



Inhabitanace
Tacie Jones

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While the concepts and imagery presented here are not autobiographical, there is no way to fully detach lived experience from the process of making and theorizing this work. And although its impetus is a lifelong journey of healing, the focus here is transforming the inhabitation of trauma into an awareness of embodied presence. From a space of reflexivity, *Inhabitation* asks you to come back to your body through heart-minded creative action. This practice-based interdisciplinary methodology integrates the emancipatory powers of women and gender studies, consciousness studies and art. Through this hybrid approach, *Inhabitation* creates space for reconciling an imposed fracture between the sensory and cognitive aspects of our lives to rewrite the restrictive narrative that trauma can hold over both.

Acknowledgements

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Part I: Learning Power

A Fractured Consciousness

In many ways, consciousness is a complex enigma. This mysterious capacity for responsive awareness is fundamental to how we orient within the space we inhabit (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 3). But our consciousness also shapes how we embody and express our place in the world. Based on the connection of our awareness to space and time, it would seem that consciousness is largely formed through a reciprocal exchange between our internal and external experiences.

Could an amalgam of what each of us think, feel and experience be tied to a flux of interconnected data that continuously surrounds us (Hayles 298-300)? If this is true, because culture formation in the United States historically wields binary disproportions to build and maintain power the impact of these pairings likely informs both our individual and collective consciousness.

A binary requires two halves. As seemingly simple relationships, binaries could be the creative basis for all sorts of new combinations. But they become problematic when one part of the partnership steps away from collaboration with its colleague to assume *power over* it (Pansardi 74). This severance of equality fractures our ability to be with the spaces that exist between binaries, let alone imagine new worlds beyond them.

The Cartesian dualism of mind over body is one place to start examining how opposing binaries map onto many socio-political power dynamics in the West. From a disposal of the somatic as a primary source of experience (Gallop 1), other binary fractures easily emerge. Culture holds power *over* nature, masculine *over* feminine, human *over* non-human, Individual *over* community, and so on. The United States embodies a structural system that exemplifies this fractured use of power.

Central to the work of *Inhabitanace*, a complex link between the gender binary and consciousness is one clue to better understanding the construct of power in the United States. At its core, gender is a *power over* relationship that revolves around strength above weakness. One way this is historically expressed is through masculine domination over feminine, where the former gets a sense of self, worth and power from the latter's lack thereof (MacKennon 22). While essentializing gender in this way is certainly problematic, these foundational tendrils are rhizomatically observable in the United States even into the twenty-first century. We don't have to look far to see this relational imbalance dispersed through culture, politics and mass media, where it makes its way into public consciousness .

Many of us are inhabited by traumas that result from the polarity of the gender binary. Often when bodies undergo intimate forms of attack, dissociation can emerge. This fracture between thinking and feeling easily takes us out of our bodies because we've learned that the somatic space holds less power than cognition. But when we dissociate from our bodies, we are more prone to suffering (Van der Kolk 181) and more likely to disengage from the flux of consciousness that holds everything together in curiosity and love.

Perhaps when we begin the work of reconciling our mind and body fracture, we also begin to reclaim our individual power. If the flux is an invisible web connecting everything that surrounds us, our unique bodily experience also constantly feeds the collective. The impact of our consciousness then pertains to both our own experience and actions and the larger whole (Di 1376). Perhaps the sensory space of the natural world holds lessons about this type of interconnection that humans can't readily access due to the fractured consciousness we are tasked to navigate. With these postulations, much of the imagery in this book signifies human bodies in league with the expansive natural world.

*Could it be that reuniting with
our material earthly connections
can bring us back to the sensory
and allow us to begin
the transformational work of being
in our bodies,
in embodied presence?*



Gender Genealogy

What
might an understanding
of a
fract-
ured
consciousness
tell us about
how we learn
and
embody **gender**?

Simone de Beauvoir was among the first to unpack the gender binary phenomenon as a consequence of the mind and body breakup. She tells us the masculine subject lives from a space of the mind, and has the luxury to transcend bodily realms (Beauvoir 17). With this power, he is afforded the mental capacity of a universal search for what lies beyond. Conversely, the feminine is a creature of internal immanence (17), which she experiences largely through the objecthood of her body.

Expanding from de Beauvoir's essentialist subject/object argument to interpret the differences between *woman* and *man*, the trouble of gender is a fracture that perhaps requires a knowledge of genealogy to fathom. The allocation of gender as we commonly experience it in the United States, is difficult to trace to a single site of entry. Rather a genealogical understanding reminds us that the gender binary is embodied through "practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (Butler ix).



Iris Madion Young
applies de Beauvoir's immanence of
woman theory to the somatic
phenomenological work of
Merlau-Ponty.

She tells us the lived
experience of the female gender in
patriarchal societies is experienced
primarily through an
I cannot
body as opposed to the
I can,
mind-centered, body of the
dominant male
(Young 36).

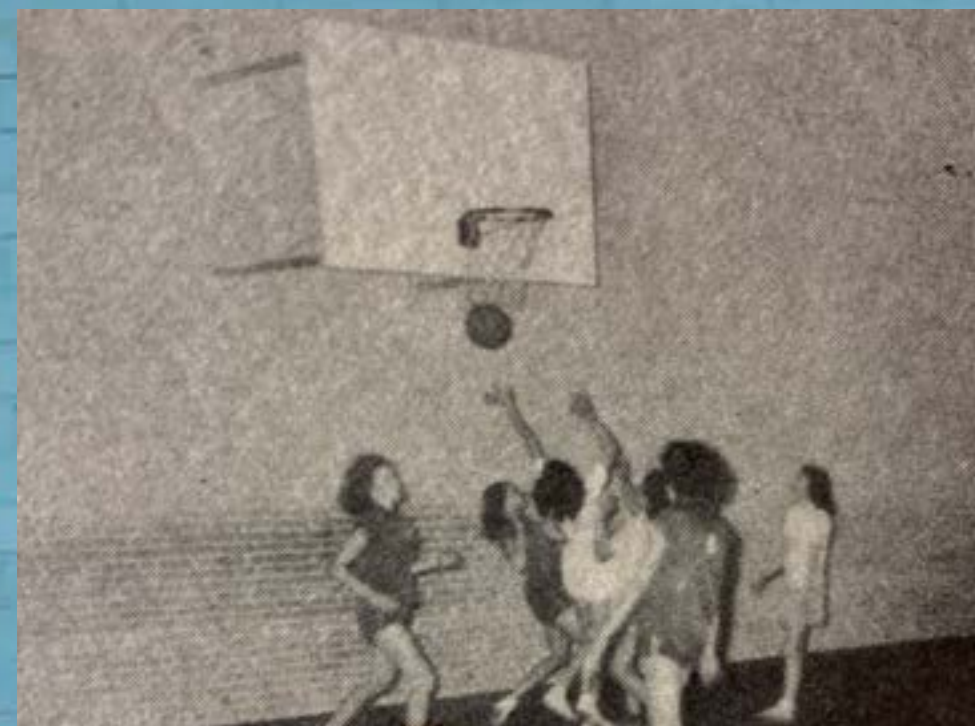
*But, if we consider the
flux of consciousness,
and the
genealogy of gender,
the binary of
an immanent body and a
transcendent mind
might simply be two
permeable points
within
a constellation of
possible experience.*

*How much of this I cannot inhibited bodily
behavior relates to the mind-body
fracture of trauma?*



Where Beauvoir thinks *woman* should reclaim her power by reaching the heights of *Man's* transcendence (Beauvoir 754), ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo reminds us that suggesting the oppressed follow the same path as the oppressor only elevates his subjecthood by endorsing his process (Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground* 4).

