

## Embodiment and the Politics of Healing: Interview with Reiki Master Kate Daher

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Feminist critiques of electronic media theory tend to focus upon its rhetoric of disembodiment. Early cyberfeminists such as VNS Matrix and Sandy Stone inserted images of bodies and discussions of pleasure at the very heart of machine culture. Some recent work focuses on pain, especially the pain specific women have experienced in disease, therapy and disabling accidents.<sup>1</sup> In a way this makes sense. In critical theory, pain has long been established as a way of communication that precedes and overrides language. Thus, it is accorded more authority than language. Because this primal form of communication is located in the body, it validates the body. It is puzzling however, that in electronic media culture, it is primarily women who offer their own pain as a response to theories of disembodiment. Most white male electronic media theorists speak little about their own bodies, and even less about their pain.

At first sight, the emphasis on women's pain in cyber culture seems regressive. Is it not the pain of childbirth and other kinds of suffering that presumably validates women in traditional societies? It is worth noting that women accorded celebrity status in the West today include the Virgin Mary, Princess Diana, Mother Theresa, Marilyn Monroe and Frida Kahlo, all icons of suffering. The privileging of female suffering over other aspects of embodiment suggests a pervasive conservatism at the heart of electronic media theory, a position manifested in other theoretical responses related to embodiment/disembodiment.

To be sure, various female theorists invoke their experiences of pain and the technological interventions employed to alleviate it, to argue for the pervasiveness and even for the desirability of cyborgian conditions. This position foregrounds agencies and pleasures that prosthetics bring to human existence and sometimes even playfully casts prosthetic devices as elements of “fashion.”<sup>2</sup>

In her book, *How We Became Post Human*, Kathryn Hayles makes an eloquent case for the elaboration of an embodied posthumanism, a philosophy and a manner of living integrating human bodies and intelligent machines. Despite her brilliant analysis and incisive critiques, she does not question the supposition that our “partnership” with intelligent machines must be the inevitable next stage of human evolution. While I accept the necessity of working with machines, intelligent or not, I refuse to view this as the only possible form of evolution. Theorists such as Manuel de Landa have argued for the evolution of machines independently of human will, yet individuals and institutions, commercial and military, have played an active role in shaping the symbiosis of humans and machines, currently accepted as the natural product of “evolution.”<sup>3</sup>

Native American, African and Eastern philosophers, among others, have posited different kinds of human development. Some of the techniques prescribed to achieve the goals of these traditions (i.e., meditation in Eastern religions) are now accepted in some Western scientific and medical institutions. Yet discussions of forms of “evolution” alternative to the technophilic visions of the West, are anathema to critical writing. To choose only one example, critiques of the militaristic procedures of Western medicine abound in critical theory, yet few respectable theorists would delve into the territory of alternative healing practices. This area is powerfully repressed despite the engagement of numerous artists, critics, and academics in alternative healing traditions as healers or as clients. Discussions of these practices inevitably suggest different forms of embodiment, different utopian futures, and different social and economic priorities.

To the extent that states, institutions, and individuals have a vested interest, for political, military, or other reasons, in Western technological practices, non-

Western and non-technological practices are subject to suppression, suspicion, or derision—not to mention that the modes of being around which these practices are formed are antithetical to capitalist productivist/consumerist instrumentality. Perhaps this is why few theorists discuss the health costs of human “integration” with machines. As the increasing incidence of repetitive stress injury (RSI) and other muscular, psychological and immunological disorders linked to the use of recent technologies demonstrates, pain is an endemic condition of postindustrial societies. The predominance of women’s voices in discussions of this phenomenon could be interpreted simultaneously as individual acts of resistance and, as yet another version of the traditional role of women as enactors of collective suffering.

This is not to deny that the pursuit of pain is an established part of pleasure rituals in diverse social strata. Recently, however, various theorists have interpreted pain practices in various subcultures as testimonies to the alienation of feelings and lack of a “spiritual sense of organic connection” in postmodern society. In pain, the body reaffirms itself and refuses to disappear.<sup>4</sup>

If the reality of embodiment is undeniable in pain healing, the potential of the body speaks volumes. Why not examine healing as an avenue for empowerment? In this anthology, we can only begin to scratch the surface of this topic. To do it justice would necessitate several volumes on pain, practices of healing, and theories of embodiment. We have chosen Reiki for this interview, not because we desire to privilege it over other healing traditions, but because we are fortunate to know a practitioner in our community, Kate Daher, who is a teacher, healer, and activist and whose objectives align with the purpose of this book.

