Sacred Shapeshifter:
Embracing Ambiguity in Two-Spirit Identity

by

Kay Nadjiwon

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Interdisciplinary Art, Media & Design

Ignite Gallery, 100 McCaul St, March 20th-24th

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2025

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

ABSTRACT

This Master of Fine Arts thesis explores the reclamation of Two-Spirit identity and its significance within the queer Indigenous community, examining how Eve Tuck's desire-based research framework can shape futures centered around decolonial love. Grounded in personal narrative, familial histories, and Anishinaabe epistemologies, both the written and creative productions disrupt conventional understandings of tradition, challenge rigid gender binaries, and foster intergenerational healing as a means to raise a new consciousness. Through autoethnographic modes of storytelling, stitching, beadwork, and sculpture come together to explore the ambiguity of Two-Spirit identity and engage in world-building. Rather than focusing solely on damage, this thesis highlights the power of possibility, resilience, and kinship across time and space, carrying ancestral knowledge forward as a gesture of futurity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my partner Zach, thank you for your unconditional love and support throughout this, and all of life's journeys. I could not have made it this far without you.

To my father, Simon, who has always been my biggest supporter regardless of what I pursue. Thank you for always listening, researching, and trying, albeit silently, to understand.

To my *aanikoobijigan, chi miigwetch* for all that you have done and will continue to do. You have given me the strength to pursue my dreams, and I hope that this work can inspire future generations to do the same.

To my primary advisor Susan Blight, thank you for your wisdom and encouragement. You have constantly reminded me of my own power, and given me hope for what the future might hold.

To my secondary advisor Julia Rose Sutherland, thank you for helping me bring my artistic visions to life. Your love and commitment to the materiality of making is infectious.

To Peter Morin, thank you for showing up in this city years ago, as the only NDN in the institution, and enacting change. You have carved an indelible path for Indigenous students.

To Rhéanne Chartrand, for being the first Indigenous professor I ever had. You were a beacon of light during my undergrad years, and have inspired me to pursue research and teaching.

To Catherine Blackburn, for being the only other Indigenous kin in our cohort. You have provided me with endless support, and filled my belly with laughter only a *neechie* would be capable of. Thank you for showing me what Indigenous excellence looks like.

To Amy Noseworthy and Emília Nahdee, for all your help with installing my exhibition.

To the rest of the IAMD cohort for being wonderful artists, thinkers, and peers. For never accepting what the institution tells us is the best they can offer, and always fighting for change.

This MFA thesis would have not been possible without all of you. *Giizagiin. Apane.*

DEDICATION

To all of the queer and trans Indigenous youth that feel lost and alone, drifting through the twilight zone. Neither here, nor there. You are loved, valid, sacred, and *ever deadly*. I know it may not feel like it, but your Ancestors are standing behind you, cheering you on, all the time. We have always existed and we will persist. You are the reason I continue to live and create. May this give you the inspiration to continue to live and create too.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

POSITIONALITY:
WHO I AM AND WHERE I KNOW FROM

As Anishinaabeg, we recognize that each individual has a responsibility to make meaning based on their clan, community, personal gifts, identity, and lived experiences. Thus, it is important to clarify my positionality in this work. As Kameelah Janan Rasheed reminds me, we must acknowledge "where we know from"[1] and how this affects our approach to research and meaning-making. With that said, allow me to introduce myself:

Boozhoo indinawemaaganidog
Ziigwan Waagosh Manitou nindizhnikaaz
Mishiikenh n'dodem
Ojibwe miinawa Potawatomi Niizhin Ojiijaak
Neyaashiinigmiing nindoonjibaa
Tkaronto, waaki-midaaswi-shay-niswi ninda

Greetings, all my relations. My name is Kay Nadjiwon, and my Anishinaabe name is Spring Fox Spirit. I am from the Turtle clan. I am a mixed Two-Spirit Anishinaabeg with Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Scottish, and French ancestry. My grandmother was born in Neyaashiinigmiing (also known as Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation or Cape Croker) along the southwestern shore of Georgian Bay, but she moved with her family to Sault Ste. Marie when she was around ten or eleven years old. Thus, I am a registered member of Batchewana First

[1] Roberson, "'Come Think with Me'", p. 548.

Nation, but have always considered Neyaashiinigmiing my ancestral homelands. As I write this, I live and work on Williams Treaty territory in what is known as the Greater Toronto Area, and go to school in Treaty 13 territory in what is known as the city of Toronto.

My mother grew up in Oshawa and raised me in the next town over, along with my younger brother. I grew up renting a house in Neyaashiinigmiing with many family members for a week or two every summer since I can remember. I am grateful to have grown up having the opportunity to experience my homelands and learn from the Elders in my family and community. However, outside of these summer weeks, I grew up in a suburban town where the only exposure to my culture was sharing Cedar tea from a percolator in the backseat of my mother's car with a small room of Indigenous folks at the community centre every Wednesday evening and monthly Full Moon ceremonies at the Boy Scouts camp down the road from my mother's work.

My father was born in Oban, a small coastal town in western Scotland. He met my mother at a friend's wedding, moved to Ontario in 1992, and became a citizen fifteen years later. Although often quiet and reserved, he has always been a fierce activist and a sweet soul. Nowadays, we meet a few times each month for lunch or coffee and just talk. In between our meetings he will send me articles about Star Wars being dubbed in Anishinaabemowin[2], pictures of land acknowledgments in another country (he is an aircraft mechanic and often travels for work), a video of Haka[3] performance at an All Blacks game, and anything else we can talk about together involving Indigenous politics and social justice.

