, or destabilizing quality, or interruptions as there has been in other places. As I reach the top of the hill, I look out at the green waves of hills in amazement and gratitude, feeling the earth solidly and tenderly under my feet. Atop the hill, the sky is low and close, full of hanging clouds.



At Tara, in those moments, I am in alignment with a land-spirit connection that is profoundly orienting. Though I have also connected through my singing practice at

səlilwæt and in other places on earth, there is an effortless, enveloping, and transformative quality to my contact with the land at Tara in those moments. When I come back to Vancouver, my body carries this thread of memory with me of a belonging to the earth in her unquestioning embrace that includes being effortlessly beheld and of beholding deeply.

Years later, reading my friend Margaret McKeon's dissertation, I come upon her own experience at the Hill of Tara, which also communicated to Margaret in a powerful act of witness:

Under lazy sun, I walked the broad perimeter of the grass. A fierce presence entered me. I heard, "She is back. She is changed but she is back." I strode forcefully around the hill and, as it subsided, advanced to explore the rest of the site. (2021, p. 46)

The Hill saw both Margaret and me. The spirits of the land seemed to know Margaret as someone who was returning, even though she had never physically been there before, and this encounter charged her with energy. I was cradled by the Hill's energetic embrace, filled with a sense of belonging, as the Hill summoned me into occupying my backbone and heart.

Irish-American ceremonialist MacEowen writes of the Hill of Tara: "Tara is one of those classic thin places, as described in the Celtic tradition, energetically alive with history, with the imprint and presence of things that went before" (2007, p 3). Thin places are akin to the matrixial border space, offering an evolving threshold to the unknown in ourselves and the Other(s) and a fragilizing/opening of self.

Mircea Eliade (1959) writes of the phenomenon of sacred space, which he names hierophany. Eliade speaks of the fundamental orientation to the world that happens through the experience of a finding of centre, a fixed point in chaos. In her work around ritual, Pryer asserts that certain places on earth have particularly powerful sacred properties: "If one moves through a place with attention, one may recognize such power points (LaChapelle, 1988)" (2004, para 31-32).

The idea of thin places, sacred spaces, and power places—which are slightly different concepts—all gesture to a similar idea: that certain places on earth can be particularly energetically potent, offering access to other realities or ways of perceiving (Armbrecht, 2008; MacEowen, 2007).

In her ethnographic memoir, *Thin Places: A Pilgrimage Home*, Ann Armbrecht highlights the intersubjective nature of encounters with thin places, which she suggests are deeply shaped by what the visitor is able and willing to receive:

People make pilgrimages to thin places, places where gods have made their mark on the land. As the legends of the hidden valleys make clear, these journeys are internal as much as external. What the pilgrims encounter—the blessings they perceive—depends as much on their receptivity as on the sanctity of the land they pass through. (2008, p. 81)

I had begun to cultivate intentional experiences of land connection through singing at the Inlet/sælilwæt: a practice of meeting the local lands and grounding my own body. I had also had spontaneous experiences of land connection, such as the connection with the glorious autumn tree when I was child in Brooklyn. Still, I had never had an encounter quite like at Tara. Snowber notes: “I cannot order the sunrise, but I can be present to its arrival” (2016, p. 61). Dedicated practice builds capacity, but the arrival of spontaneous moments of encounter cannot be predicted. At Tara, I sense a floating awareness—which I know as an aspect of myself—being welcomed by an enduring earth memory.

“Home,” Migration, Colonization, and Grief

While openness brings transformation, it also can bring familiar strains of grief. I visit County Clare in the west of Ireland, the seat of traditional Irish culture and the mythical origin place of the O’Brien clan at the beginning and end of my trip, eventually flying out of the Shannon airport. In both visits to County Clare, I am suffused with experiences of loss, and I become sick, my head filling with fluid.

The colonial trauma in Ireland is deep, and perhaps my body can feel its echoes moving through me. As Ettinger (2006a) evokes with the concept of the matrixial, fragilized boundaries can bring deeper contact with trauma or loss that lives in us, the land or somewhere in between in our transsubjective web.

I walk on the Cliffs of Moher at the end of the trip in County Clare, passing the O’Brien castle on my path. I stride along with red cliffs, which are whipping with wind, looking out at the Atlantic Ocean foaming below where the boats to North America would have travelled away. I take a slight detour into a field where I stand on a rock to look out

at the sea and close my eyes. All at once, three seagulls swoop down and start shrieking right over my head. They begin swooping lower and lower with threatening ferocity, until I carefully step off the rock and make my way out. Later, I learn it was hatching season for seagull eggs, a time when the seagulls are especially protective. I have accidentally slid beyond the boundaries of the recommended trail and climbed into their territory.

In Ireland, though there is a deep connection in places, I am aware of how my ancestors had left that land hundreds of years before. A woman at the conference tells me this story: In the 1800s, in some parts of Ireland, when a person would be about to leave Ireland for America, family members would hold what was called an American wake, mourning the person. After the person about to immigrate left that eve, the family would bolt the door. And if the leaving person returned in the morning or for any other reason, for one more goodbye, those inside wouldn't answer the door. The person emigrating was considered dead now, even while still alive and outside the door.

Though this practice may have started after my ancestors left Ireland, it speaks to the experience of finality and even death associated with immigration which was certainly true earlier as well. An article on emigration from Mayo County Library website (n.d.) notes:

For the Irish, emigration was like death. The American wake was a custom that appears to be unique to Ireland. People saw little difference between going to America and going to the grave so unlikely were they to return.

In fact, in studying the experience of settlers to the United States, I learn that in Europe and the U.S. in the 17th to 19th centuries, a disease called fatal homesickness or nostalgia was experienced as an actual deadly illness: a syndrome which could lead to death from missing one's home (Smith, 2016). Based on experience of illness, it may have often been important to disassociate from any nostalgia or homesickness of one's homeland as a settler upon fear of death. Certainly, for most people, there was little chance of ever going back. European settlers often disconnected from their own cultural histories as part of their assimilation processes. At the same time, my settler ancestors, having permanently left their original homelands, were part of a genocidal displacement of Indigenous peoples across North America. Yet these histories have rarely been recognized or grieved by the settlers and their descendants until more recent times, and even still, full acknowledgment, grief, and reparations are extremely rare.

In a 2021 workshop on Indigenous allyship led by Pulxaneeks - Nicole Grant (Haisla - Xanuksiala First Nation) in Agassiz, BC, a group of seven people stand. Each one is representing a generation of family in North America.²¹ I sit in a chair as the first generation, my hip throbbing with a familiar pain, and play the role of a European woman from the Old World (country unspecified in this role-play), the last inhabitant of the homeland before emigration. The group asks questions: What was her life like? Why did she leave? What was happening in her community? Was there famine? Was there religious persecution? Violence and war? Were there witch trials in her community? Did her family want to seek their fortune?

In the workshop, Pulxaneeks stands before each successive generation of representatives of European settler descendants (played mostly by white male participants, as requested by Pulxaneeks). The cultures many European immigrants brought were collectively marked by scarcity, patriarchy, and violence most had experienced in the Old World of Europe for many generations (Menakem, 2019). Pulxaneeks asks each settler representative a series of questions to answer in their role, including their generation's relationship with local Indigenous peoples.

As one of her questions, Pulxaneeks asks each of the settler generations: "Where are your strong women?" (Grant, 2021). Though First Nations peoples across North America were and are heterogenous with distinct social structures and cultural practices, women were/are more frequently in respected roles as leaders in First Nations societies than in the European cultures from which most of the settlers came (Federici,

²¹ Pulxaneeks explained this exercise further: "[T]he purpose of this 7 Generations Activity is to provide insight as to how we got to be where we are as a people in the place now known as 'Canada.' This is done by calling upon my lived-Indigenous-experience as well as the collective knowledge of the people in the space. We've come a long way and have a long way to go in this journey of reparations with Indigenous people and this activity is intended to give more context in relation to what we're working with and how got to be where we are. Most settler folk have an estranged relationship with their Ancestors and this is a huge disservice to our healing relationship, this activity offers guidance in regards to this" (Grant, 2023).

2004; Hale, 1963; Venables, 2010).²² Women in most of Europe at the time did not share the same freedoms (Federici, 2004).²³

This patriarchal history is (part of) my history. I think of the ancient woman I saw in my inner eye and felt as my ancestor in the guided visualisation when I chose the path of the goddess; that ancestor was powerful in her earthed body as she walked among her community. Attuning through sediments of earth places in Ireland, in my earth-body-listening practice, I am attending kinaesthetically to buried rocks and silty residue, allowing vibratory hints of embodied-earth communication in the Irish landscape. With my ear and feet to/on the ground in Ireland, I am listening longingly for an underlying respect and love for the feminine(s) and women in buried land memory of ancestral landscapes and earth layers. This embodied (historical) inquiry is an ongoing attunement to the land as a great-great-great-granddaughter of Jane O'Brian.

I recognize how in seeking Jane and seeking my own bodily connection with Irish lands, I am looking to find a way through my own labyrinth of bodily pain, an ache that feels partly intergenerational. In my journeying, I am seeking to be held by a Motherline, and to be freed of an ancient constriction that excludes the fullness of my spirit from bodily expression. In navigating this labyrinth, I am seeking rooted, elemental power as a woman on earth.

²² Venables (2010) describes the matrilineal nature of traditional Haudenosaunee culture which prioritizes a balanced relationship between genders. Ethnologist Horatio Hale also described how among the Haudenosaunee “the complete equality of the sexes in social estimation and influence is apparent in all the narratives of early missionaries” (1963, p. 65). James Adair, in his 1775 writing, deplored what he called “petticoat government” of the Cherokee (1775, p. 145-146). Spanish explorers condemned the differences they saw around Indigenous women’s freedom of sexuality and movement among which were also labelled as a sign of devilry and/or witchcraft (Federici, 2004).

²³ Federici (2004) discusses how that the Enclosures— which deprived European peasants of common lands that women and men worked alongside each other—intersected with crusades to root out suspected (disproportionately female) witches in Europe: “Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, the witch hunts expropriated women from their bodies” (p. 181), further reducing European women’s agency. This expropriation intersected with colonization in the Americas.

The Composition of Water

Back in Vancouver, it has been a long time since I have gone to the water. Months. Since I moved into this house. But tonight, despite other plans, my body insists on a walk. “Just go around the block,” I tell myself. “A few minutes of fresh air.” I put on my black boots, lock the door, and walk through the rain-kissed streets, slick with orange leaves and green strips of grass amidst the sidewalks. I walk past the dog park and then up the hill curving slightly downwards. I pass Hastings. I know I must keep walking. I make it to Dundas Street and jump a bus that is rolling by. It takes me almost all the way to the Inlet/səlilwət.

As I get off the bus and cross the street, the water twinkles below the hill. The trees are tall here on these streets and the leaves are thick with the water of the recent rain. It smells almost like a secret about to be revealed, fresh with the sweet smell of the elements. I reach Wall Street and walk to a bench overlooking səlilwət. I place my red raincoat on the rain-drenched bench and sit down, looking out at the Inlet. The water shimmers and a tree with bright orange leaves leans out into the wind in the backyard of the house near where I am sitting. Brightly coloured red, green, white, and blue shipping containers are perched next the water, near the train tracks which run below. The sky is white and grey and blue; seagulls are flying in formation across the top of the sky. From a distance, they look like pieces of down sprinkled from a big pillow of clouds.

I begin to sing quietly, as I often do here, my throat opening in a kind of whoosh of vibration. The sky is so wide and open, and my voice joins the noises of the place: the shriek of gulls, the buzzing of cars, the open-throated wild echo of wind. I sit, singing, watching the birds and the lapping water and the red-blue-white shipping containers, and the trembling, glowing trees nearby. And as I sit there, the mountains take me in. I can feel my body shifting as they wrap me in an invisible cloak that stretches across the Inlet. It touches my brow and my chest, soothing me, dissolving away my headache, and my doubt. My pores widen and time stretches into droplets of water. I am no longer singing aloud, but the wind is in my throat. I sink into the melody and memory of the place. And it rocks me.

When my body feels it is time, I put on my red raincoat, stand up in my boots, and look out once more to the mountains and water. I promise to come back. Then I make my way up the hill, the sharp, tingling mist close against my skin.

Chapter 8.

Germany, Alsace, and Embodied Anchoring

Before I dive into the next part of my tale, I need to admit something to you, dear listeners. In trying to articulate the next several chapters of this story, I hit a block. I vacillated and struggled. But why?

My whole dissertation traces insights from intimate embodied and spiritual inquiries. Yet the upcoming chapters include some specific explorations of my therapeutic and spiritual life that have felt more vulnerable to share. Some vignettes in upcoming chapters more extensively explore my relating with etheric realms, and certain stories feel like a spiritual coming-out, so to speak.