*MF:* What is the best way to describe Reiki?

*KD:* Reiki is an ancient healing art whose origins are a mystery.

The word *reiki* comes from Japanese: *rei* meaning “the wisdom of a higher power” and *ki* meaning life-force energy. The Reiki method of healing is performed when the ‘life force energy’ is passed through the hands into the human energy system. This is done in one of two ways: Either by laying the hands directly on another person, or self, or by bringing the receiver’s energy field

into the practitioner's hands and working on the person from a distance. As a Reiki healer I may send the life force energy to anyone, anywhere on the planet. I can take someone into my hands, so to speak, ease the areas of their distress and send energy that can help them heal. I need only ask their permission, and they don't have to be present in the flesh to do that!

*MF:* How would you explain the process of healing in Reiki?

*KD:* With little or no effort, the healer's hands heat up and produce a warm, flowing energy. The energy travels through one person into the other and creates a deep state of relaxation. Reiki is holistic; it works on the entire self—spirit, mind and emotions. Fundamentally, its nature is gentle and loving. It is kind. It cannot harm. It has its own intelligence, seeking out areas of dis-ease, mental and emotional fatigue, and depression and it travels freely to those areas. Whether or not I can consciously pinpoint a person's area of distress, Reiki knows where to go. I've worked on people with back problems and found the exact source of their discomfort. I recently worked on someone who was having severe headaches. He was in terrible pain and had gone to the emergency room a few times in the middle of the night. They scheduled an MRI and gave him high doses of painkillers. The doctors couldn't figure it out. When I started working on him, I could feel the pain in his head through my hands, but at the same time, the Reiki seemed to know that the source of his troubles was in his neck. My hands turned to fire on the right side of his neck and shoulder. I was quite certain that he had suffered some injury there, and that if he could correct the problem with his neck, his headaches would go away. At first he argued with me about my findings but then after thinking about it, he considered the fact that he recently started rowing and it was possibly the root of his pain. He began seeing a chiropractor and the doctor confirmed my thinking on this. Which brings me to another point: Reiki works well with other branches of medicine.

*MF:* In Western medicine, the diagnosis of disease relies on the opinions of experts and the use of sophisticated technologies. Healing depends on the patient's consumption of prescribed pharmaceuticals and the application of various technologies to the body. The human body is viewed primarily as an

object to act upon. Some alternative healing practices maintain there is knowledge in the body that allows the body to heal itself. What is your position on these issues?

*KD:* Without a doubt there is a place in the world of alternative medicine for Western medicine but the relationship is not often reciprocal. Recently a medical doctor who earned his M.D. from Stanford University was driven from the directorship of an alternative medical center of a local hospital for his controversial practices. In an attempt to discredit his work, the local press referred to him as the “Sweat Lodge Doctor.” This doctor, who was also a Native American, was extremely well received by his patients and highly regarded by the professional staff alike, but, by all accounts, the hierarchy was not as tolerant of his views on alternative medicine. In a sense, what’s changed? Millions of women were tortured and murdered between the 1400s and 1600s for healing methods not approved of by the physicians and Christian churches. Still, the interest in alternative medicine is exploding: Tai Chi is used to cure back problems; meditation is replacing painkillers, natural herbal remedies are replacing pharmaceuticals. Much of what people are turning to comes from Asian or Native cultures of the Americas—acupuncture, Reiki, herbal medicine, Qui Gong, sweat lodges. Millions are beginning to figure out that they play an important role in their own recovery and health. This is certainly true with Reiki. Anyone can practice it. Anyone can use it for self-healing and meditation.

About two years ago my gynecologist found a small lump on my breast and she was concerned, especially since my mother died of breast cancer. She insisted I be scheduled for a mammogram immediately. Meanwhile, I spent the next week Reiki-ing my breast. I could see through my “third eye” or “higher self” that there was a small mass, but after several days it disappeared. When I went for the mammogram it was gone. The radiologists couldn’t make heads or tails out of the doctor’s description of what they were supposed to find. It was almost comical to see how desperately they tried to find something. While I insisted they wouldn’t, they insisted they must! We went round and round until they finally conceded that while they saw some sort of “shadow” on the x-ray, actually no mass or lump existed. They shrugged their shoulders at this

mystery and it was beyond me to explain the truth of what had happened. I can't imagine they would have believed me, can you?