[2] The language of the Anishinaabeg.
[3] Haka are a variety of ceremonial dances in Māori culture. A performance art, haka are often performed by a group, with vigorous movements and stamping of the feet with rhythmically shouted accompaniment. They are performed to welcome distinguished guests, or to acknowledge great achievements, occasions, or funerals.

Throughout this paper, I share with you details about myself and my life that are often considered extraneous to academic writing. I am following in the footsteps of Black and Indigenous feminist scholars who have long advocated for self-identification as academic practice. It is imperative that I invite you to understand who I am and where I come from in order to position myself within the academic sphere which I currently inhabit. Beyond providing important identity markers that situate my experience and knowledge, I also share fragments that I feel are significant to this project and the dissemination of my knowledge. Furthermore, I find that traditional didactic writing has failed me in this context. As a result, I rely on creative modes of knowledge transmission that better encompass the murky brilliance of what it means to be Two-Spirit. I employ my own shapeshifting skills in order to attend to what I desire to communicate within this space.

My practice of self-location is rooted in Nishnaabeg custom and celebrates my own experiences as valid sources of knowledge in an academic realm that often relies on citation as proof of knowledge. During my undergraduate degree, I was taught to insert citations abundantly and haphazardly to meet certain criteria for an academic paper. Instead, this thesis follows a relational approach to my practice of citation that ensures I have a meaningful relationship to either the author or to the body of work I am citing.[4] Further, I employ my own citational politic that prioritizes the voices and writings of Indigenous, queer, trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people who have been marginalized and excluded within academia and our communities.

[4] Christie-Peters, 'Anishinaabeg Art-Making as Falling in Love: Reflections on Artistic Programming for Urban Indigenous Youth', par. 11.

THIS ACHING ARCHIVE:
THE CRAFTING OF MY OWN DESIRE

> *This is an aching archive – the one that contains all our growing grief, all of our dispossessed longing for the bodies that were once among us and have gone over to the side that we will go to too.*
>
> – Angie Morrill and Eve Tuck[5]

I grew up in a small suburban town in southwestern Ontario in the early 2000s where homophobia and transphobia were rampant and inescapable. Kids sharpened their tongues, hurling words like *dyke, lesbo, faggot, freak* across hallways at me for years. I was quick to be labeled by others, but always struggled to understand which one really fit. I thought I was lesbian, then bisexual, then maybe asexual, but nothing ever felt right. I always knew I was different, but never had the words to describe *how* until I reached my senior year of high school. Back then I called myself non-binary, but a better term for what I experience is one rooted in Indigenous ways of being: Two-Spirit.

Throughout high school, I was friends with people who were either at the time, or later discovered, that they were queer in one way or another. Despite this, I never felt that I had truly found my community. This feeling permeated into and throughout my undergraduate degree as well. Julietta Singh shares that there are two ways to understand how desire emerges within us;

[5] Morrill, Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Qollective, 'Before Dispossession, or Surviving It', p. 2.

one is through a single moment that fundamentally alters the way you act and react, and "the other is through accrual, how over time and repetition our histories draw us toward certain practices and ways of feeling and wanting."[6] All of these seemingly minute feelings of longing come together to create a dynamic whole, until you can no longer ignore that thing tugging at your pant leg or whispering in your ear. Tuck expands on this thought, sharing that "desire is not mere wanting but our informed seeking."[7]

Although there were a handful of other queer people in my high school, I never felt understood in the same way they could understand one another. When I was accepted into my undergraduate photography program, it felt the same. There were a handful of other queer and trans people, but nobody was Indigenous (and in fact, I never met another Indigenous student in my four years there). Again, grad school would prove to be nearly the same experience; queer and trans students (and for the first time, *one* other Indigenous student), but never anyone else who was both. However, grad school presented our cohort with opportunities to engage in critical conversations about the world and the systems which underpinned all of our lives, which made the loneliness slightly less painful because there was an understanding between all of us.

In the winter semester of my first year, Peter Morin of the Tahltan nation came in to speak to our studio class. Peter shared some very beautiful things that I immediately wrote down in fear that I might lose what I knew I should hold onto. He started by sharing that "I come to you as someone who is traumatized," which in and of itself is so innate to us as Indigenous people when we consider the effects of intergenerational trauma. He went on to say that

[6] Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, p. 19.
[7] Tuck, 'Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities', p. 418.

vulnerability is one of his methodologies and that his art "presses on the soft spot" where all of that hurt comes from. He continued, stating that colonization wants us to rest in a known familiarity, but that through art we are able to resist colonialism. Then, he said something that has stuck with me since that day: *"Sometimes, we have to make art to be able to breathe."* It sounds so simple, yet rings so true. Art is a mode of creation that allows us to express both our deepest pains and desires as a means to expel our trauma and invite healing.

With this in mind, I am reminded of Morrill and Tuck as they write that "the opposite, the endgame of our opposing our dispossession is not possession — not haunting, though I'll do it if I have to; it is mattering."[8] Although colonization, heteronormativity, and transphobia have taken what could have been from me and my Ancestors[9], I create art as an act of resistance. This thesis, everything I have made up until this point, and everything I will craft after this, is an act of *mattering*, of enacting my informed seeking. This is how I take a breath and continue to live.

