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Shapeshifting Power: Indigenous Teachings of Trickster Consciousness and Relational Accountability for Building Communities of Care

Abstract

Difficult dialogues are necessary work in order for communities to form coalitions, yet often these dialogues pose challenges for engaging in long-term work for social justice and systemic change. Power dynamics, microaggressions, and discomfort unlearning power and privilege can make long-term collaboration difficult. It is for this reason I discuss thinking of coalitions as *communities of care* and offer practical strategies for collaborating differently for sustainable action. Using Indigenous epistemology and methodology, Indigenous feminist and Indigequeer scholarship, as well as Indigenous land-based pedagogy and storytelling, I offer interventions using trickster teachings or *trickster consciousness* which I describe as comprised of a) humor and play to navigate discomfort, b) embracing multiplicity and the unknown, and c) embracing relationality as a site of meaning-making in critical and difficult dialogues. These foundations are rooted in Indigenous epistemology, center land/other-than-human-relationality, and employ Indigenous methodological and political frameworks of *refusal* by naming dialogic practices in organizations and higher education as Indigenous practices. As a Cree-Métis (Michel First Nation) author, I urge that dialogic practices seeking to employ trickster consciousness or other Indigenous frameworks not only *cite* Indigenous scholarship and intellectualism, but also radically shift hiring, acceptance, and/or inclusion practices to ensure Indigenous peoples are present and direct beneficiaries of the work in institutions and organizations.

Keywords

Indigenous, land pedagogy, land relationality, Two Spirit, Indigequeer, dialogue, intergroup dialogue, higher education, antiracism, critical studies

SHAPESHIFTING POWER:
INDIGENOUS TEACHINGS OF TRICKSTER
CONSCIOUSNESS AND RELATIONAL
ACCOUNTABILITY FOR BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF
CARE

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This essay argues that Indigenous epistemologies of relational accountability offer opportunities for sustainable, Indigenized coalitions and capacity for difficult dialogues across difference. Using land-based relationality, pedagogy, storytelling, and trickster consciousness, this essay discusses practices that have been part of Indigenous knowledge to make a sovereign re-turn to Indigenous teachings to build solidarity between different communities.

Difficult dialogues are necessary in order for communities to form coalitions. Yet often these dialogues pose challenges for engaging in long-term work for social justice and systemic change. Skewed power dynamics, microaggressions, and the discomfort of unlearning power and privilege can make long-term collaboration difficult. It is for this reason I discuss thinking of coalitions as *communities of care* and offer practical strategies for collaborating differently for sustainable action. In this essay I feature a combination of Indigenous epistemology and methodology, Indigenous feminist and Indigequeer scholarship, and Indigenous land-based pedagogy and storytelling to contribute to existing work on power relations in activist collaboration. I offer interventions based on relational accountability and trickster teachings, or *trickster*

*consciousness*¹ of shapeshifting, which embrace multiplicity and the “unknown” to help navigate the resulting discomfort in building communities of care. As a Cree-Métis (Michel First Nation) author, I urge that dialogic practices seeking to employ trickster consciousness or other Indigenous frameworks not only *cite* Indigenous scholarship and intellectualism, but also radically shift hiring, acceptance, and/or inclusion practices to ensure Indigenous peoples are present and direct beneficiaries of the work in institutions and organizations.

COMMUNITIES OF CARE

Just shy of two years before starting my PhD program, I would often retreat to the mountain region now called the Adirondacks on unceded Mohawk and Oneida lands in what is now known as Upstate New York. My community of the Michel First Nation² carries lineages and has ancestral memory tied to these lands and, with every footstep on a mountain hike, I would feel as if I was coming to *remember* these lands even though I had spent little to no time here. The smell of balsam fir crunching under foot as I hiked to summit peaks shared with me a memory. Wind held me gently on the summit slopes and sang to me when the hours in the woods felt long and quiet. The sun shone just enough to offer views that helped me better understand the land as an animate being—one with hopes, dreams, fears, wishes, wisdom, and memory.