Reiki allows you to heal yourself—to heal depression, anxiety and physical ailments, but it can also give the power to heal others. My father who lives 300 miles away from me had a bad knee that interfered with his walking and most certainly interfered with his golf game! He was miserable! Again by using Reiki II - distance healing, I could see the imbalance in the knee and I proceeded to send healing energy over a matter of a few weeks. Since then, his knee no longer bothers him. He is now a Reiki healer and in many ways, a different person. He is more reflective and centered. This combination of Reiki and working on the self is what benefited him.

*MF:* I understand that you were an activist prior to becoming a healer. Are there political aspects to the practice of Reiki?

*KD:* In the sense that Reiki is empowering and that it teaches us that we can heal ourselves it is very political. It also, by its nature, challenges Western medicine and the notion that someone or some technology has all the answers for our well being. Reiki does come from a higher power but that power is also internal. When used, Reiki creates a sense of wholeness and health. In this way it challenges the notion that we are dependent on commodities, on government or some outside force for happiness. Mental and emotional well-being results from practicing Reiki and in this society that is very political.

I don't know that my activism led me to Reiki. Maybe so. I've been active in social movements for over 20 years—in the women's movement, in solidarity with the peoples of Latin America; the movement to end apartheid in South Africa. I've also been a member of several trade union organizations. So I guess in a broader sense I've been active in movements that attempted to heal the planet, to eliminate racism and sexism, or to struggle against oppression whether it's in a factory in Georgia or a barrio in Nicaragua. I became interested in Reiki when I met nurses who practiced therapeutic touch healing. I started researching alternative healing methods and found my way to Reiki. Or maybe it found me, I'm not sure. At any rate, after receiving the attunements I remember thinking that, "I've finally come home." That's the best I can explain

it. It was something I was quite familiar with, something that I had known a long time ago and far away from here and it was back. We reconnected. It seems to me that the ability to heal oneself or others on an individual level is an integral part of healing the planet on a global level. It is the dance of unity. The self and the whole, one connected to the other and vice versa. The whole is the sum of its parts and the parts are the sum of the whole. I don't think it's enough to just work on oneself, though. I think through giving of oneself, say, to the struggle for social change, one can also heal. I think this very ill, very sorry planet is demanding it of us.

*MF:* How do you view social change at this point in history?

*KD:* As an absolutely necessary and inevitable phenomenon. One way or another, there will be social change. Of course we can't predict in what form, or whether it will be progressive or reactionary, but it will happen. If enough people, healers and activists alike, work for progress—real progress—then we have a shot at ending the tremendous oppression and exploitation the majority in the world face on a daily basis. *The New York Times* just reported that slavery is on the rise in the United States. Slavery, imagine that! We abolished human bondage in 1865 with a Constitutional amendment and now it is being discussed in the press, almost as if it is business as usual. How can this be? The *Times* article was based on a CIA report: "International Trafficking in Women to the United States: A Contemporary Manifestation of Slavery." The report asserts that more than 50,000 women and children are brought to the United States each year as slaves or indentured servants and argues that there is virtually nothing that can be done to stop it because the cases are difficult to investigate and prosecute. To me that sounds like business as usual, that is, that the capitalists deal in commodity trade, profiteering, and consumption—whatever the market dictates! This is but the tip of the iceberg of social problems that the world's poor and exploited face. Dozens of countries can barely pay the interest on their debt to the World Bank and other profit-making institutions and governments. What's the solution? Cancel the Third World debt; reorganize the wealth for more equitable distribution; take the profit out of production and apply it to human needs. Social

change and social organization are necessary for a more balanced world. But I think we need a radical break from the institutions and governments that support a profit-making economic system.

*MF:* Our educational system trains us to view mind and body as separate entities and to favor mind over body. Further, it prepares us to treat our bodies as objects that are modifiable and even replaceable. This is unlikely to change unless there is intervention at early stages of education. It is well known that elementary and high school teachers have been instrumental in disseminating awareness about environmental issues. Do you have any suggestions for a pedagogy of embodiment?