[8] Morrill, Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Qollective, 'Before Dispossession, or Surviving It', p. 5.
[9] I capitalize the word Ancestor, although it is not seen as a proper noun in English. I do this, following in the footsteps of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and other Indigenous scholars, to honour those who have passed on, to give them agency and recognition in a language that often dismisses these nuances.

INTRODUCTION:
DESIRE AS ONTOLOGY

> *Desire is a refusal to trade in damage; desire is an antidote, a medicine to the damage narratives. Desire, however, is not just living in the looking glass; it isn't a trip to the opposite world. Desire is not a light switch, not a nescient turn to focus on the positive. It is a recognition of suffering, the costs of settler colonialism and capitalism, and how we still thrive in the face of loss anyway; the parts of us that won't be destroyed.*
>
> – Eve Tuck & C. Ree[10]

In the Western world, desire is often interpreted through a lens of shame. When we feel desire, we are told that we are ungrateful; that we need to be more appreciative of the things we already have instead of complaining. However, as Sara Ahmed frames it, "We must complain. There is a lot to complain about. If they [feminists] hadn't complained some of us wouldn't be here. If we don't complain some of us won't be here."[11] Thus, this thesis is an act of complaint; an act of revelation, of reframing desire, of demanding to be heard, of refusing to be erased. Above all, this thesis is an act of informed seeking, to make sure that I, and others like me, stay here (so we can continue to complain) because complaining can be a matter of life and death.

The lives of queer Indigenous people are permeated by desire. The desire to live, to love, to find community, to feel safe. In an attempt to reframe the shame often associated with desire, I

[10] Tuck and Ree, 'A Glossary of Haunting', pp. 647-648.
[11] Ahmed, 'Feminist Complaint', par. 67-73.

draw on Unangax̂ scholar Dr. Eve Tuck's desire-based research framework[12] from her open letter 'Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities', whereby she counteracts her initial concept of damage-centered research.[13] Tuck discusses the ways in which Indigenous trauma is over-documented and over-researched, instilling an internalized narrative that we, as Indigenous peoples, are fundamentally broken. While she writes about the damaging effects of anthropological research conducted upon Indigenous peoples as a whole, it is critical to think about the specific harm that damage-centred research can have and has had on Two-Spirit folks specifically. There is a long and painful history of invasive studies conducted on Two-Spirit people that has positioned us as savage, sub-human, sinful, and shameful. Instead, desire-based research frameworks "are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives"[14] as a means of defying the pathologization of damage-centred research. When describing desire-based research, she emphasizes that:

> Desire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the *not yet* and, at times, the *not anymore*. In many desire-based texts there is a ghostly, remnant quality to desire, its existence not contained to the body but still derived of the body. Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness.[15]

Tuck's interpretation of desire is fundamental to this thesis as it forms the theoretical framework behind my research and creation. This project arises out of a queer Indigenous methodology that encourages me to speak from, and give validity to my own experiential knowledge, which is ultimately informed by my life experiences and innate desires. I have spent much of my life feeling out of place, never being enough of one thing or another. Thus, this work comes from a

[12] Tuck, 'Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities', p. 416.
[13] Ibid, p. 409.
[14] Ibid, p. 416.
[15] Ibid, p. 417. Emphasis in original.

desire to create something that would have benefited me as a young queer Indigenous person who needed to understand that I was, in fact, both Indigenous and trans *enough.*

My arts-informed research project takes the conditions of my informed seeking as a starting point for an investigation into how to build an alternative world, one founded in decolonial love and Nishinaabeg values. My interdisciplinary practice centers around stitching, beadwork, and sculpture to honour my desire and engage in world-building. As an expansion upon (and critique of) the anthropological research forced upon my queer and trans Indigenous Ancestors, my practice seeks to deromanticize the concept of tradition, destabilize rigid notions of gender binaries, and enact intergenerational healing as a means to raise a new consciousness. Through an autoethnographic approach, I examine moments and experiences from my own life, placing myself as both researcher and (agential) object of study. The creative production, exhibition, and written document of this MFA thesis engages with the following research questions within a praxis of desire:

1. What does it mean to be Two-Spirit, and who can define its meaning?

2. What roles were held by Two-Spirit people prior to colonization, and how can we return to holding our Two-Spirit kin in high regard in our nations and communities?

3. How can we collectively and individually create a future where Two-Spirit people feel safe, loved, welcome, and cared for?

LITERATURE REVIEW:
HISTORY, EXCLUSION, REFUSAL, AND AMBIGUITY

> *We do not have an institutional home. We are the unhoused, left scavenging for ways to go on because waiting is the hardest thing to keep up with. To be queer and native and alive is to repeatedly bear witness to worlds being destroyed, over and over again.*
>
> – Billy-Ray Belcourt[16]

When I began thinking about what I wanted to research for my thesis, I felt hesitant to pursue the concept of Two-Spirit identity and history because of the limited amount of affirmative research in the area. The vast majority of research about Two-Spirit people are invasive anthropological studies on what was previously known as the "berdache" and contains little to no input from Two-Spirit people themselves, placing them as objects of study rather than agential individuals. The term berdache has been used by missionaries and researchers on Turtle Island[17] as early as the 18th century to refer to any Indigenous person who did not fit the Western binary of either man or woman, or those that had sexual or romantic relationships with someone of the same sex.[18] Although the term was primarily used to describe people whom Europeans read as male and were thought to be the passive or receiving person during sex.