This time became not just reprieve; it provided *lessons* in listening. Not every step was comfortable. My feet ached, I wondered if I would get lost, the wind was sometimes intense and achingly cold on my face, and needles of fir would stick to my skin and pierce it. These were all lessons. The

¹ I use the phrase *trickster consciousness* as it is defined by Ojibwe scholar Gerald Vizenor (“Trickster Discourse”) and Anishinaabe Métis scholar Melissa K. Nelson who indicate that when we embrace the shapeshifting, playfulness of the trickster who takes on many forms, we can come to understand multiple viewpoints existing simultaneously, a concept embraced by Indigenous ontological-epistemology.

² The Michel First Nation is the namesake of Chief Michel Callihoo, the son of Mohawk fur trader and traveler Louis Kwarakwante from the Mohawk territory now known as Kahnawake near present-day Montreal. Michel First Nation honors our Mohawk ancestry and connections to Mohawk territories.

branch showed consent when it pierced me; it did not want my touch. Wind could bend the trees, ripple mountain streams, and shapeshift the clouds. As soon as something felt familiar, the wind would upend what I thought I knew. The wind is a trickster. I share this story because so often practitioners of social justice and feminism remark on the importance of sustaining difficult dialogues and being in community as an antidote to the isolationism and rugged individualism so often required to survive colonization's imports of white supremacy and competitive capitalism. Being in community, however, is not always easy. In my experience, I have often felt isolated even in community because, since the dawn of colonization, our relations to each other, to others on this land, and to the land itself as Indigenous people have been interrupted. When I am on the land, at least, those moments of loneliness (while still present, as my story suggests) are not as pronounced. Our teachings as Cree people remind us to constantly reflect—especially in relationship to place—in order to come to know ourselves, our roles and responsibilities to our communities, and to make meaning from knowledge we encounter. These are all part of *wahkotowin* (our natural law of kinship), *miyo wîcêhtowin* (being in good relations), and *miskâsowin* (deep self-reflection, particularly in the land), points to which I will return later.

Colonization has—by design—made ruptures in our relations to one another as Indigenous people, something I know from having experienced microaggressions as a Two Spirit Indigenous person with a dis/ability who grew up working-class/cash poor. How then do we *re*-cultivate these relationships when colonization has brought with it tenets of rugged individualism and isolationism so associated with the competition embedded in capitalism and the violent hierarchies of cis-heteropatriarchy and white supremacy? How do we also cultivate meaningful—and with that *accountable*—relationships to others also oppressed by these similar structures? While building coalitions across difference and engaging in critical, difficult dialogues, there are tensions. Some experience discomfort as they encounter power (or privilege) and grow relatedly defensive or guilty, in turn causing harm and microaggressions (or worse) to others. How then do we forge coalitions that can enact meaningful change toward feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist futures?

It is here I propose thinking of coalitions as *communities of care* that center Indigenous concepts of not merely community-building, but relational *accountability*. I use the term *communities of care* rather than *coalition* because the former emphasizes long-term care over the kinds of short-term collaboration usually present in *coalitions*. Both require labor. To provide care or, as Sefanit Habtom and Megan Scribe note, *to breathe together*, is a labor of love. It is a commitment to long-term cultivation of building connection and relationship with one another, an Indigenous praxis that remembers that “alliance is a practice of survivance”³ (Driskill et al. 20). Communities of care center our relational accountability to one another, healing from colonial harms and its related oppressions, and committing to navigate discomfort and give/receive feedback in order to grow into community with one another. In short, it *embraces* conflict and discomfort while also attends to issues of safety, an important point to which I now turn.

