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Spiritual Archives

Communication, Healing and the Politics of Performance

Abstract

In this essay, I present the concept of "spiritual archives" as a relevant and innovative tool to analyze and critically understand performance's political power and healing potency. I argue that this concept contributes to the discussion about our ways of categorizing sources of knowledge, which means that the spiritual archives are an episteme, a legitimate way to obtain information about the world. First, I develop the concept in the context of the discussion about "valid" sources of information for research in Performance Studies, which comprise, so far, the archive and the repertoire. Then, I explain four characteristics of spiritual archives by applying the concept in an analysis of my performance art piece *Medium*. I end by explaining human communication in the context of spiritual archives and their political potency.

Keywords: critical spirituality, performance as research, performance art, healing, politics

Introduction

Let me offer a succinct portrayal of some 'mysteries' in performance.

In 2008, the Trinidadian-Canadian writer NourbeSe Philip published her book *Zong!*, a critical, powerful, experimental series of poems related to the assassination of about 132 enslaved Africans thrown overboard from the ship called Zong in 1783. Philip references a *spirit*, Sataey Adamu Boateng, as co-author of the text. Since the publication of the poems, she has been performing excerpts in a ceremonial style, dressed in white and using elements such as metal bells, incense, beats, live dance, and percussion. Some performances have occurred behind closed doors by invitation only; others have been open to the public in university settings and streamed online.

In 2014, the gender-nonconforming Mexican performance artist Lechedevirgen Trimegisto had a vivid dream. In their sleep, the artist had a *visitation* of a historical-magical figure: Niño Fidencio, a healer from northern Mexico (1898-1938). Around that time, the artist struggled with severe health issues. Surprisingly, their lab results improved after the dream. Impacted by the episode, Trimegisto became devout to Niño Fidencio and created a piece called *Campos del dolor* (Fields of Pain) to explore the unofficial saint's life, works, and healing miracles.

In 2020, the intuitive, trans extraordinaire theater maker Asher Hartman published his book *Mad Cloth on a Holy Bone: Memories of a Psychic Theater*. In the Prologue, he explains his company's devising processes, which include energy work, meditation, and improvisation. According to him, when writing a play, he enters a "light trance" (153) and *channels* information that becomes numerous pages of potential script content.

I refer to these examples as 'mysteries' because part of the performances' content is located within an unusual source. Although the artists might have turned to historical and literary research as support for their creative endeavors, such as legal documents (in the case of Philip), historical entries (in the case of Trimegisto), and archetypes and mythology (in the case of Hartman) the ignition of their projects resides somewhere else, a realm that some might call "supernatural."

My research grapples with these 'mysteries' and asks pertinent questions: *Where* does this information obtained via communication with spirits, revealed in dreams, or channeled come from? Where does this information reside? *How* do the artists access it? In a decolonial refusal to discard such stories as false and superstitious, that is, taking seriously what the artists account for as part of their creative process, the way they describe their work, and their journeys accessing knowledge via artmaking, how do we theorize these "alternative" sources of information?

Hegemonic Western thinking does not include this type of knowledge, nor does it provide appropriate concepts for labeling it in a way that recognizes its existence and value. How to theorize and name such content to reflect its relevance and role in the creation and reception of performance?

In this essay, I attempt a response to these questions by presenting the concept of "spiritual archives," a compound term that refers to a vast reservoir of information accessed by embodied processes different from reading books, interviewing human subjects, or scrutinizing past documents. Going beyond (but not without) the mind and the body, I call these archives "spiritual" because they appeal to the third part of a triad theorized by Black,

Brown, and Indigenous feminists: the triad “body-mind-spirit” (Pérez 2019, xiv). As I will explain further, Western scholarship has extensively described and theorized sources of knowledge related to the mind and the body but not so much associated with the spirit.

The spiritual realm is intentionally overlooked in academic research as a site of truth, following a colonial mindset that translates as a disenchanted, individualistic, and even sometimes solipsistic worldview. I argue, among other scholars, including Black feminists (for example, M. Jacqui Alexander, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Ana-Maurie Lara), Latinx/Chicanx feminists (such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Laura Pérez, and Theresa Delgadillo), and indigenous scholars (such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith), that looking at spirituality is necessary for any attempt to decolonize knowledge production. No doubt, advocating for the ‘return’ of the spirit is only one element in decolonization. Necessary steps involve creating reparations regarding land and resources, supporting an indigenous agenda (Smith 2012, 121), and indigenous projects (143).

The epistemological dimension of the spiritual makes it an episteme, a system of understanding, and a supplier of truth (Tinsley 2018, 2; Alexander 2006, 293). In this context, spirituality is "a worldview, a perspective, and a perception" (Anzaldúa 2015, 38) and mainly "a different kind and way of knowing" (Ibid.). Moreover, as will be evident in the analysis of my case study, spiritual knowledge is tied to the observance of personal and collective wounds and creative ways of healing, which is why spirituality is also profoundly political.

No doubt, I name something that has had many names. I did not invent it (how could I?); I am making connections, laying out bridges between discourses, disciplines, and terminologies that approach different aspects of human nature and human knowledge. My argument is part of a petition for unification to repair what colonization shattered, the collaborative work and fellowship amongst the body, the mind, and the spirit. I aim for a humble reparation related to the knowledge we consider relevant, truthful, illuminating, worthy of mention, and analysis. It is a small gesture in a big project of collecting the forgotten pieces that keep us incomplete, disconnected, and disempowered.

In what follows, I present and theorize what I am calling spiritual archives. The term refers both to the time-space we visit and the information we gather when we sit in silence or ride on the sound of a mantra; where we go and what we hear when an ancestor or a spiritual entity communicates with us; what we grasp when we enter a trance by dancing, doing a durational performance, or with the aid of sacred plants that lead us; or the pieces of knowledge offered by the Tarot or by other ways of divination and guidance. The spiritual archives are the *place* and the *content* we access when we are in what some theorists call an “expanded state of consciousness” (Brennan 1993, 6). This state can be achieved in different ways that usually invite the mind and the body to come out of their quotidian ways into a more silent and receptive setup.

Although the concept of spiritual archives has a broader application, I concentrate here on its function within the analysis of performance and, more specifically, performance art and its overlap with experimental theater, not only responding to my embodied research methodology (the production of performance as a form of study via the body) but filling in a gap in my home discipline, Performance Studies, concerning the place of the spiritual.

