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Alchemy of the Unseen: Ritual Movement, Chaos Magic(k), and the Queer Reclamation of Mystical Praxis as a Method of Emotional Processing

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Abstract

This research explores the intersection of artistic practice and mystical frameworks through an autoethnographic investigation into ritual movement and chaos magic(k) inspired practices. As a queer witch and practitioner-scholar, I engage in autobiographical ritual performance to examine affect, emotional processing, and symbolic gesture, using a relational dynamic coaching model as a structural framework for reflection and transformation. This study interrogates the role of ritualised motion in engaging unconscious patterning and grief processing, positioning embodied magic(k)al practice as both a research method and a form of queer agency.

Collaborating with Chaos: Ritual as Method

In a world often structured by data, textual evidence, and scientific reason, this research asks: what can be known through the body (Latour; Haraway; Grosz)? More specifically, how might ritual—marginalised by colonial and positivist worldviews—be reasserted as a site of embodied knowledge (Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 74; Ahmed 15; Manning 27)?

Within ritual and performance theory, scholars such as Schechner, Turner, and Bell argue that ritual can be increasingly understood not as static symbolism, but as a transformative, embodied process, with Schechner and Turner describing ritual and performance as “restored” and “living behaviour”, holding the capacity to reconfigure meaning through repetition and affective engagement (Schechner 35–52; Turner 128; Bell 74).

Bell further shifts the focus from symbol to practice, defining ritualisation as a social practice, deeply shaped by emotions and context (31). Myerhoff’s ethnographic work with ageing Jewish communities shows how ritual sustains identity through narrative, particularly in moments of transition (86). Turner’s concepts of “liminality” and “communitas” position ritual as a threshold space, where normative structures dissolve and new forms of relation emerge (94–113, 125–30).

In practice-based research, ritual functions as a vital epistemic tool—a means of knowing through movement, affect, and symbolic iteration (Bell; Nelson). It is in this context that my own rituals take shape. I have discovered my own eclectic practice to be unconsciously influenced by chaos magic(k)—a contemporary, experimental tradition that prioritises individual belief and intentional symbolism (Carroll and Hutton 19). My current practice draws from a lineage that spells magic(k) with a ‘k’ to distinguish spiritual and metaphysical practice from stage magic, a usage popularised by Aleister Crowley to signal its transformative and theurgical intent (125–6). Within the title and body of this writing I have included the letter ‘k’ in parentheses to emphasise the optional use of the spelling, considering it is not always used by practitioners aligned with similar paths.

Additionally, my evolving engagement with the term “chaos” reflects not only the foundations of chaos magic(k), but a deeper psychological orientation toward meaning-making amidst uncertainty. In ritual, I aim to affect the probability of outcomes through symbolic engagement, casting intent into a field of unknown possibility, and I do so by coupling belief with release. This release involves an intentional “forgetting,” a key principle in sigil-based chaos magic(k) derived from Austin Osman Spare, where desire is coded into symbolic form, embedded into the unconscious mind through trance or other altered states, and then discarded from conscious thought (Spare; Muczková). Through these methods I attempt to surrender to the possibility that what feels chaotic may only do so because I am standing too close to

perceive the broader choreography of the universe's cosmic dance (Mohd Said and Ali Termizi). My practice therefore becomes an attempt not to conquer chaos, but to collaborate with it.

Spare's sigil process has shaped the chaos magic(k) tradition's emphasis on psychological and affective immediacy (Muczková; Hookway; Spare and Dirnberger). Building on this lineage, I now perceive the unfolding arc of my ritual practice as contributing to the creation of a hypersigil—a concept first articulated by Grant Morrison to describe a long-form, symbolically encoded artwork designed to transform the creator's reality through narrative magic(k) (Morrison 16-25). Where Spare's traditional sigils aim to embed a condensed desire into the unconscious via a single symbol, hypersigils function as living, evolving spell-structures—mythic containers that shape identity and experience over time (Morrison).

In her extension of this idea, Carolyn Lovewell (formerly Elliott) reframes the hypersigil as a self-authored persona or life-narrative imbued with aesthetic, erotic, and symbolic charge. For Lovewell, conscious identity construction becomes a magical act, and every embodied choice—how one dresses, speaks, or performs—participates in a larger ritual of self-transformation (Elliott). This has become a particularly resonant aspect of my research. When viewing my ritual practice through this lens, it becomes an ongoing hypersigilic operation: spellwork that scripts identity into being through gesture and symbolic repetition. I have intended to leave behind a formerly embodied past, ushering in an envisioned future.