Eline Kieft writes: “Much like the body, spirituality is an uncomfortable bedfellow for many academics.... Studying a spiritual practice continues to be more acceptable than experiencing it” (2022, p. 29). Kieft observes how writing directly about spiritual experience in the academic world can still be considered questionable. Spiritual experience (especially of the non-Abrahamic religion variety) can be dismissed or worse in certain contexts of our modern world, including the academy.

Aware that I was bridging intimate spiritual processes with academic ones, I wrote in my journal in 2018: “How can the spiritual be bridged to the academic? What should be said? What should not be said? What should be spoken, shared and what should be kept to oneself (not written)?” (Richardson, personal journal, July 7, 2018).

Should I avoid revealing certain embodied and spiritual learnings to adhere to a code I learned is appropriate for academic writing? Should I avoid talking about certain topics to protect the privacy of my own experiences? I genuinely struggled with these questions, but the ultimate answer I came to is this: I can’t complete this dissertation in a meaningful way without sharing significant experiences I have had related to inspired bodily inhabiting.

Writing of these esoteric experiences allows a partial tracking of invisible spiritual processes that have their own intricacies. In the next two chapters, I explore how

working intentionally with prenatal/birth memories in southwest Germany and Alsace, France, the lands of my paternal great-grandmother, Lena, seemed to foster an embodied stability that supported an inspirited homecoming in Ireland, the land of Jane O'Brian. My writing here on spiritual experiences in thin places builds on previous inquiries in this dissertation. In these upcoming chapters, I elucidate with specificity certain pathways of etheric relating which were turning points in my journey.

Embodied spiritual processes offer learnings which can be reflected on with curiosity and careful attention. In tracing these inspirited experiences through writing, I offer glimpses of my own lived experience and emergent understandings.

At the same time, I want to acknowledge that while writing about these encounters feels important, I have struggled with doing these experiences justice in words. In life writing related to etheric experiences, it can be hard to evoke the fullness of the messy, not-completely-known, all-at-once co-arising. I don't want to reduce these experiences to less than what they were. All experience is always happening in a not-fully-determined emergence that is reconstructed in my life writing and in my embodied theorizing (HAMPL, 1999). I am in a tango with the unknown in life and in writing. While reconstructing these stories with care, I acknowledge all that can't be fully expressed or understood by me or by others, as we all dance with the mystery.

Now, dear listeners, breathing in a deep breath, I will go ahead and tell you the next part of my tale.

It is October 2017, three months after my first trip to Ireland and encounter with the Hill of Tara. Winter is approaching in Vancouver and the days are darkening. I fall into an experience of lonely separation, as the light fades from the world, and some other losses occur in my life. I walk down to the water regularly, and sing, but a tide of longing is rising up that even singing at the misty shores of the Burrard Inlet doesn't soothe.

I long to return to Ireland. But I wonder if and how I should make additional trips. Travels are expensive, and I also consider whether I am lost in my own escapism seeking a rarefied vision of a homeland. I consider the ideas behind Basu's analysis (2004) of roots-tourists who claimed ancestral connections in appropriative ways. Am I idealizing some other place to avoid my own mundane life in the present? At the same

time, I feel an almost aching hunger to touch the earth again in certain sites in Ireland and to feel the resonance of those lands in my bones.

In late October, I go to a women's spiritual gathering with my friend Margaret, driving together across the border to the nestled peninsula expanse of Port Townsend, Washington (S'Klallam lands). At this warm gathering, an elder tells me over dinner that I look disoriented, like I need more connection with my female ancestors. It is true that a part of me still feels that ache for Motherlines, though I am closer to the earth, increasingly affirmed by a sense of contact with the soil.

Back home in Vancouver, I look out my apartment window at the grey skies extending bleakly through the city and I feel a chill creep into my bones. Searching for solace and connection, I decide to participate in an online workshop which uses a guided trance experience to relate with one's ancestral lineages. In this workshop, the facilitator teaches that many cultures have had practices of ancestral veneration, but over the last centuries, those practices have been abandoned in many modernized Western societies. The workshop is offering a pathway of returning to those practices of ancestral relationship. This model of ancestral work is rooted in rebuilding a relationship of ancestral tending. This work suggests that in our lineages, we can find strong and wise energetic presences who can offer eldering to us in invisible or spirit forms (Foor, 2015).

As the online workshop begins, I sit cross-legged on my bed, a knitted blanket warming my legs. I listen to the instructor's words through the computer screen. The workshop involves a light trance process, which invites an awareness of four specific lineages of ancestors stretching far back in time (from the recent past to thousands of years back), guided by certain questions. The instructions in this workshop are to notice any images, felt senses, or perceptions which emerge when one's attention is on that lineage while trying to maintain energetic boundaries from what we perceive to avoid merging with anything disturbing we notice (Foor, 2015).

The October air coolly grazes my body. I wrap the blanket more tightly around me and deepen into a light trance. I sense into these four ancestral lineages one by one. I am amazed by the warming sense of almost-ecstatic light I feel when sensing into my father's mother's lineage of women, not as much in the last hundred years, but

stretching further back in time. Encountering the warmth of this lineage makes my whole body heat up, meeting the cold of my drafty bedroom with a fiery comfort.

I do not know my father's side of the family well and I have never identified consciously with these Alsatian/German relatives. Yet when imagining this lineage of grandmothers, I experience an easy nourishing light, quite distinct from the other lineages. Kieft notes spirits can be perceived in different ways:

Just as we have different visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles, spirits can be perceived as images, symbols, colours, through sounds or other senses, somatic feelings and through abstract shapes or words in our minds. (2022, p. 133)

In the case of these Alsatian/German grandmothers, I perceive through visual imagery, but even more, through a strong kinaesthetic sense of warmth.

As part of this same workshop exercise, I also sense into Jane O'Brian's lineage, the women in my Irish Motherline stretching back in time. However, my sense of that lineage is still murkier, buried in a cave-like darkness, and my felt-sense has more disturbances in the field. After completing the exercise, the facilitator of the workshop urges us to put our awareness and receptivity on ancestral spirit-elders where we experience the most ease as our first point of focus to build an initial practice of ancestral reconnection. The facilitator explains that building a strong connection with one lineage can eventually strengthen our ability to connect further with other lineages. The facilitator notes that we may not even completely understand why certain lineages are easier or safer to immediately connect with, but we can sense this in the field (Foor, 2015).

When the online workshop ends, I go to the kitchen and put the kettle on the stove to make some tea. Reflecting on the workshop as the kettle heats, I am surprised that the lineage with which I have the warmest sense of resonance is my paternal grandmother's lineage of women. What do I know about this lineage?

My father's grandmother's name was Lena (full name: Magdalena). I remember that my father told me as a child, he used to ask his grandmother Lena where she was from because she had a different accent than he did. Even though she was born in the U.S., Lena was raised in an ethnic enclave in Western New York. Lena's family spoke a German dialect. She told my father that her family was from Alsace ("Alsasser" she

would say). Though now on the eastern side of France, Alsace was fertile land that historically went back and forth between empires.

Returning to look at my previous genealogical and family history research, I find that Lena's grandparents, uncles and aunts, and mother got on the boat from Le Havre, France and landed in New York in 1835. Though Lena described her family as being from Alsace, I can last find record of her family in Europe in 1828 in a border town that is now in Germany. Other research later reveals that the borderlands of Alsace and southwest Germany were fluid and changing as the borders kept changing over centuries, as Hasebe-Ludt discusses (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). In Western New York, the German-speaking people blended with each other. Some of my ancestors might have been from what is now Alsace, while they married some who were from further east in what is now southwest Germany.

As I drink a warm cup of tea after the workshop, I wonder what the homelands of Lena's lineage would feel like under my feet.

Birth into Being

Along with the ancestral reconnection workshop in fall 2017, I seek resourcing in other ways as part of meeting the ongoing darkness of these wintry times. As the cavern in my awareness shimmers, I am called back into the void. For years, I had been tiptoeing around this darkness. I sense this is a key turning point of choices that can allow me to find my way further through the heaviness or alternately, leave me floundering for a long time to come.

Still intrigued by working somatically with the womb experience after my transformative craniosacral work with M., I am interested in other embodied healing modalities around prenatal and birth experience. Through a random announcement on social media, I see that a daylong in-person class is being offered in somatic approaches to transforming prenatal and birth trauma imprints in November 2017. This work is called Birth into Being. I immediately sign up.

I show up for the class being offered in a basement studio in North Vancouver among the trees. The newly trained facilitator is a bright-eyed young woman, eager and enthused to share the Birth into Being work she has just learned. Offered by donation,

the class consists of only three participants including me. We nervously sit on yoga mats, chatting, as we wait for the class to begin.

During the class, the work resonates for me in a visceral way. In one foundational exercise, we practice the act of spiraling with our bodies. I find this movement energizing and grounding. Later, we each lay on our own mats, while the facilitator leads us through a meditation from the time of pre-conception all the way through early life in vivid imagery. The meditation's focus is on a warm, safe, and joyful experience of being in the womb, birth, and infancy, which is believed to plant another imprint in our psyche if our original experience was difficult in some way, creating new neural pathways. As the facilitator nears the end of the guided meditation, she comes to each of us, lying comfortably on the floor in our own spaces, and welcomes us verbally and physically with gentle touch.

While I often feel isolated in fall 2017, in the days after this workshop, I sense a warm support holding me which includes a strong awareness of my Alsatian/German grandmother lineage. These two workshops in fall 2017 (the ancestral course and Birth into Being) dovetail in a nourishing way, creating a sense of supportive contact which lifts me out of a place of deprivation and into a rich, abundant holding in the days after.

Looking back, I had a similar felt sense when I was eighteen in rural Vermont doing theatre, my spirit newly reawakened in my body. I also felt this nourishment on the dance floor that night at Just Dance (about which I wrote the earlier poem "Dance Break" in this dissertation), and at other points in my life as well: a particular frequency of nourishment that supported bodily grounding and a light, effortless joy. I notice how this facet of my experience is particularly accessible through a felt contact with the German/Alsatian grandmothers.

After the workshop in the basement in North Vancouver, I feel a pull to keep connecting with the prenatal/birth exploration as well as with the Alsatian/German grandmother lineage. When I look up future Birth into Being workshops, I find that the only major training is being offered in a small village in southwest Germany, just a few hours' drive from the area where my great-grandmother Lena's ancestors are from. At other times in my life, such a workshop would be hard to afford, but financial circumstances align to make the workshop possible, and I enroll.

After signing up for the 10-day workshop in Germany, I begin to envision a longer pilgrimage: a journey to ancestral places in both my grandmothers' maternal lineages (Germany/France and Ireland) and to sacred sites in these regions. I write an SFU travel grant to support a pilgrimage exploring pre-Christian women's folk wisdoms and sacred sites alongside those of my ancestors in these areas. I receive the grant.

Excited, I plan my journey. I decide my pilgrimage will be five weeks. I will make visits to a series of ancestral landmarks I can find as well as meaningful ritual sites. I will walk and meditate in these places, though the trip will not involve a rigorous multi-day walk as many organized pilgrimages do (Russell, 2004). Yet the trip will be my version of a pilgrimage: I will bring my body (again) to journey to and dwell in certain sites, experiencing what emerges somatically: connection, grief, openings, new insights.

I look ahead to the pilgrimage as a future point of light in the winter and spring. Meanwhile, my teaching term as a Sessional Instructor at SFU along with other work commitments is a challenging one. By the end of the term, I am very tired.

Yet as the plane to Munich takes off, I feel a quiet and grounded elation. Wedged between two large men in the back of the plane, I settle my arms on the armrests next to each side of the middle seat. I take out my journal and place it on the plane tray table. Without thinking, I begin to write, free associating in black felt-tip pen. The first words that spill out on the journal's page are unexpected: "I am going home." Though this does not cognitively make sense, as I have never even been to Germany or Alsace, my hand is writing out a feeling which is surging in me: an intuitive sense of a deeper landing to come.

The Birthing Field²⁴

The first stop is two weeks at the Birth into Being workshop in a small village, Kisslegg, in southwestern Germany. I arrive on a night train into the fresh evening air of Kisslegg. Disembarking from the train, I walk gingerly in the dark, dragging my rolling

²⁴ Elena Tonetta-Vladmirova, the founder of Birth into Being, describes the birthing field as the heightened context which we enter and co-create as a group in focusing on exploring birth and related experiences in her body of work called Birth into Being. The idea is that the birthing field may amplify our prenatal, birth, and other subsequent iterations of these early experiences as we consciously choose to focus on this inquiry in this group container (Tonetti-Vladmirova, personal communication, August 2018).

suitcase to the workshop venue, which is a plain and bright old hotel. The land immediately feels welcoming.

I settle into my new room with its yellow walls and view of the green fields through the window. I chat with my roommate, a kind woman from Slovenia who is also attending the workshop. She tells me of her joy of swimming in the ocean, and particularly of swimming with dolphins.

