

“The teachings we need about life are already there in nature.”

Every Cell of the Earth:

A conversation with feminist scholar Monica Mody

Betsy Cornwell

Monica Mody is a writer, poet, and transdisciplinary feminist scholar. I shared my time at the Notre Dame MFA program with Dr. Mody, and I was always entranced by the power of her poetry, as well as her everyday conversation and simply her presence. Here, Dr. Mody offers wisdom for wellness-seekers that transcends her wide-ranging fields of study and becomes applicable to anyone.
—Betsy Cornwell

Betsy Cornwell: *An aspect of your work that I've always admired is your integration of embodiment practices, like dance, into your spiritual and creative work. As someone who spends most of my time writing and teaching, I tend to forget that I live in my body as well as in my mind; as a trauma survivor I have often struggled to allow myself to practice embodiment or to feel fully embodied. Have you always combined those practices? How do you find that they push against or enrich each other?*

Monica Mody: Living in this culture—where we are taught that the head is separate from the body and have learned to glorify intellectual, creative work beholden to disembodied paradigms—it has been essential for me to make returning to the body into a practice. Through practice, I have gradually been able to make the body a conversant who gives regular input in my work/life.

Like many of us, I grew up in a body-negative, cognicentric environment inflected with colonial continuities. Somewhere along the way I lost the organic, joyful connection to the body I am told I had as a toddler.

Although I continued to learn Indian classical dances, martial arts, improv theatre, contemporary jazz dancing, etc., during my preteens all the way to my early twenties, it was only when I rediscovered dance as an expressive medium—where I could give shape to the energy within the body and release forms into new forms, guided by the body's own intuition—that I found I was being restored a natural connection to the body. I can say that showing up to dance every week changed my felt sense of my embodiment. This recovery was closely tied to my doctoral research and writing at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Writing a dissertation can be a pretty language-heavy exercise. Moving from dense formations of word and theory into the fluidity that is possible within an embodied experience made it possible for me to move into fluid spaces within my writing.

I also found myself being visited while I was dancing/being danced—by an array of ancestors and other guide figures who were invested both in my personal healing and in the healing of the ancestral/collective waters I was wading in during the writing and research. Getting really embodied thus allowed me to become a clearer, more open, yet grounded recipient of this order of relational knowing. When I acknowledge the body as a locus of creativity, knowing, and transformation, it is because of how important embodied practices such as dancing, walking in nature, laying down on the Earth, sitting with my back against a tree, and breathing are to my writing process.

Right now during the coronavirus pandemic, when many of our normal structures (e.g., in-person dances) are suspended, I have to consciously build

self-promises, including embodiment practices, into the schedule. It can be hard sometimes! But I know how important these practices are in keeping me grounded and centered so that I can be fully present to my life and work. I also think about how the body and the Earth are one. Earth-based paradigms have long considered the body to be a microcosm of the Earth. Then, my embodiment practices also become a way for me to reconnect to Earth values. My sense experience shows me that the body is not just an inchoate mass of matter that needs to be clothed and fed so that the mind can go about its business. It truly is alive and sacred. Being in the body is what reminds us that we are a living field moving within a constellation of living fields. In fact, research shows that cognition and imagination are embodied processes. We need to reframe thinking, knowing, feeling as processes that are always in situ body.

I want to acknowledge the role of trauma in cutting us off from our sensing and inhabiting of the body. I want to acknowledge that when we hold trauma, it is often not just our own trauma we hold. We belong to families, cultures, histories, collectives—their experience is continually co-arising within our bodies and nervous systems. I want to acknowledge how healing trauma at the personal, familial, cultural, collective, ancestral, intergenerational levels is the need of the hour. And, just as trauma accumulates in the body and nervous system, it is here that we can invite a befriending. Even if it is slow going, even if it is an imperfect journey, that is okay. The point is to come back to the body again and again instead of buying into the ideologies

that constantly tell us we are not enough. The point is to remember that we are interconnected and part of a continually moving web. The living pulse of remembering is the point of this journey. The vital pulse of life wants us to remember!

BC: *You also integrate creative work like poetry into your analytical and academic work, a skill that I frankly envy—when I try to be creative and analytical at the same time, it can feel like trying to build a wall at the same time as breaking one down. Do you have advice for holding those modes together in an integrated way?*

MM: I think theorizing and poetry are related processes. But we have been trained to see analysis as a deconstructive/destructive activity only, which is somehow over and above—instead of being part of—the creative cycle. Creative cycles are never undertaken without analysis. Analytical processes might be happening without conscious awareness, but analytical competence is a part of creativity.

It is also okay to see them as complementary moves instead of them needing to exist at the same time. In my own writing, it is not always easy to do this when I forget that writing is a recursive process, or that I don't need to say/do it all right here right now!