These pathways advocate for spontaneous and personally meaningful symbolic associations rather than rigid ritual systems or inherited dogma (Carroll and Hutton 23). Accordingly, my approach to ritual is shaped by an ongoing autoethnographic process, whereby I treat my body as a living archive of affect and memory, capable of generating situated knowledge through symbolic movement (Haraway 583; Shaughnessy 151).

From Bare Bones to Layered Meaning

My research practice has centred on a series of eight solo ritual workshops conducted in my favourite drama studio at the University of Exeter. The sessions formed a cumulative, movement-based inquiry into symbolic meaning, intuitive reflection, and affective transformation—a process aligning with Practice-as-Research (PaR) frameworks that validate embodied, intuitive and affective modes of knowing (Nelson 52; Leavy 3; Shaughnessy 151). Each workshop was structured around a square marked on the floor, with each side anchored by a ritual tool representing a cardinal direction, an elemental force, and a principle from the GROW coaching model in which my professional coaching practice is situated (Yates 118–27). The square provided

both spatial and conceptual structure—a frame within which to conduct a somatic investigation. The tools were engaged with one at a time across the first four workshops, each explored in depth through physical movement and verbal reflection:

East / Air / Goal: a wooden ritual dagger, carved by hand, representing the intellect and the intentional clarity of a coaching goal.

West / Water / Reality: a wand made from a Wistman's Wood branch, set with Lemurian quartz and pyrite, representing emotional insight and the acceptance of present-moment reality.

North / Earth / Options: a cherry wood and birch besom broom, used to explore grounded potential and branching decision-making.

South / Fire / Will: a wooden staff, later replaced by a polycarbonate baton in public demonstrations to signify ethical distancing from fully enacted ritual. This tool represented forward movement and the momentum of personal will.

The “R” and “W” stages of the GROW model became particularly meaningful over the course of the workshops. Reality offered a framework for present-moment attunement—how I was feeling, where I was emotionally, what felt true. Will came to represent a transitional question: What will I do next? What action or direction is now aligned with what has been felt and understood? These stages supported a coaching-oriented dialogue between embodied experience and symbolic process.

In workshops one to four, I used wooden poles as substitutes for the personal ritual tools. This allowed me to explore how symbolic resonance and affective engagement might be generated through belief and intentional projection rather than through material specificity. This approach aligns with chaos magic(k)'s emphasis on constructed symbolism and subjective meaning-making (Carroll and Hutton 23; Spare and Dirnberger). In later workshops, the genuine tools were reintroduced to observe how material and energetic presence impacted my emotional and kinesthetic experience.

Following the first workshop, I realised that I needed to begin each session by ritualising the research space itself. This involved calling in non-physical guides and my own well ancestors, inviting the energy of those who had walked the studio floors before me, and visualising a sphere of protective light surrounding the room and the wider building. I extend this invitation to the wider environment, welcoming the nearby land, trees, sky and birds who fly between, into the ritual space as energetic witnesses. These preparatory actions echo ritual studies literature that positions intentional container-setting and environmental co-presence as central to ritual efficacy (Bell 74; Schechner 35–52).

Each session included intuitive movement to music drawn from a personal grief playlist associated with my relocation when saying goodbye to my previous home before moving across the country to study my postgraduate degree. Holding one rit-

ual tool per session, I moved through the square and engaged a symbolic interplay between the active tool and the remaining three, which remained in place on the floor. As I moved, I spoke aloud, reflecting on feelings, posing questions, and allowing verbalised thoughts to accompany and shape the movement. This ongoing verbalisation reflected an integration of ritual and coaching practice, while the movement functioned as a somatic investigation into the relational dynamics between emotion, action, and symbolic focus (Denzin vii; Leavy 3; Shaughnessy 151).

Each session was recorded on video for reflexive review. The camera became a form of non-human witness, offering a layer of mediation through which I can later observe changes in physicality, energy, and emotional processing. This approach aligns with Robin Nelson's research, in which reflection, embodiment, and documentation are interwoven into iterative understanding (52).