The workshop begins the next day with six hours per day of lectures, discussions, and embodied explorations of prenatal and birth experiences and how they may be impacting our current lenses on the world. Some participants are midwives and other birth workers; some are seeking parenthood; some are there to explore how their own prenatal and birth experiences have shaped their lives. The workshop is based on a premise shared by a subset of somatic educators, reflected in the words of Liz Koch: “It is particularly important to recognize how our birth experience is re-enacted in our daily lives, and when left unconscious can obscure our ability to thrive” (Koch, 2019, p. 72).

Spiraling is an important part of the workshop as it had been in the introductory class in North Vancouver. The workshop also includes a form of performative re-enactment, akin to a kind of drama therapy. We role-play difficult prenatal, birth, and early life experiences, first in their original form and then with a different outcome. We take turns working on our own scenarios while other group members support and play various roles, and then switch to support others in their role-plays. In the ending part of the role-play, we improvise the scenario into a more life-giving story, where the issues get tended and addressed. Re-enacting womb, birth, and early life scenarios offers new lived experiences of accompaniment.

I am lying on a soft mat in a sunlit room, looking out the panoramic window at a green field after re-enacting my birth experience with a small group. Our re-imagined scenario of my prenatal experience and birth is still vibrating, circulating another body-memory through my cells.

In this newly imagined womb-time, I have the loving company of another being (a twin) in the womb. A vibrant red-haired classmate plays my twin and after our connective time in the womb, we exit the birth canal one after the other, meeting each other in the

outer world with delight and familiarity, cementing a relationship that will continue throughout our lives (in this imagined scenario).

With the birth re-enactment complete, I lie on a mat, and several group members touch my head, shoulders, and feet gently, sharing affirming words to remind me of this new experience, massaging the new memory into my physical being. I am receiving the message of visceral accompaniment, that other being(s) are present with me, supporting my travel between worlds. The reverberations of communally re-imagining my prenatal/birth experience (and other early experiences not described here) in a supportive group will continue throughout my trip.

Solo Journeying in Germany and Alsace

After the workshop, I travel in southwest Germany and Alsace. I continue to open in relationship with the land, my feet meeting the ground in new ways. These experiences reinforce my past sense that there are certain places (perhaps with matrixial resonances) that further invite an intimate interrelationship between my body and earth. I notice in my travels in Southwest Germany and Alsace, I feel a different quality in encountering the land than in Ireland. In Ireland, the land feels more raucously magical to me. In southwest Germany and Alsace, I frequently sense a warm and simple sense of contact, like a rhythm or a language I know. My body sinks in on the land in this region in a stabilizing way.

I visit the convent of Mont Saint Odile, the patron saint of Alsace, and her sacred spring on the side of the mountain. This spring, I am told, had earlier been a pagan worship place. I walk down the fragrant trail to the sacred spring of Odile, and see the sun spark through the trees, as I feel deeply into the ground there.

At the site, the sacred spring is pouring out of a pipe into a bowl, the spring itself protected by a metal gate. I put my cupped hands under the spout and bring the water to my mouth; I rub some on my closed eyes and on my arms. Sitting on a bench near the spring, my attention is jostled as some tourists burst forth from the steep forest path. Irritated by the beeping of someone's phone, I turn back with determination again to the spring and feel my face still wet with the cool spring water. A slight headache teases my

temples. I ask the spring of Saint Odile and the mountain dirt for clarity and compassion on the path.

The sun breaks and I feel a connection between my belly and the earth. Then anchored in earth, I become aware of the still-cloaked stars in the daylight sun. A yes reverberates in my belly: a felt glow of the effortless web that locates me viscerally on this mountain land. This grounded spaciousness is centering.

After some time in Alsace, I journey out of the region for a few days to a Tibetan Buddhist retreat in Vienna, Austria. Though the retreat has lovely elements, I feel a marked difference in my relationship with the land when I am in Austria for a couple of days.

Travelling back to Stuttgart Germany, I am elated to have arrived back in the region of southwest Germany right next to eastern France. My body relaxes, my spirit singing more easily. The next day, I board the train from Stuttgart to Lauterbourg, France, a border town. Lauterbourg is 15 kilometres from the town where I can last locate my great-grandmother Lena's family. I am excited to be venturing to the exact region where my own ancestors lived.

The Braiding of Hel

In addition to the nurturing elements of land-based connection, I encounter challenging visions. Kieft notes that: "There is a metabolic effect of expanded consciousness within the body, in which psychic energy can be perceived as bodily sensation or vision" (2022, p. 122). As I settle into the after-effects of the birth workshop and new dimensions of land-based resonance, other imagery unfolds.

The Braiding of Hel

I sit by the lake
in the small village
grass pressed against my skin
a wide blue sky
calm water
in a country I am just meeting for the first time

a country my ancestors left two hundred years
ago before it was a country at all

It is the German grandmothers who call to me
I sense their radiance, a flash-bang of ecstatic invitation
I had never considered Germany

the land I still objectively view with some shame
horrifically aware of the Holocaust
Yet I feel the warmth of those older spirit-women

And when my feet land on the earth in southwest Germany
I see other women
with the same cheeks as me and my father
Travelling to Kisslegg
I hear the sound of German
warm and guttural in my ears
familiar and close to my skin

A few weeks later, I am in Alsace, France
across the border from the town where
I can last trace my great-grandmother's family in 1828
I get off the train in Lauterbourg
on a beautiful sunny day

But I start to see images
blood-soaked
a woman speared
visions come unbidden
as I walk the path into town

A massacre
what war is this, I don't know,
but the earth has been fertilized
with blood here
so much death
invasions
famines
empires
recent wars

now I speak in French,
ask for directions
to a hotel at the village square.
so close to my ancestors can be traced
near the German-French
border

I say, please, to the images—
to stop, flow down into the earth,
where you can rest

In the hotel room, on a double bed,
the sun sifts in
and I am recumbent
warming
a lift in my cells
to feel a quiet

Another kind of spirit
seeps into the room
filling me
with sunlit pulses
a braiding of Hel
in the lavender room
white curtains open
to the village square.

I hope your reading/listening to this poem did not disturb you. Some readers of this poem have told me it is disquieting to read due to the visions of violence. I understand that perspective, but for me, this poem shows the intimacy I feel with the land in this region and the transformation wrought when these difficult visions were ultimately met by the earth.

In Lauterbourg, I experience disturbing imagery, and I ask the earth for support. Despite the overwhelm, I sense the earth's backing in these moments. My body-spirit finds enough grounding to stay present as a witness amidst a cascade of imagery. I don't experience a short-circuiting in an endless, incoherent flow I can't handle.

I allow a movement of these violent images into the earth and my body-psyche is no longer actively holding them like too-hot burning ashes in my palm. As a letting-go occurs, I feel the presence of affirming and powerful light, evoking the Alsatian-German grandmothers whose warmth and strength had led me to visit Alsace/Germany: “another spirit enters, seeping into the room, filling me with sunlit pulses, a braiding of Hel.”²⁵



Figure 8-1. Lauterbourg, August 2018

Lauterbourg is quite close to the last home of my own ancestors before they emigrated. Though my ancestors left this region in the 1800s and I can’t verify their specific stories on the land in Alsace and Germany, my forebears have most likely been both perpetrators and victims on this land base. In the context of hundreds of years of

²⁵ Hel is a reference to the Underworld in old Norse mythology which may have a connection to an older Scandinavian Goddess and Anglo-Saxon goddess named Hel and possibly to Holle, Holde and Perchta in German folk religion (Davidson, 1998; Hammer, 2005). My use of Hel here has a link with what has become an understanding of Hell in Christianity but is also a reclaiming of that concept, similar to Cixous (1993). Motz (1984) argues that the goddess Holle was popular among women in the Middle Ages in what is now Germany. Drawing on Motz’s conceptions of Holle, Hammer describes Holle as “a feminine force outside the social universe—an elemental spirit of nature who gives and takes away as nature does, and who is a shepherd of the cycle of life” (2005, p. 74).

invasions, occupations, wars for territory, feudal oppression, pogroms, religious conflicts, and violence against women, how could this not be the case?²⁶

The first and most vivid image I see is an attack on a woman as part of a larger scene of a massacre. Solnit writes: "...half the earth is paved over with women's fear or pain and until the stories that lie underneath see sunlight, this will not change" (2020, p. 66). In this experience in Lauterbourg, I glimpse the unfolding of a violent attack, possibly on one my foremothers or possibly on an unrelated woman, "paved over" (Solnit, 2020, p. 66) and then raised up like a spectre in the August sunlight. I also later see more painful experiences of both women and men. A later historical review gives me a glimpse of Lauterbourg's history and more details of the occupations, peasant uprisings, famines, and wars.²⁷

If my body-psyche is a cauldron for the matrixial, my experience in Lauterbourg architects a new inner structure of relating with those matrixial traces: whether they be from my Motherline(s), the land, or the larger collective. I can allow multiple sediments of intergenerational and collective histories to sift through my consciousness. I am then able to have other subtle, relational encounters in the present.

This experience in Lauterbourg and in Alsace/southwest Germany in general fosters a greater landing on earth for me. Somatic educator Koch provides a definition:

²⁶ I have wondered how this process of metabolizing painful histories differs if one is working with intergenerationally felt histories of ancestors who have enacted violence versus the experiences of those who were victims. My sense is that grounded embodiment supports the metabolizing both aspects of my histories. Embodied presence supports self-connection and earth-connection which allow for a durable core and circuit of flow amidst strong emotions like fear, grief, guilt, and shame.

²⁷ Following the Roman occupation of the area, most people were serfs in a feudal system during the Middle Ages. In 1348-50, the Black Death killed between one third and two thirds of the population in Europe, and major pogroms took place across Alsace in 1349, as Jews were blamed for the plague (Currin, n.d.). Famine was common for hundreds of years in the Lauterbourg region. Peasants in Lauterbourg joined a Germany-wide and Alsace-wide revolt against the Lords in 1525, which was suppressed and punished (Beyond-the-Forest and Niederlauterbach history, n.d.). Lauterbourg was then repeatedly sacked during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and the population was decimated. The area had to be repopulated by immigrants from other places. The area was sacked again by multiple armies (1673-1680), again (1701-1714), and again during the Austrian War of Succession (1740-1748). During the era of Napoleonic power, war and destabilization continued from 1782-1815. As the 1800s progressed, overpopulation and poverty also led to a stream of emigrants from the area (Beyond-the-Forest and Niederlauterbach history, n.d.). During World War II, in 1940, the lower town of Lauterbourg was destroyed by the Nazis. Most of the town was rebuilt after the war. (Beyond-the-Forest and Niederlauterbach history, n.d.; "Lauterbourg", 2022). This brief review indicates the historical imprints which may live in the land. Much more could be uncovered with additional research.

“The word *landing* is a term I use for feeling grounded and able to locate in space and time...” (2019, p. 71). She notes: “If we are connected to ground and can feel the earth’s rhythms, we are more readily available to be responsive and adaptive to subtle changes. But if there is shock still reverberating, there will be discord and disorientation” (2019, p. 74).

As Klein observes, a relationship with the actual earth around us and beneath our feet can loosen “the boundary between ourselves and the outside” (1997, p. 146). This makes it more possible to “actually contact” and possibly “transform...some of this stuff and send it out, in purified form, to the universe at large” (1997, p. 146). Klein points out: “If we can’t send it out anywhere, we are left holding it” (1997, p. 146). Part of my past overwhelm was that in moments of terror, I was holding too much that I didn’t know how to metabolize, and one thing that was missing was a kind of closeness of relationship with the earth beneath my feet in a way I could consistently trust.

Just as M.’s work supported a circuitry in my body through craniosacral work, my experiences in Alsace plant the seeds for a new structural circuitry to witness matrixial traces. This circuit is necessary to metabolize past trauma that lives in my body and/or perhaps live in the place through ancestral and earth echoes so that I have more clarity and power to act in the present.

A full circuit or flow of energy can only happen when we are inhabiting our whole bodies. In my travels in Alsace/Germany, my lower body and pelvis root more easily than in my everyday life in Vancouver. I am finding a new strength in my lower body to allow a flow with the earth. This landing or grounding allows me to encounter the visceral communications of my body and the place and not be swept off-kilter for long stretches of time.

In my witnessing in Lauterbourg, there is a braiding together of earth and body,²⁸ acknowledging and metabolizing past histories through a relationship with the land and coming into a more generous meeting of the land, other beings, and myself in the present. In witnessing a cascade of violence, I can offer these images and sensations

²⁸ Braiding evokes the concept of *métissage* or braided stories (Hasebe et al, 2009). Braiding also alludes to how hair and braiding were central symbols connected to certain German goddesses. Hammer notes that the German goddess “Holle’s femininity and sexuality may be summed up in her association with hair” (2005, p. 69-70).

back to the land, implicitly drawing on Turcotte’s teachings (2012a; also see Turcotte, 2012b; Turcotte & Schiffer, 2014) that our difficult emotions/energies are nourishing for the earth when we offer them back in particular earth-places with consent. This flow of connection between my body and the earth, even through difficult levels of somatic/emotional upheaval, allow a deepened body-earth connection to bloom.²⁹

Working somatically with (un)memory and known stories in the prenatal and birth workshop in southwest Germany may have supported my evolving experience of landing and emergence in my body in Alsace/Germany. Ettinger (2006a) posits the womb is a carrier of imprints that access a particular matrixial field of (un)memory: she notes that these transmitted crypts of matrixial trauma may animate our wombs as adults for those of us who have wombs.³⁰

De Rosa (2021), whose work draws on the yogic system of philosophy, teaches that inhabiting our lower bodies—with a focus on the three power centres in the pelvis—is essential to grounding. This inhabiting involves acknowledging and transmuting old emotions, memories and patterns that live in these areas of our bodies. The constricted holding of emotions and memories in our lower body centres is often connected to very early life and intergenerational experiences that may have included contractions in our cores (De Rosa, 2021). Pelvic physical therapist Kent (2011) also theorizes that long-held personal and intergenerational emotions and patterns can live in what she calls the root of the body (the whole pelvis).

