Clay and Common Ground: Clanships and Polyspirited Embodiment*

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Abstract: In this article, I explore embodiment within discourses on trans and two-spirit through a consideration of polyspirited (many-spirited) within the context of Indigenous and transnational stories of clay. Two main articulations spiral out from embodiments of the polyspirited: 1) that embodiment is not limited to one or two spirits but potentially many spirits operating through or within the body collectively in reciprocal relationality; and 2) that stories of clay teach us that the Westernized scientific conception of the human body is limited in its capacity to articulate what it means to be in relation. By understanding clay stories, we begin to comprehend that we are potentially more than two-spirit peoples.

Keywords: Two-spirit, polyspirited, many-spirited, queer, trans, clay, embodiment, relationality, kinship, land, reciprocity

Introduction

The term “two-spirit,” or niish manidoowag in Anishinaabemowin, was first introduced more broadly by Indigenous (predominantly gay and lesbian-centered) folk across
Turtle Island (the Americas) during a conference near Winnipeg held in 1990 (Anguksuar, 1997). We have come to understand two-spirit, in its general sense, as an umbrella term that is intended to encompass an idea of inclusivity. However, the English language translation limits the complexity of relating—particularly by trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming Indigenous peoples. This has become a point of contention among our home communities and in academia. While many Indigenous queer folks use the term two-spirit, there are those who rather remember, establish, adopt, or adapt traditional Indigenous words, names (Wesley, 2014), phrases, expressions, or titles to describe a person as trans, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, and various other identities under a more commonly proliferated—and imperialized—2SLGBTQI (two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex) umbrella. Kanien'kehá:ka artist, Aiyyana Maracle, reminds us that historical tensions during the 1990s and 2000s regarding the inclusion of Indigenous trans people under the canopy of two-spirit led some of our Indigenous “transformed” Elders (such as herself) to seek different ways of naming trans experiences specific to various Indigenous cultures, languages, and protocols. As Maracle imparted, “Even though the old words to name people like myself may no longer exist in my language, the history of my people led me to term myself a transformed woman of the Haudenosaunee people” (Maracle, 2015, p. 161).

Qwo-Li Driskill has at length discussed two-spirit debates within Indigenous communities (Driskill, 2010, 2011) and the inherent “risks [of] erasing difference” (Driskill, 2010, p. 72) in favour of homogeneity. Affirmatively, Driskill argues that terms such as two-spirit have the power to reinsert queer, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and trans Indigenous histories, or presences, into the mainstream narrative, which are otherwise continuously overshadowed by Westernized religious belief systems that promote heteronormative narratives. Westernized Christian and non-sectarian heteronormative beliefs frequently find appearance in Indigenous ceremonies, protocols, and everyday life for both traditional and non-traditional Indigenous peoples. As Anishinaabe scholar, activist, and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states, “This imposed an artificial gender binary as a mechanism for controlling Indigenous bodies and identity and sets out two very clear genders: male and female. It lays out two sets of rigidly defined roles based on colonial conceptions of femininity and masculinity” (Simpson, 2017, p. 123). As a consequence of the imposition of such an artificial gender binary, Simpson avers, the self-determination of 2SQ peoples from Indigenous spaces is undermined, and our contributing gifts to society erased (Simpson, 2017).

Rigid gender binaries that are counter to self-determined Indigenous ways of relating, I contend, enforce forms of state-imposed social and economic order that fortify patriarchal
heteronormative power structures. This rigid, economized social ordering prompts lateralized gender policing under prescriptive traditionalisms within Indigenous communities (Simpson, 2017). Counter to such binarily gendered, sexualized, and racialized ordering is the acknowledgement that every person’s medicine bundle is a unique gift from the Creator and that the collectivization of the gifts within each being’s bundle contributes to the health of a reciprocal society. As Simpson states,

> We all have the responsibility to figure out how to become contributing members of our society while honoring our deepest truths, our gifts and skills, our clan affiliations, and our names. Self-actualization is a relationship between ourselves and the spirit world [...]. (Simpson, 2017, p. 120-121)

To both Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) and Qwo-Li Driskill (2011), the gifts, or medicines, that two-spirit queer people carry are particularly grounded in Indigenous land-based ways of knowing. As Driskill imparts:

> The stance that Two-Spirit people carry very particular medicine— which is not to be misunderstood as more (or less) important than men’s or women’s particular medicines—is one rooted within Native worldviews and land bases, and separates itself from non-Native belief systems as part of larger practices of maintaining and continuing Native cultural practices. (Driskill, 2011, p. 418)