In a discipline that successfully has given the body and embodied knowledge the place it deserves, I invite Performance Studies to its next chapter: going beyond the physical, not back into the mind, but into the spirit. This step does not mean forgetting about the body or

reinforcing a version of the body as a mere vehicle to connect us with “higher” realms. The information in the spiritual archives needs the mind and the body. When we “come back” from accessing it, it infuses our daily lives with sacred immanence (Anzaldúa 2015, 90). For that reason, this proposal is part of a project to bring back the body, the mind, and the spirit as a united front for an anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, decolonizing liberation; a project that works alongside and is not separated from the critical assessment of the hegemonic power structures that subjugate us and the necessary collective actions in the social arena to tear them down.

In this sense, I understand the decolonial work in the intellectual ground as a mission that requires the reencounter of the triad body-mind-spirit (Pérez 2019, xiv), the unification of the fragmented self that colonization left uncommunicated, rendering the mind as superior in a hierarchy where the body must be second because the spirit is non-existent. In the words of Ana-Maurine Lara: "The work of decolonization has to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness … both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert, and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment” (2020, 4). This decolonizing work not only brings back the spirit but also insists on its political and social relevance, depicting “spirituality as a terrain of political struggle, let alone as a site of consciously decolonizing ideology, alongside gender, sexuality, class, and racialization” (Pérez 2019, 135). In sum, I see the consideration of spirituality in performance as a political act and the attempt to study it of the utmost importance.

When we use the spiritual archives to analyze performance, the concept illuminates areas that have been ignored, dismissed, or erased. Such areas include the effects of performance on the maker’s and audience’s mind-body-spirit and the subsequent politics of care, the potential healing force of performance, and its political efficacy. With the spiritual archives as an epistemological lens, the power of performance rises in a more profound and sustainable sense than when we choose to close our senses and discourses to the spiritual.

Some of the guides for us who look for the spirit to “return” to the classroom are Audrey Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Yeye Luisah Teish, M. Jacqui Alexander, Sharon Bridgforth, Christen A. Smith, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, among others. Since my site of knowledge is a creature with two heads, one being the academic discourses and the second the spiritual practices and the belief systems that sustain them, I also have to pay respect to the worldviews that have nurtured my spiritual path and led me to attempt this reunion: the akashic records belief system and practice, the Pathwork for Self-Transformation, the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, the Latinx indigenous-based *curanderismo*, and Afro-American folx wisdom and practical rituals. I give these traditions a leading role in my awareness of the spiritual archives and their rightful status as theory. I will use some of that spiritual philosophy to weave my findings, applying concepts of these traditions to performance analysis. To these ancestors of thought and living guides, I humbly pay tribute to you and all interested in becoming whole again.

It is essential to mention that in the context of my research, "organized, institutionalized, traditional religions in Western thought" (Delgadillo 2011, 3) are very different from *spirituality*, understood as: “non-Western and non-institutional forms of relation to the sacred” (Ibid.). Spirituality is seen here as a reclaimed and autonomous impulse from subjects dealing with the aftermath of colonization to approach the divine, a tool that allows them, that allow us, to use and play with actions and rituals in performance in our own

laboratory of the spirit, so to speak, where we patiently carve a connection, through the body and mental states out of the ordinary, with the beyond.

The last step in enunciating where I am coming from is to position myself (in alignment with my understanding of feminism) by saying that I am a trans nonbinary mix-raced or *mestize* subject, with (among others) Spanish ancestry and an indigenous one that traces from the North and Central Andean region of South America and the Muisca peoples. I was born in a place we know today as Bogotá, Colombia, and I work as a performance art maker, akashic records reader, scholar, writer, kundalini yoga follower, and healer apprentice.

I wanted to write about spirituality in performance as epistemological and political because it saved my life. After leaving home due to homophobia and transphobia at a young age, after leaving organized religion for the same reasons, cutting ties with family members, friends, and acquaintances, after falling into a deep cycle of loneliness, abandonment, and depression, I found the spirit where I less expected: in radical performance art pieces in the streets of Colombia, México, Brazil, and the United States; in drag shows at bars and cabarets, in cold galleries and live exhibitions.

Fixed Archives, Embodied Archives (Repertoire), and Spiritual Archives

One of the primary interventions of my research is related to how we think about sources of knowledge and archives, adding a new element that has yet to be explicitly theorized in this context. I develop the term to link the archive with the notion of the spiritual, the ethereal, "beyond the physical body" so that we can use it to understand performance in innovative ways.

Discussions about what can count as an archive have been highly influenced by the terminology proposed by Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003). In her book, she distinguishes the *archive* as inscribed non-changeable content (sounds, words, images), such as the books one finds in a library comprising the colonizer's description of their adventures of "discovery" in the Americas or the original manuscripts of a lost queer writer one wants to praise and make visible. Understood as such, the archive has determined hegemonic ways of knowledge validation and has been the battle horse for logocentrism, the supremacy of the word.

In contrast, the *repertoire* refers to intangible and mutable information codified in rituals, choreographed movement, and orality, such as indigenous dances performed in local communities and narratives that have survived generations via storytelling and word of mouth. Both the archive and the repertoire are reproducible but require different skills (using a scanner to copy a document versus learning and performing a set of steps, for example).

One of the pivotal consequences of Taylor's intervention in the field is that it invites us to recognize and give space to the knowledge communicated via the body. Whereas fixed archives have been studied and accepted as academic sources in disciplines such as History, Literary Studies, or Cultural Studies, the knowledge produced by the repertoire has been widely ignored or even erased from research. Concerning the triad mentioned before (body-mind-spirit), fixed archives appeal to the mind, the innovative notion of the repertoire appeals to the body, and none appeal to the spirit.

Contemporary discussions about sources of knowledge grapple with whether the repertoire can be considered entirely separate from the archive or if the concept of the archive

can comprise various media that include the repertoire. In Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland's edited volume *The Sentient Archive* (2018), for example, instead of referring to the repertoire to talk about knowledge codified in the body, dance scholars use terms such as "embodied archive" (28, 115) to refer to what Taylor would label as the repertoire.