*KD:* I agree that the educational system trains us to view mind and body as separate entities but it depends on what class one belongs to as to whether or not the mind is favored over the body or vice versa. I teach in an inner-city high school, mainly working-class kids that are tracked in what is called “mainstream” classes; these are the “tough” kids, the “bad” kids, the ones who are expected to “get by or get out” and it is a struggle to get them to realize that they have a mind that they can use, and with that mind combined with critical thinking comes empowerment. They use their bodies to labor. Most of them work in the evenings—school to work with very little studying, thinking, and reflecting. I am challenged by and challenge this every day. Teachers compete with MTV, commodity consumption, racism, and sexism and, like salmon running upstream, progressive teachers combat the constant barrage of propaganda coming from the market system. On the other hand, while the middle class is taught to favor the mind over the body they are also expected to be consumers and producers as their primary function.

*MF:* Do you think it is possible to devise teaching methods that combine both the mind and the body?

*KD:* I do. But I don’t think this exists so much in the United States, certainly not in the public schools where I teach. I am traveling to China this summer and will be able to visit several schools. I’d like to know how they work with Tai Chi and Chi Gong in the schools, since millions there practice. I will ask this question of those who use both the body and the mind.



*MF:* Finally, I have heard that most Reiki masters are women. In your view, what accounts for this?

*KD:* Well, I can't say that is the case. I know both women and men who practice Reiki in this country, and I believe that it is practiced worldwide by both men and women. A friend of mine traveling through India by rail found books at various stops that taught about Reiki. It is possible that the majority of Western practitioners are women since we tend to be more interested in alternative healing methods but as a worldwide practice, I don't have any statistics.

*MF:* What do you think makes women interested in alternative healing?

*KD:* I will speak from my knowledge and history as a woman in the United States. In the 1970s, out of the women's movement—the second wave of feminism—there was an explosion of interest in discovering our own bodies. Women demanded the right to choose abortions legally. We organized self-help clinics, and began delivering our children at home. We started working with herbs and other forms of natural healing. This revolution in thinking and behavior, the idea that we could control our own bodies, empowered us. It gave us hope and self-confidence. It made us look at each other in a whole new light: As allies, as sisters. This was not limited to the middle-class communities; but poor women as well. Blacks, Latinas and Native American women also challenged the medical establishment and its contempt towards women. There were too many hysterectomies performed, forced sterilizations were common, especially in the poor neighborhoods in the United States and Puerto Rico and there were very few medical doctors who were female. We had no voice. The women's movement opened our eyes and gave us the determination to begin caring for each other and ourselves. It awakened our interest in healing and self-healing and deepened our concern for the environment and the whole earth. I don't mean to speak in the past as if we accomplished our goals. There is still a long road to travel. ★

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1 Linda Dement, "Typhoid Mary," Diane J. Gromala, and Jacov Sharir, "Dancing with the Virtual Dervish: Virtual Bodies" in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Anne Moser, and Douglas MacLeod (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996). Phoebe Sengers, "Technological Prostheses: An Anecdote." ZKP-4 Net>*Criticism Reader*"; ed. Geert Lovink and Pit Schultz, 1997. Vivian Sobchack, "Beating the Meat/Surviving the Text: or How to Get out of this Century Alive" in

- The Visible Woman*, eds. Paula Treichler, Lisa Cartright, Constance Penley (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Victoria Vesna, Keynote address to the Digital Arts and Culture Symposium, Bergen, Norway, August 2000; Li Chiao Ping and Douglas Rosemberg, paper/performance at Performative Sites: Intersecting Art, Technology, and the Body, October 24–28, 2000.
- 2 Petra Kuppers, paper presented at Performative Sites: Intersecting Art, Technology, and the Body, October 24-28, 2000. Penn State University, USA.
  - 3 Brian Winston, *Media Technology and Society: A History: From the Telegraph to the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
  - 4 Celeste Olalquiaga, “Pain Practices and the Reconfiguration of Physical Experience” in *When Pain Strikes*, eds. Bill Burns, Cathy Bushby, and Kim Sawchuk (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). See also Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Westein, *Data Trash: The Theory of the Virtual Class* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).