As a mixed-race trans person of Haudenosaunee and Cantonese descent who was born and raised far from both of my parent’s ancestral territories, the unbelonging and longing to belong to my communities, and to learn what has been lost or disconnected within my family, is both a wound as it is its own medicine. This has, for me, led to an inevitable questioning of how gendered, racialized, sexualized, and colonialized bodies capacitate ancestral relations that are beyond a male-female binary, anthropocentrism, or cultural singularity. Rather than a collapsing of specificity, I seek to articulate what might emerge through cultural specificity (exemplified by my own Haudenosaunee and Cantonese heritage) within the opacities of society’s interpretation of being mixed-race. That is, on the one hand I experience a “never being Indigenous enough” by way of an essentialist prescription of Indigeneity predicated through the authenticity politics that followed the Indian Act. On the other hand, I am an embodiment of being Othered (Said, 1978/1994) and as such feel at risk of neoliberal extraction when convenient to the state, through the state’s cultural capitalization of global soft power (Nye, 1990).

Such inabilities in completely belonging (as intimate kin to peoples and places) elude possibility for many dispersed Indigenous peoples, Black folks, and people of colour. As
Joseph S. Nye, Jr. exemplifies in the case of the U.S., “While Americans can also be parochial and inward-oriented, the openness of the American culture to various ethnicities and the American values of democracy and human rights exert international influence” (1990, p. 170). This plays out through the ways in which cultures become potentially commodified. Within Canada, the exportation of Indigenous arts and cultures abroad become materialized as soft power and economic accumulation. This is done through systemic, colonial extractions of bodies and compartmentalized identities, partitioned from relationships to lands and waters, while simultaneously promoting the exotification of Indigenous and racialized peoples’ cultures as the state’s own cultural wealth. In Canada, relationships to land, waters, oils, and other kin are accumulated through privatized property ownership as well as provincial and Crown “resource” extraction.

What I aim to show in this paper is that, by analyzing clanship, the embodiment of spiritedness can be understood as beyond a single or two-spirited relation. Various transnational understandings of relational embodiment not only describe land and water as non-human kin, but stories from Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations throughout the globe also have recollections of our bodies being made from clay. These stories of bodies being formed from clay are not only metaphoric, I argue, but materially form a common ground in which to understand land- and water-based relations that are grounded in each person’s own cultural perspective and positionality within the body. From an Indigenous queer and trans perspective, I contend that clays from which we descend bind and bundle the many-spirits (polyspiritedness) present within our bodies. Culture, therefore, cannot be theorized without the consideration of its culmination, comprised of a multitude of migratory beings’ ancestors moving across and carrying forth lands and waters resident within their present embodiments. These complexities begin to illuminate why there is the need to go beyond both Indigenous two-spiritedness and limited definitions of racialized embodiment. Beyond this, there remains the necessity of naming systems of polyspirit embodiment, which are grounded in specific language(s) and culture(s). What I offer through this word, polyspirit, is a descriptor which speaks to various ways in which ancestors relationally visit, or reside, within a body as an aspect of land, emergent from clay. Polyspirit is not meant to become a universalized theoretical term; rather it speaks to a need to articulate that which is inarticulable when comprehending relationality from an irrecollection of time immemorial. This common ground, which fell from the sky, from exploded stars and meteors, who became beings on this earth and is composed of the minerals and metals which produced biochemical reactions with their oceanic relatives, has rendered us the culmination of our ancestors.
How clay bundles polyspirit

From the later part of 2017 onward, Anishinaabe scholar Adria Kurchina-Tyson (whose work is also included in this issue) and I have shared conversations inspiring each other’s thinking upon a need to articulate what may be understood as polyspirited (many-spirited) or, in Kurchina-Tyson’s words, multispirited embodiments of expansive relations. These polyspirited relations are embodiments of ancestral kinship multiplicities. The embodiment of Indigenous ways of knowing, the embodiment of Black knowledges, the embodiment of Latinx and Asian knowledges, and the complexity of liberating oneself and community from racialized, gendered, and sexual scripts through grounded embodiment all touch upon those very tender wounds reminding us, as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour) peoples, how our roots have and are continually being torn and uprooted while new branches and beings (re)surge (Simpson, 2017). Our own entanglement creates further distress as we attempt to parse and sort ourselves from the violent coercions of colonial and heteropatriarchal assimilation. Belonging is always troubled when complicated by property ownership (Federici, 1998/2009) or capital (Robinson, 1983).

