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Queerness, Witchcraft, and Embodied Presence: Aesthetic Knowings of What a Body Can Do

Megan Bigelow

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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QUEERNESS, WITCHCRAFT, AND EMBODIED PRESENCE: AESTHETIC KNOWINGS OF WHAT A BODY CAN DO

by

MEGAN BIGELOW

A master’s capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Megan Bigelow

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the capstone requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Queerness, Witchcraft, and Embodied Presence: Aesthetic Knowings Of What A Body Can Do

by

Megan Bigelow

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Taking as a point of entry the critique of representation and affirming the limitations of the cuts that language makes, this capstone project explores the imbrications and assemblages between Foucault’s concept of subjugated knowledges, witchcraft and other body-based ways of knowing and being, and the consciousness of non-human forms such as plants and through the framework of non-representational theory, process philosophies, aesthetics, queerness, and the concept of difference itself.

Since such theories themselves are living, breathing entities, this capstone project explores the ideological split that has occurred between sacred and secular beliefs, moving through different figures such as nuns and witches and examining how different iterations of energy—both in the form of vibrations and other forces—enact discourse and the materiality of mattering through bodies, power, aesthetics and the nexuses that bodies exist both within and as deeply material events, concluding with an ethics of non-linearity and relation.
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Paisley Currah

Patricia Clough

Kandice Chuh

Nick Bazzano

Robin James

dancers everywhere at the rave

witches past, present, and future
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Chapter 1: Overview

As I am a visual artist as well as an academic, this project presents and places in conversation with my writing both artistic still images that I have made throughout my time at the Graduate Center. It provides a visual document of my work as well as new work that was made during this writing. By including images made both with my own body and with objects my body has gathered as it moves throughout the world, I am practicing a unique way of conducting research that is not solely constrained to the senses of reading and thinking; rather my methodology and research practices include the air I breathe, the colors I see, and how my body itself receives them. These are all concepts I have explored, presented papers on at conferences, and work I have published during my time in graduate school. In turn, this methodology reflects and exemplifies the very concepts I am learning, creating, and moving through and is a unique form of illustrating them beyond the page.

My methodology has always been profoundly embodied, and I take my own body as both an artistic material and a conduit for larger, systemic sociocultural forces through which art and theory pass and flow. I occasionally use my body in the images that I make, and the objects that are within the pictures are everyday objects that I find while moving through the world, such as discarded items, bits of trees and flowers, and other objects I find in the world as my body moves within it. An aggregator, of sorts.
Working with the idea that the occult is defined as something that cannot be measured, this project uses a framework that is critical of measure and representation, working with concepts such as the role of nuns as quiet resisters within the church. It segues into an ethics of relationality and joy, in which the sentience of non-human actors and agents is not negated but rather is affirmed as, after Nietzsche, an active force. The occult, affirmation, and relationality drive my passionate creation of these images and my life itself.
Consequently, I reject a static model of existence in favor of a dynamic, matter-in-motion approach in which epigenetics, prescription hormones, and other lived experiences such as queerness have differential outcomes and allow for a fractal, quantum informational approach to both specific instances like the concept of hormones and more general relational circumstances such as empathy has ethical implications for collectives of care and relations of power.

Taking the critiques of identitarian and representational frameworks as points of entry, my approach entails how to think, feel, and sense with and through the visceral materiality of living, moving, changing, and existing in the world as both a bounded bodily being and a differential contraction of forces, emotions, affects, and flows that cannot be represented directly but pass through the body-itself to events of form such as the production of artistic objects, sensations, and the aesthetic and the intent of artists.

At times I wish to trouble the concept of artistic intent for its reliance upon representational and identitarian arguments while also simultaneously hesitating to completely disregard its productive effects and the beauty of its hopeful longings for a different world.