Against what it might seem, these different categorization systems go beyond mere terminology. To give embodied knowledge the status of an archive also means to inscribe it side-by-side with traditional documentation, which could indicate a disruption of the text's sovereignty. On the other hand, one might argue that using new words is necessary to think differently or extend the horizon of what is possible. Taylor argues in "Save As... Knowledge and Transmission in the Age of Digital Technologies" that using a different concept (the repertoire) is required because when scholars try to comprehend the "live" inside an archive, the result is an erasure of the embodied (2010, 6).

However, recent scholarship shows that we might be ready to expand what archive means instead of constricting and losing whatever we label as "archive." The possibilities for the concept are evident in the intellectual production of books such as *The Sentient Archive*, just mentioned above; Julietta Singh's *No archive will restore you* (2018), in which the author dwells on her body as the "impossible, deteriorating archive" that she is (27), similarly to Jo Hsu in *Constellating Home: Trans and Queer Asian American Rhetorics* (2022), who talks about his "bodymind as an archive" (144); or Jenny Sharpe's *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* (2020), which addresses archives produced by Black people who were dehumanized and whose knowledge was degraded by historical processes of racism and colonization.

Another advantage of using the term 'embodied archive' is that it can also refer to less formal practices, such as the trauma stored in one's body that cannot be accessed via language or rationality but via the body. If we look at the word's origins, the term' repertoire' points to a set of movements (or steps) but not necessarily to unscripted actions. For instance, the gesture of a woman when she avoids looking directly at a man's eyes because of a trauma response. Even the pain that determines a body posture might tell us more about what the body knows than a choreographed dance passed body to body, verbally or through a score. Therefore, unscripted actions and gestures can be considered legitimate sources of knowledge, as I have argued before (Koeltzsch and Lima 2021, 250).

Taking the opportunity to use the word 'archive' to name different sources and types of knowledge, I coin the term "spiritual archives" to address both a time-space and the vast information contained in it. Complementing Taylor's theory, I linked the fixed archives to the mind, the embodied archives (what she calls the repertoire) to the body, and the spiritual archives to the spirit. Attending to the spiritual would complete the sources of knowledge that originate from the different dimensions of our existence: our intellect, our flesh and bones, and our spirit.

The spiritual archives coincide with what is known as the "akashic records" or the "book of life" (Todeschi 1998, xii), the "book of Toth" (Silva 2020, 8), or the "cenote" (Anzaldúa 2015, 5). As both the place and the content, I used 'archive' to echo the origin of the word, arkheion, which points to a place and the information held in it (Derrida 1998, iii). The spiritual archives host ancestors' wisdom that we gather when not reading a text but channeling a message in the present. These archives are an energetic space that stores all past deeds,

thoughts, intentions, and feelings, present conditions of the spirits, and future possibilities (Shier 2005; Teish 2021, 89; Howe 2010, 2016; Feick 2018; Silva 2020). In that sense, the spiritual archives enact simultaneity of past, present, and future, and the knowledge stored in it can also address all temporalities.

To close this section, I want to go back to the categorization of the archives I offered here and apply it to an example inspired by the illuminating text of Omi Osun Joni Jones's *Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity* (2002). As a scholar, one can access the written archive of the African religion Yoruba by reading about their "mythology." In an immersive installation at a museum, one can learn some of the steps of the traditional dances of Yoruba; that is, learn a portion of its repertoire or embodied knowledge, perhaps with accuracy, if one is a professional dancer. However, neither of those levels of access (written and embodied) will explain the eventuality in which we are taken by the goddesses in ecstasy or we have a transformational experience that shakes our worldview in a small or big way. We need more than the archive and the repertoire to make visible, describe, and theorize about that aspect of our performance experience.

The spiritual archives come in handy in this case. We may find that accessing such archives takes more than reading a text and copying a set of movements (both important and laborious tasks). We might find that a particular disposition of the mind, facilitated by the body's movement, is also required. Perhaps we might find that the moment of ecstasy was unrequested, unexpected, and even scary. Nevertheless, we would not know any answers to these inquiries unless we open the analysis to other realms beyond the usual. I argue that the tool of the spiritual archives as an explanatory concept can be of aid in this enterprise, given that analysis of performance experiences and their transformational power will be incomplete when limited to the dimensions of the mind and the body only.

In the next section, I explain what I have found as some of the main characteristics of the spiritual archives using the description, analysis, and interpretation of my performance art piece, *Medium,* that occurred at the University of Texas at Austin (2018) and in The Momentary Museum in Arkansas (2021). First, I offer a participatory description of the piece that aims to activate the reader's imagination and bodily and spiritual senses to apply the characteristics to the case study.

Diversity, Animateness, Interactivity, and Materiality of the Spiritual Archives in the case study of *Medium*

Imagine yourself sitting face to face with a stranger (me). We are inside a circle of thick grains of sea salt, and the theater lights form a perfect spotlight around us. You and I are inside the circle, and everything else is in a blackout. From a distance, we look like some mystical rendition of the famous piece by Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present. *In this piece, the so-called "grandmother of performance art" sat in front of one audience member at a time, looking at their eyes in complete silence for three months and eight hours a day inside the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.*

Before you come in, I have cleaned the space with incense, a big sodalite stone, and a mantra called Ajai Alai. *In the kundalini yoga tradition, this mantra is a tool to awaken our radiance and expand our energy.*

Before we start, I have asked you to choose a conflict with someone, present or past, that remains unresolved. I (with my feminine voice, heavy accent, wide hips, bound chest, and "masculine" haircut) will stand for that person even though I have no idea who they are, nor will I ask about them.

For about twenty to thirty minutes, we will talk as if I were that person, and you are invited to say and ask everything you have not said or asked before. Unlike similar performance art experiments, including Abramović's, we do not have any audience. It is just you and me, and I have promised absolute confidentiality.

Unlike a theater game or an improv exercise, the atmosphere has some seriousness. I have prepared for this conversation with a rigorous practice of meditation, a body and spiritual cleanse, a petition to my spiritual guides to allow me to be of service, and a sort of momentary pause on my identity, history, traumas, and triggers so that I can plug into a unifying state of consciousness of some sort.

Like a performance art experiment, I have let go of my expectations and followed the desire to create a break in our quotidian lives. In this momentary out-of-the-world art bubble, we can connect in a unique way facilitated by this setup.

As soon as we start, you might feel that your heart skips a beat or slightly aches, or your throat gets tight, and you feel like crying; maybe you suddenly feel anger and sadness. You may also feel curious, nervous, and expectant of what will come.