Unfortunately, berdache had been the only term queer Indigenous people had to describe their intersectional identity for many years because anthropology is a space "of knowledge and

[16] Belcourt, 'Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?', par. 17.
[17] Turtle Island is a term used by some Indigenous people to refer to what is now known as North America.
[18] Laing, *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit*, p. 31.

contention that [has] serious implications for Indigenous peoples in the present."[19] There long existed a need for a new term that would better describe their experiences since berdache assumed similarity in gender-variance across nations and is based in colonial exoticism. This change came about at the third International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians where Cree scholar Myra Laramee coined the term Two-Spirit in 1990.[20] It is widely thought that Two-Spirit is a direct translation of the Anishinaabemowin term *niizh manidoowag*, meaning two spirits or two souls. Or rather, that *niizh manidoowag* is a translation of Two-Spirit *into* Anishinaabemowin.[21] Although the term was popularized due to the gathering, it had been used in Anishinaabe and other Indigenous communities for years prior. Regardless, the term is affiliated with Two-Spirit Oji-Cree Elder Ma-Nee Chacaby who explains in her autobiography that from a young age her grandmother and members of her community referred to her as a *niizhin ojiijak* — someone who had both a male and female spirit inside them.[22]

Prior to my graduate studies, I had long searched for a comprehensive text on the history of Two-Spirit people and purchased Gregory Smithers' *Reclaiming Two-Spirits: Sexuality, Spiritual Renewal & Sovereignty in Native America* which was a great start to my research journey. He writes of Tlingit *gatxans* (shamans and medicine people with fluid genders), Ojibwe *agokwa* (male-bodied people who took on roles associated with women) and *okitcitakwe* (female-bodied people who took on roles associated with men), Diné *nadleeh* (gender-fluid people, indicating one who changes or transforms) and many other nation-specific terms for folks who existed outside of the Western gender binary and heterosexual expectations.[23]

[19] Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, p. 100.
[20] Laing, *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit,* p. 2.
[21] Ibid, p. 23.
[22] Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, p. 126
[23] Smithers, *Reclaiming Two-Spirits: Sexuality, Spiritual Renewal & Sovereignty in Native America*, pp. 72-90.

Smithers' gives an extensive exploration of the effects that disease, assimilation, and colonialism had and continues to have on queer Native America, and does so through a critical lens, while also leaning on Two-Spirit folks for input and their lived experience. While I appreciate Smithers including the voices of Two-Spirit people within his work, this paper instead seeks to engage in a critical citational practice that highlights the contributions of queer and trans Indigenous scholars and artists alike because we are the experts of our own lives.

Since European contact, queer Indigenous people have been excluded and alienated from our communities, roles, and bodies. It has long existed within the colonial archive that queer Indigenous peoples were seen by Western researchers, missionaries, and "explorers" as deviant and sinful because they traversed normative boundaries of gender and sexuality. Notably, Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) writes about how eradicating gender diversity and diverse familial systems was crucial to settler-colonial nation-building.[24] Moreover, in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance,* Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg) writes extensively on the ways in which queer and trans Indigenous people, specifically youth, are excluded from community and ceremonial spaces in contemporary society as a result of Indigenous peoples and communities assimilating into the colonial and religious mores forced upon us.

One of the fundamental readings from my research came from MJ Laing, a mixed Kanien'kehá:ka scholar from Six Nations. In 2018, they wrote their Master of Arts thesis about conversations they had with Two-Spirit, trans, and queer Indigenous youth in Toronto about the term Two-Spirit itself. In 2021, they published a book titled *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing*

[24] TallBear, 'Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family', p. 146.

Two-Spirit, which expanded on their initial thesis research. In this extension, Laing writes frequently about the romanticization and misconception of the term Two-Spirit and their work reminded me of Greg Staats' (Tuscarora/Mohawk/Haudenosaunee) piece *Do'-gah - I don't know [shrugging shoulders]* which "is a performative gestural mnemonic work whose sources come from [his] grade school Mohawk lesson handouts and the word/gesture as experienced within [his] community."[25] The written piece, meant to be read alongside the physical work, reads:

> **Do'-gah**
> 1. I do know, but I refuse to tell you, just for today.
>
> **Do'-gah**
> 2. I need to remind you, that you can't know everything.
>
> **Do'-gah**
> 3. I don't know, and because you asked me and expect a detailed answer, I feel shame and anger at once for the irony of the colonial systemic deficits and for your extractive expectation of presumed knowledge.
>
> **Do'-gah**
> 4. I don't know, and I refuse to find out for you.
>
> **Do'-gah**
> 5. I've heard you, and will think about it. Time and reflection for considered response of what I shall tell you on my own time and to ensure cultural safety.
>
> **Do'-gah**
> 6. I do know, and I need to tell you the protocols of our relations moving forward.
>
> **Do'-gah**
> 7. I don't know - my language.
>
> **Do'-gah**[26]

This excerpt of the performance piece struck me when I first listened to it. In addition to Laing's work, it reminded me of Audra Simpson's (Mohawk) notion of ethnographic refusal, which encompasses both redaction and refusal to "provide fodder for the misrepresentations" of Indigenous peoples that litter the ethnographic archive.[27]

[25] "Greg Staats." Kamloops Art Gallery.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Laing, *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit*, p. 42.