Transmuting emotions and energies held in the lower body frees up room for our life force to move through our physical forms and for us to fully inhabit our centres. An energetic flow down and through the pelvis and lower body supports a connection with

²⁹ Indigenous Focusing-Oriented Therapy (IFOT) founder Shirley Turcotte teaches about giving our emotions to spots on earth with permission from that land-base: a consensual living relationship (S. Turcotte, 2012a). Though I was not specifically drawing on this work during this experience, this approach had shaped my understanding of feeding our trauma back to land as an energy that can be received by the earth. This experience was also informed by my work in the year before the trip with healing images of my Alsatian/German lineage as well as my other lineages in trance processes, guided by Foor’s work (2015).

³⁰ Ettinger suggests that cis women (and I would suggest others who have wombs who don’t identify as female) may have a particular access to the matrixial due to having the double experience of both the prenatal womb time and having a womb in their bodies. Ettinger argues this is not always an easy path: “Their privileged access is far from being as source of pleasure or privilege in social or cultural terms... rather, it is access to a surplus-of-fragility” (2006a, p. 181).

the land beneath our feet (De Rosa, 2021). As I work in generative and healing ways with early womb/infant experiences in a communal healing field in the German workshop, perhaps I also settle further into inhabiting my own pelvis and lower body, allowing a greater circuit of flow with the earth.

Could it also be particularly potent to do work around prenatal/early experiences close to an ancestral place with a resonance with a lineage of powerful grandmothers? I am more available to receive the supportive undertones of the land and its “umbilical cord of memory” (Menzies, 2015, p. 19). Even before the workshop starts, I feel a strange, consistent intimacy with the land. The workshop transforms me while the land itself cradles me, teaching me more about rooting and landing through the interaction between my body and place. In travels in Alsace/Germany, I find my body becomes supple in feeling into a land-based context in this visceral way, walking in place, even if I know little of my ancestors’ personal histories in this place. While being embedded in place is not always linked to ancestral connection, places rich with our own intergenerational histories may have a particular meanings and resonances of intimacy (Menzies, 2015; Monaghan, 2003).

The land here teaches me a different lesson than the land of Ireland, offering a stabilizing force I didn’t even know I needed until I attuned to the warmth and invitation of Lena’s lineage. Journeying in Alsace/Germany during this period ignites a new kind of rooting with the earth itself: a stronger circuitry to allow a flow of matrixial traces without getting knocked permanently off-kilter.

Inhabiting my body is an ever-continuing journey that is never complete or finished. But this part of my trip offers a turning point, supported by the depth of contact experienced in the workshop and a quality of resonance with the earth beneath my feet. As I allow the overwhelm of known and unknown stories to be transmuted in my bodily core and as a clear, stabilizing light enters my cells in Alsace, I gain space for the fullness of my spirit to settle. This stability informs the next part of my journey and my life. Though I bid farewell to the region at least for the moment, I bring with me a new lived knowledge of embodied anchoring in my bones.

Chapter 9.

An Irish Stone Circle and a Cycle of Returning

I hope you are keeping warm by the fire. Some soup from the pot will soon be ready, but it's not quite done yet.

My dear listeners, I want to mention something before I continue my tale: these experiences of heightened intensity I am sharing are not all there was.

In my five-week trip, I had many more mundane experiences of happiness, loneliness, curiosity, and boredom. I meandered through villages, walking for miles, peering into shops, and tromping through fields on the outskirts of town. I sat at outdoor cafes, drinking espressos, and watching birds roost in old churches. I spent lonely nights lying on crisp hotel bedspreads, watching tv. I visited the aunt of a friend with whom I roamed cobblestone streets, eating ice cream. I ate alone in restaurants, feeling at times self-conscious and at other times, delightfully free. I took a trip to a village in Sweden to visit friends of friends and went with them to a local museum, played with their twinkling baby boy, and grated potatoes for dinner. I stood on train platforms for long periods of time. I got impatient, checked my phone, and took selfies.

All these moments were part of my journey. In this dissertation, I am focusing on stop moments which were touchstones of somatic and spiritual learning. I am centering these heightened experiences because I am tracing the links between inspirited and bodily inhabiting. Like shooting stars in the night sky, the heightened moments are not all that matter. But in this writing, I am focusing on these occurrences to unpack their significance in my pilgrimage towards bodily presence.

Now having said that, will you have some more tea? And then I will tell you what happened when I returned to Ireland.

After a month on the continent, my pilgrimage journey ends with a final stop in Ireland. I had always known I wanted to end my trip in Ireland before returning to North

America because I have craved a return to a land that profoundly nurtured me in my first encounter there.³¹

I land in Cork in southwestern Ireland, so happy to be in an Irish airport. In the airport lounge waiting for my ride, I sit next to an older Irish woman waiting for her husband. She banter with me in that warm, easy way I remember from my last trip in Ireland. The only negative part of my experience is that I am beginning to feel sick. In the last part of my travels on the mainland, I went to Sweden and stayed with some friends of friends whose whole family had a persistent flu. In the airport, my head starts to hurt, and my eyes begin to water a bit.

My new friend D. drives 1.5 hours from her home to pick me up, though she barely knows me from our one day of the Brigid's Way pilgrimage the year before. The sickness is worsening. Yet driving with D. through the wild green and the curving Irish roads, I feel at home again, even though it is only my second time in the country. After a less-connected experience in Sweden, it feels good to be on land again that sparks a visceral sense of dialogue with the earth.

D.'s house is by the sea in West Cork. Her living room window opens to a 180-degree view of the water. Our connection is bright and unexpected. My body is tired. Soon, I will be racked with the flu I picked up at the end of my trip on the mainland. And yet sparked by each other's stories, we talk into the night. Though the sickness is unpleasant, it fosters an even more liminal space in which I am even more receptive to the world around me.

The next day, after we chat over breakfast and strong coffee, D. drives us 45 minutes to Drombeg Stone Circle through the verdant Irish landscape. Drombeg is believed to be an old Druid site, perhaps a site of blood sacrifice, D. tells me. Other tourists are at the site, talking in a loud British accent. We sit on the side, looking out at the elfin swath of green near the stones and the valley around us. The land feels alive,

³¹ An article which includes parts of an earlier version of this chapter was published as: L.R. Richardson (2022), Motherlines, thin places, and somatic orientations: An embodied inquiry. *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities*, 9(1&2), 145-159, https://doi.org/10.1386/dmas_00039_1

as if the fairies are close at hand—if you could just pass through the portal at the right time of day at the right angle, you would cross over to a mythic otherworld.

When the other tourists leave, D. and I wander around the site, first together, and then each on our own. D. picks berries nearby while I explore different aspects of the site slowly, examining remnants of stones. The land feels particularly alert as I move deeper into my slow walking investigations of the site.

After examining another part of the site, I walk up slowly to the central stone circle and enter it. I decide breezily to stand on a stone in the center. As I climb up and my feet touch the smooth, ancient rock, something begins to occur.

Time changes.

An invisible flow begins from somewhere above my head down into my body. This is not just a visualisation, as I have done many times. It is not even a subtle sensing of energy: the current is stronger than a very subtle flow. This flow surges down the top of my head, through my spine, my pelvis and core, and down through my feet. This encounter is unexpected, beyond my scope of experience.

I stand agape. I feel a shifting in my being.

Some parts of me that have been slightly askew are aligning through my backbone like well-placed vertebrae. I feel myself fully here, born to this time and place. I sense other worlds--other times and places--finding their own orientation, connecting fragments of memory into a new flow.

The encounter continues for a few minutes. At one point, I peer around the place for D. But she is nowhere to be seen. The place appears empty of other humans. Eventually the flow tapers and I know it is time to go. I say thank you and step off the stone. I take a piece of my hair and I leave it on the center stone to honour this exchange.

When I walk out of the stone circle, there is D. again in the berry bushes, picking blackberries. She offers me some berries, putting them in my hand. She says it was funny, for a while, you disappeared.

We drive home companionably together.



Figure 9-1. West Cork, Ireland, September 2018

D. and I spend the next few days together. We eat meals, drink coffee and tea, visit the local town, and other local places in Western Ireland, including a trip to the sea at the southernmost tip of Ireland. One day, after D. goes to work, I lie down on the grassy lawn in front of her house. I am relishing the grass against my skin, the hard earth against my chest.

I feel aware of myself as part of a line of women and other genders, too. I feel how I (we) had lost full trust in our bodies, in the ground beneath me (us). Now here, in this moment, there is a returning and an allowing. I feel myself being called into rest in soil.

Grass tickles my cheeks, And I breathe a deep sigh, billowing out from my belly as I rest on that stretch of green, waves dancing down the hillside in the familiar sea.

The experience I just shared has been difficult to write about, perhaps because it touches the sacred in a profound way, which is difficult to articulate. In those fifteen minutes standing on a stone at Drombeg, I felt a clarifying force move down through the top of my head and down through my whole body into my feet and into earth. I have never experienced such a thing before or since. On reflection, this experience was only possible because of the earlier earth-grounding in my time in Alsace/Germany, allowing my body-spirit to be anchored enough to receive such a movement of energy.

While my experience in Alsace had anchored me, this etheric experience at Drombeg went far beyond my own body yet included my body as well. As I think about it now, these moments feel like an interdimensional redress, as if important missing fragments were brought back into my body from other times and places, and those times and place were also recalibrated.

The Drombeg experience rendered a sense of homecoming that I had longed for especially after my disorienting overwhelm in Toronto. I didn't fully have clarity to describe this longing, though I have tried desperately, but I have been reaching toward this reorientation since leaving Toronto and, in some ways, for my whole life.

The gift of alignment at Drombeg took place in the land of Jane O'Brian (though I still don't know where in Ireland her family was from). Though the site has been associated with Druid sacrifice by some, my associations with the stone circle at Drombeg are of a renewing re-alignment. My experience standing on that stone, feeling the forces of the universe, reverberated into multi-dimensional chorus where the harmony finally clicks after years of slightly unsatisfying song writing. I was changed by those minutes at Drombeg, and then by lying on the soil outside D.'s house later in the trip, feeling myself coming to rest on the earth.

Later, when I try to describe this experience at a workshop, First Nations educator Pulxaneeks of Haisla – Xanuksiala First Nation offers me language, saying it sounds as if I called my spirit back (Grant, 2021) and that seems right. Perhaps when we truly call our spirits back, other realignments can happen through time and space. At Drombeg, spirit fragments came back down through the scattered dimensions into the curvature of my spine, landing me in an "us": a re-membered stance of soil and stone.

Meeting the Inlet/səlilwət Again

Arriving back to my life in Vancouver, I am glowing with a certain quality of peace. My body is echoing with multiple truths. I feel connected but also very tender. At the same time, the flu rages, and I will be sick for the next four months. The shifting down into my body anew has prompted inner reckonings that need to be assimilated at a deeper level.

After a week or so, it is hard to be back. I miss Ireland and that easy and profound land connection I felt at Drombeg, at Tara, and in other places. I feel disconnected, even angry. One day, I push myself to walk down to the water. Once at the Inlet/səlilwət, I look out and my throat is tight. My thoughts are racing. Guided by my old practice, I begin to sing. I sing at first by rote, but then my throat begins to loosen. And as I sing, I feel one layer of a kind of crusty containment in me start to break open.

Slowly, I begin to connect, but this time, I can feel another wider circle of the elements, the kind of circle that I feel so easily in Ireland though this is a different circle of vast presences here at səlilwət. My voice cracks me open to this, and remembering, I suddenly feel the capacity for a new choice. I realize the place is present and alive; it is my choice of whether to be open to it, too. I deliberate a moment, pausing and feeling this larger dialogue with the spirit-element forces. Though I have had a felt a sense of connection many times through singing at the water, I feel more acutely aware of the vastness of elemental presences around me, vibrating with life, and a sentient recognition.

This moment arrives as a stop moment (Fels, 2014, Appelbaum 1995), where recognition of the possibility of choice tugs on my sleeve. Shivering for a moment, I feel the power of this particular place at səlilwət. I say aloud: "I choose to belong here." And a whoosh of sensation moves through me, down into the earth and back up again. I am washed with something loving.