It would be unrealistic to expect that all safety issues would be eliminated in communities of care because we live under anti-Black colonialism and sexist-racist capitalism. The world is violent to those of us pushed to the margins by it. Communities of care are spaces of harm reduction and as such are *intentional* spaces where participants recognize that we are there to build relationships with one another and importantly have a *desire* to do the work. I will not suggest that dialogue, coalitions, nor communities of care occur with those who desire to hold onto colonialism and its related ills. In short, it is futile to dialogue with our colonizer-oppressors; they cannot hear us while we are straining to speak with their boots on our necks. This is a key mechanism for reducing harm. Communities of care instead focus on listening to one another as peoples impacted by the oppressions that have been brought to these lands because of colonization (Byrd 126). Decolonial feminist of color scholar Chela Sandoval notes that we must not forget that we must hear and listen

³ Survivance is an Indigenous term. For more, see Vizenor (*Manifest Manners*).

to one another as oppressed peoples as much as—if not more so than—we try to scream at the pillars of power that oppress us.

RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

As Indigenous people, we are not ourselves alone, but rather ourselves only in relationship to our ancestors and lands, our families and communities, and to those we are responsible. This interconnection does not mean “we are all the same on the inside” as is so often understood in whitestream and race evasive⁴ discourse. Indigenous concepts of relationality imply *responsibility* and *reciprocity* (S. Wilson). Wahkotowin and miyo wicêhtowin teachings demonstrate that we must *attend* to our responsibility to all those with whom we are in relation. Our relationship to another entity *determines* our responsibility to it and the reciprocity we can expect to share with it. Our responsibility constantly shifts depending on context, changes in life and land, and especially power dynamics that shift under colonialism. We have different relationships with the pillars of colonial power—colonialism, white supremacy, and cis-heteropatriarchy that also uphold and are upheld by capitalism, ableism, and nativist-nationalism. We therefore have different responsibilities *based* on those relationships to power and each other under these systems. The practice of miskâsowin helps us identify who we are and subsequently what our roles are. It is a practice of education that recognizes that meaning is made, and knowledge exists, *only* in relationships (Kolopenuk; S. Wilson).

Because this is a relational work, let me introduce myself a bit more to you before we dive into some of these concepts. This is a practice our elders and storytellers do at the outset, so I hope they forgive this transgression as I write this work for not just Indigenous peoples, but broader audiences to include non-Native scholars and community activists. I am a Two Spirit

⁴ I borrow the term “whitestream” from Sandy Grande who deploys it often to mean those that would take up Euro-centric and colonial paradigms of dominant, mainstream ideology. I use the term “race evasive” instead of “colorblind” because the latter can be ableist in that it implies that blindness is a deficit.

Cree-Métis and Irish aayahkwew iskwew⁵ who, as a white-coded/white Native, grew up away from my ancestral lands. I have and will continue to spend years—a lifetime—reconnecting to these traditions and my kin as part of my love for community and responsibility under wahkotowin (*natural law of kinship*). As a white-Native, my physical appearance grants me unearned privileges (to which I must be accountable), but the oppression I experience as an Indigenous person is not based solely on skin color because our identities are both legal/political as well as racial (Brayboy; Grande).⁶ As Métis intellectual Âpihtawikosisân says, “the colonial state still wants us dead.” For some of us, our light skin is a direct result of generations of sexual and gender-based violence, a primary function of settler colonialism by forcing whiteness *onto* Native bodies in order to erase us under the settler logics of blood quantum (Arvin et al.; Deer; Simpson; Wilson and Laing).⁷

My Michel First Nation community claims me and I claim them. Identifying my Indigeneity is a refusal to allow settler eradication of my people to be enacted through my light-skinned body. I am not “half white” and “half Native.” I am not a body of math and fractions. I am a body of land. I am a body made of my ancestors who braided themselves together into me. Those ancestors include relatives still living, land-based kin, and those who are in memory. I am a braid. I am Indigenous-Irish and carry responsibilities to leverage the power white supremacy has unjustly given me—usually at the expense of my darker-skinned kin—for the aims of Indigenous resurgence.