In her essay, “Diachronic loops/deadweight tonnage/bad made measure,” Katherine McKittrick (2016) urges us to reconsider how Black people’s embodiment has been tied to biocentric racial scripts. She asks,

How are discussions of race and space and knowledge tethered to an analytics of embodiment that can only posit black knowledge as biologic knowledge? Does this foreclose the ways in which alternative racial configurations are, or can be, collectively and relationally and spatially liberatory and, perhaps, staging a range of black knowledge formations that, while certainly embodied, are not reduced to the biologic? (McKittrick, 2016, p. 23)

Here, McKittrick speaks about the necessity to move Black knowledges beyond the biologic, to induce new and liberatory ways of knowing, living, and being in this world. I ask that Indigenous peoples and other people of colour work in relation with McKittrick’s call, so that we can be prompted to remember our stories in relation to each other and to our bodies, ancestors, lands, and waters which, when remembered, call for an expanded definition of what can be understood as a body.

My question, building upon the work of McKittrick, is about whether we can think about embodiment, not only as racialized and Indigenous peoples through the languages and sciences of colonial conquest, but as kin to land and waters, grounded in our own cultural ways of knowing—while in relation to one another. This understanding of a common material
ground is not an erasure of difference, nuance, and multiplicity, nor is it a move toward pan-indigeneity. Rather, it is a common ground that spans from the oceanic floor (Philip, 2008; Walcott, 2018) into swamps (Snorton, 2017), where clay, mud (Snorton, 2017) and sands gathered upon the turtle’s back and form the basis of relations between all (non)human beings. In Snorton’s description of the Snaky Swamp, he states:

Yet here, as with flesh, the swamp is both material and metaphysical. In addition to being a polyvalent literary device, the Snaky Swamp is a real place. Located west of Edenton, North Carolina, it bears a geographical proximity to the Great Dismal Swamp, a site for the longer-durational inhabitation of marooned Africans and native people, that conveys how its ecological features produced an adversarial terrain for human life, rife with the imminent and ever-present difficulties of cohabitation with its nonhuman animal inhabitants for the displaced and dispossessed. (Snorton, 2017, p. 72)

Snorton’s example of the Snaky Swamp calls attention to an issue of perceived impasse within Indigenous Studies. That is, land is integral to Indigenous peoples and Indigenous ways of relating, while the positions of non-Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, and their relationship to place, are situated within a generalized binary framing of white settlement.

In a Tweet on December 3rd, 2018, Rinaldo Walcott (2018) reminds us that Black histories via the Middle Passage are inaccurately fabricated as forms of settlement. The marooning of peoples of African descent across Turtle Island (inclusive of not just North America but also Central America, South America, and the Caribbean) is inferential to a loss of African Indigenous identities:

If colonization of the Americas begins in land theft and the compromising of Indigenous bodily autonomy, for Black people it begins with our bodily theft and the removal from lands we can no longer claim. In short colonization begins for us with a theft of our Indigeneity. (Walcott, 2018)

He proceeds in the same thread by saying:

And in thinking about living better together we will have to think more concretely about what land in all it[s] manifestations might mean for some Black people. We have to think seriously about the seas as also constituting human modes of being. (Walcott, 2018)
Other examples of naturalization and cultural-political identities demonstrate how dialectics of racialization and blood quantum are divisibly debated in terms of the conferral of citizenship rights, or externalized legitimacy through community acceptance, or an internalization of settler logics. These include, for example, Cherokee Freedman citizens within the Cherokee Nation (Byrd, 2011), or Taino self-determinacy (Neeganagwedgin, 2015) beyond creolization narratives in the context of Indigenous survivance in the Caribbean.

By definition, to be marooned is to be left in a position of entrapment, yet as Snorton’s (2017) gesture points toward, historical and contemporary issues of cohabitation are fundamental to consider with respect to how Black folks have long been in relation with Indigenous folks. Accounting for configurations of nuanced self-determinacy and how displacement and belonging are addressed remain important issues within Indigenous nations across Turtle Island. From a Haudenosaunee perspective, extending the rafters is a material and legal process whereby extra beams are added to a Longhouse in order to accommodate additional families within the lodge and under the protection of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Haan, 1985, p. 422).