I am deeply aware how belonging in communities and to places cannot be fully chosen. Belonging needs to be earned, found, and built over generations. Even more as a settler on unceded Indigenous land, assuming my belonging on this land in the context of ongoing realities of colonization of which my lineages and I are a part can suggest a disrespectful entitlement.

And yet, saying “I choose to belong here” is—in the ways I know how—a clear choice to inhabit this body in this life and to be receptive to open-hearted connection with this place. I am not entitled to this place, but I can *choose* an offering of my presence and willingness to show up, which opens my capacity for relationship with the place and taking of responsibility for my own participation. Choosing to belong on earth in this moment is choosing to step out of hiding and be in full contact with this place where I have sung so many times before. Suddenly, the anger is gone, and I feel emplaced here in these moments.

In her book *Thin Places: A Pilgrimage Home*, Ann Armbrecht writes: “We experience the sacred not simply by visiting places that are sacred. We enter the sacred when we let go of the fear of being exposed and begin to open our hearts to the world around us” (2008, p. 91).

Armbrecht discusses how letting ourselves open to connection is part of experiencing the sacred. Patterns of protection and fear and, in many cases, real-world realities can make it feel dangerous to be open. Yet in this exposure and self-revealing comes the possibility of a shift in perception, sparking new embers of connection.

At some level, connection is a given: we live it in every second in the air we breathe, food we eat, and earth we walk on. Yet experiential and lived connection are not always felt. And such connection cannot be demanded ready-to-order, even when we are able to speak our choices aloud. Such desires for connection can only be honourably requested with an open heart. Yet these experiences of feeling transported into a larger sense of interconnectedness build the confidence in me to make that request, to envision that possibility. In the deepest grief is also longing. If it is possible to open to that longing, there is the possibility of following the thread to the source of our love (Prechtel, 2015). My experience at the water that day brings me into a dialogue with a vast circle of the elemental presences at *səliwæt* in a different way.

Irish Mud and Coming Home

Despite the powerful experiences of my journey, or perhaps because of them, I continue to feel sick for months with flu-like symptoms after my return home. My material body is processing a huge download and I am physically struggling. My sickness

eventually morphs into a sensitivity that makes it hard to digest almost anything. Previously, I had sensed that if I dove into the fullness of oceanic and matrixial encounters, my body would get rocked to the core, and it could be hard to recover. In Toronto and New York, my body-psyche wasn't grounded enough to navigate this flow; now more than ten years later, I am on the edge of my capacity, but I sense it is possible to navigate these realms with inner, relational, and earth support.

For the December holidays, I decide to return to stay with my mother for a month in Brooklyn. As I arrive and settle in, there is a new ease between my mother and me. In the last twenty years, my mother has developed a rich life of her own and a thriving community of which she is a vital part. At the same time, I am also transforming as I unearth Motherline connections and resonances.

I have the sense of something unfinished; as my body grows sicker, I know there is still something I need to do in Ireland. I decide to spend a remaining chunk of my savings to take one more trip from New York to Ireland for eight days in mid-January. In this trip, I am completing a circle. I return to the Hill of Tara once more, seeking the soothing and answer for the sickness that is lodged in my body.

Each trip during this two-year period is part of a larger spiral of episodic pilgrimage, pursued through repeated visits. This cycle of pilgrimage visits reaches completion in my final journey to Ireland in 2019. As it turns out, the January trip is not the majestic, effortless wash in consciousness, but a push to meet the earth more fully and truthfully.

Returning to the Hill of Tara

I come to you
on a cold January day
rain-splashed.
Mrs. Maguire says I need good galoshes
but I head out in my new-to-me leather boots.

Tara, two years ago, you welcomed me,
with thousands of years of ritual memory
megalithic tombs in your soil
the ordeal of Kings

My whole body tingled with
the greeting of your deep earth
as I walked up your hills that green July
You met me fiercely, lighting up
a wild spiral through my spine
touching down to the dirt and raising up on the hills.

Today, two years later
you are slippery
as I walk in the January rain
trying to climb your heights
I fall on my belly hard
right shoulder smacks the ground
grinds my Irish sweater
in the sludge.

I get up quickly,
sliding
as the mud starts to pull me down to the
earth again
I wonder if I can make it after all
I scramble up the hill
to the grass at the top
And when I reach your summit
standing in the vigorous wind
you are laughing
in voracious play.

Nothing to cry about, you tell me
falling in the mud
It's part of being here
It's part of climbing the Hill in winter
without good rain boots.

I am shiver-splintered with cold
and covered in muck
as I find an alternate way down the hill
grumbling at your shapeshifting
with the winter rains
my smarting shoulder
and my attachment to your

primal welcome.

Learn to fall whole-heartedly into dirt
your whistling wind winks
the sacred is not pristine
the Hill will wrestle you
through your own wanting

Learn to meet your own soil
quixotic and shifting
our bodies are not always easy
laugh with them, round-bellied
shoulder blades ready
take a risk
kick up your toes
in the grass-softened mud
and taste the salt of earth on your teeth.

It is earth I encounter at Tara this time: a direct encounter with grimy, slippery, unrelenting mud. My shoulder smarts. On this trip to Tara, my ideas of the sacred are confronted with the mud and falling on the earth. I need to keep facing the mud. I can't romanticize it. Meeting the earth sounds all well and good until the wind is cold, my body hurts, and I am smeared with dirt. Yet Tara is showing me that I need to keep landing fully on the earth with all its pain and uncertainty. It is in this ongoing encounter that I will taste life.

In Irish mythology, the Cailleach is the tough love Mother goddess. She is as old as creation and stories say she formed nearby megalithic sites such as Loughcrew by dropping the stones she was carrying in her skirt in the landscape. Ó'Crualaoich (2003) discusses how this Mother Goddess is a shaper of geologic formations who is intimately interwoven with the land in Ireland in Irish folk and vernacular cultures:

traditions of the cailleach, the supernatural female elder, are to be found attached to natural features of the physical landscape—mountains, lakes, rivers, tumuli, caves whose shape she has moulded and whose location she has fixed... (p. 29)

It could be surmised that I encounter a glimpse of the Cailleach at the Hill of Tara in her wild, cackling enormity and muddy forcefulness. Ó'Crualaoich (2003) describes

how the Cailleach has a nourishing aspect and a destructive, frightening side: “the latter allied to the fierceness and wildness of forces and aspects of nature and landscape that can overwhelm human life” (p. 54). At Tara in my last visit, I am not coddled, but knocked around a bit, not in the most horrendous of ways, but still, I feel the harshness of the elements and the vulnerability of my own body in the face of the mud and the wind. Falling and struggling with the mud at the Hill of Tara bruises my body and my ego and challenges my sense of the Hill as a comfortable, nurturing maternal refuge.

Yet, here, too, the land invites me (taunts me even) into taking the risk of an embrace: this time not soft, but voracious, rough, and windy. This is the Hill’s laughing invitation this time: to meet the gritty earth with the fullness of my embodiment.

Cave of Cats

I am still sick, not able to eat much at all. Slammed down into uncomfortable physical realities, I attempt to rest in my room at Mrs. Maguire’s bed and breakfast at the foot of the Hill of Tara, where I am staying.

When facing emotional heaviness, Fraleigh advocates the power of intentional movement to explore these dense states, which can otherwise be depressive: “Heavy movement commonly drags us down, for instance, but if one makes a conscious choice to move in a heavy way, the process can be undertaken with curiosity toward the result” (2015, p. 10). Though I do not attempt to dance my relationship with heaviness or falling in Ireland, I am similarly moved into investigating the materiality of my relationship with messy earth descent. While part of me wants to push this humbling Tara experience away or tidy it up, I also am compelled to investigate further this landing in mud, heavy falling, and even being catapulted down into the earth’s body in disorienting ways. If mud and falling are showing up in my journey, is there anything they could teach me beyond my perhaps too simplistic ideal of the Tara’s comfortable welcome?

I have an idea: I will look for more mud. I research and read, coming upon the mythological Cave of Cats, Oweynagat (Úaimh na gCat), a day’s travel away in County Roscommon. I decide I will journey there and climb into the muddy cave.

Caves have appeared in my meditations and inner imagery of my Irish Motherline, which affirms my sense that a climb into an Irish cave is fitting. Oweynagat

has rich associations in Irish mythology as a portal to the otherworld, a land in Celtic lore that could be associated with abundance and peace but also with destructive forces. Some scholars suggest that the Cave is associated with the powers of chaos. Out of Oweynagat came pigs who caused a blight on the land until Queen Medb was able to reckon with them. The Cave of Cats is also linked as the home of the dark Irish war goddess, the Morrigan (Waddell, 2014).

This dark expedition into the Cave of Cats is a way of intentionally moving my body in a physical journey with mud, going downwards into the earth's belly.

The Balm of Oweynagat

I am at the Cave of Cats, Oweynagat
its geological caveness
underlaid by its connection
with a dark goddess of Ireland
the Morrigan
a war goddess
a goddess also of sovereignty, a shape-shifter
associated with the crow

Here I am, crawling
sliding in the narrow passage
my hand touches the cool, muddy stones
I duck my head
where my guide Mike warns me
to avoid low-hanging stone edges

Coming down this dark passage
reminds me of birth
and at one point
I fear the stone walls falling in on us

Eventually, we reach the large cavern space
tall enough to stand
though the passageway becomes muddier

Mike says this cave
was considered an entry point

to the otherworld,
perhaps used for rites of passage
or initiation
an important mythological space

I feel the cool cave air
Mike asks if I would like him
to turn off the light
for 30 seconds
I nod
this is just what I had been wanting

He does
we are subsumed in inky blackness
the lack of light is all-encompassing and smooth
one must surrender
there is nothing else

I feel a spark of terror
underneath that,
an invitation
into silken night

I inhale soft darkness, relaxing
I could stay here a long time
steeped in the succor of black space
elongating emptiness

Then Mike turns on the light
and asks if I am ready to go.

My trip to Ireland this time is an encounter with the unpredictability of the earth, the lack of comfort, the coldness, the rain, and the mud. It is also an intentional climb through the mud to a cave of creation. I learn again that I need to climb through—not away from—the mud to a place of deep life force (and accompanying emptiness) that I am longing for.

As I land into deeper bodily inhabiting, I continue to excavate new layers of memory to be metabolized in my cells. The journey to the Cave of Cats facilitates an

encounter with a healing dark that meets me, and helps me digest other dark experiences, which still live in my body and may be contributing to making me sick.

In the height of my unravelling, primordial journey in 2005, I had an experience with darkness on the underground train through the city. As I rode home from a meeting, the subway car chugging with passengers rapidly shifted in atmosphere in my psychic awareness. It was not that I had never felt aversion or fear in the face of darkness before, but this experience was different. My body-psyche shut down afterwards. Despite earlier, positive experiences of embracing the unknown, I had been confronted with a dark spectre that I couldn't or didn't want to assimilate.

My response of shutting down was helpful in a short-term way. Yet in a long-term way, shutting down separated me from the full healing possibilities of the void. Through somatic and ritual work for many years before and through this dissertation inquiry, I was able to slowly reconnect with the womb-informed *Ellemental* realm (lefevre, 2017).

In a normative culture that frequently disowns the darkness and rushes to the light, Ann Armbrrecht suggests the opposite: “the point is to let the darkness be everything it is—healing, nurturing, soothing, and embracing, all things I could not get from the light” (2008, p. 195). This does not mean only dwelling in darkness, but it does mean honouring darkness and the teachings it offers on its own terms. Of course, darkness is not only soothing, healing, and embracing; its immersive lack of light offers a complex territory that can yield dangers as well as gifts. Still, demonizing the dark and attempting to excise it from human experience leaves us without resources to navigate this part of living. A real negotiation of dark territories may include embodied inquiry, ritual, and communal processes that help embrace the fecundity of the unknown as well as cultivating agile boundaries in destabilizing encounters in the dark.

Journeying with darkness takes me into the land of the generative void, but also potentially into encounters with fear, pain, and vulnerability. The appropriate path is not necessarily embracing dark terrain without discernment. Yet if I can turn towards darkness with a discerning attunement—as I was able to do in the Cave of Cats with Mike's accompaniment—I can perceive the darkness' properties beyond my own fear. With this awareness, I can open to the dark's immersive healing gifts; I can also navigate the dark's spectres with more soul-connected dexterity. In addition, as I build my

capacity to receive more accompaniment (from both other humans and the more-than-human world), my discerning receptivity to the lessons of the dark grows.

Oweynagat is the home of the Morrigan in some tales. The Morrigan is a goddess associated with war as well as land and sovereignty. In some stories, the Morrigan shapeshifts into an animal, at various times becoming a wolf, a heifer, or a crow, the latter being the one she most often embodies. Associated with open sexuality, the Morrigan is distinct as an Irish goddess in that even in later literature, she is not subordinate to the masculine figures and is not able to be defeated (Kempton, 2017). Oweynagat is also a site of healing in the Cattle Raid of Fraéich when scores of women emerge from the Cave to carry the wounded hero inside; the next day, the hero emerges completely well and unscarred (Waddell, 2014). The stories surrounding the Cave of Cats evoke multifaceted understandings of the Cave's potent, chaotic, and sometimes curative powers.

