

**Our Skins are Membranes, Not Walls: A Multiracial Feminist Conversation**

by

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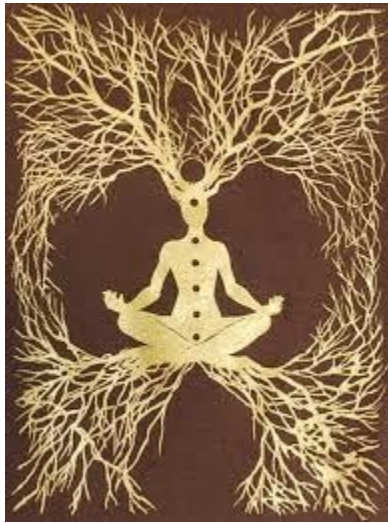
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*"I'm no longer accepting the things I cannot change; I'm changing the things that I cannot accept."*

Angela Davis

*"Education can't save us - we have to save education."*

Bettina Love



## **Introduction**

In 2021 three of us—African American, South Asian, and white—began talking online about teaching during the Covid pandemic.<sup>1</sup> When the uprisings in response to continued terrorism of Black people mobilized, our conversations expanded in the face of both crises. We shared about how these crises are changing our work in universities, prisons, meditation centers, refugee camps and yoga studios. We shared our grief about how the continued assaults on Black people in the US is mirrored in the devastating impact of Covid-19 on Black and Native communities. We also reflected upon various *yogas* (unions) and embodied practices that support us personally and in our teaching. We found ourselves puzzled by people who say, “we just want to get back to normal” when actually this period might give us a chance to make fundamental systemic change, at an embodied, cellular level. We want to open new capacities for connection, perception, and resistance. We asked each other how, rather than sinking into despair, we might realize our capacity for political action. We collectively realized that as multiracial feminist teachers, each of us values somatic knowledge, historical memory, and community building, and see them as integral to contemplative practices.

### **Crafting a pedagogy of power (Zahra Ahmed)**

When my co-authors and I began writing together, I had been sheltering in place for three months. It had been four months since Ahmaud Arbery was murdered in Georgia by white supremacists, three months since Breonna Taylor was murdered in her bed by police in Louisville, and less than two weeks since George Floyd was executed on a street corner in Minnesota. These unconscionable acts evoked a deep emotional response from me as a human being. I felt the appropriateness of the order to shelter in place because I could not imagine leaving my home to interact and socialize with others. Since then, one of George Floyd’s murderers was convicted, but the discussion of Taylor’s killing is fading. Ahmaud Arbery’s killers were also convicted, but Kyle Rittenhouse was pronounced not guilty of shooting down two men in the street because they had the

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<sup>1</sup> We want to thank James Rowe, Shannon Mariotti and Farah Godrej for organizing “The Politics of the Mindfulness Revolution” for the Western Political Science Association, a generative conference that allowed us to first meet each other.

audacity to protest for Black lives. I am still grieving as I write.

As I processed these vicious acts of state-sanctioned, anti-Black violence, it quickly became clear that my students were also traumatized. This was evident in our online courses and even more so once we returned to in-person instruction. It seemed we were all raw from the ways the world had changed as well as the ways it had refused to change. When we were told to leave our places of business or schooling, go to our homes and shelter in place, we experienced a significant rupture. As we have continued to live in a state of heightened political, social and economic uncertainty, many of us have been confronted with the fact that much of what we thought we knew and what we expected regarding our country and the trajectory of our lives has been challenged and in many cases discarded. However, though rupture may generate trauma, it may also create opportunities.

In Gloria Anzaldúa's essay, "Let Us Be the Healing of the Wound", she writes about her shock, pain and sadness over the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the United States' violent response<sup>2</sup>. I was surprised to find that her description of her feelings during that time in 2001 exactly mirrored how I felt as the Covid epidemic unfolded in 2021. Anzaldúa writes, "In the weeks following *éste tremendo arrebató* (this tremendous outburst), *susto* (a condition of chronic, traumatic suffering stemming from emotional trauma or from witnessing traumatic experiences lived by others)<sup>3</sup> trussed me up in its numbing sheath. Suspended in limbo in that in-between space, *nepantla*, I wandered through my days on autopilot... My house whispered and moaned. Within its walls the wind howled. Like *la Llorona*, (the mythical spirit of "the weeping woman," said to wander waterfront areas looking for her drowned children) lost and alone, I was arrested in *susto*, helplessness, falling, sinking."<sup>4</sup>

This is how I felt while trying to process the unimaginable fact that hundreds of thousands of people were dying every day due to the Coronavirus. At the same time, I felt almost worn away by the seemingly

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<sup>2</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa. AnaLouise Keating, ed., *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (The Gloria E. Anzaldúa Literary Trust, 2015), pg. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Rubel, Arthur J. "The Epidemiology of a Folk Illness: Susto in Hispanic America." *Ethnology* 3, no. 3 (July 1964): 268-83.