Though teleological accounts trouble me, I wonder—how do we come to slip in between and shapeshift through the false promise of a unified, static self into the bursting dynamism of the desire to make things and wonder and keep going and wait what did he say how did she feel what did you see how did you do it why all the questions, now?
In approaching the artist’s body in all of its living, breathing, moving moments as a conduit for embodied rhetoric, discourse, and non-representational vernaculars, the body-itslf can be viewed as a fraught, queer site of knowledge and aesthetic production. I’m interested in such relations of embodied materiality and the intimate, processual collapse related to concepts such as the social materiality and how this translates through my body as an artist and, consequently, the body of the viewer of artworks I make, particularly as they are mediated and interface with digital tools such as a flatbed scanner and Photoshop, the tools I use to produce the majority of my images.

Figure 2
Chapter 2: Nuns + Witches

I contend that despite being forced into static models worthy of critical discussion and dismantling such as representation and transcendence, I have a prehension, a feeling, a wondering-in-the-wind that, after Patricia Clough, the preindividual is something that stays within the body and itself is a form of, after Michel Foucault, subjugated knowledge, particularly with respect to events such as the witch hunts of the Early Modern period and the ongoing transcendence of traditional religious models.

For example, herbs and oils are used frequently in traditional folk medicine and witchcraft rituals and healing practices. What agencies and actors are building dynamic relations when such plants are used in healing ways, and what forms of knowledge were released back to the earth during the witch hunts when witches were burned? How are these ways of knowing and being subjugated knowledge in one sense, due to the witch hunts and the murder of witches, but fully present in another sense in that they are embedded, as potential, within the ashes, the earth, and the nutrients in the soil and their dynamic relations of matter and of time?

Immanence is not related to Some Thing as a unity superior to all things or to a Subject as an act that brings about a synthesis of things: it is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence. No more than the transcendental field is defined by consciousness can the plane of immanence be defined by a subject or an object that is able to contain it. We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life. A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss. (Deleuze 2005, 27)
This concept of immanence by Deleuze, coupled with Karen Barad's notions on the physicality of touch and bodies in *On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am*, illustrate a touching between different individuations of the life force itself—namely through plants and physical touch.

![Figure 3](image)

I contend that non-linear touch throughout time occurs when the power that the church has traditionally exerted over traditional forms of immanent knowing, such as witchcraft and paganism, and how, despite a model that relies upon the transcendence of priestly and godly
knowledge in the form of “a creator,” there exist immanent forms of knowing and touch that still remain and are considered acceptable modes of being within the church.

Attempting to tune my body into these prehensions and approach my body more as, after Deleuze, a contraction of forces and materials within Bergsonian duration and to use these sensations, these affects, these gut feelings in order to make theory and ways of knowing and existing in the world lies at the heart of my methodological yearnings and desires-to-exist. Barad offers: “theorizing, a form of experimenting, is about being in touch. What keeps theories alive and lively is being responsible and responsive to the world’s patternings and murmurings.” (Barad 2012, 206)

Foucault’s conceptualization of subjugated knowledges paired with Deleuze’s critique of representation offer a generative point of entry for thinking about the realms of sensations, affects, knowledges, and affinities that exist in relation to the leaky borders between plant, human, and non-human and animal life. Foucault’s emphasis that such knowledges are “naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault 1976, 17) offers several points of entry due to their emphasis on cognition and scientificity, modes of systemization which are often ways of producing knowledge that are, ostensibly, “objective” but which ultimately exclude whole realms of embodied knowledges such as witchcraft and the occult.

One such figure that particularly comes to mind when thinking through embodied models with regard to the preindividual that remains despite participating in models of transcendence and
whom sits at the confluence of religion, immanence, transcendence, and embodied ways of knowing is 11th century Christian mystic Hildegard von Bingen. She describes when she was “forty-two years and seven months old, a burning light of tremendous brightness coming from heaven poured into my entire mind. Like a flame that does not burn but enkindles, it inflamed my entire heart and my entire breast, just like the sun that warms an object with its rays.” (George 1995, 66)

Hildegard recounts her visions: “All of a sudden, I was able to taste of the understanding of the narration of books, I saw the psalter clearly and the evangelist and other Catholic books of the Old and New Testaments.” (George 1995, 66)

Which visions and sensings are permitted, celebrated, and preserved as holy and acceptable, and which visions and sensings, such as paganism, witchcraft, and shunned forms of knowing are not permitted access to representation, veneration, and transmission throughout generations and slicings of time? This is a question I am deeply interested in thinking through theoretically, particularly with respect to the role of plants, animals, and non-human forms of the life force which humans are continually in contact with—be it through our senses, through digestion, through cultivation, and/or through coexistence and cultivation.