My experience of lived darkness in the Cave of Cats amid its mythological traditions viscerally embeds me—if only briefly—in the rich complexity of obscurity, fostering a more nuanced and relaxed relationship with darkness. Somatic educator Koch affirms the power of the darkness and the unknown in somatic transformation work: “To access the process of dissolving and re-emerging whole is to go into the dark” (2019, p. 112-113).

Before I left for this trip to Ireland, I talked with my friend A. about my trip and my illness; she sensed that my body was exhausted, leading to my literal inability to digest. She perceived a place that vibrated with a blue-black rest beyond the stretching of the mind which would be soothing. Her intuitive perception resonated, but I didn't know how to pursue this place of blue-black rest further.

My experience of my descent into the Cave of Cats intersects with my own multi-layered experience of darkness. The darkness calls to me. I resist and she calls again, more insistently. I learn about the power of the cave and the vibrating dark. When I open to the cave's lack of light, I find a balm of complete blackness I needed.

Landing

Upon my return from my third journey to Ireland, over time, slowly, slowly a new settling into my body begins to take root. While I hope for seamless, easy clarity and resolution, that is not what I experience. In my travels, I have encountered life and death through lands that draws forth what lives in my own body, marinated in the jagged rhythms of shrouded ancestral and earthen histories.

Yet over time, the sickness recedes. In rocky fits and starts, my body stabilizes. At the end of this trip in January, I receive an email inviting me into a cooperative community home in a small city outside of Vancouver where I had previously applied to be a member. Unlike a rental, this home is co-owned by members, offering a different level of stability and communal life. From a house in Ireland by the sea where I spend the last night of my trip hosted by Ursula (who I had met on the pilgrimage the year before), I say yes.

I return and settle into my new home. Sometimes I imagine my bones as animated by the mud of Tara and by the darkness of caves. I sometimes find how to move my body in ways that vibrates through darkness, incorporating the earth's depths, without being marooned: instead allowing the echo of both the fertility of darkness and the luminosity of morning light.

Standing in the middle of a stone circle at Drombeg, falling in the soil hard at Tara, and climbing through muddy Cave of Cats all reflect embodied processes that allow for the spiraling of my own etheric sensibilities with the vibrant earth. These sites amplify echoes and bring me to portals in myself; they also invite me to keep exploring the generativity of more subtle threshold moments in my life.

Seabird Comes Home

Dear listeners, I see the sky has grown dark and I hear the wind whistling outside, as we are still gathered together at the hearth. Do take a moment to notice how you are. See if you are wanting movement or stillness and if you would like some more tea.

As you listen to what your body needs, I will share my next tale. It is a story of creating space for a powerful body-memory and in that process, reclaiming another important dimension of bodily inhabiting. As you listen, I invite you to notice, too, what helps your body settle into the space that is yours.

After a series of ancestral pilgrimages in Alsace/Germany and Ireland and after years of somatic work along with local singing practices and ritual, my capacity for bodily reclamation deepens. From what seems like my earliest existence, there has been a primal fear of full grounding, leading to a bodily contraction that had slowly been transforming over time. After my new lived experiences on the land in Alsace/Germany, in Ireland, and eventually back on Coast Salish lands, I have more emotional and physical capacity to settle in the face of fear. My body is learning somatically about belonging and invitations into earth contact in new ways. Though bodily inhabiting is a lifelong, non-linear process that is never finished, there are clear shifts in my relationship with my body over time after my cycle of journeys.

Other stories begin to emerge in my writing, stories which are also layered somatically along with my earliest survival fears.

Seabird Comes Home

She is a scared bird there,
close in the pocket of birth
I accompany her
 soft at the wing
A teeming mass of
Tender
 Brimming
 Light
counting her breaths now

she is
numb
A noise
quick she flies
to a place in the sky,
I breathe in the frozen landscape
right inside her skin

Orange subway seats
I am thirteen
on the D train,
Brooklyn to Manhattan
a man legs open
leers across the smudged
subway car
as we cross the Manhattan Bridge

I have the thing he wants
pulsing

I ball my essence up tight
throw my spirit fast and hard
over the bridge
deep into the water below

I can feel him reeling from across the aisle
as I vacate
my own skin

The thing he wants is gone
I am nearly empty far across the aisle

his eyes almost cross

he can't follow deflates looks away
I made him go away
I feel my own power
but where am I in the dredge of the sea?

Now thirty years later
I want me back

so I trace gently
I feel the geography of
my
 own
 flesh
sifting through
for the riffing of
 pulsation
my own grooves
calling myself back into being
rippled tender
from the depths of water
hidden skies
 That protected her me
 I touch
 a tiny bird cracking open its shell
 in the softness of this new
 welcome.

My body has been layered with stories—different sediments from various periods of my individual life as well as intergenerationally and from the collective—which converge to create patterns and ways of being somatically. Patterns of earlier survival fears that echo from the womb/ancestral/early life intersect with navigating being a girl/woman in a patriarchal society. In very few of these experiences have I felt fully safe inhabiting my body.

Rebecca Solnit (2020) writes: “To be a young woman is to face your own annihilation in innumerable ways or to flee it or the knowledge of it, or all of these things at once” (p. 4). Embodied safety is not about inner work alone. Our safety as women (and well as non-binary, trans, and gender non-conforming people and all other people who are targeted) is deeply shaped by larger social systems and laws that impact our lives daily. At the same time, my sense of power as a woman is buoyed by lineages and relationships of visceral support which affirm my existence. I have discovered one source of invisible support through ancestral connections, particularly with a sense of my great-grandmothers, and a sense of the earth’s support beneath my feet. Drawing on

this support in connection with my embodied experience of land communication and healing from earth sites situates me in a generative power that I can call on in my being.

The above poem reflects my teenage experiences as a young woman on the subway, but it also shares about an even younger part of myself—a wisp of my earliest spirit—which had flown away and could begin to be welcomed back to my body. The poem portrays my own increasingly trusting relationship with a sense of embodiment, as I slowly inhabit my own being opening.

Snowber stresses putting our awareness on our bodies including places which are often ignored and even shamed in our head-valuing culture:

I stand in praise of hips, in praise of the pelvis. Here one may find centre, the place that truly carries us, no doubt the place where we give birth, experience wonder of union...What if we just lived more deeply into our pelvises? (2016, p. 36)

Including attention on our hips and pelvises allows us to find and be in touch with the literal centre of our bodies. Kieft (2022) writes: “Moving from the divided and uneducated body to a multi-layered and literate body that is brimming with aliveness supports our relationship with the holy” (p. 83). A deeper reclaiming of my own centre has been a fundamental part of my own ongoing inquiry into embodiment. Inhabiting the earthy pelvis cultivates a presence in my bodily core in my most profound attunement with life.

A rich relationship with sacred places and presences can support a relationship with physical being, offering an invitation into further bodily inhabiting and grounding on earth.

Short Play: The Old Woman, the Young Woman, and the Song

Travel with me again, won't you? Come into the cool air of the theatre. Please take a seat anywhere. No matter where you sit in this theatre, you have a great view of the stage.

I would like you to watch a short play I wrote. Why did I write this play, you ask? Certain voices/presences I have sensed, felt, or lived are calling for theatrical representation, asking to be heard in the echoing presence of theatre. I offer a glimpse of these voices and embodied learnings percolating during and after my pilgrimages in the context of a theatrical piece.

The lights dim. Watch and listen to what emerges in the dark.

A bare stage.

An old woman walks on to the back of the stage, singing a low song and carrying a long stick. We can't quite make out her face in the dark of the theatre. She is still singing, low, low, low, a kind of a haunting melody. Only the silhouette of the old woman is faintly visible along with the murmur of her song.

My unseen voice of narration in the almost-darkness:

There is an open space where all of this is wordless. I am writing into that space, that blank clear slate of being. What actually needs to be said? I am not sure. There is a deep peace that comes with making room for darkness, for grief, rage, and also for navigating the strange energies that carry us into journeys that we might not have imagined, places that we did not want to visit: the hauntings, the remembrances, the burnings, the emptinesses.

I am writing into that place.

There is no point in reliving the past. Only allowing the past to morph into what is needed in the present. Fire becomes ashes. Night turns to day. Trees are born out of shallow water. The earth changes. It dies. It is re-born into a universe of a billion universes.

So how do we allow ourselves to trust the ground in this kind of changing world, when our roots have been pulled out and our stability continues to be rocked? Some will say grounding is passé, an old story in a time of emergencies, destabilizations, and loss. But I will tell you this: there are loves that the earth can teach you. This kind of grounding allows you to move while also being in dialogue with the soil.

You see I am not sure if I even want to be speaking this. I want to be listening, just listening into the quiet. Waiting for what needs to emerge.

The old woman begins tapping the stick on the ground in front of her rhythmically, like a heartbeat. The lights come up slowly.

A young woman in red rushes on stage. Upbeat music begins. The young woman begins to dance, first swaying and sashaying. Her movements are sensual and lively. She extends her limbs into space as she moves, enjoying the dance.

Then the young woman stops for a second and faces the audience. She looks out at the audience with suspicion.

Young woman: *BWAAAAAH!* Don't watch me! (Shakes her head and sticks out her tongue at audience.)

The young woman begins to move again, now twirling faster and faster as the music speeds up even more. She keeps spinning until she drops down on the floor, her red skirts splayed around her, her eyes closed. She doesn't move.

The music stops, and the stage is silent for a few moments.

The stage goes dark.

Scene 2

The lights come up. The young woman is still lying on the ground, eyes closed. The old woman has moved forward and is standing next to the young woman, looking down at her. The old woman sings her haunting song again for a minute. Then she looks up and speaks in a solemn tone to the audience:

We all can lose touch with the song. Sometimes we lose touch because we are afraid.

If that happens to you, open your ears to the rhythm, even when you can't hear the song anymore. Listen carefully for the rhythm in a tree's vibration or your own breath, or in the sound of the sea, and then you need to climb inside of it, that rhythm.

Keep the rhythm until the song starts singing itself again. Only the song knows the right timing.

The old woman taps the stick on the ground rhythmically for five seconds. Then she steps closer to the audience, peering out into the theatre. She whispers:

And I will tell you a secret: you can't kill the song. Sometimes the melody is hidden, but even when you think the song is lost, its resonance is vibrating in your cells, in the rings of certain trees, and the sediments of the seafloor that no one thought to ask.

The old woman looks down at the young woman again with tenderness. Then the old woman carefully places her stick next to the young woman on the floor.

Still lying on the ground, the young woman opens her eyes abruptly and looks up at the old woman, alarmed. The old woman begins to sing her melody softly.

The young woman looks up into the old woman's eyes. They look at each other for a few seconds. Still on the ground, the young woman slowly and carefully stretches her hand out to the old woman, and the old woman takes the young woman's hand, supporting the young woman into a sitting position.

The young woman sits, listening as the old woman who keeps singing her low melody. Gradually, the young woman picks up the stick next to her and begins tapping it thoughtfully on the ground in time with the song.

After a period of only tapping along, the young woman's voice quaveringly joins the old woman's singing. The old woman smiles. The young woman's voice grows stronger, bringing a new depth and dimensionality to the song. The young woman continues to tap her stick on the ground as the two women sing together as the lights go down.

Fade slowly to black.

Chapter 10.

Body, Earth, and Belonging

In writing about returning to the Lower Mainland of British Columbia/Coast Salish lands and finding moments of deepening connection with these lands after my ancestral trips, I find the word *belonging* crops up as an important one in my writing and my life, as a kind of invocation and acknowledgment of a felt sense which has increasingly emerged in my being.

Experiences of belonging are shaped by social, cultural, political, economic, historical, psychological, and physiological elements of experience. I am focusing here on the visceral experience of belonging in my body on an inspirited energetic level, informed by all these forces.³² Celtic theologian John O'Donohue writes: "Part of the reason we are so lonesome in this modern world is that we have lost the sense of belonging on earth" (1999, p. 7). When I inhabit my body, there is an inherent relationship with the sensual world around me; I am less separate (Snowber, 2016).

Elemental Chorus (Qayqayt territories, August 2019)

I lean against a tree in a quiet park
backbone flush against fresh bark
feet planted
a whoosh of breath
from my belly
a sole note sung as an offering
to the gods of loneliness and forgetting
crows join in, cawing
almost aggressive,
are they scared I will hurt their eggs?
I stay another few moments
sing another note

³² I want to acknowledge that as a cis settler woman of European heritage, dominant society often affirms aspects of my social belonging, which smooths my way tremendously; at the same time, as this dissertation explores, this privilege does not preclude bodily disconnection. In fact, disassociation may be one manifestation of our histories which European settler people need to grapple with (Menakem, 2017).

the sound becomes crisper
crows sing boisterous
my body now in line
with tree
crows
earth
my own voice
is this
a felt practice of belonging?
listening
for an elemental
chorus
in unfamiliar places?