<sup>4</sup> Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, 9-10.

never ending loop of Black death being streamed and projected onto every available screen. I had never felt grief as wide as what I felt then. As a coping mechanism, I tried to shift my focus to rituals that heal. I began lighting candles in memory of those who had died. I spent more time in nature and I felt deep gratitude for the blessing of the trees, the animals, the winds, the rain. And I allowed myself to weep. My practices helped me decide that, for as long as I can, I will make each day an opportunity for social justice intervention. Similarly, Anzaldúa also turned her attention towards healing. In the same book she wrote, “Transitions are a form of crisis, an emotionally significant event or a radical change in status...In *nepantla*, we undergo the anguish of changing our perspectives and crossing a series of *cruz calles*, junctures and thresholds, some leading to a different way of relating ... and to the creation of a new world.<sup>5</sup> I have learned that, when we are wounded or traumatized, we can turn our attention inward - toward the wound - and begin to do the work of bringing ourselves back together. This is called healing.

I deepened my reliance on contemplative practices during this time and used them to help me create a classroom container to effectively hold both spirit and social action. As a Politics professor, I define politics as the generation, leveraging and mobilization of power. I am grateful for the scholarship of Jean Baker Miller, bell hooks, Celestine Ware, and others who assert that power can be theorized beyond the capacity to oppress; it can also be understood as a possibility for creating liberatory change. Beloved Black feminist scholar and ancestor bell hooks references this idea in her book, *Feminist Theory: from margin to center*, when she references Celestine Ware’s discussion of power as a means for counteracting oppressive tendencies.<sup>6</sup> While crafting my own educational philosophy, I also relied in part on Jean Baker Miller’s understanding that power can be understood as the capacity “to be powerful in ways that simultaneously enhance, rather than diminish, the power of others.”<sup>7</sup> I integrated these ideas with my intention of helping students bring their full selves to the classroom - wounds and all - and to help them recognize their capacities for effecting change.

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<sup>5</sup> Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist Theory: From margin to center*. pg. 83. Boston: South End Press. Ware, C. (1970). *Woman Power: The Movement for Women's Liberation*. New York: Tower Publications.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, J. B. (1982). Colloquium: Women and Power. *Work in Progress* (pp. 1-5). Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies, Wellesley, Mass.

## **The Practice: Intentional transitions and bearing witness**

Two practices that have been especially effective are what I call intentional transitions and the practice of bearing witness. Each of these practices have helped my students and I acknowledge our full complexity as human beings within and outside of the classroom while grounding our academic work in an ethic of critical analysis, compassion and care. While meditation has become a common part of the U. S. lexicon, its spiritual aspects are often overlooked because they are unquantifiable and therefore unable to be commodified. Rather than calling the practice a meditation, I named my classroom practice an *intentional transition* in order to help students understand its purpose. This grounding practice only takes 45 seconds at the beginning and the end of each class. I explain it to my students as an opportunity to allow our spirits, minds and our bodies to catch up with one another and integrate. For 45 seconds, we simply breathe together. I use a meditation timer with one bell to signal our start and three bells to signal the end. The timer also includes the sound of a running stream as ambient sound. Sometimes I offer simple guidance or tips for noticing how we feel.

Once our initial bell rings, I may say, “We are all coming in from other classes, other places, other activities. [Breathe in and out.] I invite you to just notice what thoughts or feelings you may be carrying with you right now. [Breathe in and out.] And as you bring the light of your attention to them, just see if you can breathe in with a sense of ease and refreshment and breathe out with a sense of release and relief.” [Breathe in and out.] End. These instructions are meant to help students ease into the practice. When we end class, I may say, “Notice any thoughts, feelings or ideas that are still with you. We see them... [Breathe in and out.] As we take these seconds to breathe together, allow yourself to feel the fullness of the room and the support of this community that we’ve created. [Breathe in and out.] And as we prepare to leave for the day, maybe we can just send out whatever positive energy we can to one another so we can take that with us today.” [Breathe in and out.] End.