The final workshop culminated in a live demonstration shared during my department's performance sharing week. In this performance, I wore a black cloak to embody the role of practitioner and signal an intentional shift into ritual persona, later removing the cloak to indicate a progression towards an embodied future identity, standing in visibility to both myself and a witnessing audience. A photograph of Devon's Wistman's Wood was projected on the wall behind me, and when demonstrating the initiation of the ritual container I extended the protective light visualisation outward to include the fallen oak outside the drama studio and the Dartmoor woodland themselves. These gestures honoured both personal and environmental sources of symbolic resonance and further layered the space with aesthetic and energetic intention.

Throughout the process of developing this specific practice, the King Arthur myth of Brocéliande—particularly the image of Merlin's entrapment within a tree or rock—became a guiding metaphor (Haight; Perrine). This symbolic reference mirrored my own feelings of grief, transition, and eventual re-emergence, leading me to name the artistic demonstration of the practice *Brocéliande Now*, situating the mythic framework within the present day and my chosen geographic setting of Devon's Dartmoor National Park. The practice allowed for the reframing of constraint and containment into an undoing and a process of release.

Originally developed to hold space for grief following the loss of my home and former identity, the ritual process evolved into an exploration of imposter syndrome around movement practice and the complex emotional experience of being witnessed. Moving from private performance to a shared demonstration introduced questions about exposure, authority, and representation (Ahmed 159; Glissant 189). Through this research, my body emerged not only as a site of expression but as an epistemological instrument: a medium through which feeling, knowledge, and transformation are enacted and made intelligible (Kershaw 104; Nelson 52).

Queer Mystical Praxis

Once my autoethnographic thesis concludes, I intend to further develop my ritual process as a therapeutic method of emotional processing, transferring the coaching model in which I have trained into a somatic embodied practice to ultimately explore participant research. This reflects Muñoz's description of queerness as an "ideality" not yet here—a becoming that exceeds the constraints of the present (1): the rituals are constructed not solely as staged performances, but intimate rehearsals of transformation, with each ritual act serving both personal and political purposes. Recentring intuition, symbolism, and ritual gesture within Practice-as-Research affirms somatic intelligence against the dominance of textual and Cartesian logics (Butler 9; Haraway 581; Manning 27). My rituals have developed as vehicles for change-making within my own body, transforming meanings associated with each emotion rather than solely expressing them—they are tools for reflection, processing, and alchemy (Shaughnessy 151; Nelson 52). In addition, the spontaneity of my research workshops has embraced a sense of failure within my ritual practice. I feel aligned with Jack Halberstam's provocation that failure can function as a queer method and an alternative epistemology that resists mastery, making space for the unknowable to emerge (2-4, 88). Moments of emotional overwhelm, symbolic misalignment, or improvisational deviation serve as generative openings and affective interruptions that move the research forward (Halberstam 120; Denzin vii).

While identifying as a queer witch, I feel my practice resists institutional legibility—I am reluctant for my eclectic practice to be defined, in order for it to remain alive and dynamic, neither static nor stagnant, yet I have found in studying my Masters that I lean on academic theory for structural authentication within the academy. It appears I am blending chaos magic(k), intuitive coaching, movement, and symbolic artefacts to craft ritual containers for affective transformation, aligning with post-structural queer theory (Foucault and Derrida, qtd. in Namaste, 220) and anti-essentialist spiritual practice (Carroll and Hutton 23; Ligan 3), to offer a flexible methodology that simultaneously supports both structure and improvisation.

My resonance with queer mystical praxis is not only about identity, but about stance. Anti-authoritarian, anti-essentialist, and anti-hierarchical, it disrupts the fantasy of pure lineage, embracing instead what Bhabha calls hybridity: the unstable space where meaning is negotiated, not inherited (37). This hybridity is the ritual terrain on which I work, building on a desire to remain unconstrained by outwardly imposed structure, free to dance with potentiality and possibility in response to personal resonances.

Denzin describes performance autoethnography as a way of knowing through the body—an epistemology that is affective, political, and poetic (vii). In my work, sym-

bolic movement and ritual performance emerge from emotional experience, but do not explain it; they move with it.

Kershaw positions PaR as a method that collapses the binary between theory and practice, locating meaning in creative embodiment (104). Nelson advances this with his “multi-mode epistemology,” where performance, reflection, and theorisation work in tandem to generate “liquid knowledge”—shifting, affective, and iterative (52).

