

# KNOTS: A Land-based Pedagogy on Pain, Trauma, Healing, and Research

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**Abstract:** Grounded in a land-based and healing-centered approach to scholarship, this creative article showcases how a state violence scholar and survivor grapples with the pain and secondary trauma that occurs when conducting interviews with people who have also been directly impacted by state violence. Namely, the author offers radically vulnerable reflections about her process in the witnessing and writing about the violence that is enacted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This essay is bilingual, multi-media and combines poetry, (meta)physics, ancestral wisdom, and autoethnography to contextualize pain, trauma, and the healing process from state violence and experiences of collective wounding.

**Keywords:** *borderlands, healing research, land, migration, trauma, land-based pedagogy*

## A Creative Offering to Survivors, Triunfadoras, and Sobresalientes

My psychotherapist reminded me that part of healing trauma is reclaiming one's creativity and imagination. As a survivor (and daughter and granddaughter of survivors) of interpersonal violence and state violence, the path toward personal-ancestral-historical healing has been extraordinarily hard and deeply painful. It hurts to open/see my wounds and process the shame, guilt, and rage that often prevents me from accessing and connecting to my soft center. However, turning toward the land and the universe has allowed me to breathe, relax, and dance with my creativity and imagination—my soft center. As an organizer and scholar who is exposed to various events, memories, content, and experiences of state violence, it has been critical to have an intentional communication with the soil and the sky for it has offered me ways to process painful emotions and write about trauma

in more humanizing and affirming ways. This essay, then, is a poetic offering and an invitation to survivors, triunfadoras<sup>1</sup>, and sobresalientes<sup>2</sup> to reclaim their imagination, creativity, and connections to the land and to the universe.

This essay was submitted for a graduate course that was taught by my advisor Dr. Michelle Fine in the fall of 2021. Michelle asked us to write about the “knots” in our work and reflect about where we are stuck in our research and writing. While the assignment inquired me to think about the knots in my work, I felt compelled to reflect about the teachings of the land in relation to my knots. What purpose do knots serve? What can I learn from land-based and embodied knots?

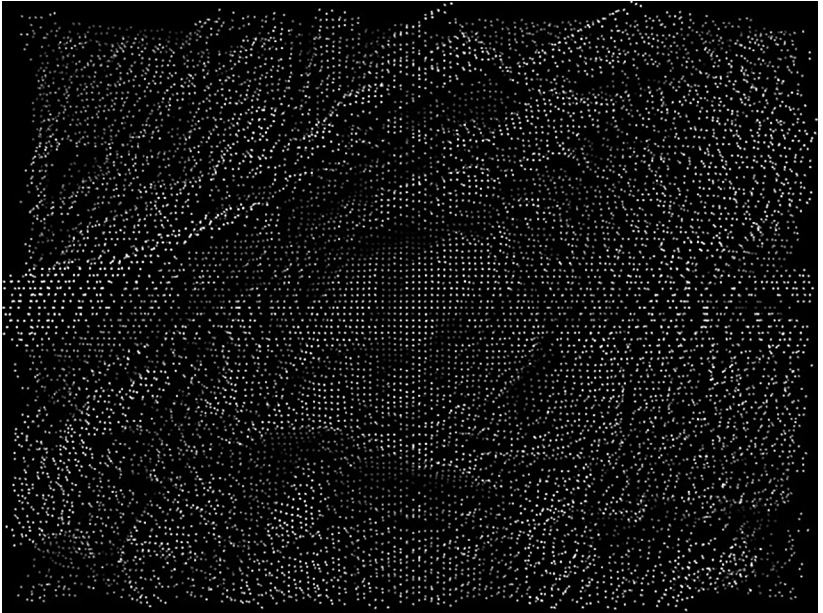
**“The mountains have knots; the knots are stars”**

*(See Figures 1a, b and c)* On April 16, 2021, the Center for Women & Gender Studies at The University of Texas at Austin hosted a virtual book talk with Dr. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein (2021) on her recently published book, “The Disordered Cosmos: A Journey into Dark Matter, Spacetime, and Dreams Deferred.” Dr. Prescod-Weinstein’s work took me back to my senior year in high school, after having been accepted into University of California, Santa Cruz, when I was excited about the prospect of studying quantum physics in college. This was around the time when, for a dollar or two, I bought a used copy of Allan Watts’ (1873) “Cloud-Hidden: Whereabouts unknown. A Mountain Journal” at the corner of a Bohemian coffee shop near Haight-Ashbury. For as long as I can recall, I have been fascinated by how mystic the soul and the universe are.