I have found that this simple ritual allows us to intentionally come together in this collective project called education. It also gives us a chance to collectively catch our breath. Students have been overwhelmingly supportive of the practice. One student told me it was the only time in her day when she was able to sit still and

just be. Another student told me they had mentioned our intentional transitions to another professor and encouraged them to include it. “It only takes 45 seconds,” she said, “but it goes a long way.” Yet a third student told me that he specifically enjoys the sound of the water during our transition because he feels his anxieties loosen up and “flow like the water.”

I also teach my students the practice of bearing witness. According to Jules Shuzen Harris, “To bear witness is to embrace both the joy and the suffering we encounter. Rather than simply observing the situation, we become the situation.”<sup>8</sup> There are three steps to this practice: 1) Identify the need or the issue; 2) Hold space to be there for your feelings and to be there for others; 3) Serve the situation (do what we can do).

Students are usually able to identify the need or issue with ease. We study American politics in the context of the American dilemma - the persistent contrast between American governmental principles and practices. We use Barbara D. McClain and Jessica D. Johnson Carew’s work, which offers the framework of America’s dilemmas as a lens for studying racial and ethnic minorities in American politics.<sup>9</sup> This theoretical orientation allows us to establish a foundational understanding that, while our principles include fairness, justice and equality, many American practices are steeped in systemic White supremacist oppression. This often creates tension within students as they recognize that many political officials have espoused lofty American values while simultaneously creating or exacerbating social injustices. However, there is liberatory potential in identifying the needs or issues that arise from these injustices. Most of my students are passionate about speaking truth to power and they are eager to acknowledge the systemic forms of domination that plague American society.

Step two proves much more difficult. We talk about what it means to hold space on day one while we co-create our community agreements. I have found that this helps us create an infrastructure that we can build on throughout the semester. But even with good intentions, step two can be difficult because it requires us to be vulnerable. When we create our community agreements, we discuss what it means and what it might look like

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<sup>8</sup> Harris, J. S. (2020, February 2). How to Practice Bearing Witness. *Lion’s Roar*.

<sup>9</sup> McClain, Paula D., and Jessica D. Johnson Carew. *Can We All Get Along? Racial and Ethnic Minorities in American Politics*. New York, NY: Westview Press, 2018.



for us to hold space. Students have identified three important points that help us hold space for one another. 1) Holding space often requires silence - there may be nothing we can say, but our silence can allow us to be with our feelings and those of others. 2) When we do engage in discussion, we may not be able to come up with the correct “academic language” to express how we feel. We must be free to communicate in the ways that make us comfortable. 3) After discussing a difficult issue, we will collectively check in to determine whether we’re comfortable with moving on.

Step three is the space for action. Serving the situation requires that we acknowledge that the socio-political problems that we study impact real people. Our humanity often leads us to feel pain in the form of empathy for others - even if we don’t know how to affect change - and that is a good thing. This part of the process often makes students uncomfortable, but that is the point. At the beginning of my courses I ask students to consider what they value and then to identify a political issue that resonates with them. Whatever that issue is, once they acknowledge that it matters to them, they can take steps to learn more about it. Whether they are passionate about the environmental crisis, LGBTQ issues, gender equality, or racism and discrimination, in my classes, students learn that all action is political action. Regardless of the problem, they can resolve to learn more about it and seek different perspectives so they can educate themselves. They can talk to their peers, their families and other community members about the issue. They can find an organization that works on the issue and volunteer with them, they can make political art, etc. Step three is also crucial because it reminds us that there is always something we can do.

As I have deepened my pedagogical practices over the years, I have come to understand that I am grounded in ways of knowing that are not always supported by the academe. The epistemologies that help me to elevate my consciousness are grounded in the practices of my ancestors as well as my own spiritual journey. As a result, they allow me to be responsive to our current socio-political and economic moment while also encouraging visionary action for myself and my students. My goal as a Black feminist critical pedagogue is to co-create educational spaces with my student communities to engage these days of fire with intellectual rigor while being supported by the work of all those who have come before us.

## **On intercorporeal perception (Anita Chari)**

As a South Asian feminist, political theorist, and somatic educator, I tremble in the face of the stacked crises we face in this new era of climate disasters, global fascisms, and daily acts of police violence and anti-Blackness. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the waves of protest and consciousness that have risen against anti-Blackness and police violence in its midst continue to ignite in me a reflection about how the educational spaces I inhabit reproduce racialized and colonial violence, even as they provide us with tools to critique it. I am flooded with awareness that my own lifelong struggle with embodiment, which has also been an intellectual struggle, has always been racialized. In the midst of this brutality, it is a tiny relief that certain things can now be said. I came to somatic work while I was in grad school as I came to the realization that the loss of one's body and disembodiment are often the price of intellectual legibility within academia. I had many experiences that forced me to reckon with my intellectual dissociation and to see it as a recapitulation of many other layers of trauma: the ancestral violence of colonialism, the shock that racism left upon my skin, and the relational betrayals I had experienced in my early history. Dissociation became a portal for me, and the nectar of my creative vision emanated from my reckoning with it.