According to some feedback collected post-performances through an online questionnaire, you might feel that the chosen person's energy is coming through, perhaps not in their imperfect human personality, but in their higher-self quality (although still particular to them). Your tears will be received with the neutrality of loving compassion. Your anger will be heard with no negative reaction. Your repentance will be accepted with understanding and mercy. This interaction can be impactful and stir your feelings and mind for some time.

Perhaps a perspective from "the other side" of the conflict might be delivered to you, a gentle, nonjudgmental perspective that could allow you to see something new in this situation. Somehow, you may leave the space different from how you entered, giving you the impression that we might have been part of a short and strange "occurrence." In the end, the conflict might not necessarily feel resolved, but an emotional release might have occurred, and some ideas about what to do or not to do next could also arrive.

Ultimately, even if none of those things happened internally, you still might find this an intriguing experiment. After you leave the space, you might sense that, for a moment, we broke the quotidian and entered a liminal space between life and art, a form that some of us call "performance art."

After a reset of the space that includes a cleanse with incense and spraying water with special oils (the specifics I intentionally keep to myself), I am ready for the next person, and the next, and the next, until some hours pass, depending on the theater or gallery's availability.

At the end of the performance day, I will stay in silence, processing all my conversations, the moments I have shared, and the emotions I have witnessed and felt. I will practice a self-care and cleansing routine to prepare for the next day until the theater event or the arts festival ends.

To whom might rightfully question why sitting face to face with a stranger pretending to be someone else while having a difficult conversation is considered performance art, as it is

sitting face to face looking at someone else's eyes in silence at the MOMA (Abramovic), I must say that such question excites me the most about this form of expression. Performance art is theorized under the concept of liminality, the in-between (Pabón 2000, 76; Gómez-Peña 2005, 36, 43), something that functions as a pause, a holder of potentiality that interrupts the quotidian. I argue that part of why the quality of performance art can be so impactful is because, in many instances, it is a portal to the spiritual archives. Facilitating a momentary disruption of the rational and everyday, enticing the mind and the body to be in a different setup than usual, performance art can invite sites of personal and political transformation and healing not theorized enough yet.

In what follows, I explain the qualities of the spiritual archives using the case of *Medium* in a description that might seem unartistic, not aesthetical, and private, appealing to emotions, energetic release, and self-awareness. It must be that way since I am introducing a new category for performance analysis that requires paying attention to some things that we need to attend to more in Performance Studies. Although I could go back to the remarks about the disruption of the art canon, the tradition of relational art, situationism, presence, body as a medium, and minimalism, among other expected considerations (relevant to our field and that we have mastered), I am inviting new registers and different concerns so that our understanding of performance widens.

According to my research and experience as a practitioner, I have found that the spiritual archives have at least four characteristics. First, the spiritual archives host not only the *narrative* of past events, like the fixed archive, but also *feelings, intentions, and thoughts* around those events (Todeschi 1998, xii; Shier 2005, 4). This fact means that the spiritual archives are a vast reservoir of different types of information related to the emotional, mental, and spiritual bodies. I call this characteristic the *diversity* of the archives.

In the case of *Medium*, if you humor me by entertaining the hypothesis that I, my audience (or we both) entered the spiritual archives during our one-on-one encounter, we can see that the records relate to not only past conflicts but also some emotions and intentions around it. For example, in one conversation, someone mentioned that their ex-partner (with whom they maintain a conflict and I am standing for) helped them the most in a time of need. Beyond the care and willingness to be of aid, there was some intention of control and manipulation behind the offering of help. The person said they felt released when I responded from the awareness of that "hidden" intention and communicated it. Intuitively, they already knew about that. The open acknowledgment of such intent might help the participant to discharge clogged energies of sadness, anger, or confusion that were fostered partially by the other person's fear of accepting and facing their imperfection.

The diversity of the archives comprises not only different types of material (mental, bodily, and spiritual) but also temporality. In addition to and different from the fixed archive (but not so much from the repertoire), the spiritual archives hold information about the past but also the present and possible futures. This vastness of the spiritual archives (which could seem terrifying) is accompanied by wisdom and containment in the *access*. When aligned with the intention of unification, the spiritual archives do not obey the thirst for data nor comply with the desire to be right or control others as with the fixed archives (Derrida 1997, iv, v; Sharpe 2020, 9, 11). As far as I have witnessed, their availability depends on our growth and healing processes —beyond the fact that no human is equipped to access the entirety of the archives at once.

For example, nothing from the conversations in *Medium* I know of has been impossible to "digest" for the participants. Although we are dealing with difficult topics, there is a sense of care and a desire to not rewound or retraumatize but to offer an experience out of the quotidian that might aid healing. No doubt, my imperfect humanity could not take this responsibility to its fullest alone, so I ask for the aid of spirit. My guides and the participant's guides and ancestors take care of us, which controverts the idea that self-care depends on the subject and the subject only, that healing is related only to our capacity to "stay positive" and work on ourselves. As Alexander puts it beautifully: "We are connected to the Divine through our connections with each other. Yet no one comes to consciousness alone, in isolation, only for oneself, or passively" (Anzaldúa and Keating 2000, 100).

Second, like the repertoire, the spiritual archives are constantly changing; they are *alive*. I see this characteristic as the *animated* quality of the archives, differentiating them from sources like written documents and visual and auditory recordings. I found this quality the most fascinating because, at the beginning (as a practitioner and student of the archives), it was hard for me to understand how it is possible to consider one can "change the past" without gaslighting or inviting historical and cultural amnesia (to contend that certain situations did not happen).

I found that transforming (healing) the past means transforming the *conclusions* about the world and others and the *self-narratives* one has acquired in a way that allows one to reconfigure the negative patterns caused by personal and generational trauma (Feick 2018, 61). Anzaldúa puts it beautifully when she says that healing is “a struggle to reconstruct oneself and heal the sustos resulting from wounding, traumas, racism, and other acts of violation que hechan pedazos nuestras almas, split us, scatter our energies, and haunt us” (2015, 1). In *Medium*, for example, by replaying, rehearsing, or addressing what has been left unsaid and unanswered within a conflict, the perspectives, and narratives of the past change in small or big ways, transforming the present and the possible futures. As we saw, emotional energy can also be liberated, and intentions cleared.

