

Memory in the Bones, the Water, the Earth, the Stars

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with Illustrations by Caki Rebeiz

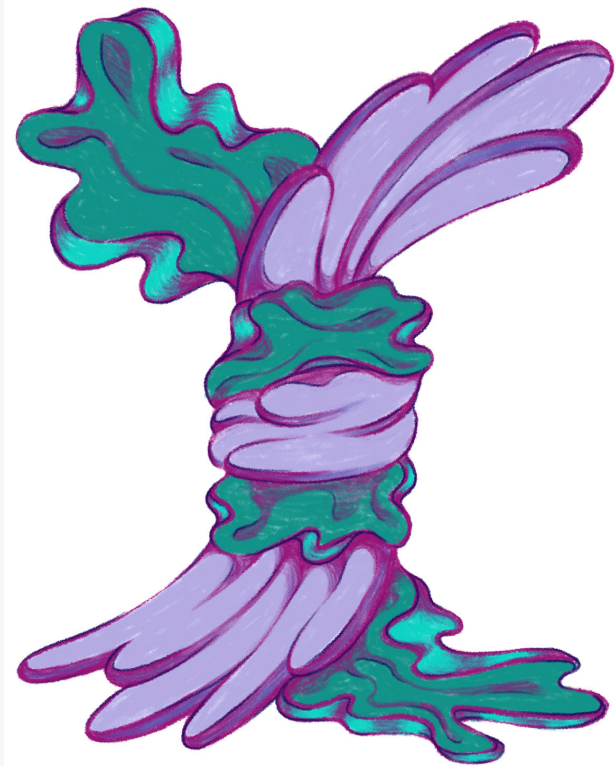


Illustration by Caki Rebeiz

“Water memory” is a theory about how water can retain a memory of substances even after the substance has dissolved. Proposed by French immunologist Jacques Benveniste in 1988, water’s memory is a fact for communities who have loved and valued water for millennia. Though water’s memory is only a theory to Western sciences, how could entities dissolved in water simply disappear? Why wouldn’t the water remember what it had absorbed?

This is something I wonder, too, about bones: do their elements remember their previous states? Matter doesn’t disappear—energy can transform it and bring it into existence, but matter cannot be created from nothing. And so, why wouldn’t the elements in our bones remember their previous lives as other things? Though time erodes everything (even things meant to last forever), matter itself endures through time, manifesting as various bodies in a new life cycle. The transtemporal nature of matter seems a fitting metaphor for the conversation of restitution that is to follow.

Artists Quill Christie-Peters (Anishinaabe) and Valincy-Jean Patelli logged into Zoom on Friday, March 4th, to discuss how memory and restitution guide their respective visual practices. As part of the Fluid Mutualism symposium, the event educated attendees on how our bodies and minds are related to water—a being that connects space, time, and life on Earth. The H₂O that runs through rivers from lakes to the sea also runs in our blood. During their land acknowledgment, Professor V, the moderator and a symposium organizer, reminded us that our bodies are [60%](#) water. Anything that has an impact on water has an effect on us. If water remembers, so does more than half of our human body.



(1), (2) Illustration by Caki Rebeiz



Valincy-Jean Patelli first discussed their artwork and practice in the context of restitution. Their series *Heirlooms* (2018–ongoing) is a material investigation into how one’s ancestors’ past is present in our bodies. Our kin’s past continuously forms our bodies’ present as we inherit everything from physical likeness to ancestral trauma. Describing them as “speculative lost objects from the Middle Passage,” Patelli thinks about otherwise histories—how memory lives within objects and how a could-have-been past haunts those objects.

A tall, [gold, bead-covered](#) object in the *Heirlooms* series brings to mind barnacles on the surface of something that lives underwater, like remains on the Atlantic ocean’s floor. The sculpture brings together materials that evoke histories of the slave trade: gold, representing European and colonial wealth and abundance, and barnacles, arthropods that rest on other beings (like rocks, whales, or lobsters) for their survival. Its material and aesthetic allusions to the Middle Passage lead viewers to understand that the art object is part of a critical fabulation (Saidiya Hartman’s term) of the Atlantic slave trade. Patelli inserts them into this historical narrative, making it a history that *could have been* rather than *was*.