Weaving together the intellect with the body has led me to the work I do now—stitching together embodied experience with critical theory in academic, carceral, and healing spaces. My passion has been to bring somatic trauma-informed practices into these spaces, working with the relational, contact-based practices of biodynamic craniosacral therapy, sensate practices, sound, and collective movement. These practices have been the way that I've been able to materialize my commitments to the intellectual and spiritual traditions that have shaped me: Black and postcolonial feminisms, Marxist theory, and Buddhist contemplative practices. I weave embodied practices into my practice as a critical theorist and teacher, working with what I call the *intercorporeal field* within the classroom space. The intercorporeal field is a potent space that contains layers of memory and historical experience that we can begin to access when we deepen our relationship with sensation and embodiment. Sensing this field allows us to feel and practice within a space that is in some sense not yet individual, allowing us to have perceptual experiences that go beyond the boundaries of our individualized

physical bodies. These practices require us to attend subtly to the specific locations of our bodies in physical and relational space. As many of us teach, work, and socialize within the confines of virtual space now more than ever before in this pandemic era, attention to the intercorporeal field is especially important for creating generative learning communities. The field becomes a resource to us in our physical and virtual realities as we experiment with the ways that we can access different registers of contact. Even when we can't feel the physical presence of the other on our screens, sensing the field brings another dimension of contact that emerges in our new ways of being together across the vastness of time and space.

In May 2020, as the Black Lives Matter protests emerged, I walked around my Portland neighborhood searching for traces of the uprising. Graffiti on the sidewalk, signs of memorial and support tacked up on a building. I see a picture of George Floyd, and his gentle eyes haunt me as I continue walking. Leaflets litter the streets across the lines of police tape. I prefer these traces to the images. The images are devastating. Images of a Black man lynched in broad daylight. Images of bodies in protest, holding the line against the state and police violence. Images of the former President, a hollow man, mocking death and religion. And then images of us, us, in boxes and screens.

I continue to search for traces, because I struggle as a teacher during this time to touch reality together with my students, even as the layered catastrophes that we face bring a level of hyperreality to our lives. The art historian Barbara Stafford describes the hyperreal as a level of perception that is “intensified, and forced to become more than it was when it existed in the real world.”<sup>10</sup> It describes, at the visual level, images that are both compressed and magnified. By these lights, our pandemic condition would be thoroughly hyperreal, compressed into pixels on phones and screens more completely than ever before. At the same time, reality is intensified by the deep emotional charge and grief of the unfolding condition of planetary destruction, racialized violence, and war that we confront. Stafford notes that the hyperreal image forces itself upon us, bursting into our perception. And we have no choice but to look, even if, as with the head of the medusa, it turns us to stone.

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<sup>10</sup> Horst Bredekamp and Barbara Maria Stafford, One step beyond: Hyperrealism, January 1, 2006, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-5-autumn-2005/one-step-beyond>.

The video of George Floyd's murder is this kind of an image. We freeze in the face of it. But it also necessitates action in protest of its atrocity. This movement from shock to protest, resembles what Audre Lorde described as the process of "the transformation of silence into language and action."<sup>11</sup> It is not just about words, but about sensation, drawn from the recesses of history into the present, into the visible, into collective feeling. The question is how do we move from hyperreality to sensation, and then to action?

As a college teacher, I ask how my students and I can relate to the image of George Floyd, which is at the same time everything beyond an image. I ask myself how we can continue to respond to the vibrations in the streets of the protests ignited during that time of great political intensity? Many of my students were protesting, others remained at home in solidarity. All of us were changed by these moments. It raised questions for me. How can we bear witness to something unfathomable, rather than anesthetize ourselves from the pain of this violence? How can we attune to the possibility in this movement with our vision and awareness, in our personal and public lives? And how can we do so, when more and more often we are having our conversations across virtual space, without the vibrations of voice and contact touching skins? How can we feel past our skins that delimit bodies, maintained as individual, bounded, and separated by the neoliberal state, into the intercorporeal space that is ignited just now? This is the work that excites me in the present: the work of self-undoing in the presence of history, race, sexuality, and capitalism, and the work of creating new capacities for sensing and connecting as we bear witness.