Instead of stretching for a hierarchical top, perhaps we might consider new paths to a transformed gender consciousness that don't follow the breadcrumbs of old power narratives, or inadvertently perpetuate trauma?



One way the genealogy of static hierarchical gendering keeps afloat is through the demand for prescribed performative identities. This prescription is both “a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler 140) . If we consider the idea that a prisoner perhaps becomes a physical representation of the law’s power (135), gender as a binary fracture is similarly imprinted on bodies, but also deeply felt and embodied through lessons that give rise to performatives that maintain patriarchal power.

**If our bodies
perform
their socio-cultural
roles
so innately,
is this consciousness
a form
of
collective
embodied
memory?
And if it is,
how did we
get here?**

School Memory

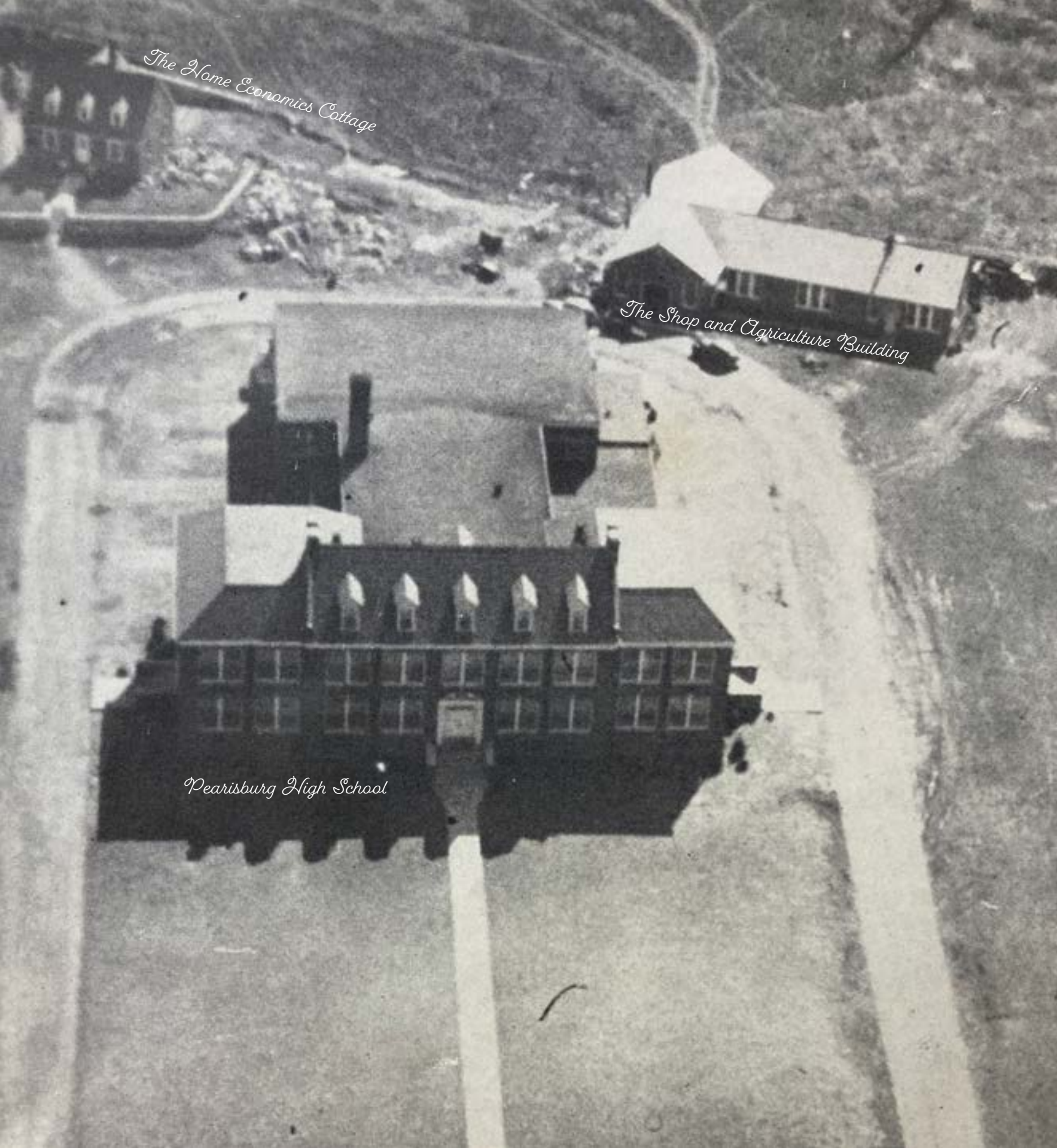
We learn our place in the world early on through a series of ranging inputs. If Butler is right, and gender is a genealogy made up of deeply woven fabrications (Butler 185), then the rote memorization of this embodiment is likely internalized through the aid of standardized education. Schools are a primary means for disseminating a culture to its masses (Gatto). The expectation of gender performativity as an attribute of identity is certainly administered during the formative school age years. With the onset of compulsory schooling in the the late nineteenth century, children were openly trained to perform their gender, girls expected to tend and prepare a proper home, and boys to provide for their families.

In the rural setting of Southwest Virginia, a region with deep Appalachian roots, there has long been a sense of do-it-yourself resilience. In the late 1930s, Giles County almost lost a \$100,000 WPA grant to build the Pearisburg High School.

When the funds weren't released in time to meet the initial construction deadline, a resourceful Superintendent hired a bulldozer on his own to ensure ground was broken (Pearisburg High School Reunion Committee). The school opened in 1939. By 1948 it was the largest in the county with fifteen classrooms, nine teachers, indoor toilets, and central heat. Resources included a gymnasium, a cafeteria, auditorium, library, science lab, athletic field, a home economics cottage, and an agriculture and shop building.

According to a school board survey report that year, the school earned a score card of "good" only because of lacking janitorial services, but the home economics cottage was "modern and well and equipped" and the shop was noted as "adequate" (Giles County Schools: A Survey Report).