Fast forward to a few years ago, my partner and I started having conversations about physics. Even though I graduated with a bachelor of arts in psychology from UC Santa Cruz, I am still very much excited about physics. Luckily for me, my



Figures 1a, b and c. A close up of a mountain elder; Digital alterations of the close up.  
Photo taken in Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Territory (colonially known as El Paso, Texas).



partner received a bachelor of science in physics with honors from The University of Texas at El Paso, so I often pick his brain on the waves versus particles debate, thermodynamics, gravity and dark/white/wormholes, large-scale energy such as stars, and mathematical equations such as  $H\Psi = E\Psi$ , which is used in quantum physics to describe the effect of an operator on the state of a particle—that is, when a particle (e.g., electron) is disturbed, you can use that equation to determine the energy state of a particle. Moreover, he explained to me the difference between the two most prominent fields within physics: on the one hand, classical physics looks at the macro scale such as planets and big (energy) forces; on the other hand, quantum physics looks at the micro scale such as waves (e.g., light, sound) and particles (e.g., electrons, photons, protons, neutrons, quarks, atoms).

But here is the fascinating thing: the question physicists have been trying to answer for years is, what links these two scales, classical and quantum physics? What is in between? What weaves the material (planets or particles) to the unknown? Basically, what is the *nepantla* (Anzaldúa 2009)/*Nié* (Báez) <sup>3</sup> of physics? What is *in* between? What is *the* in between? For me, spirit and consciousness inhabit this multidimensional space that is in between the micro and the macro.

Espíritu.

Conciencia.

Historically, Indigenous peoples have tapped into this in-between space. Some would even say that shamans and curanderas who use Sacred Earth Medicine such as Peyote, Ayahuasca, Kambo, and Rapé (pronounce ha-peh), among others, have been able to shift their state(s) of consciousness and connect to something that is beyond themselves. Ancestral practices are geared toward

seeking connection and gratitude toward the matter/meta-matter that takes care of us and ensures our existence. As someone who learned about spirituality from the matriarchs in my familia, I understand the importance of seeing and connecting beyond what we have been taught is “science.” The field of physics has been dominated by white men, so you can imagine how much knowledge they lack due to the limitation of the field’s colonial frameworks. That is why some would argue that our ancestors were mathematicians, physicists/astronomers, biologists, botanists and healers all at once.

Colonial measurements can impede our ability to (un)learn and see/feel/hear beyond. When we honor and protect the land as sacred, energy becomes altered, but it cannot be necessarily measured. How do you measure consciousness? How do you measure spirituality? How do you measure dreams? How do you measure the powerful impact that your ancestors’ prayers have on you? Some states cannot be measured. Can the in-between space be measured? Does everything have to be measured? Sacred experiences cannot be measured.

Returning to the main concern of this reflection, do knots alter our state (because ultimately we are composed of particles)? That is, do knots have an impact on us? What are the knots communicating to us? Are the knots stuck energy? And what can we learn from the land about (releasing/embracing the) knots? To think even further about the meta(spiritual)physical space, I want to think about Dr. Prescod-Weinstein’s (2021) definition of a system:

In physics, a system has a symmetry related to one of its properties if that property doesn’t change even if the system is somehow altered... Physicists are taught from day one of frosh physics that if you can simplify a problem to something that has some symmetries, you

should. In fact, we have a running joke that all of physics boils down to “approximate this cow as a sphere.”

In the embodied, how do we articulate *symmetry*?

Mountains are also bodies, only older and wiser, yet silent.

Mountains can be symmetrical. Can mountains be symmetrical?

(See *Figures 2a, b and c*)

In the embodied, in the flesh, how do we articulate an *altered system*?

Trauma, pain, and suffering alter the neurons in our guts and brains, our bone marrow (Segalo 2020), and our joints (think of autoimmune conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis).

Are the knots in our bodies re-articulations and alterations of our materiality?

“Nudos”

I am familiar with knots  
I have felt knots in my throat  
tengo muchos nudos en la espalda  
I have felt knots in my finger joints  
causing me to write  
and m o v e  
slower  
reminding me to  
stop and smell the rosas  
y otras flores blancas.  
sometimes the knots hurt

at other times they suffocate me  
 los nudos hacen trensas  
 when it rains the knots melt  
 when the moon is full the knots dance  
 when I am dehydrated the knots harden  
 my laugh tickles my knots  
 los nudos siempre estan conmigo  
 they walk with me.