The fact that the passionate protests against anti-Black police violence that have unfolded in recent years were ignited out of an atomization greater than we have known in our lifetimes, imposed by a historically unprecedented quarantine, speaks to the evolution of these new capacities. Thousands of people emerged from their houses almost simultaneously, risking illness and state violence. No doubt this movement was the result of years of patient organizing on the part of Black Lives Matter and other social movements. It also speaks to the possibility of intercorporeal connection that stretches through time and space beyond our walls and computer screens. We witnessed the emergence of collective affect as a direct response to the intensification of oppressive,

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<sup>11</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Reprint edition (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 2007), 40–44.

neoliberal forms of subjection.

I'm interested in facilitating these capacities for intercorporeal connection, where we do not assume the limits of our skin as the limits of our perception or of our interest. For me, the practice of "Sensing the Field" is fundamental for potentiating these capacities. The first part of this practice involves simply sensing the ground and the lower parts of our bodies. Together in a group, we sense our sit bones and our feet in contact with the ground, allowing the nervous system to come into a slower, deeper state of regulation. Grounding is a way of finding the inherent resiliency of our being and of our nervous systems in the face of crises, ruptures, and disaster. Often our tendency as intellectuals is to want to theorize our predicament, to talk about it, to analyze it. These are crucial responses. But grounding is a way of getting underneath our patterned ways of responding, by very simply coming into our contact with the earth. No matter what is happening in the world or in our lives, our sit bones are usually a stable place within the body. As we ground in community, we begin to emerge from the shells of our bodies into a perception of intercorporeal space.

The next step of this practice is to sense the field that surrounds our bodies, and that we share. To say that we share this space, does not mean that we override differences in power, history, and identity by practicing together. On the contrary, we heighten our attention to the specificity of our own experience in social space even as we do so in relation to collective space. We can enter this field initially by sensing our skin, noticing the sensations we feel in this membrane that both connects and delimits our bodies. First perceiving our skin, we move our perception outward, just off the skin and into the field. The intercorporeal field is a subtle, ineffable space of communication. When we enter it, we enter it through sensation and listening, not with concepts or preconceptions of what we might find there. In that inquiry, a deeper attunement emerges. We can inhabit our identities and then, perhaps, undo them. We can feel the other while feeling ourselves. These are capacities that we possess, yet that lay dormant under the spell of neoliberal segmentation. Even while in virtual space, relating from within boxes and screens, the intercorporeal field is palpable.

Sensing into the magnificent chaos in the streets in 2020, I felt these dormant capacities reigniting in the social body. Historical memory lives in the intercorporeal body, and we need to relentlessly pursue these

collective memories in our practices together, even as neoliberalism would try to reduce memory and embodiment to a monadic, individual phenomenon.

### **The practice: Sensing the Field**

Here I share a practice that I use in my pedagogy to cultivate perception of the intercorporeal field. This work is by necessity impressional—it involves paying attention to levels of perception that are often undervalued or underattended to in our quotidian experience. While I would usually guide participants to do this practice with their eyes closed, here I suggest that you alternate between reading the words on the page and attending to your bodily and intercorporeal experience, to accommodate the format of reading. Or you can do the practice a few times while reading, and then once you are more familiar with it, you can do it once more with your eyes mostly closed.

Find a comfortable place to sit where you can easily move between reading words on the page and sensing your body. Make sure you are sitting in a way that is relaxing for your body. Begin to feel the sensations in your body. Notice where sensation is arising in your body and feel its texture. Notice the quality of sensation. Neutral sensation words that may help you attend to sensation include: cool, warm, tingly, fuzzy, fluid, hard, soft, constricted, pulsing. Take a few moments to move with the sensations in your body as they shift and change from one sensation to the next, from one part of your body to another. Keep a slow pace as you practice sensing, even allowing yourself to read these words more slowly. You may wish to close your eyes here for a few moments to deepen into the sensate experience of your body.

Then let your attention slowly move downward in your body, keeping your awareness fluid. Allow your attention to come into your sit bones and pelvis. Feel the contact of your sit bones with the chair beneath you. Notice if one side sit bone feels more grounded than the other, more present in your awareness, silently naming to yourself if it is the left side or the right side. Sense where you feel your weight on that side sit bone, does it feel more to the front of your sit bone or more towards the back? Allow your attention to settle more deeply into where you feel that weight. Notice how the pace and tempo of your body's rhythm may shift as you anchor your attention

into the weight.