I do not take these responsibilities lightly; when I do not attend to the needs of those with whom I am in relationship, I am ultimately also harming myself because again, I am not myself alone. This does not mean

⁵ Aayahkwew iskwew are Cree language terms that situates me as a Two Spirit person whose gender cannot be understood in English-language epistemology.

⁶ We are sovereign citizens/members of our nations/tribal communities and are legally categorized by settler governments as Native based typically on blood quantum, tribal ID cards, and related colonial tools to identify us that are not imposed on other minoritized non-white peoples in the U.S. and Canada.

⁷ Light-skinned people do not experience *more* gender/sexual or other forms of violence.

tending to my responsibility is easy work; in fact it can make it is very complex. When I return to the teachings from my nation of miyo wicêhtowin and miskâsowin, however, I am given tools to navigate discomfort that may arise when I come to understand the power and privileges I carry that I must work to share as well as when I encounter new information. I am even given tools to help understand how to ask for others to be reciprocal to me and to address safety issues that may arise. I reflect in the land under the practice of miskâsowin to better understand how to be in relationship with others across difference—how to be in communities of care. In the practice of being in right relationship with each other as Indigenous people and as people in communities of care, the trickster teachings—or *trickster consciousness*—rooted in Cree stories teach us often how to be in right relationship and how to make sense of our self-reflective practices in miskâsowin.

TRICKSTERS AND TRICKSTER CONSCIOUSNESS

Tricksters are teachers in Indigenous storytelling, pedagogy, and history. Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor's preeminent and heavily-cited texts ("Trickster Discourse;" *Manifest Manners*) are informed by the collective knowledge of Indigenous communities that continue to inform Indigenous scholarship and thought (Nelson). They are playful, curious, and humorous shapeshifters endemic to many tribal nations, each with their own set of teachings. Because I write from my position including my relations as a Nehiyawak (*Cree person*)—the only place from which I can speak—I discuss largely the teachings of Wesakecahk, the Cree trickster-shapeshifter who is neither man nor woman, but energy who can shapeshift into all and no genders, human and other-than-human form including plants and animals, water and wind, constellations and cosmos (A. Wilson).

SHAPESHIFTING

It was early morning, a few miles into one of my long, mountain hikes in the Adirondack region. The air was unexpectedly cold and so thick with fog that at elevated viewpoints, all I could feel were clouds around me. The

weather forecast had said it would be warm and sunny, but the air foretold something different. I had been working across difference with other communities of color and, as the only Indigenous person in the space, again felt the stab of loneliness and retreated to the mountains to find reprieve and to practice *miskâsowin*. It was in this space that a question came to me about how much the land loves us, but I also pondered to myself, “Who do I mean by *us*?”

Does the land love us all? Light-skinned faces so often greet me when I hike the Adirondacks. My white-coded body has unearned freedom to move and that includes in natural parks and similar lands that are often hostile to darker-skinned people of color. Does the land miss and desire the company of those who have been barred from it—namely Indigenous people including the descendants of those Indigenous to the continent of Africa who were stolen and enslaved on our stolen lands? Is the land never angry? Does the land not have desire to resist the confines of being owned (even by public settler institutions like national and other municipal parks)?

I did not receive outright answers, nor did I expect to. Dominant discursive practices like to paint Indigenous people as hyper-spiritual and hyper-connected to the land. It may only *appear* to settler logics that we are hyper-connected because colonial traditions do not value land as kin and thus view our relationship with it as *solely* spiritual rather than also epistemological and scientific (Cajete; Kimmerer; TallBear and Willey). Certainly spirituality can be part of our land-based connection, but I will not bring that tradition into the settler gaze. I share that after miles of grueling terrain where the fog condensed to water on my skin, I found a thick patch of moss on the ground in the shape of a heart (see Figure 1). It was so apparent—a heart for love! After I took a picture of it with my phone, however, I noticed the heart could easily be a rear-end in disguise. Perhaps it was *Wesakecahk*, shapeshifting from a heart (to show that the land loves you, if you care for it including yourself and others as part of it) or a rear-end to moon you if you sever these ties and label it “Other” along with the bodies of particular humans!