We find this fluidity in chaos magic(k), where belief is not fixed, and becomes operational. Symbols derive their charge from context and intention (Carroll and Hutton, 19). My wooden staff does not hold power inherently—it becomes charged through movement, ritual, focus, as well as inhabiting the space of symbolic associations I have encountered throughout my own life, as well as meanings potentially accrued through a collective unconscious (Jung).

A Material Culture of Alchemical Tools

It is my belief that the ritual tools in my practice—dagger, wand, broom, and staff—do not necessarily carry power in and of themselves, but are animated through intentionality and performance. This aligns with Alfred Gell’s concept of the “art nexus”, where artefacts are embedded in social relationships and mediate agency, becoming active participants, carrying affective and symbolic charge through repeated use (6).

My wand (Fig. 1), forged by a dear friend from a fallen tree branch at Dartmoor’s Wistman’s Wood, is set with quartz and pyrite crystal, stained with dragon’s blood incense. Its scent, shape, and weight become vectors for energy, memory, and transformation. Drawing on Turner’s framing of ritual as reflexive space, my relationship with each tool shifts through use (130). At times, the wand extends my grief, at others, it conducts joy, anger or release. This evolving relationality between practitioner and tool generates embodied knowledge—not permanent nor objective, but iterative, affective, dynamic and co-produced, enabling the rehearsal of new meanings, and ultimately new selves (Turner 130).

The evolving dynamic between myself and my ritual tools often feels less like manipulation of passive objects and more like a dialogue—an exchange in which agency appears distributed across both practitioner and artefact. My wand, for example, feels to have a presence of its own, which influences the quality and rhythm of my movement. This is not a predetermined belief I consciously introduced into my practice, but one that has emerged through ongoing embodied interaction, suggesting that how I describe and relate to my tools may reveal latent animist sensibilities within my framework (Ingold; Harvey; Abram).

While chaos magic(k) emphasises belief as a tool and often adopts a consciously pragmatic or psychological orientation, its flexible ontology embraces multiple belief

systems, making room for practitioners to experiment with animist modes of thinking (Carroll and Hutton). This creates space for my own practice to lean toward an affective animism: a sense that objects may be co-constitutive agents in the ritual process. Such a perspective aligns with contemporary animist and materialist thinkers who argue that subjectivity and agency emerge through ongoing relational encounters between bodies, materials, and environments (Ingold 67; Harvey 11; Bennett xvi; Manning 6).

Tim Ingold argues that in animist worldviews, agency is not confined to humans but distributed through “meshworks of interrelation” between people, places, and materials (Ingold 67). This reading invites further inquiry: does my wand “act” in ritual, or do I project relational dynamics onto them through movement and narrative? Even having a preference using “them” instead of “it”, when referring to my wand indicates a sense of assigned personhood. Exploring this question does not require ontological certainty. Instead, it allows me to analyse how the affectivity and symbols I attribute to my tools may expose unconscious beliefs embedded in my practice. In this light, noticing the felt presence of a tool becomes less about its intrinsic spirit, and more about the emergent co-production of meaning within the ritual encounter (Barad 141).