Keeping your attention slow and fluid, allow your attention to spread outward to your skin. At first you may sense discrete places on your skin, allow your attention to spread until you feel your skin as a whole. Take a moment to sense this membrane of your body, the boundary between your individual body and the space outside of you. Then allow your attention to move just outside of your skin. Keep your attention open, sense whatever impressions you may notice in the field just outside of your body. Then gently prompt your awareness to find the impulse to complete the practice.

### **Liberating Zoom (Becky Thompson)**

When Anita, Zahra and I first began meeting together on zoom two years ago, we thought our purpose was to write an article about how we see contemplative practices as key to our teaching. What drew us together was our realization that multiracial feminism--a liberatory movement that centers the work of women of color as activists, theorists and artists who are committed to undoing systems of oppression--was central to our work. And that yoga, meditation, and free writing are some of the practices that keep us alive and are key to our teaching. At the beginning of our meetings on zoom, we didn't know that we would practice contemplative rituals together and that our meetings would become a healing space for us, a journey and joy that moved beyond finishing a collaborative article.

I start there because the twin troubles of Covid and state sanctioned black violence have taught me like never before how loose we need to stay “in the knees” (flexible, willing to pivot in new directions) to respond during crises. Part of what I learned through our meeting together is that while all three of us are quick to make healing space for other people (in prisons, in refugee camps, for our students, for vulnerable faculty, for children), a characteristic that I think is common among feminist faculty, we also need spaces for reflection and healing so we can keep doing that work. For example, when Anita led us in a grounding ritual, I became aware that my mind was even busier than I had thought, a humbling realization, and that busy-ness if left unchecked would make it hard to really listen to Zahra and Anita. While it is important to listen to everyone, that quality of

mind is especially important for white women to nurture in relationships with women of color who historically and currently are talked over, talked about, and talked through—both within and outside of the academy. Grounding exercises allow me to find the kind of spaciousness I needed to listen deeply.

Of course this lesson can reverberate in the classroom too. Many students come to class with busy minds, and often haven't had space to take a breath, to lay their burdens down for a while. When students came to class having to reckon with the fact that the country where they are living is one founded on systems that continue support the gunning down of Black people in the streets; when they came to class feeling the great inequities in who was getting care, and not during the pandemic; they came needing a chance to reflect, to settle down, to start again. The twin pandemics taught me that I can't start with grounding rituals just sometimes.

The minute I think to myself, "Oh, just skip that today, because there is so much curriculum to cover", then, I am in trouble. A grounding exercise introduces a state of being we can share that goes beyond words. A belonging that is not dependent upon performing; one that highlights just being together. This ritual reminds me of a lesson passed on to me by the Mohican elder, Don Coyhis who talked about how when we come into this world we zip on our earth suits. And when we die, we unzip them (the suits being a metaphor for our racial, gender, class, national identity). The grounding ritual can feel like a way to unzip while we are still alive, to recognize that systems of oppression are real and vicious and deadly. They are also human created, i.e. neither inevitable nor universal. As Zahra said after one of the grounding exercises we did together, "I have different aspects of my identities but I don't hold them too tightly. We make it clear who we are but we don't stay there."

Another lesson that has been particularly relevant during this time has been seeing virtual spaces as locations for expanding community. It is ironic because while the early months of Covid closed down so many communities, as students had to drag their coffee mugs from their dorm rooms back to childhood homes, as people could not meet collectively in a safe way, the essence of community seemed to hang on a very thin branch in a cold wind. But as classes I taught met on zoom and as we tried to practice meditation and yoga through little tiny boxes, new versions of community started to arise. As students tried to find space in their apartments and houses to take a zoom class, I began to notice relatives, friends, and cats behind them, trying



not to disturb them as they walked by. Along the way, it occurred to me that community could expand if those slinking around were invited to be part of the class meeting. Such an invitation counters notions of individualism and meritocracy that have often excluded the very people who have made that education possible. Many students I work with are the first generation in their families to go to college/university. Their relatives are the ones working two jobs, taking out a second mortgage, or selling blood, to be sure that their children can attend college. Yet these relatives were the ones trying not to get noticed during zoom sessions. As students faced isolation and had few people to talk about their studies, inviting relatives, roommates and friends into zoom sessions opened up community and this expansion allowed us to contemplate what community means, how boundaries are established, and how learning becomes segregated by generation. Once I realized that I could send zoom links to anyone, that I could cut and paste links and make them available to people who were not officially enrolled in the classes, who could come and participate widened internationally. Zoom culture makes it possible to expand the university boundaries, which expands who we are meditating, free writing, and practicing yoga with.