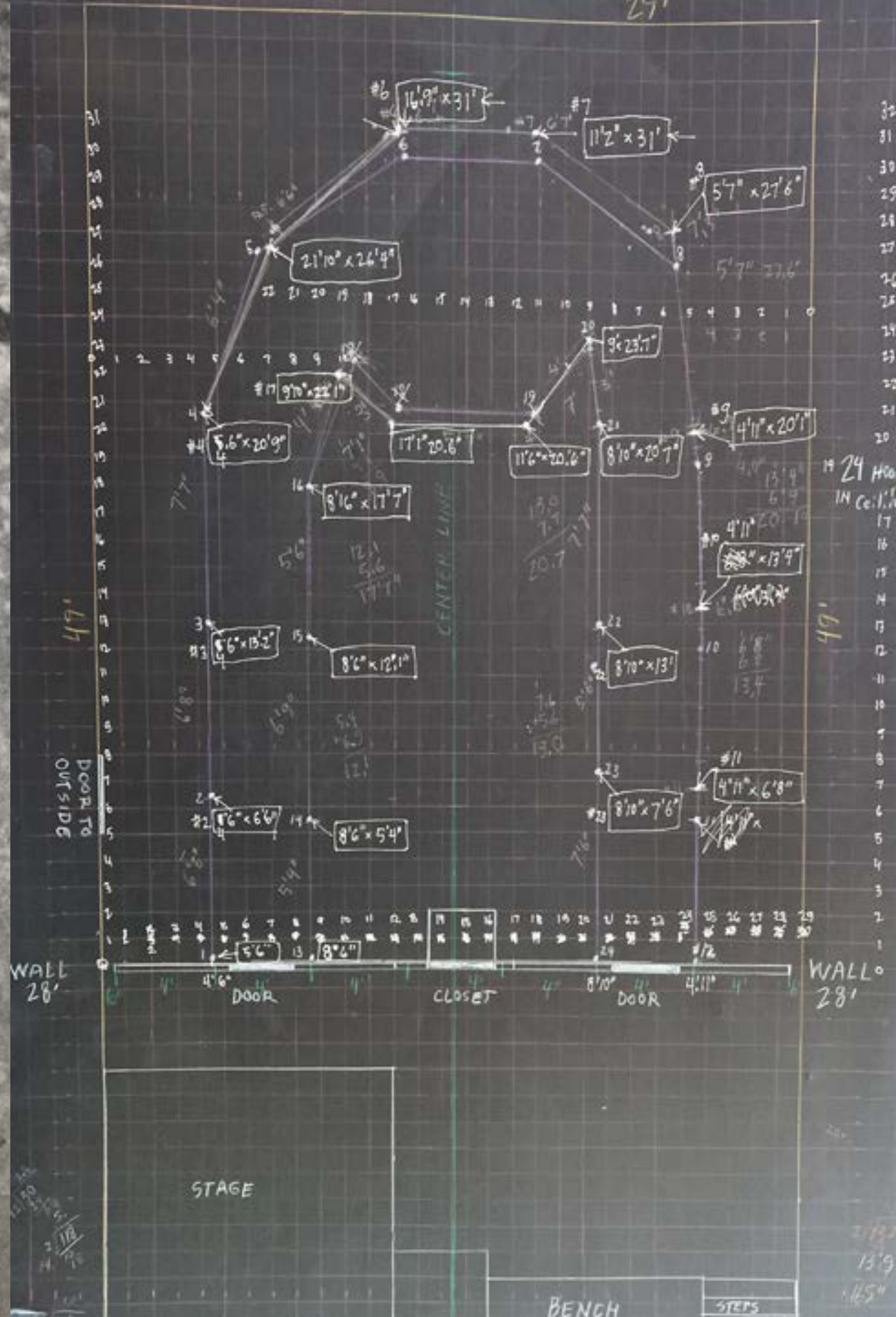




The Home Economics Cottage

The Shop and Agriculture Building

Pearisburg High School



27

19 24 HOO
14 Ceil. 11'

49'

WALL 28'

13'9"
14'5"

STAGE

BENCH

STEPS


DOOR TO OUTSIDE

DOOR

CLOSET

DOOR

WALL 28'

A black and white photograph showing a large, out-of-focus crowd of people. In the center, a person is holding a large, dark, textured object, possibly a piece of fabric or a large bag. The background is filled with many other people, some appearing to be in uniform or organized groups. The overall scene suggests a public gathering or event.

*“The Future
Farmers of America
is a club organized
by the boys
taking agriculture
to promote interest in
agricultural
methods and problems
to find
better methods of
farming”
(Pearisburg High
School, 1954).*

*"The
Future
Homemakers of
America
is open to all students
of Home Economics.
The members learn
all the proper ways of
home-making
and have
many
varied activities"
(Pearisburg High
School, 1954).*



The building that was once Pearisburg High School is situated in a largely white, working-class community of southwest Virginia. Class and power have a long history of exchange in Appalachia. In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault explores Jeremy Bentham's architectural prison design. The panopticon maintains optimum control over inmates through constant observation and inspection (Foucault 188). This strict division of space and its central form of surveillance soon spread to other cultural institutions that enforce specific, socially accepted behaviors. Schools are a space historically used for "controlling or correcting the operations of the body" (138) through distinct binary separation. Considering this power, perhaps gender is not only taught, but also in some ways enforced in schools.

If gender is a tool for power, one way of maintaining its separation could be the gendered spaces of the old shop classroom adjacent to the home economics cottage. Paulo Freire tells us that power over someone or thing imposes a prescription to transform the consciousness of the oppressed (Freire 20-21) into one of acquiescence. By spreading a consciousness that genders, the old school in Pearisburg is haunted by the memory of this prescription.

The gendering of education in the United States is still alive in the walls of the old high school and the bodies inhabited by its lessons.

As a site of memory, or *les lieux de mémoire*, where memory "crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 7) within a space or environment, schools can't help but contain the narratives of binary consciousness. As a physical space of embodiment, these places of memory contain ghosts (Till 9) of fractured gender, race and class, all for the purpose of power. The embodied memory of school as a gendering space where we learn power through prescription is part of the flux of our individual, and ultimately collective, consciousness. But, if memory is a living phenomenon "tying us to the eternal present" (Nora 8), how does the suspended memory of schools, their economic lineages of disparity, and their gendering function manifest in society? And how do we begin to transform this fractured embodiment into something more present and whole?





Part II: An Agonizing Inhabitation

Sexual Trauma in the United States

Binary oppositions are partially why trauma and the dualism of Modernity exist within a similar discourse of power (Cvetkovich 17). If schools help to maintain a fractured, gendered consciousness for the sake of power, sexual trauma is one tragic outcome of this genealogy. While the power dynamic between binarized masculine/feminine is likely a catalyst for many instances of intimate violence, sexual trauma is also connected to a larger infrastructure. Sexual trauma is both an intimate form of everyday lived experience, and an accepted cultural phenomenon. The guilt and shame associated with this psychic form of trauma is enmeshed in a culture that historically pathologized victims as willing participants in their traumatization (Brown 127) and has subsequently normalized violence.



As lived experience, sexual trauma can be a complex transgenerational problem for survivors and their offspring (Youssef et al. 253). This means our parent's symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder become inherited through both "psychological and biological factors" (Yahyavi et al. 89). This is both genetic and learned, nature and nurture. If we partially come into the performatives of binary gender through the memory of school, the inhabitation of its worst-case aftermath might come about by a generational combination of learned behaviors, repeated cycles of abuse, and epigenetically coded symptoms of trauma (Youssef et al. 252).