Fig. 1. Charo Neville, curator of Kamloops Art Gallery performing Greg Staats' *Do'-gah - I don't know [shrugging shoulders]*. Photo by Frank Luca, April 19, 2021.

In the work, Staats writes that he feels shame and anger for the extractive expectation of presumed knowledge, that he does not know, and refuses to find out for you. These excerpts remind me of Simpson when she writes:

> My notion of refusal articulates a mode of sovereign authority over the presentation of ethnographic data, and so does not present "everything." This is for the express purpose of protecting the concerns of the community. It acknowledges the asymmetrical power relations that inform the research and writing about native lives and politics, and it does not *presume* that they are on equal footing with anyone. This presumption of equal footing is false.[28]

[28] Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, p. 105.

Here, there is a clear connection between Simpson's notion of ethnographic refusal as a mode of not presenting everything as a means to protect community and Staats' boundary of needing time and reflection to consider what he feels comfortable sharing as a means of ensuring his own cultural safety. While Simpson and Staats are speaking of sovereignty and language respectively, these concepts extend themselves to the representation of Two-Spirit identity as well. Considering the harmful colonial history that Two-Spirit people have faced, and the effects that we continue to face, we must also engage in ethnographic refusal as a means of protection.

Ambiguity exists in the same vein as refusal and is another important tool of resistance. Laing expands on the relevance of ambiguity as a facet of Two-Spirit identity, stating that "many people want simple answers that are at odds with the nuances and diversity of two-spirit lives."[29] Furthermore, the participants in Laing's research also shared similar thoughts that encompass embracing both ambiguity and refusal, insisting that "if you are not a two-spirit, trans, or queer Indigenous person, you do not need to know what two-spirit means. Instead, you need to *know* that you do not know what two-spirit means."[30] This consideration is important because it is at odds with the definitive answers that non-Two-Spirit people want from us. There is power in labels, but there is also power in labels that do not lend themselves to those who exist outside of that definition. The statement that if you are not Two-Spirit, you do not need to know what being Two-Spirit means is simultaneously an act of power and protection for Two-Spirit folks, especially youth who already battle invasive questioning about their gender, sexuality, and Indigeneity from Indigenous, non-Indigenous, queer, and non-queer people alike.

[29] Laing, *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit*, p. 49.
[30] Ibid, p. 46. Emphasis in original.

NOT WOLF, NOR DOG:
WALKING BETWEEN WORLDS

> *The future will belong to the mestiza. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the way we behave—la mestiza creates a new consciousness.*
>
> – Gloria Anzaldúa[31]

In 2012, at the age of 91, my great-uncle Wilmer Nadjiwon published his autobiography titled *Not Wolf, Nor Dog: An Ojibway Elder's Tales of Residential School, Wartime Service, First Nations Politics and Some Experience with the Great Spirit.* Early on he writes about being born a half-breed on the reservation as his father was "a native whose colour was right [...] and could claim the right of being a Wolf"[32] while his mother was the daughter of a European settler. He states that his problem is being neither Wolf, nor Dog, and that choosing which side to be on is not that simple. Wilmer's description of half-breed reminds me of Gloria Anzaldúa's (Chicana) concept of *la mestiza,* "an Aztec word meaning torn between ways"[33] which describes one who "faces the dilemma of the mixed breed"[34] and is "cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems."[35] While I do face the dilemma of the mixed or half-breed on the basis of having both Indigenous and settler ancestry, I also

[31] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, p. 80.
[32] Nadjiwon, *Not Wolf, Nor Dog,* p. 23.
[33] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, p. 78.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

straddle the culture of queerness, and battle the struggles of existing at the sidelines. By this I mean that while present in Indigenous spaces, I must deal with the homophobia and transphobia that exists as a result of colonialism, and the erasure of queerness from Indigenous society and custom. At the same time, there are spaces in the queer community that do not understand what it means to be Two-Spirit or Indigiqueer, and exclude us as a result.

When I was fourteen I was given my spirit name, along with my mother, brother, aunt, cousin, and some other Anishinaabe folks who met up at the community centre every Wednesday night. My aunt had the idea that we would all offer the resident Elder, Gerard Sagassige, a tobacco tie and ask him to perform a naming ceremony for all of us. She hosted it in the late spring in her backyard and it was a beautiful all day event. I was given the name *Ziigwan Waagosh Manitou,* which roughly translates to Spring Fox Spirit. I cannot say that I remember the day in its entirety, but I do remember small bits and pieces of what Gerard said about how he came to give me my name. He said that I, like Fox, am always observing from a distance and need to dip my toes (or paws) in the water before fully committing to plunging into the depths.

Unfortunately, in Western stories, the Fox is often seen as a sly thief. However, in Anishinaabe tales, the Fox is seen as a trickster, a being that is able to walk between worlds. When I spoke to my primary advisor for guidance on more stories about Fox, she told me that like Coyote, they need defending. They are both creatures who have learned to adapt to colonialism and can exist both in the wild and in urban centres. With their little paws, they are able to traverse both worlds. Similarly, I am able to traverse between the worlds I inhabit as a Two-Spirit person; both queer and Indigenous. Yet, I am never fully accepted as either for I have

fair skin, do not speak my native language, am reconnecting, and am not seen as "fully" trans as I do not fit the binary idea of a man, nor a woman. I, like my great-uncle, Gloria Anzaldúa, and countless others who hold multiple identities, exist in a third space. Indeed, I am not Wolf, nor Dog. I am Fox. I am queer. I am trans. I am Two-Spirit. I am Anishinaabe. I am *mestiza.* I am mixed-breed. I am ambiguous and I am unashamed.