Of course, it is students who should decide who is invited to the learning table. But with zoom culture, we get a chance to see why Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Leota Lone Dog, Cherríe Moraga and others called the first publishing press by and for women of color “Kitchen Table Woman of Color Press.” What if we understand learning as intergenerational? When I had the chance to teach yoga in China and Thailand, it was simply assumed that mothers brought their children to class, that stretching and breathing together was communal, that yoga is an earth-based practice. Luckily in my teaching yoga at the Dorchester YMCA in Boston I have been able to honor this approach. But still, that is the exception, not the norm in the US. What if we see teaching as an earth-based practice, so that opening each class begins with people sharing what Native land they are on, where they are sitting, who is with them, and what they want to focus on today. What if those introductions also made space to talk about who is sick, who is still in jail, who is working in and outside of the home, and who the essential workers are in their lives that made going to school possible for them?

During this time especially I find myself yearning for collaborative ways of learning and loving. Such a

hope requires us to think about who we invite to the table...not only those who are living but those who we carry inside of us. One characteristic that we know about trauma is that it taps into historical memory. We are witnessing examples of historical memory that students and faculty carry into the classroom and into zoom learning. When people across class and culture were panicked about running out of toilet paper we knew something deep was being tapped—those early moments in our lives when we don't yet know how to take care of ourselves, when we are still learning how to listen to our body's most basic needs. When we witnessed people panic about whether they would be able to get enough steak, enough orange juice, you couldn't help but wonder how historical memory was being tapped—of Native people being forced off the land that sustained them, of white people coming across the plains not sure if they would make it over mountain passes, of people who starved after crops were burned during the Civil War. We witnessed historical memory as white police continued to brutalize Black men and women.<sup>12</sup> Across three centuries, whites have been the killers and gawkers—our gaze stuck on shame and guilt for which we have not yet reckoned. The protest signs now are right—white silence is white violence. When Navajo doctors and activists speak up that their nation is suffering like no other people—the death rate having exceeded that of New York City—historical memory reverberates: children stolen from their homelands by white people, ripped from their elders; people with Covid alone in hospitals where few can call them grandma in Navajo.<sup>13</sup> The isolation of boarding schools and hospitals during Covid runs deeply counter to Navajo commitments to community. As teachers we have a chance to invite in historical memory, to anticipate and then honor its presence in the classroom.

This historical moment gives us a chance to invite into the classroom ancestral knowledge, traces of memory that shape how we act in times of crisis. Yoga, meditation, free writing, and mindfulness all make space for us to not only invite our own bodies into the conversation (what we feel, sense, hear, yearn for) but also that electrical field (typically called the mind) that extends way beyond the body that allows us to think

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<sup>12</sup> I think, too of historical memory tapped during Hurricane Katrina—scenes of people drowning in the water conjuring up the Middle Passage; people crowded in the Superdome that mirrored people trapped on slave ships. Diane Harriford and Becky Thompson. *When the Center is On Fire: Passionate Social Theory for Our Times* (University of Texas Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/20/839138181/indian-health-service-doctor-details-heavy-covid-19-impact-on-navajo-nation>

and feel in expansive ways. What if, as we teach with Zoom, we understand the space between ourselves and those we talk to on the screen as sacred? What kind of energetic and sensation work could be done with this understanding?

A third lesson I have learned during the twin pandemics is that participating in a Black Lives Matter demonstration with students, lovers, children, and puppies, can, itself, be a contemplative practice. An act of expansive witnessing. When thousands of us poured into the streets in June 2020 after George Floyd was murdered, seeing each other masked but breathing and reaching and chanting together, there was an exhilaration made possible by collective protest that we took back to our zoom meetings. This is part of what Anita is teaching us when she says that even with zoom, there is an intercorporeal energy field that can be named, experienced and worked with. She teaches us that this field carries historical memory and goes beyond the boundaries of the physical body. This energy field may be why the Opaskwayak Cree researcher Shawn Wilson recently shared that several Native elders had a similar dream where the earth was saying she wants to be brought to the Internet.<sup>14</sup> The earth wants to be seen and felt, as part of the Internet. Those of us who were able to attend demonstrations to stop police brutality and to abolish the punishment industry brought our energy back to zoom boxes. That energy is experienced and shared. This reality connects with how Zahra is speaking about power as a generative resource. She has a quote below her email signature from Winona LaDuke, “Power is not brute force and money, power is in your spirit. Power is in your soul. It is what your ancestors, your old people gave you. Power is in the earth. It is in your relationship to the earth.” When George Floyd said, “mama, I am through” the earth heard his cries. Anyone listening heard him. The students I work with heard him and they needed to talk about it, write about it, demonstrate about it. Grounding rituals, free writing and yoga (even with zoom) helped us stay connected as a community as we also invited people into the community that had been left out of the zoom box. As a white, antiracist queer woman and mother of three chosen children, as a yogi and a poet, I struggle to keep my body and mind calm when what I so often feel is sadness and rage. Community rituals of belonging help me move beyond stuck feelings.