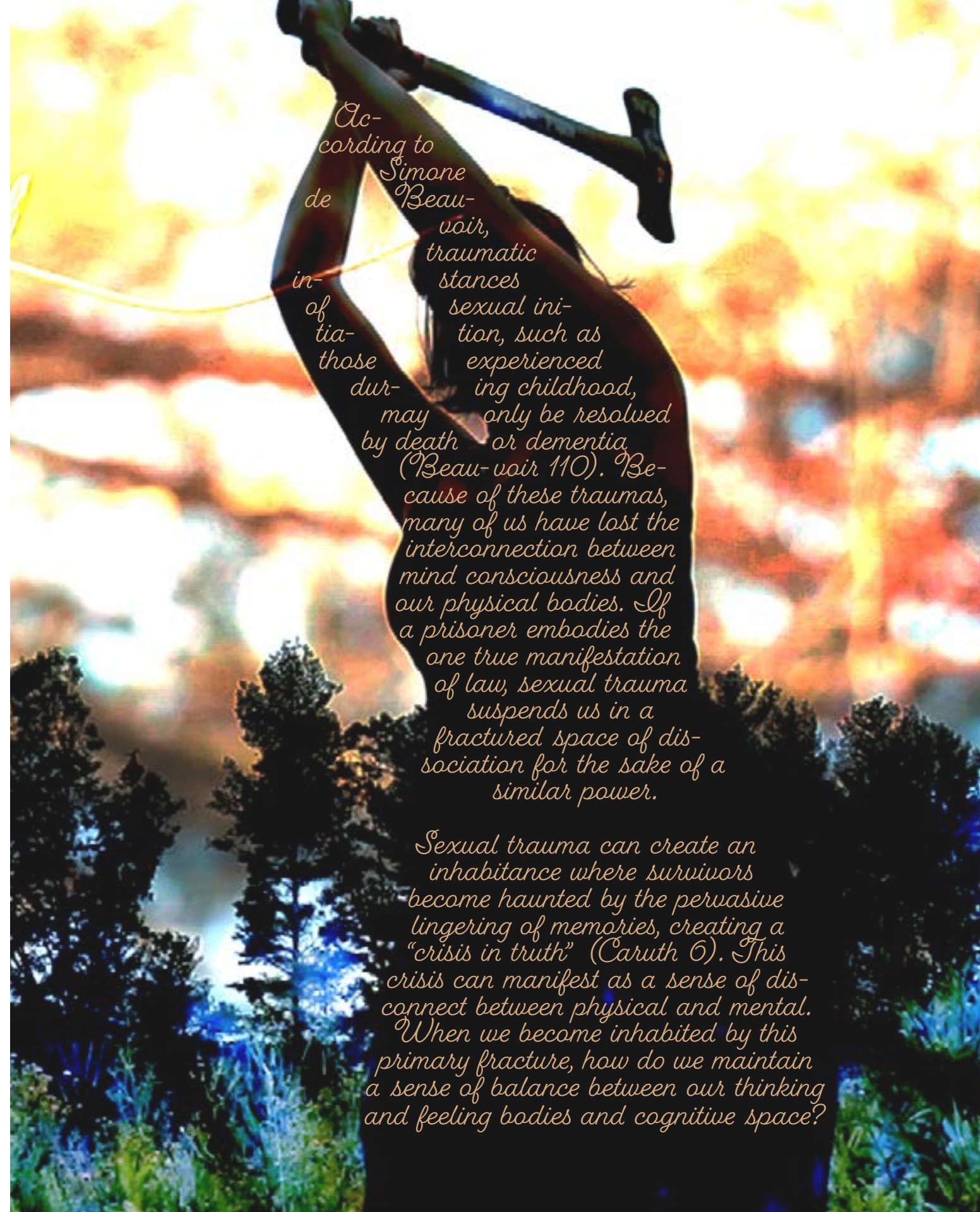
Like the gender binary, sexual trauma is a genealogy, a cultural phenomenon not easily traced to a specific historical moment. The term cultural trauma implies a group's shared experience with a particular event (Alexander 1). Under this definition, the lived experience of sexual trauma, physical abuse and emotional and psychological traumas suffered in intimate settings are often seemingly omitted by much of the discourse of cultural memory.

While collectively shared, the agony of this inhabitation often remains hidden from plain view, yet deeply lived and embodied. The physicality of our memories lingers, no matter how much philosophical emphasis has been placed on the mind (Mortimer-Sandilands 283) and transcending the material world. Because of its complex layered inheritance, combined with a genealogy of gender prescription, the looping cycle of sexual trauma can have devastating effects on one's consciousness to the point of dissociation.



Fractured into Dissociation

One of the many potential outcomes of posttraumatic stress disorder is a severed sense of being, both in our own bodies and from the world outside. Sometimes a dissociated symptom of trauma persists as bodily memory for a lifetime.



According to Simone Beauvoir, traumatic instances of sexual initiation, such as those experienced during childhood, may only be resolved by death or dementia. (Beauvoir 110). Because of these traumas, many of us have lost the interconnection between mind consciousness and our physical bodies. If a prisoner embodies the one true manifestation of law, sexual trauma suspends us in a fractured space of dissociation for the sake of a similar power.

Sexual trauma can create an inhabitation where survivors become haunted by the pervasive lingering of memories, creating a "crisis in truth" (Caruth 6). This crisis can manifest as a sense of disconnect between physical and mental. When we become inhabited by this primary fracture, how do we maintain a sense of balance between our thinking and feeling bodies and cognitive space?

Dissociation
is linked
to affect, which (like gender and
sexual trauma)
is both an
individual and
collective
condition.
Affect is different from emotion.
It is unconscious, non-representational,
pre-subjective (Reeves 107).
It is often
the precursor
to emotional
feelings.
Sara Ahmed
tells us
that affect is
the **sticky substance** that

*“sustains or
preserves the
connection between
ideas, values, and objects”
(Ahmed,
Happy Objects 29).*

Is the
dissociated affect
of
trauma
consciousness
a
missing piece
to the binary
power puzzle?

Are we unwittingly preserving the conditions
of sexual trauma by staying with this affect that
declines the experience of our sensing, feeling
bodies?