This story of *Wesakecahk*’s shapeshifting is about recognizing that there are things that can be unknowable from one’s position, to make

meaning based on reflection of *our* relationship (and subsequent responsibility) to the particular entity or learning moment that shared with us an insight, and that—as such—multiple meanings coexist based on different relationships. Whitestream diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices espouse tenets of valuing and listening to multiple viewpoints. The shapeshifting of Wesakecahak is not to be confused with these tenets as the shapeshifting of Wesakecahk—or trickster consciousness—contends with the context out of which particular viewpoints emerge including contending with power dynamics and history.



Fig. 1: Photo of a tuft of moss on a forest floor.

Wesakecahk’s shapeshifting demonstrates that viewpoints come from our relative positions of relationship to one another and place. Feminist of color thought (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli; Lerum) values subjectivity as a place for making meaning and decenters the need to find “objective” truths or reality often present in whitestream and cis-male-dominated traditions, often asking if objectivity exists at all. As I understand from Cree

teachings and scholarship, there *is* an objective “truth” or “reality” that exists, but not *all of* it can be known to *all of us* because we cannot be a part of all the different relations that exist in our world. I cannot know all the teachings that emerge from all the lands and waters and systems that make up this planet. I cannot know all animate beings’ experiences in their respective position that make up their set of knowledges.

As Cherokee Two Spirit literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice notes, it is only the colonialist or imperialist who demands to have access to all knowledge in all spaces and contexts (26). *I can only know that with which I am in relationship* and *I can only know so much about a particular relationship depending on the depth of the efforts I put into that relationship*. As Cree scholar Shawn Wilson notes, the more that we cultivate a relationship between ourselves and the entity to which we are in relation or about which we want to know more, “the more fully [we] can comprehend [the entity’s] form and the greater our understanding becomes” (79). Relationships are the only way we can come to know anything. When we allow ourselves to not know everything—expressed through Wesakecahk’s shapeshifting and trickster consciousness—we can respect that the patch of moss is a heart for some and a moon for others. If it is a moon for us, what do we need to do to make it a heart? Can we do anything at all?

As a shapeshifter, Wesakecahk holds multiple perspectives from the trickster’s different embodiments. This demonstrates how knowledge and meaning emerge from context, relationship, and—importantly—from *place*. Because we come from different places—as humans with different positionalities and relationships, and from different *lands* that raise us—we carry truths that emerge from these particular contexts. It would be ridiculous to assume that the teachings that emerge in the northern grasslands of the Nehiyawak (Plains Cree) would be the exact same as those of the Nihithawak (Woodland Cree) let alone of the Tohono O’odham whose teachings emerge in what are now the borderlands between the settler nation-states of the U.S. and Mexico. The teachings from my nation value buffalo, mountains and prairie, and the medicines, animals and constellations that make up how we survive and thrive in what are now the Northern Rocky Mountains and Plains. These values would be

relatively useless in regions of the world where buffalo, cold winters, and mountains and prairies are absent. It would be as ridiculous to assume that the truths held by Afro-Indigenous/Black-Native Two Spirit trans women would be the same as those held by other trans women of color who do not share the *same* relationship to settler colonialism as Indigenous people.