I don't feel this sense of belonging in the same way when I am numb or in constant constricted terror that takes me out of my embodied experience. Of course, my thoughts and spirit can also wander to other times, places, and through satisfying disembodied streams of thought, trance journeys and in other forms (Kieft, 2022). As Pinkas describes: "...in the journey of sending the psyche to travel, it may leave the body but always returns" (2016, p. 208). Bodily belonging for me means I can regularly return to and be open to an embodied home in my physical being.

What does it feel like to find home in a bodily way? For me, bodily home is a felt sense experience that can feel different at different times, but one way to describe it is that my life force is in visceral, fulfilling relationship with my corporeal form: a largely welcoming dance between body and spirit that allows a sparking friendship between the two—at times a union—versus a strained or antagonistic relationship. Touching more moments of this experience of inspirited bodily inhabiting feels like a great gift of existence on earth for me. I say this, aware that I have had significant chunks of time when I have felt very cut-off from belonging in this way. I also recognize that each person's relationship with this kind of inhabiting is likely unique in the context of many mediating factors.

Over the process of this dissertation inquiry, my bodily belonging has been deepening—in fits and starts, returns to numbness, tentative de-armourings, and moments of welcome and arrival. Allowing increased inhabiting of my body and relational contact with the earth happens in the context of awkward aching, tender

uneasiness and sometimes emptiness and fear. Seeking bodily belonging on earth is a multi-layered exploration, an inching and feeling into the darkness and unknown, which has been and will be a lifelong inquiry for me. I still avoid or distance from my embodied experience at times, retreating to my head. Yet, in a spiraling process over this time of my inquiry, I have found that my everyday capacity for belonging in my body has been growing and this has been deeply resourcing to my body-spirit. John O’Donohue notes: “...a sense of belonging liberates us to trust fully the rhythm of loss and longing” (1999, p. xxiii). A sense of bodily belonging allows stronger emotional flows to move through my body while I remain rooted here in this time and place.

Drawing on Buddhist and feminist traditions, religious scholar Anne Klein (1994, 1997) emphasizes the connection between bodily inhabiting and earth connection:

To inhabit our physical body fully, and to feel connected to it through the earthy body beneath us is to be physically grounded, able to inhabit our bodies as the mooring and support for all of our activities. (1997, p. 142)

According to Klein, physical grounding both roots us in our own presence and strength and connects us to a more open system of flows larger than individual selves—what she calls “the flesh, blood, and rushing currents of feeling and energy” (1994, p. 126). When we are grounded in the earth, we can inhabit our bodies more easily. Without connection to the “earthy body beneath us” (Klein, 1997, p. 142), as I have experienced, we are less likely to settle into our bodies.

As I cultivate my own permission to exist and to inhabit my body fully, I am brought deeper into existence on the earth where I am. Bodily inhabiting embeds me viscerally in the world in which I live, impacting my human relationships and my connection with the more-than-human world. This intimate relationship with bodily experience has larger cultural and political implications (Klein, 1998; Nadeau, 1996; Snowber, 2016).

What are the Stories of these Lands? History and Ceremony as Webs of Connection

As I enter my own cells, I awaken further to the stories of the land where I live. I learn that my new home of New Westminster, where I moved in the late winter of 2019 to join the co-op, is on the lands of the Qayqayt Nation (officially the New Westminster

Indian Band). New Westminster is on the Stó:lō (Fraser) River which was historically a source of sustenance and bounty (Baker, 2011).

I sometimes spend time walking along the quay at the Fraser (Stó:lō) river, now a bustling boardwalk. The Stó:lō river was renamed after fur trader Simon Fraser who came to these lands in 1808. Fraser's statue stands imperiously on the river quay boardwalk with a particularly offensive plaque. Sometimes I have wondered how many people it would take to push that statue into the water to sink to the water's bottom, finally touching the chthonic soil of the riverbed.

The film *A Tribe of One* (Cha, 2003) traces the journey of Qayqayt Chief Rhonda Larrabee to gain recognition for the Qayqayt Nation. This Nation had three reserve plots near/in what is now New Westminster, BC (Canada Library and Archives, 1880) and was officially recognized in 1879 through 1916, when the last reserves in New Westminster were closed.

One of the reserves was right next to what became Queen's Park, named for Queen Victoria in 1864 (Campion & Shields, 2015). Queen's Park is a place I regularly walk, about 10 minutes from my current home. As I walk in the park among the trees, I wonder where the edges of the reserve are.

In addition to the Qayqayt Nation, other First Nations inhabited the land on which I walk. Before European contact, the hən̓q̓əmi̓n̓əm̓-speaking Kwantlen were one of the most powerful and largest nations in this region. The Kwantlen were one of the groups along with the Musqueam and Tsawwassen who claimed rights to the reserve lands of New Westminster because they had historically inhabited the lands here (New Westminster agency p. 406, n.d; New Westminster agency, p. 637, n.d). One of the Kwantlen's biggest year-round villages Sxwo:yimelh (Campion & Shields, 2015) was in what is current-day New Westminster (Kwantlen First Nation history, 2013).

Today, I hop on the skytrain and cross the Stó:lō river to SFU Surrey where the Kwantlen are leading an open ceremony for all students, staff, and faculty. SFU Surrey is on the unceded lands of the Kwantlen and Qayqayt as well as the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, and Tsawwassen.

At SFU Surrey, I slip into a seat before the ceremony officially begins. The Kwantlen ceremonialists sit on upraised podium: as guests settle in, the ceremonialists are singing. The singers are warming up the space, a young spokesman explains in his introduction to the event. The singing pervades the large white lobby in which we are gathered, echoing off the walls and through my body. My feet resting on the floor, I close my eyes and listen. Eventually, I rise for my turn to be brushed by cedar along with all the other ceremony attendees, as the singing continues. The man doing the ceremonial brushing sweeps each of our bodies with fresh, green, cedar boughs.

As I return to my chair and sit down again as the ceremony continues, I expand and settle, held in an invisible architecture made palpable in these moments: an unseen netting which connects this material world with an etheric one. Sitting in my chair, eyes closed, as the ceremony continues, I rest in this wide, fluid yet stable, song-filled web. I notice my own expansion into a comfortable vastness.

Since I was young, I have periodically had the image of a web, akin to a spider web: a delicate weaving which connects worlds, seen and unseen. In my imagination, the web is ubiquitous, spun warmly and vibrating in the air between earth and sky, encompassing and connecting life. I have seen images of how each part of the web is accessed through specific ceremonies and embodied practices, which are innovated, cultural pathways to the wider matrix of which we are all ultimately a part.

In some places, the weaving of web has been ripped and there are gaping holes of empty space. Even the empty space is part of the matrix at its core. But the image of the web evokes the importance of nuanced cultural practices to concretely weave human groups into relationship with the larger tapestry of life.

Indigenous ceremonies and songs created in relationship with land-bases and shared over generations are embedded in land relationships. For years, these practices were suppressed by colonial laws and genocidal policies including residential schools. Massive epidemics brought by Europeans to Turtle Island also decimated whole villages, leading to the loss of cultural practices. While these histories continue to impact the present, Indigenous resurgence movements have been reclaiming and renewing ceremonies, language systems, and forms of governance. Yet the struggle for full Indigenous sovereignty and equity continues, seeking to (re)create a world that truly

supports Indigenous leadership, Indigenous knowledge systems, and Indigenous peoples at all levels (Asch, Borrows, & Tully, 2018).

In these moments of the cedar-brushing, I (we) receive the gift of shared ceremony and songs held by the Kwantlen Nation, which allows me to feel that web through a pathway that has been carved and reclaimed through generations of work and relationships of the Kwantlen after years of colonization that attempted to suppress these cultural knowledges.

My own ancestors played a role in these attempts at colonial erasure and genocidal practices towards Indigenous peoples, as settlers in other parts of North America/Turtle Island. Today, due to the generosity of the Kwantlen, I receive this gift of this ceremony. It is not fair, but I receive the fullness of this offering in the present. The path that colonial culture has taken us all down is a road to destruction, though some of us have been given much more privilege on this road, and that does matter. The ceremony is one more invitation to keep learning from the people who have stewarded and continue to steward reciprocal relationships with these lands: to keep learning about the web in which we all exist.

As I allow myself to inhabit my body fully, my encounter with the webbed nature of the universe deepens. It is my intention to keep listening to the learnings of this meeting place between present-time bodily inhabiting and ancestral echoes, the teachings of Indigenous elders, scholars, and practitioners and the movements of Indigenous resurgence, and the often-challenging encounters with my own privilege and ignorance on unceded Indigenous lands. Is my above set of intentions enough? I don't know.

How do I show up ethically on these lands in this body? There is no easy or quick resolution to this question. I seek to slowly become "naturalized" through deepening reciprocity with and care for the lands I inhabit (Kimmerer, 2013). At the same time, as a settler on unceded Indigenous lands, profound ethical questions remain. These questions are beyond the scope of this dissertation, but they are connected to a vitally important inquiry around ethics as a settler on Indigenous lands which I will keep returning to in my work and throughout my life.

Friendship Garden: Asking and Receiving

When COVID arrives in early 2020, I stop travelling beyond the borders of my neighborhood as most in-person activities, meetings, and classes halt. Only a few cars stream through the empty streets and the trees seem to breathe more deeply. The slowed-down world meets my body's rhythm, and my cells calm alongside the quiet roads and fuller inhalations of blossoming air. At the same time, collective fear and uncertainty abounds.

After being locked in front of a computer screen on Zoom calls in the earliest days of the pandemic, I start to take extended walks through the local green spaces in Qayqayt lands. In close proximity to my home, there is a park called Friendship Garden with a series of small waterfalls, a small red bridge, and a pond. Friendship Garden is a Japanese Garden, which is part of a larger stretch of green space called Tipperary Park.³³ As part of my walking route, I go to Friendship Garden daily to meditate, sit, and sing, writing about these experiences in field notes, some of which I share below.

Field Note: Asking and Receiving

Today I walk in Friendship Garden, feeling the uncertainty and loss of these times. I don't know what will happen.

Walking outside from my contained computer virtual world, I think: oh, I miss you, earth, oh, you are real. I hum, singing softly, but I still feel removed from the world, not fully there. Now I begin to make sound and I find the sobs are pushing my belly open, my breath.

Two ducks swim by, and I am so reassured by their clarity and their unbotheredness, swimming along in the pond together, on their way to their next destination. Crows are flying now overhead, cawing.

I kneel at the edge of the pond, and put my hand in the dirt, wanting to make contact with something real, right here, right now in my hands. I feel that crumbly dirt in

³³ I learned in 2022 a couple years after I wrote these journal entries that Tipperary Park takes its name from a reference to Country Tipperary, a reference to Irish labourers who were part of a contingent of men who squatted in the park while working on local construction in the late 1800s which stuck as the name (Parks and Recreation History of Park Sites and Facilities, 2011).

my hands as I kneel there, glad to feel a real substance on my skin. I stand and I sidle up to light green fronds of plants at the water's edge, amazed at their full dimensionality. Here they are, in full living life force in this place. I turn back towards the tree behind me and rest my head on her. Please help, I say.

She is wide and strong. I sense she is saying: We are with you, all of you. We are here if you can just receive us.

I lean full body against her. I am held for a long time. After hearing of the strict home-bound shelter-in-place orders in other countries, I wonder if in a couple of weeks, I will be allowed to come out here and do this at all. To be here on this patch of earth near this pond and quietly sing and lean against a tree.

Eventually, I tell the big wide tree thank you. I kiss her bark. Then, I walk up the hill back home, watching the flock of birds flying through the sky, and the yellow flowers popping brightly out of the bush on the side of the house.



Figure 10-1. Friendship Garden, April 2020

Field Note: Igniting the Centre

I walk among the trees tonight. I feel how I can be in my body but also in a larger vastness, and how I don't have to be identified with only the scared self—that is a part of

me to be cradled, but it is not all of me. I bring my attention to my whole body, and then bring my attention specifically to my pelvis. I realize how this attention ignites my connection to life here and now, to the full embodiment and to all of creation through the body. Realizing again in this moment that I can choose another way to be in my body: I don't have to be welded so fully to body-memories rooted in past moments in time.

Field Note: Birth

Down at the small park, I sit on the other side of the tiny pond on a stone, perched over the sparkling water. It vibrates an impressionistic painting inverted, the water mirroring back the leaves of trees, the sky, the buds of spring flowers.

Another universe lies in its depths. It waves and wobbles and glitters in a stark vibrating picture of another world. And here I am, perched on stone, back firm against a tree, knees splayed open to the water below. There are holes in my long johns under my skirt and the bare skin of my thighs touches the air. I sit there, almost resting on top of the water, nothing but shivering, shimmering water's light all around me and I sink in, almost becoming the water, too, and its alive, inverted universe.