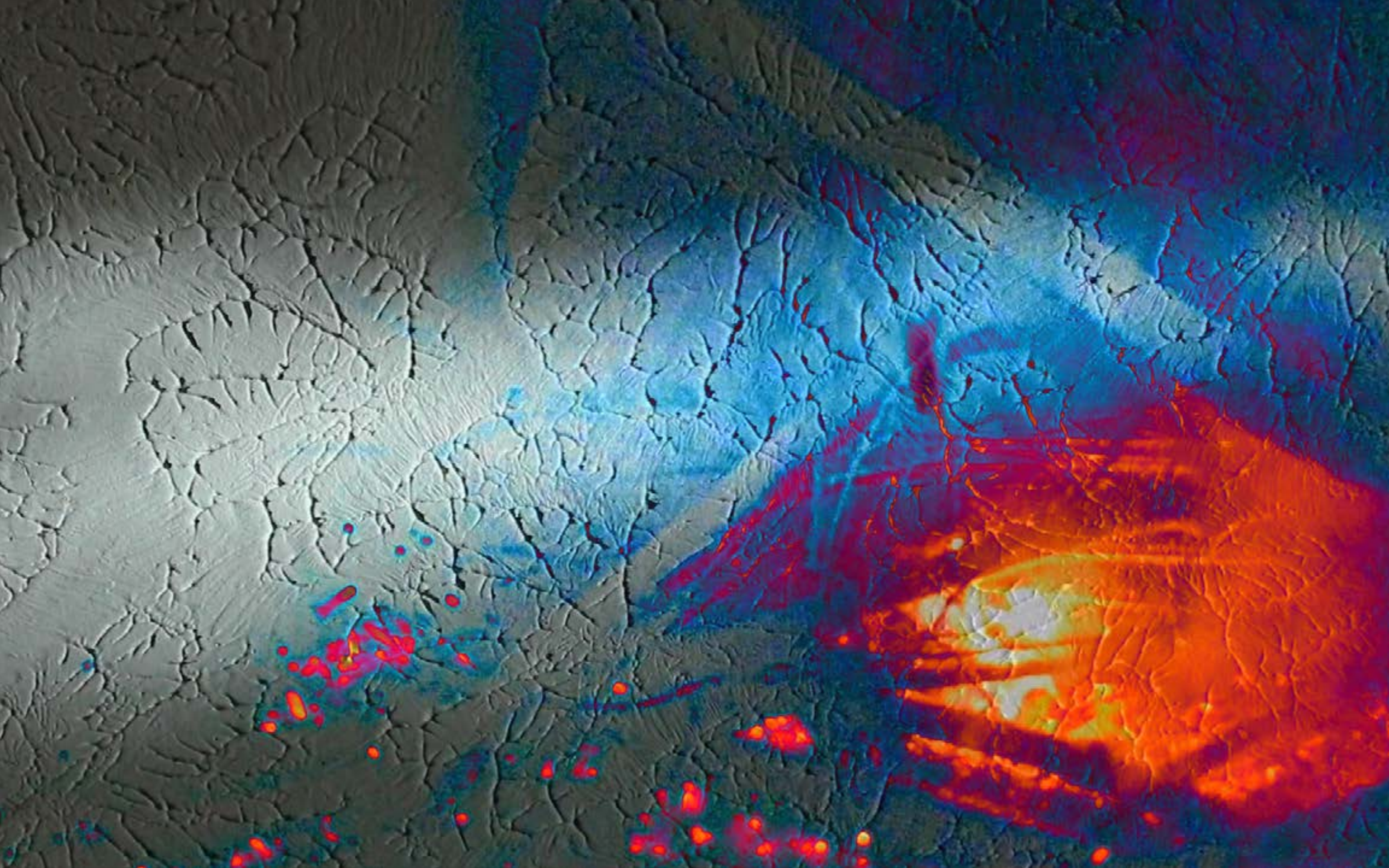
Even if our consciousness is inhabited by trauma dissociation, it cannot escape the law of impermanence. It is hard to argue against the concept that all things change. Matter shifts and moves continuously within and around us. Moments come, and then depart. There is really only one present moment at any given point in our lives (Tolle 48). These are the lessons of the natural world that the Enlightenment-driven ethos of binarized thinking refuses. Remembering our bodies, witnessing our process, and creating sites of memory that inhabit interconnection and the impermanence of our experiences could be tactics to bring us back into our bodies in embodied presence. *Inhabitanace* transforms a lineage of being inhabited by one's traumas, to a foundational space of physiological safety through interconnectivity (Schwarz et al. 2) with what actually is.

Being with what is might be
where our true power lies.

To transcend, or move beyond a set of limitations, seems like an appropriate goal for the binaries that perpetuate sexual trauma. Many of us have tried to move beyond trauma. Like de Beauvoir and her predecessors, we often think transcendence will offer a way out and beyond. We might try to talk through our past using therapies that rely heavily on cognition. We might try yoga, meditation, and seek to transcend the bodily structure that houses our suffering. But without first reconciling our physical experiences, these attempts are futile.

Spiritual Bypassing

If trauma is somatically stored and possibly even handed down through generations (Lee et al. 250) transformation likely cannot start from the mental space of transcendence. Shooting off into the astral plane without first tending to the dissociated space between minds and bodies is what's called spiritual bypassing (Masters 29), and this is problematic for those seeking to heal from bodily traumas. Because the inhabitation of trauma can haunt us on a physiological level, an attempt to transcend without first transforming that material embodiment at best might move us into further dissociation, and at worst may lead to continued cycles of traumatization. To avoid this pattern, it could be more helpful to work our way from the bottom up, from the immanent and sensory earthly bodies we all navigate the world through, to the transcendent mind capacity within each of us.



Part III: Transformations

Heart-minded Creative Action

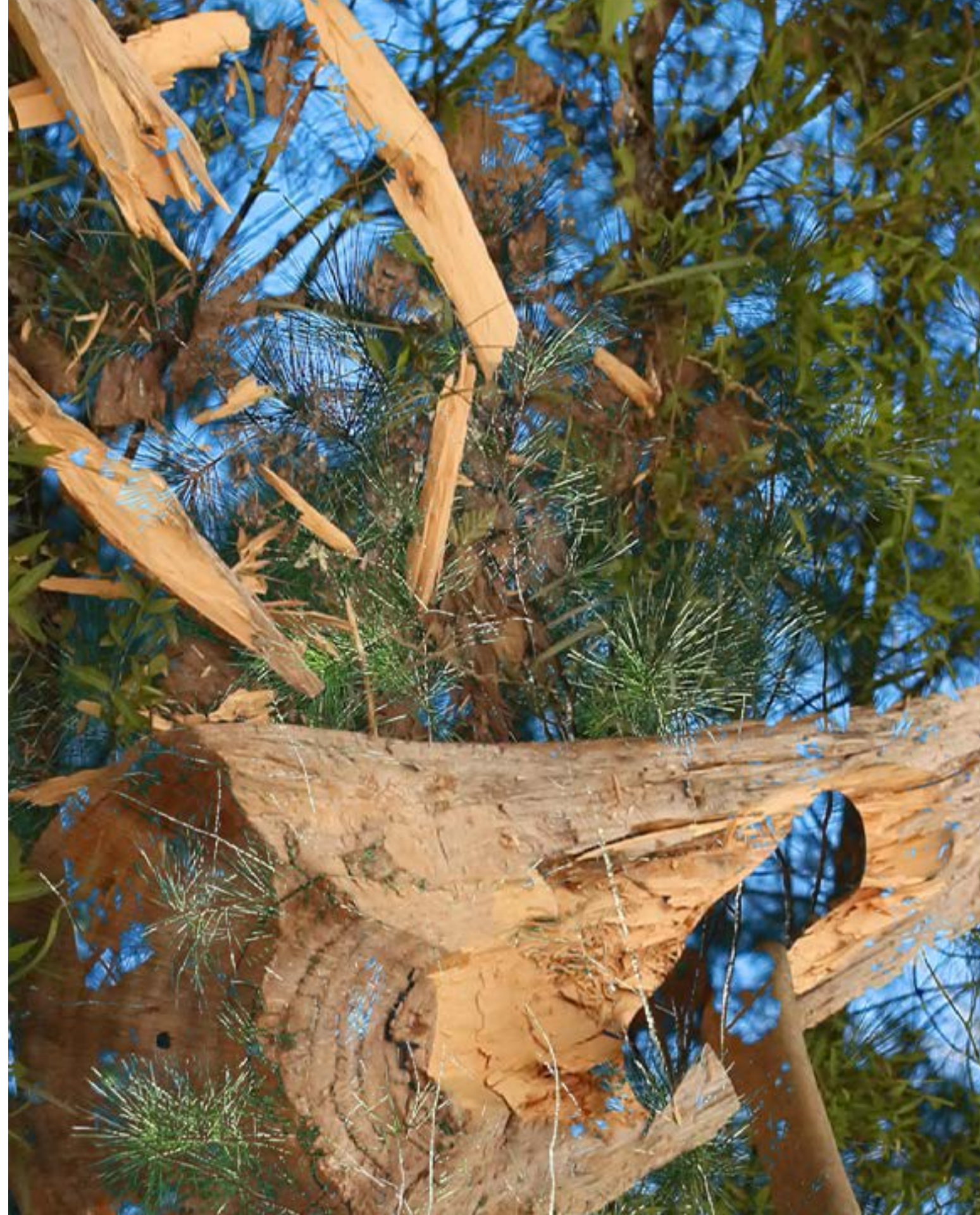
Hearth-minded creative action is a new form of research creation that emphasizes both literal and metaphorical transformations. Research creation merges the historically set apart worlds of theory and praxis. The practice in this methodology aims to contribute to collective understandings rather than just individual goals in the artists' studio (Candy 3). The theory is developed through this practice and the work created. Research creation is interdisciplinary and brings together seemingly disparate fields of study to produce something altogether new. By harnessing multi-modalities, this form allows us to "tell new stories and offer new sites of traction" (Loveless 105). From the space of research creation, we are better positioned to consider what research that doesn't rely on thinking alone might look like.