Returning to the centrality of kinships with land within this conversation, Glen Coulthard defines land as a “system of reciprocity and obligation” (2014, p. 13). Yet to Edouard Glissant, “Imagining and recreating from traces of memory removes a person far away from systems, far away not only from ideological thinking but even more from the thought of any imperative system” (2008, p. 87).

So, I ask, how might clay, as a material and spiritual embodiment of geographies (McKittrick) and oceanographies (Walcott), work to repair colonial dispersions?

**On clay as a common ground**

As I am only in the early stages of being a Kanién’kéha language learner and am limited in my knowledge of our language, Susan M. Hill’s authorship in *The Clay We Are Made Of* (2017) will come to serve as the starting point for thinking through a polyspirit embodiment grounded in the Haudenosaunee creation story. Hill reminds us of how Onkwehonwe were first formed from clay. She recalls that, “One of the Kanyen’kéha words for clan is Otara; when one asks another what clan they belong to, the question literally translates to ‘what clay are you made of?”’ (2018, p. 5).

This question of clan kinship and grounded normativity as an embodiment of polyspirit in land and water—or clay—are reverberant within many Indigenous and transnational
cultural *hirstories*. Stories of clay embodiment are moulded by various nations across the world. In Haudenosaunee storytelling, Onkwehonwe were created from clay. In Yoruba storytelling, Obatala (Kendi, 2009) created people from clay. The Greeks say that Prometheus moulded people out of clay, and Athena breathed life into them (Graves, 2017). Sumerians had different stories of Enki and Ninmah\(^1\) creating people from clay and blood, or the underground fresh waters of Abzu. In the Qur’an, it was written that Allah created people from clay (Naqvi, 2018), and similarly there is such reference in Judeo-Christian texts (Katz, 2003). In Hindu scripture, Ganesha was created by Parvati from clay (Vanita, 2000). From numerous Indigenous nations upon Turtle Island to the descendants of Inca nations (Urton, 1999) at its tail and across the Pacific Ocean, the Dyak (Taonui, 2006) and Māori (Taonui, 2006) each have our own stories about people being moulded from clay. In the *Chu Ci* 楚辭, the poetry or *Songs of Chu*, the goddess Nüwa created people from clay (Peterson, 2015).

Importantly, within formalities of science, clay is actually considered different than soil. That is, clay is predominately inorganic, comprised of minerals or metal, and silicon. When clay is wet it plasticizes. While the stories of our formation—descendent from clay—may seem as though they would have a direct and assured footing upon scientific mattering, they proved to be more difficult for Western science to attest until most recent. At the Kavli Institute at Cornell University for Nanoscale Science, for example, Yang et al. (2013) conducted a study verifying the stories that our ancestors have been telling us since time immemorial. That is, Yang and colleagues were able to show that clay played a vital role in creating the necessary condition for genes, biomolecules, and biochemical reactions to culminate, stably. Yang et al. conclude that,

> In the scenarios of early life evolution, the confinement of biomolecules and biochemical reactions within the clay hydrogel enabled a positive crowding effect, favoring an increase in protein expression. On the other hand, without the clay hydrogel, it would have been very difficult to achieve confinement in a vast quantity of ocean water; therefore the concentration of genes would have been essentially zero, resulting in no protein expression. (Yang et al., 2013, p. 4)

Without the plasticity of clay to act as a *bundle* in which biomolecular and biochemical reactions may occur, there would not have been a stable enough environment to become embodied into polyspirited selves.

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\(^1\) *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*. Retrieved January 5, 2019 from http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.1.2#
Polyspirited Naming Embodiments

What does it mean to embody bone memories of a collective clanship akin to agential relatives who were and are nonhuman and so-called “objects”? What does it mean to be akin to an architecture of belonging which spiritually, emotionally, and physically extends our rafters? What might be remembered within one’s body from those times and placed-based recollections when/where our ancient ancestors were birthed from dormancy? Or from rivers of lava or mercury that surfaced from beneath our oceanic floor bed and solidified into those who we call grandfather or grandmother stones—stones who silently watch our walk upon this earth throughout successive generations while bearing witness in our ability to endure or to relate?

An example of kinship/clanship formations in relation to intimacies with nonhuman beings or ancestral “objects” is embedded within translations of Chinese surnames. Using an autoethnographic approach, I demonstrate how nonhuman kinship relations are ancestrally passed down intergenerationally, and show that the embodiment of names are materially-present relations tied to land, waters, and clay.