Even though no one comes to a performance art piece to collect their own abandoned fragments, I argue that part of why some pieces feel so impactful and unforgettable involves the spiritual archives. When a traumatic experience happens (and a conflict with a person can be an example), a part of our psyche is left behind, frozen in time, and unable to process the past (Pollock 2009, 40). In the spiritual archives, we are offered the opportunity to collect ourselves, rejoining with the missing parts that harm has made us leave behind (Anzaldúa 2015, 29).

As I mentioned, in its boundless storehouse, the spiritual archives keep track of everything that happened and the possible outcomes of a situation. The reconfiguration of the past immediately changes our present and future possibilities. Therefore, a shift of awareness and a release of emotions changes, in turn, our present moment and what is for us to come. Being oblivious of such a potentiality in performance, I insist, is missing a dimension that is open for analysis.

Because they are alive, the spiritual archives can be transformed personally and collectively in our healing journeys. They hold the power to reinscribe the past and turn our futures, which is one of the reasons why they can have social and political relevance, not at all by erasing the tragedies that happened but by helping in healing the narratives, the

conclusions that the wounds took us to create about ourselves, the world, other people. In this sense, the social relevance of the arts comes to the surface since it emerges as a great tool to work with the spiritual archives in an approachable way toward the community. Awareness of the spiritual archives, how to work with them, and how to identify their role in our life and performance production offers an excellent opportunity to address the past and seek reparation.

Third, the spiritual archives are highly "*interactive*" (Todeschi 1998, xii). This interactivity means that they influence our present. The archives can be an excellent tool for the exegesis of personal, cultural, and social texts and performances. In *Medium*, for example, participants found that one response or behavior they usually have is connected to the conflict they are dealing with, particularly if the conflict is with a significant person in their life (mother, father, sibling, best friend, or ex-partner). The archives influence our daily lives, reactions to other people, preferences, and paths in and out of our personal mind-hells. When we take them into account, the spiritual archives give us a new understanding of our actions and a new window into the actions of others, including what we think and feel when witnessing a performance. This characteristic of interactivity is vital in explaining how working in the spiritual archives transforms our present and future, given that they influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Fourth and final, the characteristic that needs more background to be adequately described, the spiritual archives are *material*. Not with the same density that forms our physical bodies, yet material. Their materiality helps us explain why we can consult them (if they have substantiality, they leave a trace we can access; if they have energy, we can interact with it). This materiality also explains the effects spiritual archives have on the self and others, especially when included in performance.

The quality of materiality directly results from the fact that according to my studies, thoughts, emotions, and intentions are also material (although not perceivable as physical objects). For example, the energies of joy, aggression, fear, or grief have a substance and hence leave a trace in the spiritual archives, and they manifest in our world, affecting our and other people's bodies, minds, and spirits. In a performance, such energies are interchanged between performers and audiences, which explains some of our reactions when attending a piece of art. Likewise, thoughts have materiality, energy, affecting not only what we literally think about ourselves and others but also what we manifest in the outer world. To explain this materiality, let me dive into the spiritual point of view of human communication through further contextualization and analysis of *Medium.*

Human Communication According to the Spiritual Archives

I first performed *Medium* (October 2018) in a five-day event featuring my solo work at The University of Texas at Austin. I called the event *Queeriosity 1986 Series: Cyborg, Brown, and 32*, referencing Howardena Pindell's work *White, Free, and 21*, and that year's theme "Cabaret of Queeriosities" of the OUTsider Fest, an Austin-based multi-media fest I was applying for. My solo work consisted of five days of one-on-one encounters in the context of *Medium* and a closing performance lecture about my personal experience of gendered and racialized discriminatory experiences in academia and the commodification of my Latinx body as a trans nonbinary and psychiatrically disabled Colombian in the United States.

For *Medium*, people signed up virtually to experience the piece on any of the days from 2:00 to 6:00 pm. The reprint of the online invitation says:

> *Medium* uses the devising technique of "transference" (Anthony Howell) as a performance art methodology to create interactions between the performer and the audience. These one-one encounters explore channeled communication and avatar production to hold a 25-minute interaction into the unknown and the unexpected, the interstice of reality/fiction, life/art.

Whenever a participant stepped in, I would welcome them and invite them to sit on a bench with me. I would contextualize what was about to happen, giving them some artistic references that served as an inspiration for the experiment: Vito Acconci's *Transference Zone* (1972) and the transference exercises offered by Anthony Howell's book *The Analysis of Performance Art: A Guide to its Theory and Practice* (1999).

In Acconci's piece, the artist was immersed in an "isolation chamber" at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York (Tate) that contained objects of seven people important to the artist. When an audience member knocked on the door and entered, the artist transferred the identity of one of the seven people onto the random participant and engaged with them as if they were indeed that person. Similarly, Howell's performance art exercise says: "In a free session, each performer identifies another as a member of his or her family … and reacts to that performer accordingly" (Howell 1999, 148). The idea is the same: to transfer an identity from an absent body into a present one, adapting the concept of transference used in psychology into the arts.

Once I have given these references, I would ask the audience member to choose a conflict they are having with someone. I will engage with them as if I were that person. After setting a timer, we will move into an open space at the studio, where I will draw an imaginary circle where we will talk for about 25 minutes. Once the time is up, which "magically" (I believe spiritually orchestrated) felt like an ending point of the conversation, we will leave the circle to regain our usual identities.

In the second edition of the piece (2021), I drew an actual circle with sea salt on the theater floor to make it visible (Figure 1). This time, it was at The Momentary Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas, as part of a two-day performance art event that closed a performance art residency called INVERSE with a cohort of diverse makers from around the world.