I approach individuation, after Gilbert Simondon Patricia Clough, and Gilles Deleuze, as an immanent force, and sense that many forms of embodied and subjugated knowledges are transmitted, epigenetically and through Lynn Marguiles’ concept of horizontal gene transfer, through the preindividual and its many eternal longings.
Simondon offers that the difference between human and animal sociality is that the human:
“having available more extended psychic possibilities, in particular due to the resources of symbolism, more frequently calls on psyche; it is the vital situation that is exceptional in the human, and thus humans feel more destitute. But it is not a matter of a nature, an essence serving to found an anthropology; it is simply that a threshold is crossed.” (Combes 2013, 88)

Here, I am particularly interested in the crossings between thresholds, limits, liminalities, and forms that individuation takes. When Hildegard von Bingen “taste(s) of the understanding of the
narration of books,” (George 1995, 66) what of the preindividual is transmitted through her words, her tastings, and her subsequent paintings, such as “Cultivating The Cosmic Tree”? 

Figure 5
How does her own form of immanence serve as a loose network of the continuation of knowledges, subjugated to the demands of the church, but which remained immanent in her sensings, her paintings?

The resonance between forms, the rhythmicity of all of life itself, reveals itself, quantumly and queerly, in, as Barad notes: “an alluring murmur from the insensible within the sensible to radically rework the nature of being and time?” (Barad 2012, 208) The concept and phenomena of the incorruptible bodies of saints, which are said to not decompose like the bodies of non-saints do, is a great example.

Many bodies of saints have existed in this state, which clearly defies all known biological and time-based models, for centuries. I wish to underscore in describing this phenomena that just because our current models of understanding, knowing, sensing, and being cannot describe, understand, or explain a phenomena does not mean that such phenomena do not hold conceptual and existential powers.

Phenomena that do not fit standardized models of measure, knowing, and comprehensibility, such as the incorruptible bodies of saints, offer particularly potent and generative points of entry for thinking through phenomena and concepts such as the preindividual, Barad’s notion of quantum touching and the importance of touch, and the relations between all forms of life, particularly the forces and forms of embodied knowledges and relations that can be felt in the event-itself but may not necessarily make it to dominant, hegemonic ways of knowing.
Nuns and witches are not dominant figures within mainstream, capitalist, colonialist, imperial discourses.

However, immanence-itself allows for these prehensions and relations and non-dominant figures to thrive and throb and wonder in time, as humans and non-humans continue to integrate the strivings, the individuations, the burstings open and closings forth of life-itself so they can coordinate, syncopate, organize, and communicate between seemingly disparate forms of life? Between events? Between quantum individuations and the ghosts within us, between us, between walls and under the dust of time? Within models known as attractors?
Paul Preciado, in discussing Teresa de Lauretis’s thinking through the sex-gender framework, notes: “Lauretis claimed that feminist ‘theory’ could not be evinced unless it examined its own critical foundations, political terms, linguistic practices, and practices of the production of visibility. Lauretis asked what the political subject produced by feminism as a discourse and the practice of representation was. Stripped of all self-indulgence, her conclusion takes the form of an extremely lucid warning: feminism functions, or can function, as an instrument of normalization and political control when it reduces its subject to ‘women.’” (Preciado 2013, 107)
Under the apparent neutrality and universality of the term woman, where nuns and most witches fall, a host of vectors of production and subjectivity are hiding: sex, race, class, sexuality, age, ability, geopolitical or corporal difference, and so on. In Lauretian terms, the subject of feminism is inevitably eccentric; rather than coinciding with ‘women,’ it arises as a force of displacement, as a practice for the transformation of subjectivity. In order to question the conflation of gender and woman, Teresa de Lauretis developed the notion of ‘technologies of gender.’ For Lauretis, filmmaking devices—specific modes of recording, projection, montage, signification, and decoding—serve as a paradigm for conceiving of the production of gender and sexual subjectivity.” (Preciado 2013, 107)

It is within these technologies that I choose to use my own body as a tool and exploration of immanence, materiality, and subjectivity.