During the Q&A, artist and CCA professor Michael Washington brought up the recent discourse in Black arts around “the afterlives of slavery... the past haunting the present.” He cited Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe’s respective works as two writers who challenge hegemonic ways of thinking about history—specifically Black narratives in America. “Is there a relationship for you between

(1), (2) Artwork by Valincy-Jean Patelli



(1), (2) Artwork by Quill Christie-Peters

representing the past and interacting with it? Or allowing it to shape and affect us through your practice?" Washington inquired. Patelli paused, then answered, "You can hold spirit, and you can also share community." Patelli's connection to their ancestors is evident in their thoughtful selection of materials that tell the material history of the Atlantic Slave trade. These material interactions hold spirit and community: the hearts of their ancestors and the community of those who are with us now, holding their ancestors tight.

In *Unclaimed Property*, the artist circled rope around a glittery stone-like body made of plaster and glitter, the rope sitting stacked from bottom to top. The rope's frayed end peaks out from underneath the sculpture. Does the rope signal that this object is being held captive? Stuck captivating itself? Materials like gold and twine evoke the histories of settler-colonialism and the theft of land and life that colonial domination brought. How often was rope used to constrain someone and end a life during that period? The rope knows. Its fibers remember.

Quill Christie-Peters described her art practice as the practice of falling in love. Her painting and tattoo work expand typical physical understanding of the body, asking: where are our ancestors located in our bodies? How can we honor ancestors beyond human kin? Her 2022 painting *We Are Always Witnessed By Many* shows a pregnant woman leaning on her knees, resting her arms and forehead against a hard surface, waiting for her baby to come.

She kneels in deep blue water with turquoise highlights that flows towards the painting's edge, inviting the viewer to climb in. "The body is a hub for relationships," she said of this piece. "Relationships are always in the body, though they can be



Illustration by Caki Rebeiz

inaccessible or obscured.” As her body grew another body made from the matter that entered her, she communicated with all the ancestors that witnessed matter’s energetic transformation into another human.

When asked about how she frames her mixed ancestry and heritage, Christie-Peters answered, “It’s not like half this half that. It’s like a wholistic dance with the ancestors, a sense of being a whole person, not parts and pieces.” This notion of never being parts and pieces of a person resonated with what Christie-Peters remarked earlier about settler-colonialism as an attempt to remove Indigenous people from their bodies. Christie-Peter’s understanding of the body, here, is as an extended or collective body, which includes the E/earth and homelands. Colonizers sought to remove the self from the body through colonial reeducation, resulting in many people not wanting to be close to their bodies because of all the pain they held. The artist asserted that separations from the body could be rectified and restituted through pleasure with the body.

Her 2017 painting *Kwe becomes the moon, touches herself so she can feel full again* depicts a figure with lush, black hair on a pink background, legs splayed in front of the viewer, releasing a river of cosmos and constellations downstream. For Christie-Peters, pleasure is more than bodily pleasure (though that is necessary for healing one’s relationship with their body). Recovering lost knowl-

edge can lead to reclaiming intimacy with one's body. Restitution can be pleasurable. In spending more time listening to our bodies, we can rekindle ancestral relations, which helps us understand lost or obscured teachings.

Patelli and Christie-Peters's respective work finds restitution in how they engage historical trauma and hold on to histories of slavery and settler-colonialism as a part of their healing journey. Ancestors cannot disappear. History cannot disappear. Even when it is not right in front of us, it is in the water; it is in our bones.

Caki Rebeiz is an illustrator from Austin, Texas, and a student at CCA in San Francisco. She uses rhythmic line work, inspired by patterns found in nature, to express the emotions of people and their stories.

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