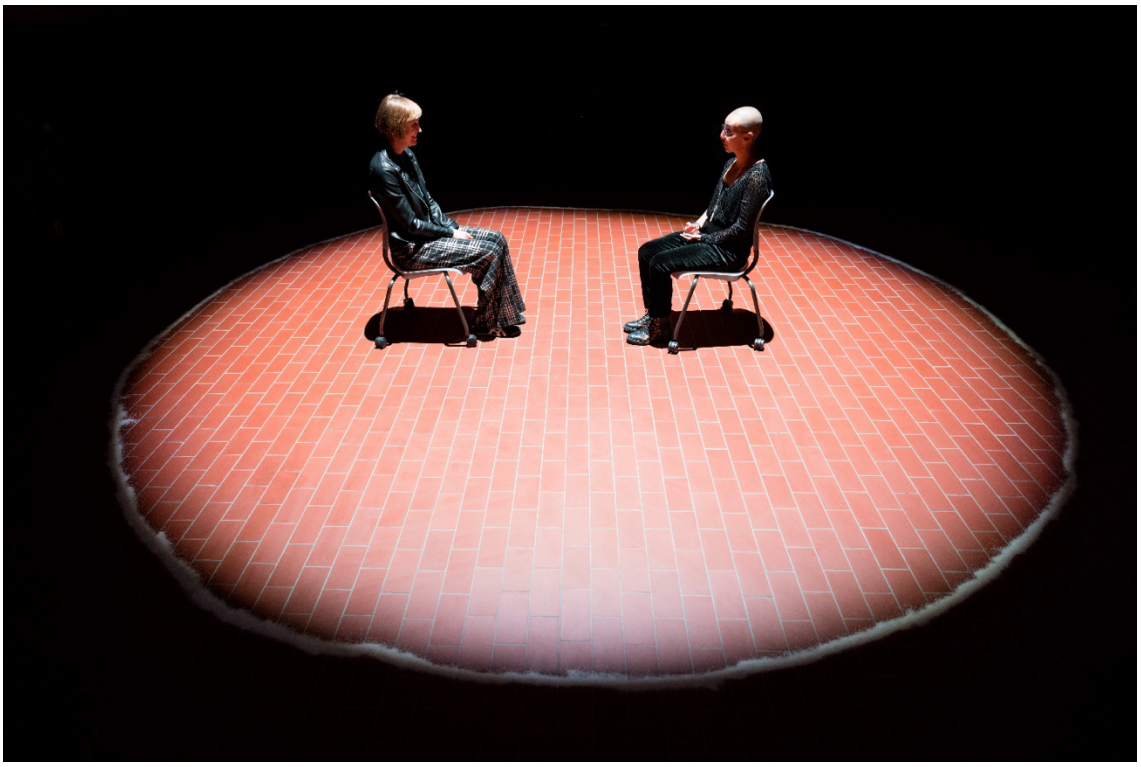

Fig. 1. Photo by Stephen Ironside.

A couple of years after the first iteration of the piece, reflecting on it as part of my practice-based research, I realized that the influences for this work were beyond artistic. My spiritual practices also inspired the concept behind *Medium* at the time. In an interesting synchronicity, while I was researching the work of artists such as Vito Acconci and attending to interventions facilitated by Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Sharon Bridgforth, who use spirituality, ritual, and audience participation in their performances, I started to learn and participate in healing sessions in which someone (or multiple people) offers their body to stand for someone else, usually representing a family member of the person doing the work. Those practices are used extensively in the Pathwork for Self-Transformation, a school and healing path I worked on and graduated from in 2021.

Like the “mysterious” performance cases I listed at the beginning of this essay, The Pathwork is founded on a series of lecture guides that are *channeled*. A team of spirits gave the 258 lectures (or what they call "The Pathwork Guide") that communicated with what the spirits call their "instrument," an Austrian immigrant named Eva Broch Pierrakos. For about two decades, starting in 1957, Broch would sit in a trance state (first, surrounded by a small group of friends and then in what was the first Pathwork center in Phoenicia, New York) to deliver the lectures witnessed by a community that believed and was transformed by its contents. She would communicate the message and have a Q&A session afterward with the Guide where attendants could ask for clarification or assistance with their issues. In other words, Broch stepped into the spiritual archives live to deliver information that would help the spiritual growth of her community. She was not considered a guru but a transmitter of transformative knowledge.

According to the Pathwork, in a conflictive experience, our personal work entails allowing ourselves to feel all that comes up—anger, sadness, despair, fear, and

disappointment—in a contained environment before acting out. Seeing our part, big or small (taking responsibility), feeling compassion towards everyone involved, and not victimizing or making ourselves the evilest creature in the world. We investigate where our responses are coming from, exploring our current childhood trauma and past life experiences to transform ourselves from a place of self-knowledge and compassion (PL257 1979).

In the piece *Medium*, I was running a performance art experiment based on the question of what would happen when I stood for another person and conversed with someone in the context of a conflict. In my attempt to channel another person's energy, the audience member could hear some of the perspectives "from the other side" with a more receptive attitude, given that the actual person was not physically present and felt more freedom to express themselves about the issue. In addition, I was also answering a call to integrate my artistic practice with my spiritual one, offering an experience where the people involved could have not only a taste of a typical performance art one-on-one piece but also a taste of the Pathwork-inspired idea of looking at a conflict from different points of view, taking responsibility for our doings and personal intentions as well as receiving (perhaps for the first time) an apology, an acknowledgment, or loving compassion.

The spatial component of *Medium* will help better understand the materiality of the spiritual archives. In my healing process, I learned that one can set a symbolic space, an "elsewhere" but still represented in the physical plane, to work on family trauma from childhood (Sparrer 2013, 91). I adapted this idea to the context of *Medium*. In the description reprinted above, I refer to myself as an "avatar." The word names the process of representing with the materiality of my body something that is not entirely me, allowing a "transference" to happen symbolically and, in this case, spiritually. Uri McMillan asserts: “Avatars, in short, act as mediums— between the spiritual and earthly as well as the abstract and the real” (2015, 11). The avatar, acting as a medium of a person or energy partially other than mine, would inhabit a sacred and symbolic space, a territory delimited not only by the circle of sea salt but by our curiosity, openness, and willingness to understand. When setting up the energetic space in *Medium*, I also " mapped" the relationship in conflict. My body/avatar would sit far, close, in front, or to the side of this audience member and would usually end in a different position after the conversation. In that sense, the emotional and spiritual energies had a density that kept us apart and in a particular position. When moved around and transformed, it consequentially changed how we positioned our bodies in space.

According to my theoretical and practical studies on healing and the spiritual (Todeschi 1998; Howe 2010, 2016; Feick 2018; Brennan 1988, 1993), communication entails a specific "substance" that makes thoughts and words material. Similarly, AnaLouise Keating, editor of the posthumous work of Gloria Anzaldúa, explains it beautifully when framing the author's comprehension of language: "[W]ords and images matter and *are* matter; they can have causal, material(izing) force. The intentional, ritualized performance of specific, carefully selected words has the potential to *shift* reality” (2015, xxxi).