The modes of systematization that produce, standardize, and elevate “common” sense to, well, a common level at which it then functions as a self-regulating machine in the production of norms, modes of being, and which knowledges are considered proper, acceptable and, most importantly, worthy of elevation to the event of representation, reiteration, and reproduction. The cost of systematization is the loss of which modes of knowledge, being, and becoming are subject to discursive and actual violence, erasure, prohibition, and, ultimately, loss. The figure of the witch and the loss of the bodily, plant, and otherwise knowledges during the witch hunts is a timely reminder of these losses.
The biopolitical classification and regulation of several types of bodies, including human, animal, and plant bodies as illegal, can be understood as serving a normalizing function based on discourses that produce common sense, such as healthiest, most practical, most economically sound, or safest for a population’s future. Foucault’s concept of subjugated knowledge again underscores what futures, visions, and lives common sense erased and rendered invisible and even killed.

As the production of futures follows the production of common sense, we have seen how bodies outside the rubric of “common sense” are disciplined via juridico-legal and biopolitical apparatuses: witches, queer bodies, foreign bodies, non-white bodies, dis/abled bodies, women’s bodies, geographic bodies, animal bodies, and plant bodies – right down to the molecular level of loss.
Hildegard von Bingen's visions enjoy an interesting parallel with entheogens—defined as substances, molecules, or plants such ingested to produce sensory experiences in human brains described as spiritual. Certain molecules, such as the DMT found in ayahuasca, or the psilocybin found in certain mushrooms, can open up a site for exploring the dissolution of boundaries between plant life and human life, disrupt common sense, and create ripples in temporal experiences of futurity, much like Hildegard von Bingen's visions.
Psychedelic cult hero Terrence McKenna said of entheogens that “Part of what psychedelics do is they decondition you from cultural values. This is what makes it such a political hot potato. Since all culture is a kind of con game, the most dangerous candy you can hand out is one which causes people to start questioning the rules of the game.” (McKenna 1992, 99)

McKenna’s assertion that the breaking down of common sense alludes to the logic of normativity that underlies the categorization of certain plants as illegal due to the way their chemicals are animated as they cross borders into the brains, queer bodies, or plant bodies inside human ones. These logics have been justified along the lines of optimal individual and societal physical and mental health, which allows for the existing matter of bodies, plants, and their molecules to be rendered illegal.

That such visions are often self-administered and externally invisible within the borders of individual human embodied experience, means they are even less available to be harnessed regulatory mechanisms: thus the attempt to subjugate such visions and make the molecules responsible for them illegal. This functions in the same way that witches and visionaries such as Hilgedard were marked as mentally ill or unfit in order to control and dominate their subjugated knowledges.

For example, the general regulation of drugs and the sensations they may produce by any state apparatus creates artificially produced divisions and, after Deleuze, molecular divisions into factions and geographic strata in which the relation of certain plants to certain bodies, events, and modes of consciousness is either permitted or not permitted. The further regulation by specific
states, such as is the case with medical marijuana in the US, further distributes bodily norms regarding health, relations between plants and humans, and which events can or cannot take place legally, socially, culturally, and, importantly, sensorily.

Figure 9

When Deleuze speaks of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, the concepts that the release of the flow of entities in one specifically territorialized environment must and will eventually
reterritorialize in a different terrain, milieu, or environment, this concept clearly illustrates that the borders between human and non-human, plant and animal, common and not-common sense are far more tenuous and indeterminate than strict representation and the classification into molecular, as opposed to molar, forms permits.