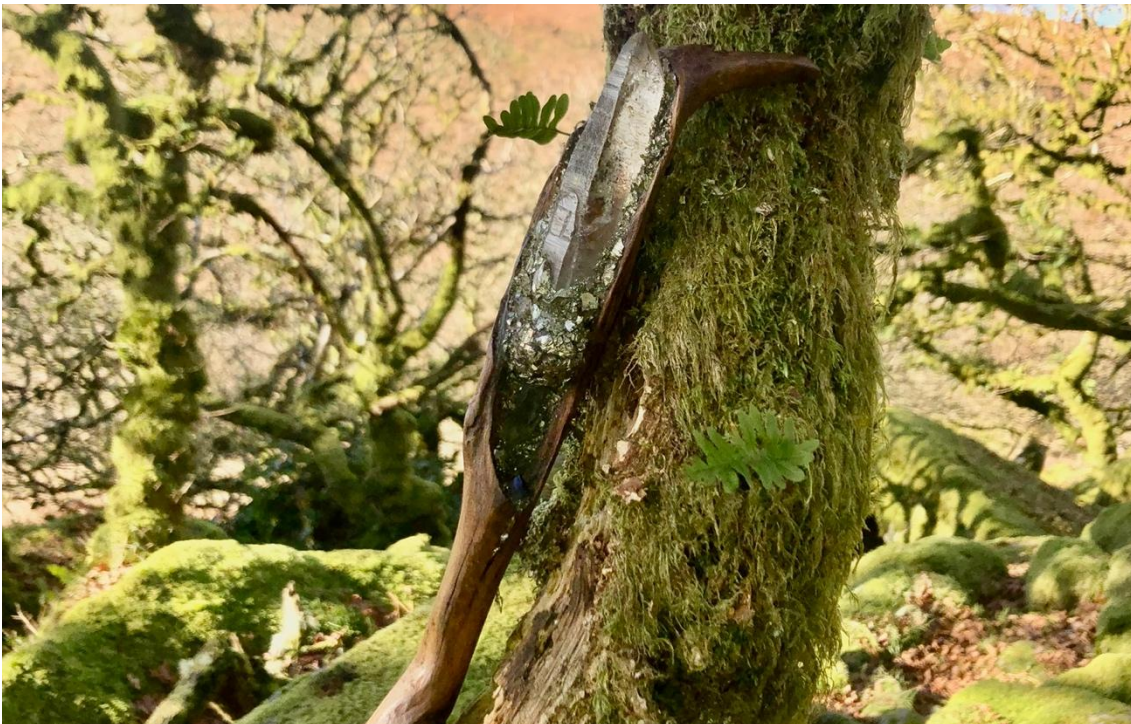


Fig. 1: The wand on their sibling tree (Fazakerley 2024, © Luke Fazakerley).

Visibility, Vulnerability, and the Politics of Being Seen

To perform queer mystical praxis publicly, whether in a studio or online, is to navigate precarious terrain. Visibility can offer recognition, but also risk. As Ahmed offers, “being seen” does not always lead to being understood (159). The witch’s body, especially the queer witch’s body, is often fetishised, exoticised, or pathologized (Grafton; Hutton; Salomonsen; Snorton). There is a thin line between representation and reduction.

In choosing to “be seen” performing my ritual demonstration, I engage in the politics of exposure. Visibility may legitimise queer spiritual practice to some, while rendering others vulnerable to misinterpretation, dismissal, or harm (Ahmed 159; Butler 22). Through my intention, I do not desire to position myself as an object to be consumed, but as a subject negotiating thresholds—between concealment and revelation, resistance and recognition (hooks 23; Muñoz 74). This tension informs my ritual design. Some performances have been intentionally opaque, layered with personal symbology, encrypted through gesture, whereby the camera or witness is unable to pick up on hidden, internal narratives. Other demonstrations when shared with my dissertation supervisor, or later a wider audience, can emphasise framing and dialogue to resist reductive reading. My practice is informed by a politics of strategic opacity—an understanding that not all knowledge must be made legible to be valid (Glissant 189). I ask myself continually: What forms of visibility empower, and which extract? What am I willing to share, and what must remain sacred? Can vulnerability itself become a methodology, one that neither sensationalises pain nor conceals the courage it takes to stand being seen?

Ritual Risk and the Political Stakes of Affect

Ritual is inherently unstable. As Leo Howe notes, its outcomes are never guaranteed; it functions within liminality, where the sacred, the absurd, and the transformative meet at a crossroads (63–79). My rituals explore grief as a nonlinear, somatic process—a space of rupture, release, and embodied reformation.

Yet in contemporary discourse, affect and intuition are no longer solely the terrain of mystics or queer theorists. Far-right and conspiratorial groups increasingly co-opt critiques of scientific rationalism, weaponising emotional “truth” to undermine critical thinking (Newell and Shanks 104). This calls for a careful, reflexive distinction between embodied knowing and anti-intellectualism.

My response is to root affective knowledge in queer, feminist, and anti-oppressive frameworks that honour partiality, positionality, and intersectionality (Haraway 583; Leavy 3; Ahmed 11). Ritual becomes not a rejection of science, but a reconfiguration

of how relational knowledge is embodied and co-created through intersubjective, sensorial, and spiritual epistemologies (Simpson 35; Smith 10).

Access, Decolonial Practice, and Magic(k)al Labor

The reclaiming of mystical praxis raises vital ethical questions: who has access to healing spaces, who is excluded? While magic(k) may offer liberation for some, it is often commodified for others. Spiritual capitalism packages ritual as a product for individual consumption, muting its collective, subversive potential (Carrette and King 20; hooks 37). This commodification risks reducing mystical work to aesthetic performance or therapeutic branding—accessible primarily to those with cultural fluency, financial resources, or social capital.