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<sup>14</sup> Shawn Wilson, “Can We Digitize Ceremony,” Ongomiizwin Research Indigenous Health Research Symposium, February 25, 2021. <https://youtu.be/hiO-pxiWFMQ>

## **The Practice: Willows, Oaks and Cypress Trees**

While each of us has created our own grounding rituals, our approaches all share an attempt to find connection with the earth, quiet a racing mind, and restore a sense of wellbeing and connectedness to other beings. The guiding words I use go something like this: gather in a circle and then stand in easy attention with your feet shoulder width apart or where it is comfortable. Shut your eyes gently if that is available to you, or let your gaze soften toward the ground. Notice how your weight is distributed on the bottom of your feet and that if you shift around a bit, you might be able to find shared weight on both feet. Notice the feel of your feet in your shoes (or socks or barefoot) and see if you can relax your toes and the arches of your feet. Imagine there are four wheels at the bottom of your feet, two on the balls of feet and two on your heels. Notice if one set of wheels is spinning in the air and see if you can breathe your way into feeling all eight wheels connected to the earth. As you find balance, imagine that you have roots growing into the earth from the bottom of your feet and that the roots go deep (and maybe connect with other roots in the ground). What kind of roots do you have? From a willow tree or an oak tree or a cypress tree? Become aware of how, as your roots grow into the ground, your balance is centered on your feet and extends through your body. Know that this grounding ritual is available to you any time—when standing in line, when you get out of bed in the morning, when you are feeling lost in a relationship or in your day. Note that this grounding ritual can be done while sitting or lying down. The roots are always there to remind you that you are connected to the earth.

## **Conclusion**

Many years ago now, Bernice Johnson Reagon wrote an article on Black women and organizing where she explained that culture creates its own methodology, that embedded within the communities we are part of are the rituals we need to sustain ourselves.<sup>15</sup> Zahra, Anita and I created a makeshift, evolving community that helped sustain us. We offer these practices as a way of honoring and sustaining ourselves and the communities we hope

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<sup>15</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, "My Black Mothers and Sisters or on Beginning a Cultural Autobiography." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8 no. 1 (Sept. 1982), 81-96.

to nurture. As Zahra shared after Anita led us in a grounding ritual, “We need to be brave enough to envision what we want to see...to be a holistic human who hopes for the best.”

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**Anita Chari** is a somatic educator, political theorist and co-founder of *Embodying Your Curriculum*, a program to introduce trauma-informed pedagogies to the higher education classroom. Based in Portland, Oregon, Chari is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Oregon, where she serves as a faculty member for the Inside-Out Prison Education Program. Her work as a somatic practitioner draws from her training in Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy, Embodiment Process work and Continuum movement. Her scholarly writing focuses on the significance of aesthetics, artistic practices, and embodiment for critical theory and practice. Her first monograph, *A Political Economy of the Senses*, was published in 2015 by Columbia University Press, and she is currently working on a book on the conceptual art collective, Claire Fontaine.

**Becky Thompson** is a poet, scholar, human rights activist, and yoga teacher. Her recent books include *To Speak in Salt* (poetry), *Making Mirrors: Righting/Writing by and for Refugees* (co-edited with Jehan Bseiso), *Teaching with Tenderness*, *Survivors on the Yoga Mat*, and *Zero is the Whole I Fall into at Night* (poetry). Becky's writing and activism have been recognized with honors from the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Association for University Women, the Ex Ophidia Poetry Prize, the Creative Justice Chapbook Poetry Prize, and the Gustavus Myers Award for Outstanding

Books on Human Rights. She has held appointments at China Women's University, Princeton, Duke, the University of Colorado, Wesleyan University and Simmons University in the US. She has been a prison abolitionist since before she knew the word.