Turning to queer theorist Lee Edelman, the “common sense” argument that the wellbeing of The Child is necessary for the wellbeing of the nation is the underlying logic to the Reagan administration’s War on Drugs, which continues to target children’s brains as the borders that must be secured against psychoactive molecules found and derived from plants. The discourse of safety attempts to eliminate future visions and contacts that may disrupt common sense. (Edelman 2004, 45)

How can invisible contacts between bodies, plants, and motion between borders, and invisible forms of animacy disrupt common sense and provide new futures and alternate queer timelines?

If what is visible distinguishes the borders of different types and locations of matter as distinct from one another, I content that hormones and queerness’ ability to be defined, along with the invisibility of futurity and of sensory experiential knowledge from entheogenic plants are all “thresholds between multiplicities” in the words of Preciado (Preciado 2013, 45) These are sites where common sense can be disrupted and subjugated knowledges can be brought forth to full bodily autonomy, expression, and power. This allows a non-linear version of time to tickle through our bodies and souls.
Can we queer visual common sense with alternate visions for queer futurities that flow between the fictive borders of beings, and understand subjectivities as networks rather than discrete visual givens subject to regulation and negation?
Chapter 3: Ethics-in-becoming

To my mind and body, the visual images sprinkled throughout this project are processual, joyful affirmations of the body’s radical potential for action, capacity, and the ability to affect and to be affected in relation—a notion I take from Brian Massumi’s definition of Spinoza’s concepts of affect and affection, in the introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*:

\texttt{AFFECT/AFFECTION.} Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). L’affect (Spinoza’s affectus) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. L’affection (Spinoza’s affection) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987)

These are my goals when I make images drawn from everything I find in the world. These are my goals by mixing words, theory, and images.

In enacting and performing my analyses through the affective, textual, and visual modes, it’s my desire to introduce movement and sensation through my readings and writings themselves, as a form of, after the late and beloved José Esteban Muñoz, a disidentificatory performativity of the very mode of embodied subjugated knowledges that Foucault details in *Society Must Be Defended*. 
Turning to Rosi Braidotti, specifically her focus on the ethics of the body in pain in *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti*, I examine the subjugated knowledges that Foucault speaks of and how it often is painful to be denied the full expressivity of one’s bodily power. Braidotti’s framework provides a powerful theoretical lens through which his pain can be conceptualized.

To me, these are the conversations that begin to coalesce around a theory of ethics. She too shares Foucault’s critique of the historicizing impulse, noting that “This historical context makes it difficult to detect the thresholds of sustainability or markers of the limits. If your body will not make it manifest or if you choose to ignore the message that this is ‘too much!’ others are likely to send out significant warning signals.” (Braidotti 2011, 303). She continues, discussing how “the subject lies at the intersections with external, relational forces. It’s about assemblages. Encountering them is almost a matter for geography, because it’s a question of orientations, points of entry and exit, a constant un-folding. In this field of transformative forces, sustainability is a concrete social and ethical process—not the abstract economic ideal that development and social planning specialists often reduce it to. It is a concrete concept about the embodied and embedded nature of the subject.” (Braidotti 2011, 309)

Through these transformative processes and shifts, through Foucault’s thinking of all of the subjugated knowledges that flow between bodies and alongside hegemonic discourse(s)—biopolitical, plant, secular and scared, and otherwise—how are we reaching new moments of the ethical-subject-itself as it is produced under late capitalism?

When it can all feel hopeless and broken down how do we, after Braidotti, enact these ethics?
In *Testo Junkie*, Paul Preciado correctly notes that sex is work. Under the increasingly intensified forms of biopolitical governance and control that are capitalism and its endless machinations—what do we have next? How do we love, thrive, and experience joy itself as our very access to representation itself is continually renegotiated, changed, denied, and discursively, biopolitically negated?