As Tuck and Yang remind us, empowerment discourse can obscure structural inequality if not grounded in critical context (5). Representation alone—seeing diverse bodies or identities involved in spiritual spaces—is not sufficient. Empowerment discourse can function as a form of settler or corporate recuperation if not grounded in critical awareness of structural inequality (Tuck and Yang 5). Sara Ahmed similarly critiques institutional diversity efforts as “non-performative gestures” that serve more to signal inclusion than to transform underlying power dynamics, cautioning that inclusion becomes a symbolic gesture rather than meaningful redistribution of power (Ahmed 117). Accessibility must therefore go beyond representation and into the ethical design of practices and spaces, teaching methods, and knowledge transmission. Who feels safe in these spaces? Whose cosmologies are being centred, misappropriated or ignored? Who is invited to participate, and under what terms?

In this context, empowerment must be reframed not as individual transcendence or self-optimisation, but as relational capacity—the ability to engage meaningfully in practices that are culturally situated, emotionally supportive, and ethically held (Simpson 22; Shotwell 131). Accessibility, then, involves not only physical or economic entry but also ontological recognition: making space for different ways of knowing, being, and relating to the unseen. Without this, even well-intentioned mystical work can reproduce the very exclusions it claims to resist.

There is also the question of lineage. While my rituals can be seen to draw on Western esotericism (Hanegraaff 251), I feel it is important for my practice to be increasingly influenced by decolonial and indigenous epistemologies in order to centre ancestral relation, land-based wisdom and responsibility (Simpson 38; Smith 10). This requires an ongoing decentring of the self: recognising where my voice ends and listening where others must lead.

Ritual Research Within the Academy

Integrating chaos magic(k) and ritual movement into academic research challenges dominant norms yet opens new pathways for embodied inquiry. As Nelson argues, Practice-as-Research affirms the creative process as rigorous epistemology (37).

My rituals do not just show or represent ideas, they operate as generative sites of knowledge production—not illustrative of theory, but constitutive of it. Each time I perform a ritual, I'm receiving new insights and understandings, evolving the practices to help me reflect, learn, and develop new ways of thinking through action. I build, test, and refine how methodologies of movement, intuition, and intention can become legitimate forms of research. PaR allows me to inhabit knowledge as a movement practice—continually shifting, responding, and evolving.

Conclusion: An Unfinished Spell

My journey through Practice-as-Research has illuminated how ritual, movement, and symbolic tools coalesce into a dynamic, embodied methodology for navigating grief, transformation, and identity (Schechner 35-52; Turner 94-113). This relational approach foregrounds the co-production of agency and knowledge, revealing how material culture animates affective transformation to destabilise traditional binaries between subject and object, theory and practice (Latour 72-89; Haraway).

Moreover, this process opens crucial ethical reflections around access, decolonial practice, and the commodification of spiritual labor (Tuck and Yang; Smith), inviting continual reflexivity on how ritual spaces can be made inclusive, how power dynamics circulate within mystical praxis, and how healing is both an individual and communal act (Ahmed 117-122; Tuck and Yang 5-12; Smith 10-14).

I intend for this research to advance a model of ritual as a queer, alchemical practice, one that holds tension, embraces hybridity, and invites transformation through iterative embodied engagement (Bhabha 37-38; Halberstam 2-4; Carroll and Hutton 19-21). It points toward future directions wherein ritual magic(k) performance might be developed as a therapeutic, participatory method, facilitating emotional processing and psycho-spiritual integration within diverse communities (Turner; Schechner; Myerhoff; Vaughan). In this way, ritual becomes both a means of self-expression to cope with change, as well as a radical practice of presence, connection, and becoming, reflecting and reshaping the worlds we inhabit (Haraway 593-596; Schechner 35-52).

Ultimately, this work does not yet offer a conclusion, but an invitation to remain in motion. As Schwandt proposes, methodology is not solely a system of methods—it is “a way of acting, thinking, and speaking” (qtd. in Mills and Birks, 4). I offer these rituals not as solutions, but as entry points—flexible frameworks for feeling, reflecting, and reframing.

Let us pause here, not with answers, but with animating questions:

- What does it mean to grieve through gesture?
- How might ritual reconfigure the conditions of knowing?
- Who gets to speak as an intuitive practitioner in the academy?

Let these questions move us into action.

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