*"Los nudos hacen trensas"*  
 (See Figures 3a, b and c)

If knots are natural patterns, then mountains and trees seem to embrace their knots. Do their knots hurt like mine do?

### **Releasing the Knots: On Secondary Trauma and Care**

How do the knots in my body impact my writing?

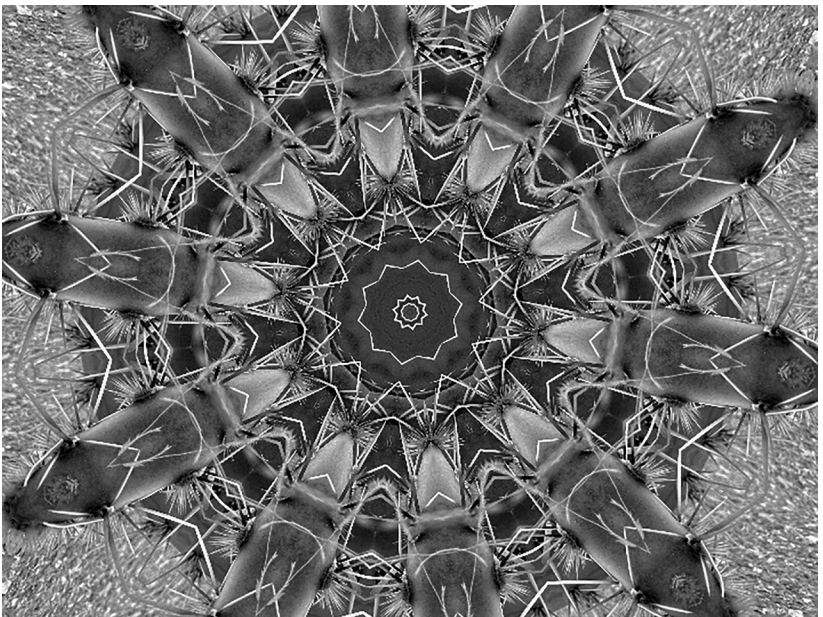
#### *Trauma Secundario*

Based on my organizing, scholarship, and personal experience with historical, intergenerational, and interpersonal trauma and healing, I can offer the following working definition about secondary trauma: secondary trauma, or vicarious trauma, is the transference or counter-transference of traumatic events, memories, emotions, and negative cognitions (e.g., "I am unworthy") about oneself from one person to another. In my experience, secondary trauma has been transferred to me via oral or written testimonies, human rights reports, documentaries that show graphic images, and through the direct witnessing of violence that has happened to someone else or a group of people. Secondary trauma, then, can feel as if the traumatic event actually



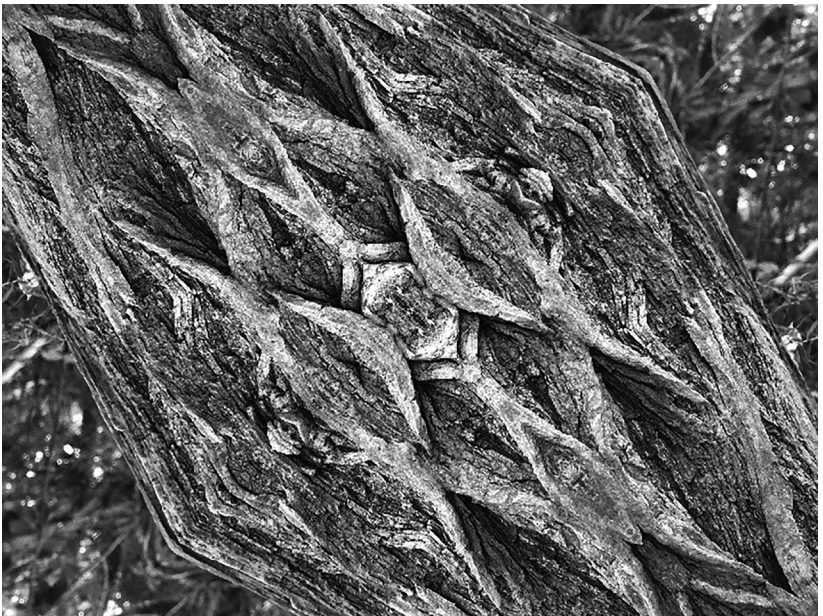
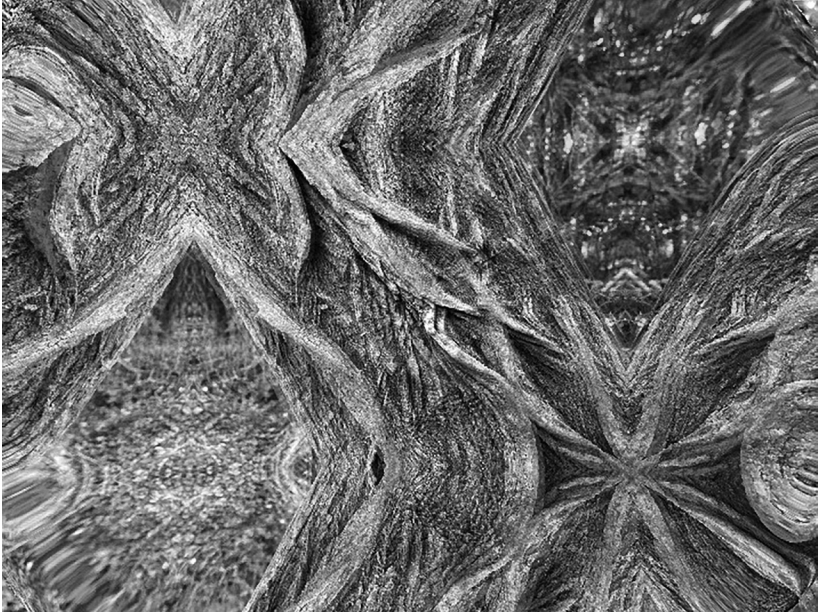