I had the opportunity to share these teachings with participants in a dialogue series I developed and facilitated from September to November 2020 that was open to Black, Indigenous, and other participants of color (BIPOC) who were affiliated with Syracuse University or were BIPOC community members in surrounding areas on Onondaga and other unceded Haudenosaunee territory. We were a small group that met over video conference due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but because land is central to Indigenous epistemology, trickster teachings, and relationship-building, the land-based activities I asked participants to engage in between each session offered us opportunities to cultivate experiences and relationships with our other-than-human kin. Some of the land-based activities included hiking (according to each participant's desire and skill-level). Options also included land-based activities such as outdoor meditation and virtual activities such as guided visualizations, a series of slideshow images with a moving meditation that I created, and resources that contained links to National Park virtual tours. Alternative options such as sipping tea, eating fruit, or sitting near a window or door to take in the sensory experiences of the lands and other-than-human kin around participants were also offered.

In nearly each session participants would share journal reflections on prompts I would prepare for them beforehand. As we had spent some weeks getting to know one another, I prepared them for a new activity in which participants would share their journal reflection not in writing, but rather in dance or movement. I offered suggestions for different levels of safety and mobility to again mitigate harms, though I encouraged participants to consider whether or not they were *uncomfortable* or were truly *unsafe* engaging in the practice and asked them to consider doing it uncomfortable, anyway. Every participant joined in the activity. As each participant showcased their movement, everyone else was asked to copy-

cat it and, when completed, we engaged in each movement together in one, single, flowing movement or “choreography.”

In this process, we laughed a lot, another component of trickster consciousness. More importantly, however, we used the opportunity to discuss how the activity made us feel and lessons gleaned from it. I asked participants to consider what it was like to engage movement when, as bodies often subjected to surveillance and confinement, our movements—like those of land owned by the state or private institutions—are often limited and/or controlled. Participants described feeling free and gaining new insights that they did not have from just their verbal/oral communication and/or written journals. Importantly—and as a site of understanding our relational accountability to one another—participants described what it felt like to both witness others copy their movements and (conversely) to embody another participant’s movement or dance demonstration.

Because each body is different, we discussed the aforementioned tenets of trickster consciousness to help us recognize that each unique body has its own knowledge to share and that because those teachings *come* from that body, it would be futile to try to make them reflections of our own experience. Just like knowledge comes from land and place, so too is our body a place! We are bodies of land. As such, this dance movement activity represents an Indigenous paradigm that values difference and discomfort. Participants shared that some movements felt uncomfortable to them and remarked that this made sense since the movement was not one that emerged from *their* body. We discussed that this demonstrated both (a) that some knowledges are not *for* us, but we can honor and respect that they exist, and (b) *all* knowledge is *only* gleaned by the ongoing practice of building relationships and the more we build relationships—the more we come to know someone through the ways they safely can express themselves mind and body—the more we will know. This is very different from colonial knowledge that values knowledge as seen from a distance, a point that feminists of color have often critiqued. Just because all bodies carry knowledge does not mean that all need to be equally positioned in communities of care. Knowledges that emerge from dominant colonial paradigms naturally cannot be a part of this work because those

knowledges are from a non-relational, disembodied paradigm. Additionally, whitestream knowledge has been centered for far too long and to *shapeshift* that power dynamic, we must be willing to embrace knowledges that have been forced to the margins. We must be willing to let the trickster come out and demonstrate to us something that *does not* resonate with us, but instead produces discomfort or dissonance. In that site of dissonance, we can reflect on what makes us uncomfortable to generate knowledge about our relationship—such as unearned power with which we have to contend. In this activity, I asked participants to reflect in future journals on that discomfort. What insights did they glean? What responsibilities do they carry and how can they tend to them?

The dialogue series ended with many participants spending time together on the land, a few co-facilitating workshops with me at academic and regional conferences, and everyone continuing to stay in touch. As some navigate life struggles, others reach out to check in, offer material support, and practice community care. I return then to the concept of communities of care as an intervention into thinking about navigating difficult dialogues. In this space, we did not always attend to microaggressions; they were few and far between. What we tended to instead was the cultivation of Indigenous epistemological foundations of relational accountability to better *know* one another and navigate our relations to one another through different practices especially and including the shapeshifting teachings of trickster stories and consciousness. Communities of care are designed to build stronger communities that can withstand conflicts *when* they arise and embrace them as opportunities for learning—as sites of dissonance—as well as for recognizing that working through conflict provided an opportunity to strengthen relationships with one another. They also recognize that caring for one another in community is a radically decolonial, feminist, and anti-oppressive framework.