In heart-minded creative action, the emancipatory potential of gender theories, consciousness work, and art are primary tools on the journey from trauma back to our true power, the present moment. Through a layered disciplinary inquiry, this work takes careful stock of the conditions of gender and sexual trauma in the United States as both uniquely individual and collectively held. Through practice, the work develops methods that hope to transform this complex inhabitation into one of embodied presence.

Heart-minded creative action
integrates
ancient and advanced work
in reconciling
a fractured consciousness
(tending the heart-mind)
with immersive art
(for creative power)
and is born from
a feminist commitment
to transformation
(in interconnected action).

When we can't quite put our finger on the pulse of a tyrannical problem, it can feel impossible to grasp hold of justice. If the complex inhabitation of sexual trauma in The United States is somehow linked to the inexplicable conditions of gender and power, from Butler's position of genealogy, the removal of a root cause allows multiple things to be true at one time. Because sexual trauma is both lived experience and a cultural phenomenon tied in with consciousness and affect, transformation might need a multifaceted approach (Rajiva and Takševa 4) to chip away at both the somatic and discursive contexts of this genealogy.

Heart-minded creative action's multiplex approach makes space for inquiry into problems that may not have specific linear answers.





Postdigital Neuroplasticity

The good news is, we do not have to be defined by our gender, or our traumas. The field of neuroscience has traditionally followed essentialist tendencies, but studies show our brains are not hardwired. This means that behavioral patterns, including those of gender and posttraumatic stress disorder, can and do change through wide-ranging sets of exposures and phenomena (Jordan and Young and Rumiati 311). Neuroplasticity in this way means that our individual, and ultimately collective, consciousness might also be malleable.

The fluidity of somatic sensation is mirrored by the natural world's continuous state of elemental interconnection. Through a hybridity of postdigital materials and imagery (Cramer 20) that exchange between digital and analog, *Inhabitanace* imagines a re-defined space of balance where the natural world is not separate from culture, the binary fracture between feminine and masculine forms are transfigured, and space is made for both the individual and the collective, human and non-human life.



The **flux** of human consciousness is now deeply **infused** with the digital, and in some ways has become a post-human and postdigital collaboration. Therefore, works of **art** that use **technology** make useful tools for exploring contemporary understandings **of** conscious embodiment through co-evolutionary dynamics (Hayles 304). However, a **postdigital** approach allows for the use of technology that both acknowledges its own ubiquity and harnesses its power to rewrite past narratives of linear binary thinking. This **hybrid layering** allows us to **reimagine** worlds that don't rely on strict definitions. Through **intentional** juxtaposition of digital and non digital processes, we may become positioned to better understand the **multiplicity** of our reality, its **impermanence**, and the **relational dialogue** of consciousness we are swimming in.

Like EMDR and haptic aesthetics, the moving image of digital video might also hold transformative possibilities. The cognitive centering of Modernism and its preceding periods of humanism and enlightenment are a manifestation of “Cartesian aesthetics” (Gablik 114). As a result of Modernism and its culture of fractured overstimulation, we are distractedly absorbed into the moving image in a way that is different from when we look at a painting or a sculpture (Benjamin 239).

If Benjamin is right, and as members of the distracted masses engaging with a moving image artwork we become a part of its narrative, then perhaps digital video that gestures at embodied presence and interconnection can aid to transform consciousness.

The work of heart-minded creative action embraces a postdigital, haptic practice to consider art and technology in the expansive sense. The digital may be present, but the inquiry here centers a reunification between human and non-human experience. What happens when we bring together both the physical and ethereal, the sensory and cognitive to create something new? What happens when digital processes join with material analog forms to reconcile a fractured consciousness of gender? Perhaps the postdigital can support the neuroplasticity of mind and body as both metaphor and an agent of change.



Part IV: Embodied Presence

Making Space

“The present moment is all you ever have” (Tolle 48).

At its best, art creates space for transformation. *Inhabitanace* manifests this intention as a postdigital art installation sited in the agriculture and shop classroom of the old Pearisburg High School. Installation art often employs heightened perception to activate space and the viewer in “everyday life and politics” (Bishop 91). Placing the work within the gendered site of the old shop room next door to the home economics cottage creates space to transform the embodied inhabitanace of gender and sexual trauma into a “bodyspace” (Kokoula 14) of fluidity, a place for sensing and feeling in the present moment.

To avoid spiritual bypassing, the challenge is to first go to the source of suffering and hold it with loving-kindness (Nhat Hanh 101). Embodied presence, a sense of being here in the present moment, starts within. Inhabitanace asks you to negotiate a temporal space by reconciling both internal and external sensory modes. By making space to tend to this cultural fracture, we might begin to inch toward a transformed consciousness. From here we can hope to one day learn to feel the connections between ourselves and other animals, spaces, places, and things around us. The world of embodied presence makes use of trauma as a generator for what lies beyond, speculative futures of embodied interconnection.

Grounding

Sometimes the full stop of a wall opens space for reflection.
5, 4, 3, 2, 1...

What are five things you see right now?





Four you can touch?

Three you can hear?