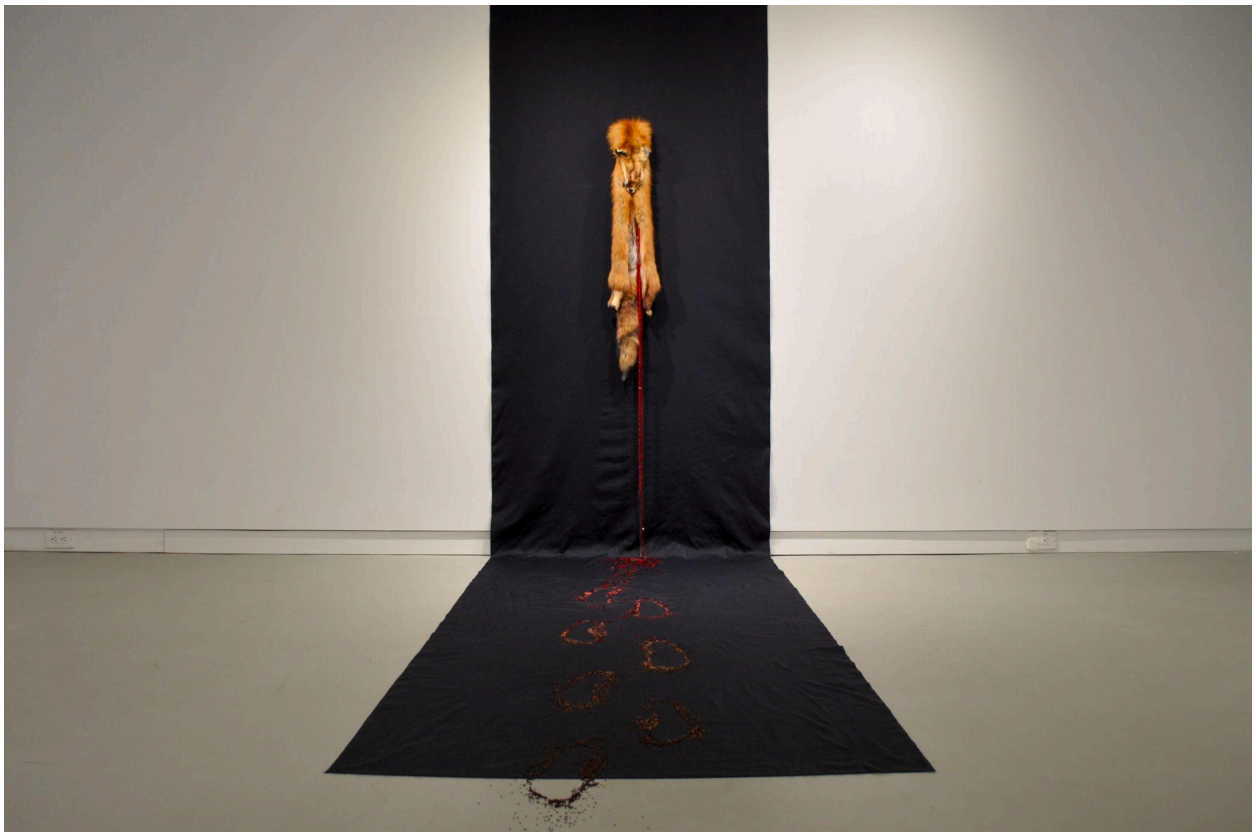

Fig. 2. *Waagosh Walks Between Worlds.* Cotton, Red Fox fur, 11/0 Czech seed beads, bugle beads, bicone beads, assorted crystals, Nymo thread. 3.75ft x 15ft. 2025. Photo by Laiken Breau.

For so much of my life I tried to fit in; performing femininity in a desperate attempt to hide my queerness, to make myself smaller, and thus more palatable to appease others. However, as Anishinaabe scholar and artist Quill Christie-Peters reassures me, "compartmentalization attempts to contain us but we have always spilled over the boundaries."[36] Thus, through *Waagosh*

[36] Christie-Peters, 'Anishinaabeg Art-Making as Falling in Love: Reflections on Artistic Programming for Urban Indigenous Youth', par. 23.

Walks Between Worlds, I attempt to showcase this act of *spilling over* visually through an act of perpetual transition because "rigidity means death."[37] It is only by remaining flexible, by walking between worlds, that we are able to diverge from "set patterns and goals and towards a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes."[38]

In the gallery space there is a long piece of black fabric that extends from the ceiling and drapes out onto the floor, with the Fox fur hanging in the middle of the wall. From the Fox's chest, an assortment of silver-lined red seed beads and transparent crystals spill out, extending into long strands of smaller beads that transition from reds to browns until they reach the floor. These strands continue until they meet loose seed beads that have left the negative imprint of my footprints, walking out from the wall, transitioning from red to brown until one footprint crosses over the fabric and onto the gallery floor. This transition from red to brown symbolizes the drying or oxidizing of the blood as we spill over the boundaries set by our oppressors. This spillage from Fox extends into the negative space of my being, leaving our traces behind as we traverse two worlds and walk forward together, defiant and unashamed.