Indigenous epistemology in building communities of care align well with the theory and practice-based research of Intergroup Dialogue (IGD). IGD is designed to understand differences and tensions, not to flatten them, and instead to develop relationships that can enact systemic change (Lopez and Zúñiga; Zúñiga et al., “Intergroup Dialogue”). Using models

like storytelling (Romney, Tatum & Jones) and relationship-building across difference (Zúñiga et al., “Preparing”; Ford and Malaney), IGD research is in line with Indigenous epistemology. Sustained dialogue over time, such as that employed in IGD, is not a discussion (without any end goal or point) nor a debate (where one side “wins” an argument), but rather a sustained set of practices that seek to make meaning from where difference and tension exist. This is in alignment with Indigenous pedagogy that values “difference” as a source of self-reflexive curiosity rather than a site for flattening or responding with defensiveness, criticism, or co-option (Justice). It also is in line with Indigenous epistemology that recognizes that meaning-making only occurs by bridging the gaps that exist between relationships (S. Wilson). It also intersects well with Indigenous storytelling, which is never frivolous and always done with intention to impart a meaning and teaching particular to audience, place, and time (Iseke). I highlight the Indigenous roots of engaging in difficult dialogues by defining spaces of communities of care built around relational accountability and the shapeshifting paradigm of trickster consciousness—including dance and movement—to enact a sovereign *re*-turn to our epistemologies as Indigenous people. When we seek out the answers to build justice and navigate conflict, we need turn only to Indigenous tradition; the answers have been on these lands since time immemorial even when taken up or used in other practices without citation to Indigenous knowledge.

The land (plants, waters, sky and air, animals and cosmos, etc.) is animate and a relative. It has a collection of memories, expressions and emotions, and hopes and dreams. It too has experienced the violence of colonization and its relationship with us as Indigenous people has been interrupted. *The land misses us*. If we ignore our relationship to the land, it becomes easy to misinterpret how we come to know our relationship to one another as human beings. When bodies of land and water are classified as “The Other,” it becomes much easier to classify particular bodies of humans as “The Other.” Dominant whitestream traditions do just that classifying incarcerated, trans and queer, and dis/abled Black, Indigenous, and Brown bodies as The Other (particularly if they do not fit nativist-nationalist standards of a particular nation-state). Being in relationship

with the land is being in a community and, when we endeavor to live in reciprocal relationship with it, it becomes a community of care that offers models for similar relationship with other humans. Because we cannot know all lands and all of their teachings, we have to spend time in it, learning what I refer to as the “land’s love language” to come to know as much as possible while also embracing that not all of it is for us to know. Trickster consciousness and relational accountability are both rooted firmly in building our relationships to land and place.

In the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic that persists and enacts germ warfare predominantly on Black, Indigenous, and Brown communities at the time of this writing, cultivating these relationships—and ensuring land-based access—can be life-saving for many of us. It is for this reason that I urge those taking up this knowledge to recognize that that while it can benefit all (Nelson), we must first examine our relationship to this knowledge to ask how we can best ensure this knowledge centers, includes, and benefits Indigenous and other people of color in our efforts to not merely survive, but thrive. Of course this work *cannot* be done without citing Indigenous knowledge. More importantly however, this work cannot be done if it does not seek to benefit the aims of decolonization: presence of Indigenous people, restitution of land/land relationality, and affirmed sovereignty and self-determination. In short, the knowledges *and* the bodies—not just mascots and historical memory—of actual living, breathing Indigenous people today need to be present in communities of care if Indigenous knowledges are employed.

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