Two you can smell?

One thing you can taste?

*1 Pound maitake mushroom
peeled into strips*

*2 cups raw sugar
2 cups distilled water
One star anise
Two black pepper corns*

*Bring spices, sugar, water
to boil.. remove spices.
Add mushroom and simmer for
30 minutes.*

*Remove onto parchment and
place on lowest temperature in
oven until candied texture.
Let come to room temperature
and toss in powdered sugar.
Sift excess sugar and store in a
sealed glass jar.*

Noticing

Interoception is internal awareness. What are you noticing in your body right now? Are there emotions? Are there sensations? What do they feel like? Are there thoughts trying to creep in? Are these repeating old stories?

In the ancient Buddhist practice of Vipassana meditation, it is the sensory experience, not the mind, that reconnects us to the present moment, that frees us from the suffering of imposed narratives. Vipassana requires sitting with each physical sensation that arises. The trick is to let these moments move through us to reach a sense of complete interconnection with all matter and energy. This is not an easy task.

It is believed in this practice that each of our life experiences are stored in our bodies. When we are dissociated from our bodies, memories get trapped. If the stuck experience is particularly difficult it might cause much unresolved suffering. If we train our minds to connect to our bodies and feel the sensations of each moment we can release the burden from our consciousness.

Anicca is the Buddhist law of impermanence. This one seemingly universal truth, that all things change, is a good reminder when we are tasked with feeling our way through unpleasant sensations. All sensory experience will change, even if only in small amounts, and even if the mind has been trained to hold our bodies in suspended animation.





A photograph of a spider on its web in a garden setting. The spider is positioned in the center-right of the frame, with its legs spread out on the web. The background is a soft-focus garden with green foliage and a brown pot. On the left side, a person's hand is visible, holding a large, dark, textured object, possibly a piece of fabric or a large leaf, which partially obscures the view. The overall lighting is natural, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

Allusive Interconnection

Transforming the way our unique binary fracture stores in our bodies starts within each of us. But the embodied memory of sexual trauma exists as individual experience and a cultural phenomenon. This means we need more than just our individual sensory-cognitive reconciliation, but reunification with a larger whole. Perhaps an allusory translucent gossamer web that holds the flux of consciousness together is in order here.

Another gesture we can learn from in the space of interconnectivity is the material feminism of trans-corporeality.

Distinguishing rigidly between mind and matter is an oversimplification, rather trans-corporeal interconnectedness represents a constellation where “one’s body has its own forces, which are interlinked and continually intra-acting with wider material as well as social, economic, psychological, and cultural forces” (Alaimo, *Trans-corporeal* 250). Rather than disengage with the natural world as many feminisms have, *Inhabittance* views transformation of human embodiment as inseparable from an allyship with the natural world (238).

When combined in disentangled partnership, the reunification of bodies and nature challenges the constructed meaning of each, complicating the lines leading out from them to “refuse the Cartesian models of knowledge, agency and subjectivity” (Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground* 10).

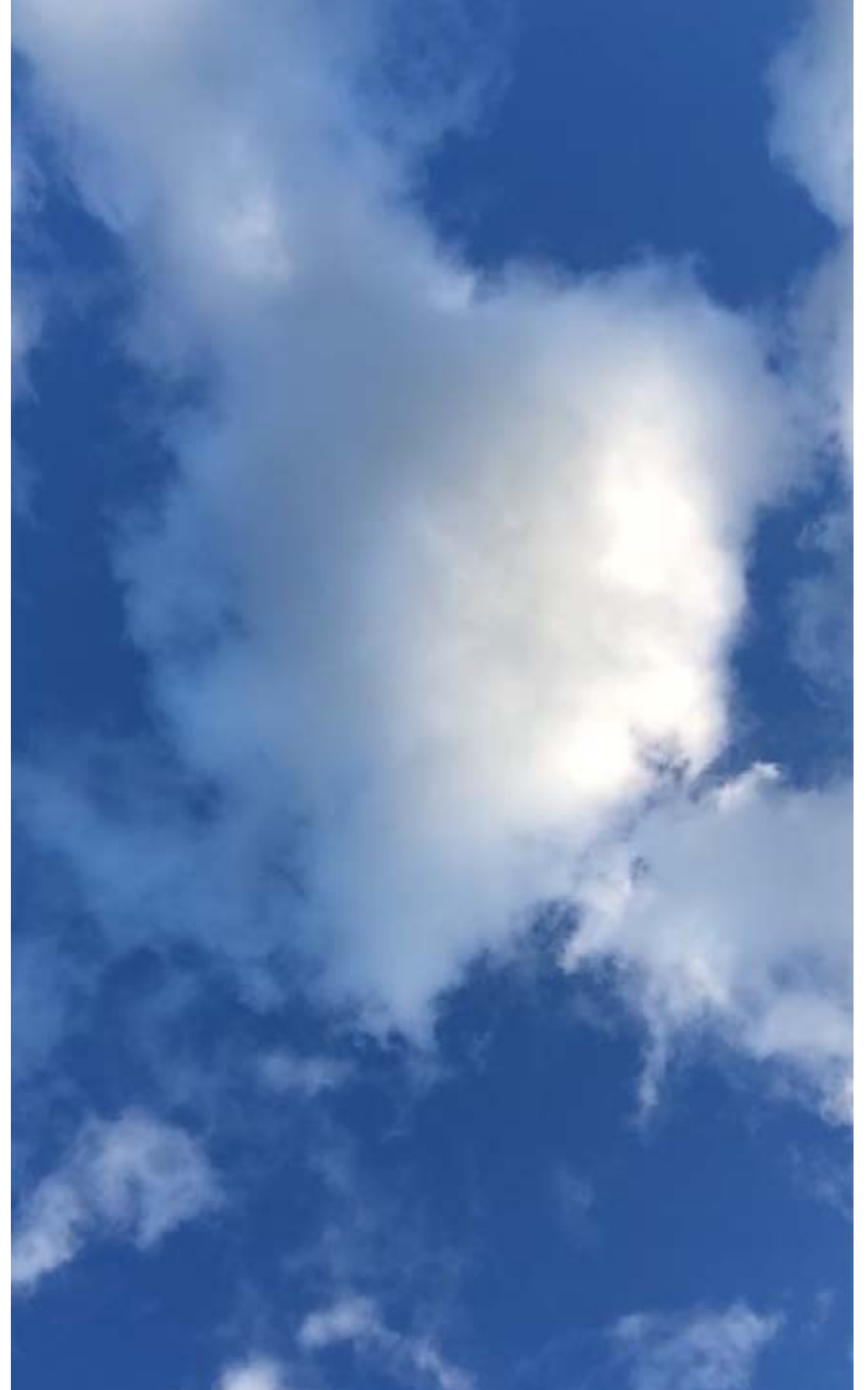
In line with this unification, Donna Haraway’s theory of naturecultures merges opposing binaries to build something new and defy dualisms. A solution to the complexities of sexual trauma may not be found within the confines of known existence. Rather, perhaps a new inhabittance is in order where we willingly, with love and compassion, relearn how to “inherit the consequences of coevolution” (Haraway 103). In this transformed space, binaries are reconfigured so the opposite half makes up for what the other is lacking.