BC: *Your past work includes a presentation at the Trauma and Catharsis Symposium at the California Institute of Integral Studies, and you've written about working with both pasts and futures. Do you see trauma and wellness as opposing forces, a spectrum, a symbiosis, or in some other way? In short, how do you see the relationship between trauma and wellness?*

MM: The relationship between trauma

and wellness in our world gets complicated because we have been conditioned to make choices that are either/or. A version of “If you hold trauma, you need to be fixed before you can be well.” The profound truth, I believe, is that we arrived whole, that the flame that is us is always and already intact. Then there are the particularities of the human journey, where in the field with us are not just our personal experiences, but also the unresolved tensions in the politic of the cultures, histories, and groups we belong to. We can train ourselves to bring awareness to our body's patterns of coherence and flow as we move through life, and this is a process. Even if there are gaps in this awareness, it does not take away from our core intactness, predicated on our interconnected nature.

Western models have strict parameters for what it means to be “well” (what is “normal”). The definitions of wellness I am reaching for emerge from non-Western, nature-based, decolonial models. Holding trauma does not interrupt our complete belonging in the web of life/culture. We are not cast off into the attic. If our wellness determines the wellness of our community, and vice versa, it also means that for such an understanding of wellness to be effected, we always and already belong. To heal from trauma, then, we have to hold a complex understanding both of what it is to be alive, and of ourselves. We become more complex as systems when we grow and transform. Our nervous systems become more creative as we heal.

Although I believe wholeness is the fabric of the universe, it is also true that false conditions have been set up over the centuries to keep us

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fragmented—experiencing trauma. Some of the healing must happen at the level of narrative. What are the stories being told in our psyche, culture, or society about us, about others? This is where writers and artists come in. Writers and artists move in a force-field of imagination. Inhering in our work in the world is the alchemical work of transmuting trauma into something we can live with, and, perhaps, into material that is not only livable-with but life-giving. Possibilities are encoded in the here and now. So, I don't see the holding of trauma as closing the system.

BC: *Your website describes you as a practitioner of earth-ecstatic spirituality. Could you tell us about that practice?*

MM: The basis of earth-ecstatic spirituality—a phrase I coined—is participation with the Earth. Receiving her playfulness, her eros and rhythms and seasons—allowing yourself to be moved—giving her in turn your playfulness and attentiveness and expanded awareness—knowing yourself to be no mere passive observer of phenomena but a direct participant in their engendering.

A few days ago, I was at the ocean, and the ocean and I—we flirted. There was something in the recognition of the Earth as sentient and willful that immediately made me feel more

connected and alive. This was the ecstasy (from the ancient Greek *ekstasis*) of transcending the smallness and fragmentation of the isolated self—standing not outside it as much as in relation, entwined.

Something altered profoundly in my own sense of being able to be in relationship with the Earth after I started studying the ways of the West African Dagara with elder Dr. Malidoma Somé. The Dagara cosmology holds a deep understanding of ritual—ritual emerges through a combination of first principles that are of, and taught by, the Earth herself. The willingness to reconstitute a sense of what life is and what balance is, amid the interaction of elements—the most basic constituents of life—this remains at the core of an earth-ecstatic spirituality for me. I have had the good fortune to study and be in ritual with many other elders, medicine people, and witches from different paths, who have a similar sense of the Earth as the first mother or generatrix.

Every cell of the Earth is filled with profound consciousness, the very consciousness that pervades the cosmos/body. There is no distinction between the macro and the micro. The teachings we need about life are already there in nature. One of the most essential of these teachings is the interconnectedness of all life.

Acknowledging and honoring the deep entanglement humans have with nonhuman beings and forces lets us speak back to the part of our brain that has moved away from nature and tries to corral us into anti-nature. The ecstasy of participation/spiritual connectedness can lighten our living, while teaching us how to love ourselves, love each other, and be good members of the Earth community.

BC: *How do you seek and practice wellness in your own life?*

MM: In a conversation a couple of days ago with a friend, we

found ourselves emphasizing how being able to say we are not doing well is part of wellness. The culture of individualism normalizes factory-manufactured cookie-cutter models of wellness, and stigmatizes experiences that fall outside that narrow spectrum. One thing I am challenging myself to do more is to break out of my own learned response of silence instead of asking for help when I need it. Conjointly, taking responsibility for doing the practices that will return me to a sense of embodied spaciousness and connection to what I would call the wellspring of

life has been vital, especially during the pandemic. For me, these practices, other than the ones I have already mentioned, include a short energy practice in the morning, morning pages, a shower at night where I integrate and

wash off the day. I love nourishing myself with herbal infusions. These practices clear and ground me, and make it possible to hear the deeper conversation between me and the intelligences that co-constitute our field. Wellness for me is that web of relations, and the ability to



Monica Mody. Photograph by Megan Rose

return to the knowing of being of the web. My kitten is part of the web! She reminds me to play regularly.

Another Earth-based practice is that of making offerings, and feeding the other-than-human worlds. The remembering of wholeness for me always entails the remembering of my interconnectedness, that I have ancestors at my back, and that the questions that are framing my living of life right now are not just my questions. It is possible that they are before me to be answered—attempted—on behalf of a larger community of human/nonhuman relations. ♦