Figures 2a, b and c. (a)simetria. A photo of desert mountains and a cactus plant; digital alterations of the cactus plant. Photo taken in Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Territory (colonially known as El Paso, Texas).





Figures 3a, b and c. A close-up of a relative (tree trunk); digital alterations of the original photo. Photo taken in traditional Munsee Lenape and Wappinger Land (colonially known as the Bronx, New York).



happened to oneself and not just the person who was originally injured. Why is secondary trauma relevant to my reflection? I would argue that some of the knots I have experienced—in my body and in my writing—form due to trauma, including secondary trauma.

Why did it take me so long to write a paper about the violence that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) enacts on immigrants who have been rendered undocumented? Here is some background: In 2019, I was a Research Assistant for the Migration and Health Study at The University of Texas at Austin. The lab was led by the principal investigator, Dr. Miguel Pinedo. As part of my job duties, I interviewed twenty-three people which included undocumented Latina/o/x immigrants and U.S.-born Latinas/os/xs.<sup>4</sup> A year later, I started my PhD program in the critical social-personality psychology program at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Early on, I started to think about which material I was going to use or generate for my second doctoral exam (which is a major milestone in my program). Intuitively, I thought about taking up a secondary analysis of some of the interviews that I had gathered for the Migration and Health Study. After obtaining permission from Dr. Pinedo to access the interviews, I re-read the transcripts from the twenty-three interviews I had gathered and ended up choosing six. At that point, I had everything I needed to write my second doctoral exam. I had the transcripts and the codebook that the original study's principal investigators and I had generated together. For the purpose of my paper, I edited the codebook and added a few other themes that emerged from the transcripts. The prospects of getting this paper done in no time seemed good.

However, months passed and I began to feel stuck. I did not know *how* to pick up where I had left off. I needed to write an introduction, analysis, and discussion/conclusion. Months later, I came across a call for papers for a special issue of

the journal *Feminist Formations* “On Decolonial Feminisms: Engagement, Practice, and Action” through the University of California, Berkeley’s Latinx Research Center. So I decided to write my second doctoral exam and submit it for publication. I was motivated to write my first sole author manuscript. For the purpose of that manuscript, and inspired by Dr. Whitney Richards-Calathes’ (2021) article on Aya where she focuses on the micro/intimate scale, I chose two transcripts out of gender and embodiment explicitness. Two stories, as opposed to six, would allow me to take a “deep dive” into these lives.

I had reduced the transcripts from six to two. So, why was I still stuck? After sitting with this feeling of immobility, I realized that the stories had actually impacted me more than I would have thought. I realized that I was feeling a deep sense of indignation and anger toward the crimmigration system in what is colonially known as the United States of America. I also felt a profound and painful sense of powerlessness for not being able to have an immediate transformative impact on the narrators who generously shared their testimonies with me. I took some time away from the transcripts and I started to forget the details. Months passed before I decided to re-read the transcripts once again. But then again, I took some time and distance away from them. I re-read the transcripts at least five times. Even though I was very familiar with the stories and the details were no longer escaping me, I felt like I was reading the stories for the first time each time I read them. *Mi cuerpo leía conmigo*. Every time, and more and more, *the transcripts invited me to tend to the visceral and to be intentional about honoring the pain: both the narrators’ pain and my own*.