While we may reject categories on philosophical, ontological, and metaphysical grounds, categories themselves do have very real, material implications for bodies as they are lived in the world, as we move through and cocreate our fleshy, sweaty, lived materialities. Bodies as they are living in the world are often distributed along intersections of the categories into which our world is divided. Verily, as Foucault notes: “Let’s suppose that universals do not exist. And then I put the question to history and historians: How can you write history if you do not accept a priori the existence of things like the state, society, the sovereign, and subjects?” (Foucault 1976, 55)

How do we truly think through interrelationality and our interdependent networks of care and relation to others that recognize that other individuals are distinct, bounded, bodily beings—separate from ourselves—while also recognizing that together we can do what we can never do alone and that we are deeply imbricated, yes, within systems of governmentality and oppression, but that we are differentially imbricated within our bodies and that, as Preciado muses “the power to produce molecular joy” (Preciado 2013, 217) is what got us here in the first place?
How do we productively work with the joys of our own unique bodies—deeply inscribed and always already within the intersectional axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability/capacity, and other categories, while recognizing the power of difference and capacity itself?

My reading of these potential places for the invention of subjectivity involves problematizing the notion of categories themselves as we move towards a concept of ethics that is not linear. How does the dynamic sociality of discourse and non-representational vernaculars relate to how bodies, objects, and other assemblies of matter do not exist as binary oppositions such as human/non-human and of the body/not of the body, but as multiple, immanent flows between subjectivities, affects, movements, sensations, and differing concentrations of time?

What is the non-representational relation between the affects and non-propositional knowings, sensings, and differential modes of becomings that flow through a body interacting with a work of art, and those that flow through the body of the artist during the creation of that work of art itself? How might the affective charge of the aesthetic be viewed as one conduit for such non-representational vernaculars?

Again, particularly as we function and move within increasingly fractured systems of violences of all sorts under late capitalism and its relentless demands upon bodies themselves: how do we care for each other, particularly when faced with our own vulnerabilities—public and private? What does it mean to “need”? 
Might such an ethics of the depersonalization of the statistical, liberal, individual conceptualization of life itself and the subject itself—a single individual’s life—be a productive entry point, particularly as the systems of governance, management and violent control of bodies within time intensify and choke off the very lived vitality and affirmation of life and love itself?

Truly—all we have is each other. What if we thoughts of bodies, movements, and relations as nodes and routings of events? What sort of ethics—particularly one that escapes and exceeds representation and may only be felt along a performative continuum of relationality—might flow through these eventy nodes, and might they contain what Rosi Braidotti approaches as “the ethical moment”?

As freedom of bodily movement is not only constrained by the normalizing power of the State, systems of affective governance, and less overt systems of control such as Lauren Berlant's concept of slow death, how do we find our ethical moments, our decisions to be there or check out when faced with the time in between an expression of vulnerability and our own body’s capacity to act and to, after Spinoza, affect and be affected by another’s expression of pain, need, and vulnerability?

What would the ethical event look like when approached from the entry point of considering it a non-representational, subjugated form of knowledge and relationality? Particularly as the violent, normativized and normalizing forms of discursive representations are often the only seemingly available ethical actions—how can we do not necessarily better but differently? How can we help another being in pain—human, non-human, even a collective?
As an alternative to a temporally linear, check-the-box-here form of ethics as evidenced by statistical models and the availability within them for limited forms of empathic identification—how might we think the collective as an ethics-in-becoming of care, time, and joy? When faced with the collective—how do we use the rather uneventful form of our own individuated life to enter into new modes of relationality, love, and care for life-itself?

When thinking of the collective as cumulative, we must ask ourselves after the unitary self has been scrambled through the violence and promise of so many everyday losses and hopes—what will our hands bring? What can each touch offer? Are we building far more then we are breaking, and what do we do with the breakings when they do come?

Owing to my general hesitation and desire to break down the false binary between the individual and the collective, I hesitate to say “individually and collectively”, but how do we create worlds individually-collectively that feed us in all of the moments that we do not have to pretend anymore, that we do not have to violate our selves, all of them and all of us, into such unitary watchdogs?

The idea here is that our talismen are always already amongst us, they have been in our bones and in the strings between them since long before we were both and they will be there long after we have died.
Plant to plant, witch to witch, body to body, we contain the seeds of ethical potential in every moment, every breath, every bloom.

Figure 10