[37] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, p. 79.
[38] Ibid.

MY QUEERNESS IS SACRED:
JOURNEY TO WHERE BINARIES CANNOT GO

some still rememberers
ride otter far beyond bounded horizons
far beyond where science
renamed the grandmother earth
renamed all our generations
renamed the northern lights
shimmering and dancing
where turtle whispers
in small butterfly voices
renamed a still beyond
to an event beyond that event
where binaries cannot go
where time itself bends itself
into the curved roof
of a sweat lodge
spirits enter and sing
in small butterfly voices
if we ask those who still can
they will tell us about this journey
a journey of not going anywhere
a journey of changing

– Rolland Nadjiwon[39]

[39] Nadjiwon, 'the old ones'. In *Seven Deer Dancing*, pp. 3-4.

I found my grand-uncle Rolland's poetry thesis while conducting research for an assignment in the third year of my undergrad. As I returned to its pages, I was astounded by the esoteric mentions of queerness throughout; notably, in the excerpt above, I became fixated on the notion of a *journey of changing* and a place *where binaries cannot go.* Reading his collection of poems filled a space in my heart; one where I grew up in a family that regarded queerness as taboo and shameful, despite our culture displaying a love and acceptance for ambiguity.

However, this clouding of Nishnaabeg values does not exist in the vacuum that is my family. Colonialism has worked long and hard to turn us against our queer relatives, and as a result "we have inherited Christian sexual mores, and settler state biopolitics that monitor, measure, and pathologize our bodies and our people."[40] Although it is undeniable that colonization has removed us from our "traditional"[41] values, I find solace in the writings of contemporary Anishinaabeg who remind me that our Ancestors would have accepted us, as queer folk, regardless. Specifically, I turn to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson where she states that:

> I believe our Ancestors love us unconditionally and are willing to work with us so no Indigenous bodies feel the pain and hurt of exclusion, shame, or outright violence in our most intimate spaces. Not only have they consistently provided us with stories, song, and ceremonies that embody concepts of consent, body sovereignty, freedom, and individual self-determination, they have repeatedly emphasized the ideas of compassion, empathy, and caring in everything they do.[42]

In this passage, Simpson elaborates on how she cannot understand that Indigenous people are excluded from spiritual spaces today as a result of certain gendered protocols that are imposed on women and 2SQ[43] folks, such as being forced to wear a ribbon skirt or being excluded from ceremony while menstruating.

---

[40] TallBear, 'Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family', p. 155.
[41] I place traditional in quotations here and will expand more on this in the following chapter.
[42] Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, p. 122.
[43] 2SQ is an abbreviation for Two-Spirit and queer.

Growing up in cisheteropatriachal ceremony circles was difficult and confusing as a young queer Indigenous person. Throughout high school I attended monthly Full Moon ceremonies at a Boy Scouts camp down the road from where my mother worked. I remember feeling sick with anxiety at the thought of having to share personal stories to the squeaky log cabin filled with middle aged women, for my experiences were never like theirs. We (my mother and I) were always the first to arrive because he (my mother's boyfriend) had to make the fire before the ceremony could begin. Starting and tending to a fire was a *man's job* and he had to come and start our ceremonial fire and then head home because this was a *women's only space.* My mother always asked me if I was "on my time" before we left so she would know to make a tobacco tie for me. The reasoning for her questioning was because we were not allowed to handle medicines as we were considered "too powerful" whilst bleeding. I always wrestled with this so-called ceremonial protocol and could never quite put it into words until reading Simpson's 'Indigenous Queer Normativity' chapter in *As We Have Always Done.* She shares similar experiences where she has been excluded from ceremony entirely while menstruating. Expanding on her frustration, she states:

> I don't consent to discussing the intimate cycles of my body as a prerequisite for participating in ceremony, particularly when men are not asked to do the same. I do know how I feel regardless of how this is explained to me. I do know that I do not feel valued, included, or powerful when my body is regulated. I don't feel respected when I'm honoured as a "life giver" and not as an intellectual. For me, this regulation is a clear imposition on my own agency, sovereignty, self-determination, and freedom. It is a gendered regulation that controls women and 2SQ people and our spiritual power.[44]

In this passage she elaborates on how these ceremonial regulations are not rooted in Nishnaabeg teachings or values, but rather that they enforce colonial control over the bodies of women and queer people. However, many people conducting ceremonies are able to evade responsibility for excluding certain people because there is a notion that queer Indigenous people did not exist

[44] Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, p. 141.

prior to contact, and that queerness is rooted in a colonial context. This myth is "perpetuated by the strategic use of tradition to limit any question of Two-Spirit people's exclusion, because it can also be considered disrespectful to question tradition."[45] In defiance of this claim, Simpson states that "ceremony is everyone, and that every Nishnaabeg body and mind has a place in our circle, because I understand the point of ceremony to be to connect to the spiritual world in a good way, and to do so requires an open heart."[46] She continues, stating that "consent, respect for individual self-determination, diversity, and noninterference–basic Nishnaabeg values–are more important than rigid protocols."[47]

Similarly to my own experience, Simpson begins this chapter by sharing how her daughter, who was beginning to question her gender, was uncomfortable at the requirement to wear a ribbon skirt into the sweat lodge.[48] Not wanting to place constraints, her daughter helped her bring Cedar and berries into the lodge (often seen as a woman's role), but also tended to the fire and smoked the pipe when it made its way around the circle (often seen as a man's role). However, unlike Simpson, my mother always forced me to wear a skirt to ceremony, despite my every attempt to convince her that wearing pants would achieve the same objective. She even kept an extra one in the trunk of her car when I started to "forget" mine at home. Thus, my queer body was controlled and mandated in a space meant for healing and spiritual connection.