Part V: Imagining A World Beyond

Utopian Demand

This utopian demand is more action than argument (Weeks 222), because there is little triumph in arguing with power. Ultimately the heart-minded creative action of *Inhabitanace* acknowledges that hope is a visionary belief to reconfigure the distinction between the past, present and possible futures (220). The utopian demand steps back from a burdensome past, in presence, just far enough to imagine what a balanced future may hold. While utopian ideals “neutralize the hold of the present” (205), in trauma it is often hard to imagine a future that exists without dissociation. The demand here draws on reconciliation of past trauma in our present bodies, while the utopia is a transcended, hoped-for future (Weeks 220) of embodied interconnection. The two are intimately intertwined and could not exist without the other. When utopian possibilities are deployed through the gesture of demand, this speculative form of action becomes a space for imagining a world where traumatized bodies become a catalyst for change.





The Theory

Cultures that revolve around one side of a binary opposition manifest dissociation in bodies. The construct of gender is a binary opposition that has historically been used for power and oppression. In patriarchal societies, gender is assigned, learned, deeply felt and lived. Sexual trauma is one by-product of this imbalanced power structure. Adding to this complexity, sexual trauma is often a combination of social, cultural, familial, and experiential situations. Because this is both a learned and biological experience, it needs an equally layered and interdisciplinary approach to break the cycle, reclaim power and reconnect bodies.

Held by the emancipatory potential of gender theories, consciousness studies, and immersive art, heart-minded creative action sensorially reconnects mind and body in a new inhabitation of embodied presence through combined theory-practice. From this transformed inhabitation we can start to remember that conscious bodies are like gossamer - webs of subtle interconnectivity that ebb and flow with the tides of each sensory moment. Through our own internal reconciliation, we can hope for an external world that mirrors our transformation. The awakened individual is one who can imagine the whole collective back in embodied interconnection.

Methodology of Practice

As an artist with a mind for analytical thinking, I have long held an interest in the theory/practice puzzle. Navigating the ancient academic divide between creativity and logic can be a challenging task. Adding to this problem, neurodivergence makes the white paper format a contentious space for me. My trauma brain requires creative methods for expression and comprehension. Embracing this self-knowledge, for this dissertation I embarked on an experimental quest to clarify and theorize a relationship between gender, trauma, and power through sensory modalities and a creative lens.

The initial methodological stages of the inquiry involved active engagement with the literature of gender studies and feminist theories. At night, I read significant texts by Butler, Cvetkovich, de Beauvoir, Dillard, Haraway, Alaimo, Salomon, Stryker and other radical minds. I both immersed myself in and dreamt of these works that defy the constructs of gender. Then I woke, cleared my mind and sat at the sketchbook. I wrote in a stream of consciousness, notated, diagramed, designed, and sketched out the ideas swimming in my mind. This daily morning practice became the inception for *Inhabitance*.

From these notes, I actualized pieces of the installation, always finding my way back to the sketchbook meditation to clarify concepts, feelings, readings and thoughts as the work progressed. Sketched images and written analysis grew into large scale drawings, video footage, olfactory and auditory studies, and sculptural components. A noticeable interaction between materials and ideas emerged - the imagery and objects responding to the content as I worked through it, and the concepts growing out of the work I made.

This iterative process allowed a deep reflexivity and parsing out of the primary contexts and emerging concepts of the research. Reciprocation enabled me to make visible my positionality, ideas of representation, assumptions about power and gender, and learn to engage these constructs through iterative inquiry and practice. Significant sections of the work distilled, allowing something clear and visible to emerge and become the basis for this book.

Interdisciplinary Research Creation

Interdisciplinary research helps us approach complex challenges through multi-modalities that disobey academia's often singular disciplinary definitions. This offers greater possibilities for practice-theory fusion with reflexive potential. Interdisciplinarity also shines a light into areas left invisible by the "blind spots" (Loveless 45) of a particular discipline. Heart-minded creative action is an interdisciplinary methodology of practice that aims to balance some of the benefits and shortcomings of art, gender theories and consciousness studies.

The inquiry-based realm of contemporary art comes out of a Modernist lineage of the white male genius artist seeking universal and aesthetic truths in his studio all alone. This tradition did not typically concern itself with issues of justice, much less the experience of Others. Where Modernist customs of art often fail to consider the specificity of social inequities, feminist theories hold a tradition of illuminating these gaps. The intentionality of many feminisms could offer to the art world substantial lessons in possibilities of multiple truths, narratives and paths to understanding experience.

While art often historically overlooks complex intersectional experience, feminisms have long departed from the sensory material world in reaction to longstanding essentialist ideas of Woman as a manifestation of Nature. This disconnect from the sensory keeps much feminist theory within an overtly cerebral space. In mutual exchange between feminisms and art, creative practice may offer a mirror to the possibilities of sensory engagement within the speculative, often immaterial world of feminist theory.

Consciousness studies is an interdisciplinary field in and of itself. This open space can reflect to both feminist theories and contemporary art an understanding that perception and awareness are not strictly the mind's work. And in exchange, to counter the vast possibilities of this emergent discipline, both art and feminist theory ground the research here in contextual specificity.

Research Limitations

If we partially learn gender (which promotes sexual trauma) through our own early and secondary educations, and our parents' and grandparents' educations, this embodiment carries into young adulthood. Gender and sexual trauma are also pervasively visible in the space of higher education as seen in the many reports of sexual violence across campuses today.

Learning gender through mass education is one way binaries make sexual trauma possible. That said, *Inhabitance* may not be a particularly useful space for some. The trouble with trying to make art that would seemingly relate to everyone is that it becomes another example of the outdated Modernist tradition of universal truths. What doesn't and what can't happen in the work of *Inhabitance* is important to explore here.

The shop and agriculture classroom of the historic old high school in Appalachia became a site to explore a gendered system of education in the United States. The potency of the site and its implications were a clear catalyst for the lessons my grandmother learned in the Future Homemakers of America - instilling how to make a proper home and how to make sure everyone else gets just what they want first. While these gendered lessons are ubiquitously present in our culture, the materials, location and implied narrative of *Inhabitance* may not resonate with some who have differently lived experiences of race, class, religion, gender, sexuality, region and culture.

While *Inhabitance* theorizes a moment of practical meditative process, the work is primarily an allusive metaphor for what has been, and what might be possible given different approaches to experiencing what is. In keeping with theorists who inspired this work, "feminist inquiry is about understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently" (Haraway 99).

Art is a space for creative expression and this dissertation theorizes a sensory place for coming to the present moment. However, this is not art therapy and does not intend to work as a healing modality. *Inhabitance* doesn't aim to fix problems, or heal trauma. In many cases the idea that healing is something that will one day happen to us, that we will be completely transformed out of our suffering, is the stuff of fantasy. But, *Inhabitance* does create space for presence, for slowing down, feeling your breath, coming to your senses, going underwater, and possibly being held by an elder who made you feel safe. Perhaps these things can create moments of healing. Perhaps that is all we can really ask for.

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