I am ready, I say, to the water, to the air, to the tree, to the earth there. I am ready. Ready for what? I don't know in language, but I do know in what lies underneath language. Ready to meet you more deeply in an elemental offering of being.

Chapter 11.

Riding The River's Currents

Dear listeners, the end of my tale is growing near. The room is dark, but you might notice that our shared presence together is warm, reflected in the hearth's flickering light. I invite you into this lustrous obscurity as I share some reflections on riding the river's currents.

Darkness. Reaching for the dark, fertile soil that is underneath all the stops, starts, objects, fears, words, identities. Allowing a direct relationship with the transmission of life force, with the fluid power of the body on earth.

Sometimes I walk down the hill to the Stó:lō (Fraser) River in the evenings. I like watching the river's movement as the light plays on its waves and bats fly close to the surface in parts of the quay. When I am agitated, I find comfort in the river's waves and the glistening of light on the lapping water.

Gloria Anzaldúa writes about embracing our own fluidity as generative: "The pulse of existence, the heart of the universe, is fluid. Identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition..." (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015, p. 135). I walk the streets of these lands, touching trees, and witnessing the water.

Do I dare to know myself as a river? What would it mean to know myself in this way?

A river spirals in eddies, churns in rapids, dances in sunlight, but is not protected on shore. Where do I maroon myself on a beach? The river is wrapping around rocks, dragging branches downstream, then flowing leisurely in the sun, bathing in fish.

Though each river is different, a river is often bold and free in its own flowing yet supported by earthen banks. Long ago, I imagined how slow, gentle presence—"warm hands, patient feet, close cradling"—could reveal "river-secrets" (Richardson, 2005, unpublished poem). When I wrote that poem, I could feel the calling of the river and the lurking threat of its flood. I was on the verge of encountering some unpalatable darkness in that watery cascade. I have spent many years of slow somatic and ritual learning with

supportive accompaniment, building capacity to allow such visceral flows in myself. I am still learning to allow movement through the roughest rapids.

What does it mean to uncover “river-secrets”? My pilgrimage towards living in a river way has involved encounters with historical traces of fear, loss, and beauty—what I understand as water-memories from womb, infancy, intergenerational, and primordial knowledges. These can be painful vortexes as well as transformative spirals in a remembered river of consciousness.

Moving waves of sound and dance have helped me navigate scary Underworld places. Unearthing glimpses of a powerful Motherline through daydreams, trance, stories, movement, genealogical research, and land connection has fostered a greater faith in a generative flow. This pilgrimage of riding the river of my own life force is interconnected with navigating still-present patriarchal and colonial realities, ancestral dirt, and encounters with the void.

I come from a line of women who I believe felt abandoned in the most primal of ways. I learned to become a holder of those unspoken stories, but in the process, I split myself. I split into the person who could hold those heavy stories separated from the most vulnerable parts of me which felt profoundly abandoned, too. These parts flew off into the sky and the sea and were floating there while their corresponding body knowledges were numb or in pain.

Restoration involves acknowledging the split, the walled-off places that experienced terror in my body from the beginning. Slowing down allowed me to begin to know of these parts of myself. A slower pace helped me not be overtaken and derailed into a vibrating mass of terror.

Inner reconciliation starts from listening to those lost parts of self floating in space. Mending comes from being with other humans and the more-than-human-world whose witnessing helps build my capacity to feel my body with less fear. Restoration comes, in part, from learning to viscerally perceive my body as an unfolding process that is always helping me find an interconnected field of relationship (Gendlin & Parker, 2017; Turcotte, 2012a, 2012b).

I have begun to welcome the shunned parts of me, which perhaps are also parts of my mother and grandmother and others who came before. Being wrapped in a cloak of remembrance in a sacred place in Ireland, I open to a wider holding where I am not split between the me that connects with others and the me that is completely alone. In singing to the water in Coast Salish territories, I experience a relaxation into a pulsing container embodied in flow with the vibrating earth. I sit in the multiphonic buzz of the natural world near my home with the caw of crows, the lap of water, the hum of insects where I can experience a broader, loving context which has room for multiplicities. This resonance is buoyed and grounded by immersion in philosophies and cosmologies of interconnection as opposed to separation (Gendlin & Parker, 2017; Turcotte, 2012a, 2012b).

Traces of the past live in the body, and particularly in the pelvis like heavy stones or eviscerated spaces of absence, manifesting physically as numbness or constriction (Kent, 2011). At the same time, shards of (un)memory can be scattered across geographies and dimensions (Pinkas, 2016). I have found that tracking and tending these fragments through a pilgrimage of embodied listening, touch, storying, poetry, singing, and movement is growing my capacity to ride the currents of my own life generatively.

I now understand the immense shift of my late twenties and thirties as a jagged gift: of being hurtled into a visceral re-tracing of womb and infant experiences, matrixial fragments, *and* a spiritual encounter with an expanding consciousness of emptiness. Through floundering and bathing in emptiness, and then learning over and over to come back into my body, I have the experience of re-entering life in new forms. While this journey has sometimes been scary, in these movements between ether and form, I have sometimes been suffused with renewed vibrations of aliveness.

My earliest experience was that the earth, the body, was painful: an experience that may be true for many humans. Why would I/we want to stay in our bodies on earth? The slow learning—bit by bit—is that this fear and pain is just one thread, one piece of the larger web of being which is woven within a bigger tapestry. I continue to slowly and viscerally learn that life on earth is part of the embodied fabric of the universe, which includes profound love. Fundamentally, the river is that flow of love.

I ride the river at times through movement, allowing my body to find its rhythms in walks to the water at səlilwət/the Inlet, Friendship Garden, and the Stó:lō (Fraser) River. I find my own river dance in movements of curling and spiraling as well as staccato stamping and the smoothness of my spine against the trunk of a tree.

Singing allows me visceral access to the river through my body. Making sound, I am less bogged down in the heaviness of old narratives, though I carry an ancient song with me. My voice carries forth my mother's voice and perhaps an older lilt from my foremother Jane O'Brian's people and a stabilizing, warm melody from Lena's lineage.

The cauldron of witness consciousness (Walsh & Bai, 2014) has allowed me to slowly metabolize painful shards of (un)memory and make intentional choices moment-to-moment which support nourishment at the root. These choices include voicing truth(s) and turning towards what is life-giving. This strengthening of my voice and ability to be present in my daily living allows me to respond creatively to fears. Unlike during the flooding experiences that were sparked in Toronto which continued into my thirties, I am no longer primarily frozen, trapped between this world and another one, unable to move. Instead, my body has found greater movement and fluidity in the face of fear, and more of my life force moves in flow.

As part of the pathway of conscious opening to what is nourishing, I have been discovering a pathway of body-land connection that can be slowly learned, but that was not taught in the culture in which I was raised. There is a particular kind of earth witnessing, which involves sensing, seeing, and having a vibrational ear open to the place's resonances while being open to being received by the earth as well (Kimmerer, 2013). This support may be particularly potent in certain earth spots and thin places where there is a strong frequency of resonance, ancestral or otherwise.

I have learned how connections between body and earth can support an interrelated looping flow of grounding. Land-based relating is a source of relational connection and love (Kimmerer, 2013). In that two-way flow, an anchored earth-based relationship can allow a greater metabolizing of my own pain and the pain I hold for others (Klein, 1997; Turcotte, 2012a). Grounding and developing an increasingly literate body (Kieft, 2022) can allow fragments of spirit to come home. Body-spirit alignment has allowed me to meet the land in my current home in Coast Salish territories with more

presence and honesty, to learn how to become available to listen to the stories of the land where I am, even if the stories are painful or I need to face my own shame. This is not all that is needed for reconciliation or justice, by any means. But being able to listen from a grounded and multiliterate body as a settler is the beginning of a different kind of pre-conversation (Lilburn, 2017).

Inhabiting my body roots me to the earth, allowing me to swim and ride the currents of memory and perception that move through me, simultaneously anchored to deep earth-places. A circuitry of relationship between my body and the earth frees up the possibility of a more nourishing relationship with the matrixial and the land on which I live.

At Friendship Garden today, I watch the small, rushing waterfall in the rain, and I can feel my maternal lineage of grandmothers with me easily. They are laughing and laughing, and I feel the aliveness of our connection. I have hit a block with my writing, so I have come here to the Garden to ask for help. Supported by my grandmothers, I also introduce myself to the land in this particular spot by the small waterfall in Qayqayt and other Coast Salish territories.

I pause, feet on earth, eyes closed. I sense a wordless message that creating writing doesn't have to be hard, just keep coming to this spot every day and bringing songs and other offerings, but most importantly, show up.

The rain pings down on my shoes and the soil. I remember the expansion I felt when I came back from Ireland to Vancouver/Coast Salish territories after my long pilgrimage in Europe. I sang by the Inlet then, and I met that vast circle of life, my anger evaporating.

A farmer's market is happening nearby, and a band is playing. I sway and move as I listen to the band's music. I hear the rustling symphony against my skin and feel another message: "Allow your embodied spirit to expand you into full presence. Don't hold yourself back. Meet the fullness of life. Write from that place." I am reminded that showing up is an expression of relationality; an expansion into full being allows the flow.

I began this dissertation with the story of John, my theatre teacher, who noted: "Someone told you that you couldn't be powerful." My dissertation process of slow somatic research has been a pilgrimage into my own intrinsic power(s). A sojourn into bodily inhabiting has allowed me to deepen in relation with a visceral life force. Greater consistent contact with this erotic vitality is a pathway to an elemental power, which emanates from an embodied capacity to dance with life.

As part of my ongoing journey of bodily reclamation, I am buoyed by a sense of the invisible river of ancestors, particularly foremothers, by vital human communities of support, and by my connection with the earth. Though my relationships with the invisible realm do not erase the inequities of colonial and patriarchal realities or protect me from pain, a chosen dance with the waters of the matrixial nourishes a rich, resonant being with life.

We are each riding our own river. This dissertation contains some of my river-rocks—moments of embodied struggles and insights—shared on the page to track a possible path through the brambles to the river-beach. The water glints below.

This dissertation is not a representation of a pilgrimage completed, but one that continues. As this work is birthed and released, I will be completing an eight-year journey which brought me back to Canada. I will be journeying again through a new darkness, into another iteration of the unknown. This time, though, my commitment is unquestionably to the river, allowing the watery wilds to move me in the lucid dark, with no guarantee where that will lead. I might even be singing.

Cavern callings

Empty space of day dawns
a seagull calls
can I open into this
ripe
 lawless
place

The rain floods down
leather shoes cautious
on soggy ground
a crack in the sole
lets the water in

how scary
to sing alone today
ragged threads
gathered
 in hope of weaving

I listen to
my friend's voice on the phone
tracking multilayers of vibration
me in British Columbia, her in Siberia,
we soften into images together
warming and incisive

I sleep well
in the morning I settle into
morning zoom co-working dates
sunshine faces
a co-op home with morning coffee aromas
yet aware of my own emptiness
I search for spacious air
 echoing earth

I walk to
the park to
 sing, pour an offering next to a rock
closing my eyes
next to a tree

I see the blackness of night
this time, aching and charred
 can I allow my own softening
 through black holes?

A breathing minute-to-minute wondering
can I remember the outstretched hand
 among ice patterns on repeat
 staving off breath

Now dark eclipse of sky transmutes to
black velvet
a plush memory thread
stretched across the heavens
a zipper down the middle
I pull it down and the sky opens

to

Incandescent morning

an unexpected sight
a flood not of water
but of light

stretched across the morning sky

feet wavering on a rock
as a rat scampers by,
the air below still murky

but the sky
the rock
under my cracked sole
are damp, tender

aching with
shining.

Epilogue

My tale is almost over, at least for tonight. I hope you stayed warm by the hearth, my dear ones. As you listened, you might have noticed how your body holds traces of stories and river stones collected from your own journeys. I invite you to imagine cradling those smooth rocks in your hands, remembering your own sojourns through water.

Before I bid you farewell for the night, I will tell you one last part of my tale. I began this dissertation with a recurring vision of women who passed the fire and ashes in the forest, one generation to the next. They passed the fire secretly hand to hand and the flaming ashes burned them, but they wouldn't stop sharing those burning remnants and they wouldn't speak of what they passed between them.

What pain and magic did those fiery ashes hold? I may never fully know. Perhaps the ashes are unspoken losses. Perhaps those ashes hold the knowledge of repeated violations. Maybe those burning remnants are the memory of primordial fires, even the fire of the goddess Brigid herself. Maybe those burning ashes are traces of ancient times which respected all women's bodies and power more than most cultures do today.

I can tell you that I still sometimes see the image of that lineage of women, passing sacred burning knowledge, hand to hand. But now I have a connection to the burning that doesn't only silently singe. I feel the heat inside me; the fire is part of the fierce blossoming in my belly. Sometimes I feel the fire as a kind of reverence, other times as a kind of rage, and sometimes I feel that fire as my deepest vitality. In an elemental dance, the river of flow feeds this body flame. And in that dancing glow, I am not alone.

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