The materiality of words, thoughts, and intentions is a consequence of the fact that everything that exists is made of *something*. This energy has frequency and properties even if we cannot perceive it directly with our ordinary human senses. In Sanskrit, that material is named *Akasha*, “primary substance, that out of which all things are formed” (Howe 2010, 4), which is the concept the Akashic records system is named after. Such substance composes the

spiritual archives and explains the materiality of its contents. One can access such archives to acquire information for guidance to oneself and others and, as I have been presenting here, to create and experience potentially transformative performances.

According to The Pathwork Lecture 14: "Your thoughts have definite spiritual forms, and such forms are created not only by thoughts but also by feelings … Although thought creates a different form than a feeling does, nevertheless, both create very definite and substantial forms" (PL14 1957, 1). Thoughts, utterances, and emotions have matter; they have a *form*, which means they occupy a "space" in spirit. Communication, then, would be more than what we might think, in the sense that some energies unseen (by those who are not trained) and spirit forms of thoughts, words, and emotions come into play when people interact.

The way of understanding human interaction connected to the spiritual archives presented here has the potential to illuminate what we think about performance and how we can understand the healing potential of contemporary cultural forms such as performance art. The key is a deeper understanding of the interaction of energy when we relate to each other and how this interlace of "material" can cooperate to create harmony or discord depending on what we offer to one another. This information could also influence our politics of care in performance to keep making conscious choices as makers. By no means does this imply that we must follow the rule of "good vibes only" in performance. Quite the opposite, it is an invitation to be authentic and present with what it is and take responsibility for our energy discharges.

In the case of *Medium*, I remember vividly the first person I saw. We sat next to each other on the wooden bench, and I explained the performance art experiment to them. Once the space was set, I asked them to sit or stand as close or far as they felt comfortable with me while thinking about this person's energy and to face in the direction they felt okay with, being right in front of me, looking into my eyes, or diagonal, or showing me their back.

As I fell into this person, I also placed myself accordingly. I sensed a pull in my body and an intense tension between us. A traumatic experience was put on the table. When, in my usual self, I get very emotional with what I am hearing, there I felt completely strange to myself, calm and open, with compassion and a very contained sadness. I also knew the person I stood for had done something hurtful and violent. I stayed present to that knowledge. The conversation was complicated, and I barely knew what was happening, but in the end, we separated many steps back. The participant had established a barrier of chairs between us. The person cried and expressed pain and anger. About forty minutes passed (one of the only occasions where I turned off the timer), and I returned to myself and sat for a few minutes with them, present to the energies mobilized. Finally, I told them to drink water and take a bath, if possible, to clear out their energy. As they left, I went into a cleansing ritual and meditation to prepare for the next participant.

With the passing hours, I could feel more and more how I was emptying myself of my identity and entering an unknown (to me) unitary space in my mind, heart, and spirit that left me feeling somehow full of grace and compassion. At the end of day five, I was different from when I started. I understood some of the people's struggles deeply. I had no option but to be a compassionate observant—even when my ego would side more with the person I was portraying for the participant, even when I felt wronged by similar things they were accusing "me" of or have done the hurtful things I heard a confession of. I could not be left untouched

by such intimate encounters (which is why I pursued a second attempt years later). During the days of the first rendition, I asked for informal feedback from the attendants, primarily concerned about the emotional state of my audience. I took that information into account for the second iteration. As I learned, some of them also found this experience unforgettable and illuminating.

Applying the understanding of communication indicated by the spiritual archives, it is possible to interpret the conversation with the audience members in *Medium* as an entanglement of energies of anger, frustration, shame, sadness, and fear that, to a humble extent, started to untangle as we reorganized the symbolic space taking physical distance, which at an emotional and spiritual level means establishing healthier boundaries within the conflict. Additionally, audience members could expose some of their feelings about what happened, giving more "density" to the thoughts and feelings already there. In revealing what was already there, the way of healing appears.

Once again, although this analysis is not necessarily aesthetical or related to the artistic quality of the piece, it is critical to understanding what is happening in the performance, the effects on the performer and the participant, and its relevance. In that sense, perhaps Vito Acconci and his audiences also entered the spiritual archives while experimenting with transference. However, with no lens open towards spirituality, we might have lost a layer of explanation that I want to recover and solidify here, offering ways to talk about it that look for the ignition of an academic conversation.

In *Medium*, I tried to convey the energy of people's grandmothers, sisters, fathers of their children, or current lovers to the point that audience members reported acting "in the real world" based on our conversations. Most of them left in tears and emotionally moved. Some of them told me the relationship changed for good; others returned to me disappointed because the person did not respond as they expected, not as it played out in our conversation. In any case, the volition to act on the situation inspired by the piece talks about the capacity and the transformational potency of the spiritual archives in performance.

In the second iteration of the piece entitled *Medium 2.0*, I offered my audience members the chance to stand as a medium for me if they wanted to, instead of me being the medium/avatar. In doing so, still with no audience other than the two of us, I could experience the power of the piece from another angle.

Profound understandings of my responsibility in the conflicts I brought to work on were suddenly available, and deep feelings of regret, grief, love, and authentic communication emerged. Once more, I asked the participants for feedback, this time in a virtual Google form. Their comments included the willingness and unexpected courage to take action, let go, or confront the counterpart of the conflict. Such feedback, which I can now attest to (since I experienced the conversation with them as an avatar), shows that a certain degree of transformation of patterns, current realizations, and possible futures was at hand. These possibilities came to life with the aid of the spiritual archives, which became a healing potency for me, as I hope it did for the audience.

Conclusion

In this essay, I present and theorize the spiritual archives, a reservoir of information that is not accessed by reading a text or learning a movement, but by reaching an expanded

state of consciousness (in meditation, dance, with the aid of sacred plants, among others) that connects us to a realm that contains all sorts of information, including thoughts and feelings we have had in this lifetime but also some descriptions about the invisible forces that influence the human world, communication, and feelings. Humans cannot access all that content at a time since our mind is not equipped, but ideally, to the bits that the subject is ready to digest and that will collaborate in their growth and healing.