It finally clicked. I gave myself permission to sit with the pain. I had made some progress. I was feeling my feelings. Historically, as a survivor, I have a deep need to contextualize (my) pain, and so in the manuscript I decided to offer a detailed theoretical background to contextualize the narrators’ testimonies

and their pain. But it came to a point where the theoretical frameworks that I wanted to include in the manuscript were not letting the stories breathe. I was reminded of my advisor's advice: "let the stories breathe." And so I did. At last, I ended up focusing on a single theme in the codebook, "Embodiment of anger, stress, anxiety, or depression due to experiences of state violence." My second doctoral exam and manuscript focused on the impacts of state violence on the body. Namely, I wrote about the affective and embodied impacts of two women who have been rendered undocumented living under the terror of ICE. My writing was an invitation to tend to the visceral: the visceral in the narrators' testimonies, the visceral in me, and the visceral in the readers.

### **Healing the Knots**

#### *Cuidado*

How did I take care of myself throughout this process? How did I get myself unstuck? How did I release the knots?

I am learning.

I am learning to be even more intentional about taking care of myself. I have no other option, but to tend to my deepest needs and desires. Tending to myself, to my needs (my need for connection, justice, and love) and desires (health, truth, justice), is an act of care. Yo me cuido a mi misma, porque como dicen por ahí, "si vos estas bien, el movimiento va estar bien."

So I went on walks to the park.

So I burned sage more often.

So I turned my feelings of powerlessness and indignation into  
creativity and action.

So I tasted the goldish colors of the Egyptian Rose tea that I bought  
at a Black-owned tea shop in Brooklyn.







Figure 4. A photo of Wendy Letven's (2017) "There are holes in my perception of the forest." Photo taken in traditional Munsee Lenape and Wappinger Land (colonially known as Harlem, New York).



Figures 5a and b. Photos of tree relatives. Photos taken in traditional Munsee Lenape and Wappinger Land.

In hindsight, I wonder if the knots form in negative spaces to alert us that we must tend to these voids? Are voids the connecting tissue between particles and planets, neurons and knots? (See Figures 5a and b)

After I submitted the manuscript, I went back to the Forever Wild trail and made loving offerings to the land for taking care of me. My offering also took care of the spiritual energy that is in the land.

Gracias arbolitos  
por darme oxígeno.  
Gracias suelo  
por guiar mi camino.

May the triunfadoras find their way back to themselves.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My mom prefers the term “triumfadora” over “victim” and “survivor” because it highlights one’s strength, inner light, and great abilities to overcome obstacles. You can read more about this in Girón, & Beltrán Girón (Forthcoming 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Sobresalir es una experiencia que Juanita Rosales y Christine Rosales, una mamá e hija salvadoreña, comparten en “Consejos de una Mamá Sobresaliente: Dialogue, Reflections, and Healing between a Salvadorean-Born Mother and her U.S.-Born Daughter.” Dicho artículo fue publicado por UC Santa Cruz Women of Color Cluster (WOCC) en *Collaboration and Conflict Research Journal* (2019). El poema que mi mamá y yo co-escribimos es un ejemplo más de los procesos emocionales e intelectuales que madres e hijas realizan como acto de sanación y liberación.

<sup>3</sup> In 2020, I attended a series of presentations at the virtual LASA Congress. One of these presentations was the panel on “Feminismo y Antiracismo I.” At this panel, one of the speakers compared the Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa’s *nepantla* (an in-between space) with Black Dominican Josefina Báez’s *Nié*, which means “ni de aquí, ni de haya.” I have found a few articles that take on Báez’ *Nié*, but I have yet to find the performance where Báez articulated the *Nié* experience. See more on *Nié*: <https://twitter.com/ayombe/status/1208103908121419776?lang=en>.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Pelaez Lopez is an Afroindigenous poet from Oaxaca in what is known as México. Alan sheds light on the white supremacist heteropatriarchal and anti-Black racist colonial legacies behind the term “Latinx.” While the original study did not critique the term “Latinx,” now as I

have learned more about the ways in which settler violence permeates identities and as I reflect about my own (former) self-identification as “Latina” and later as “Latinx,” I am split between honoring the narrators’ identification with Latinidad and the wounds that emerge from it and that are perpetuated by it.

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