In Chinese, the clan name 朱 (Choo, my maternal grandfather’s surname) means “red” or vermilion that is pigmented from the volcanic mineral, cinnabar. Some clan names have multiple meanings such as 梁 (Leung, my maternal grandmother’s surname) which can mean “a beam,” “a bridge,” an “elevation,” or “a mast.” In this way, those remembered kinships within my family—and the clay that we are made of (Hill, 2017)—are descendent of bears (with paternal Kanien’kehá:ka roots to Kahnewake), clay (the reciprocal systems of land and water), cinnabar (liquid mercury in its crystalized form), beams, bridges, elevations, and masts. These ancestors are the culmination of a minuscule sum of atomic, familial particles within a vastness of many ways of knowing kin throughout the world; a poetic science of relational embodiment made method. To cultural anthropologist Ma Guoqing, a “shared-ancestor (lian zong) or same-surname (tong xing) groups linked together by symbolic ancestors that are outside the blood line or simulated in nature [...] help us attain a deeper understanding of the appeal of having ancestors transcend blood-kinship lines” (2005, p. 54) in Chinese society. This non-anthropocentric relational acknowledgement of ancestors as sentient kin (through clanship) emphasise a necessity in conceptualizing intergenerational ancestral embodiment as polyspirited bound together within the body by the “clay we are made of” (Hill, 2017).
Conclusion

I conclude with a poetic passage in the *Chu Ci* dating back to the Warring States Period (475 BC – 221 BC) in China: “When giant turtles bearing islands on their backs stir, how do they keep them steady?” In reading the foretelling of Turtle Island’s formation (within the Haudenosaunee creation story) alongside the *Chu Ci*, how might obligations to the land and waters (as all our relations) be understood as relational?

While the common interpretation of the Haudenosaunee creation story depicts Turtle Island as those combined continents of the Americas, other ways of interpreting the creation story present the possibility of a supercontinent or, in the example depicted within this Chinese poem, the possibility of a multitude of Turtle Islands and the overlap of their remembrances by different cultures. If we replace the words “turtle island(s)” with “self-governance,” what is risked in speaking of more than one self-governance? How might that contribute to the dismantling of settler colonialist claims to the land and waters they are in relation to? When we understand that it is less about an impasse in comprehending overlaps of relational remembrance, and rather that it is about eradicating cultural essentialism as the ultimate decolonial liberation strategy, we see the urgency in finding different ways of imagining how to be self-determinant as Indigenous peoples living among Othered kin.

From my own Kanien’kéhá:ka and Cantonese cultural perspectives, I turn to Katherine McKittrick’s call to move beyond racial scripts that reduce Black knowledges to biological knowledges in order to consider how “alternative racial configurations are, or can be, collectively and relationally and spatially liberatory” upon Turtle Island (2016, p. 23). By researching transnational origin stories that encompass clay embodiment, common grounds are resurfaced from ocean floor beds, foretelling of how human beings became ensouled as beings embodied by a multitude of nonhuman and human kin, bundled together in earthy-watery containment. Non-human animal clan relatives such as those within Haudenosaunee culture (as exemplified by the bear) and Chinese clanships embodying nonhuman soil composition, mineral or ancestral “object” kinships (exemplified through cinnabar; the beam, bridge, elevation, and mast) lead to a consideration of how perspectives of two-spirited identity emphasize gendered ensoulment, rather than an embodiment of all our relations.

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2 The line as written states: 鳄戴山拚，何以安之，释舟陵行，何以迁之? *Chu Ci (Songs of Chu)* 楚辭. Written during the period of the Warring States which ended in 221 B.C. Retrieved January 1, 2019 from http://bs.dayabook.com/poetry/chu-ci-songs-of-the-south/heavenly-questions#TOC--2.
As taught to me by my Elder, Te howis kwûnt (Allen Doxtator), the *Owen:ton Karihwatchkwen* (Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, or the words before all else) give thanks to all of our relations while calling them together as One Mind, collectively unified. This One Mindedness results in putting potential or presiding conflicts to rest. Where a potential for contradiction might occur between polyspirited embodiments of conflicting ancestral belief systems, the collective consciousness of relational networks gather together under the Great Tree of Peace. This Great Tree of Peace is represented in Onkwehonwe Neha as four white pine tree roots that stretch across the four directions of the earth. Difference, then, does not have to be erased, but instead can be gathered together in agential reciprocity and as medicine.

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