When using the spiritual archives consciously to produce performance (by including the information learned in the spiritual archives in the content of the artworks or the art practice, or by accessing the archives live as I did in *Medium*), the artist can create pieces that reach dimensions hard to explain with the current concepts and categories accounted for in Performance Studies, and that I insist are worthy of exploration and analysis.

Purposefully, I started this essay with the mention of the poet NourbeSe Philip because, although she has been a significant influence on my thinking, she is an artist and scholar who openly hesitates to and distrusts talking about spirituality and the spiritual realm to the point that we are left unsure if Boateng is a spirit she encounters by a process channeling or a character invented through a poetic license (or both). I take her concerns to heart, which is why I would like to finish by addressing the three reasons why she is so suspicious of including the topic of the spiritual in academic settings. I will take that discussion as an opportunity to argue why I believe this knowledge I am calling spiritual archives is also political, perhaps in a different way than expected. According to Philip:

> I hesitate —stumble even— when called upon to write or talk about spirit and spirituality as it applies to *Zong!* For many reasons, not least of which is a deep-seated and, I think, healthy skepticism of the religious, including New Age spirituality . . . where the individual is now seen as entirely responsible for all that happens to her as governments narrow their sphere of activities and increasingly withdraw from providing, or fail to provide, adequate housing, education, and health care. So, if you live in substandard housing and are unemployed, it's because your thoughts are not positive enough and you haven't worked on yourself sufficiently.
>
> Having said this, I recognize within myself a deep regard for what we call spirit and the spiritual, for lack of other words. Both contradictory tendencies exist within me… (Philip and Scott)

I believe it is fundamental to maintain a healthy skepticism regarding any religious, philosophical, spiritual, aesthetic, or political theories. Therefore, all the ideas I present here are just invitations to partake in an ongoing conversation. The following is what I would add about Philip's concerns, which I found incredibly relevant to address.

According to the characteristic of *interactivity* of the spiritual archives presented here, what we have recorded (including our past and present thoughts) directly affects our reality; that is, we create our reality as an outer expression of our contents in the archives, we create our present and our future according to the conclusions we have drawn about our past, especially our trauma. This process is why we can transform the archives (heal them), which refers to another of their characteristics: they are *alive*. In that sense, and according to what I have learned so far, I found it true that if one is struggling in an aspect of one's life, that fact serves as a diagnosis of negative thought forms about oneself, others, or the world, as well as

a diagnosis of an unequal society that supports such experience. However, that does not mean that such thoughts and patterns are meant for the person to struggle alone, figure out all alone, or heal alone. Bigger structures such as the family, friends, groups, communities, and the State are meant to offer positive experiences of love, justice, freedom, and abundance that will help the subject overwrite the negative thoughts and patterns created by wounding human interaction. In fact, according to my experience with the spiritual archives and my healing, it is impossible to see my way forward alone, using my mind only. As we saw, a big part of entering the archives is a process of surrendering and humbly accepting that we do not know all, and we need community and spiritual and human guides to show us the way. Once they have shown us, we are prompted to act according to the information received to transform ourselves and help others.

If a public institution or public leaders do not pursue goals that benefit people, if a public servant does not work towards the communal good, or is exclusionary in their perspective, such is a symptom that the person and the structure they are part of has not healed yet. In such cases, people are convinced that they are separate from others, unaware of the energies that connect them, and hence look after their profit only at the expense of others. Such cases also show a disconnection from the land and, subsequently, the desire to destroy it. In that sense, there is a collective responsibility to one another (especially if we hold positions of power) to heal and repair mutually. Since that person and collective are wounded and have not tended to their pain, they harm others.

This circle of harm means that politics are spiritual as much as spirituality is political. As spiritual activism proposes, personal healing is connected to collective healing (Pérez 2019, xviii, 141; Anzaldúa 2015, 19). Yeye Luisah Teish explains it beautifully: "We recognize political change as a manifestation of the evolution of human consciousness; and we consciously direct our personal and spiritual energies toward the creation of an egalitarian society" (2021, 292). Working on transforming the spiritual archives to pursue joy, pleasure, and abundance impacts the collective consciousness of what it is for us to be humans in society. We can have art as a vehicle to go hand in hand with direct political action.

No doubt, we live in society for a reason. We cannot heal alone because we need other human fellows to help imprint positive experiences of love and acceptance or systems that allow us to experience wealth and justice. We cannot heal alone because we need help from human guides and guiding spirits to show us the way. I do believe that if I do not have a job, it might be related to a negative belief I am holding consciously or unconsciously about myself (that I do not deserve this or that or I am not enough, for example) or about the world (it is not safe to be successful), or about others (the way to get love is by being precarious). However, I do not think I can overcome such thoughts and subsequent patterns alone, nor that I caused them myself. As Mimi Khúc, writer and scholar, says: "[T]he world makes us sick. And then tell us it is our fault. Sickness as individual pathology, a lack of ability or will to 'achieve' wellness" (2019). To heal, I need mentors, guides, a network of care, and fellow travelers. I also need to be able to eat and have a place to live. I need the experience of wealth.

Moreover, I will not overcome my negative thinking and patterns if the State keeps telling me our lives are disposable, that I do not have sovereignty over my body, that we do not belong here, or if institutions want to use me and tell me I am not good enough and should be grateful to even be in, nor if I have people around me telling me it is my fault or I should not

aspire to great things for me, and even less if companies come to our territories and displace us, murder us, and destroy nature for their gain. The fact that healing has to do with the mind and the thought forms and emotional materials in the spiritual archives does not mean that healing is an individualistic process, nor does it invalidate the responsibilities of society and its power structures and much less the need for organized political action to demand the world we deserve. The spiritual archives as epistemology and worldview show us how much politics are deeply related to healing and how much the pursuit of an equal society is spiritual as well.

The spiritual in performance is political because it is a "freedom practice" (Eshun 2022, 139) that allows the artists and audiences open to it to reclaim sovereignty over their physical, mental, and spiritual possibilities for healing and sovereignty over the possible resources and ways of manifesting what our communities deserve and desire.

The real of the spiritual understood as an epistemology beyond an ontology, that is, as a legitimate way to know the world, allows marginalized subjects to reclaim and nurture their relationship with the sacred severed by colonialism and the consequent processes of genocide, transphobia, homophobia, and racism. It also allows artists to take responsibility for how they (we) have colluded with such violence within the scope of our own privilege, which means that the spiritual is also a more comprehensive way of feminist positionality.

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