[45] Wesley, 'Reimagining Two-Spirit Community', p. 26.
[46] Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, p. 138.
[47] Ibid, p. 139.
[48] Ibid, p. 120.

Fig. 3. *The Old Ones Invited Me In and I Entered, Shamelessly.* 11/0 Miyuki seed beads, FireLine, Nymo thread, branch, silkscreen. 5in x 8in. 2025.

Through *The Old Ones Invited Me In and I Entered, Shamelessly,* I weave myself and my Ancestors into the work. Taking inspiration from my grand-uncle's poem and Simpson's writings on the pain felt upon exclusion from ceremony, I create a space where my queer Indigenous body and mind are not only accepted, but welcomed. Through the practice of loom beading I carefully picked up one bead at a time, placing each one between the warp threads and weaving them tight with a weft thread. This process is quite meditative, allowing me to spend many hours over the course of a few weeks sitting with the piece as it came together, reflecting on my desire to create a safe space, and connecting my work with that of my grand-uncle. This piece required a lot of planning; I spent weeks perfecting my bead pattern using an online tool and hours in bead stores

searching for the perfect beads, thinking about how each type of finish (i.e. opaque, matte, transparent, silver-lined, AB[49], etc.) would affect the physical materiality of the finished work.

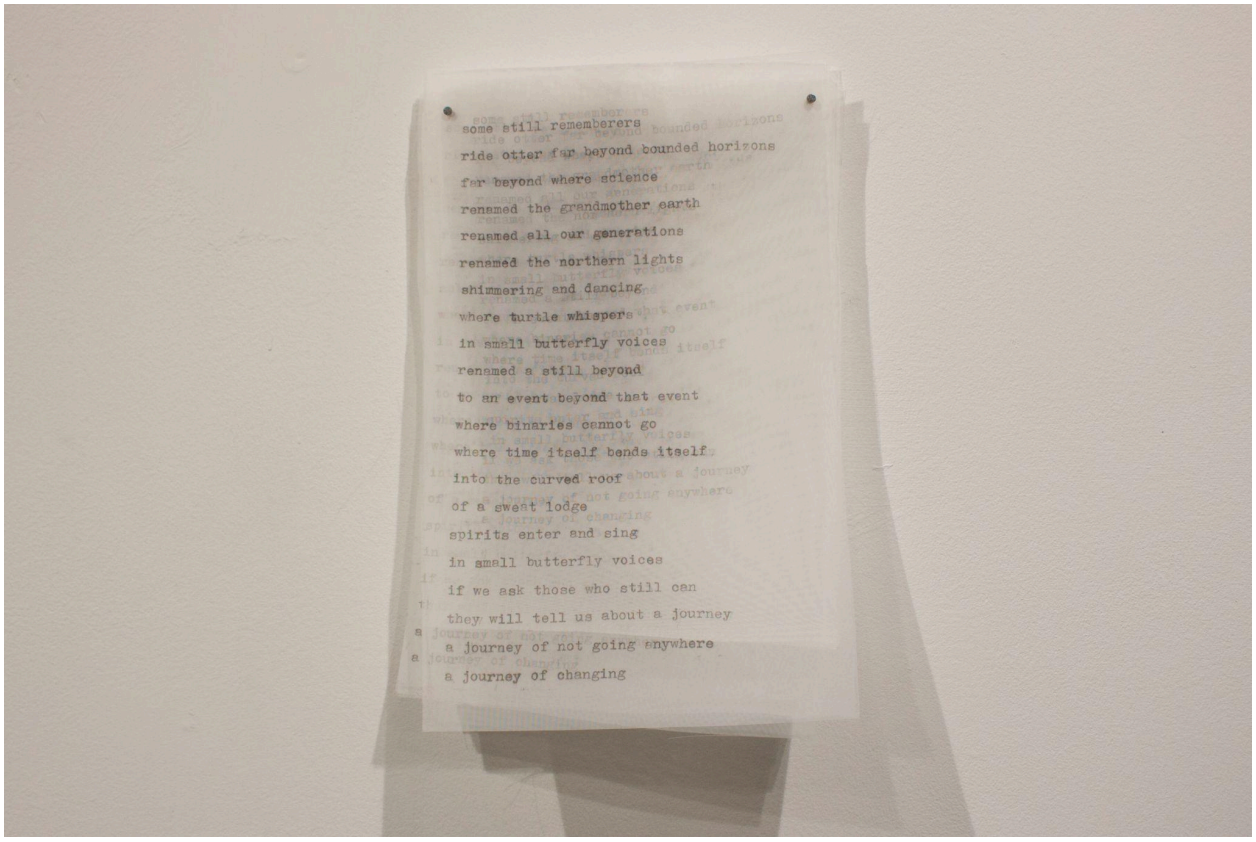

Fig. 4. *The Old Ones Invited Me In and I Entered, Shamelessly* (poem detail). Dimensions variable. 2025.

Like the northern lights in the sky, this piece hangs liminally in the atmosphere of the gallery, held up by clear beading thread from the ceiling. The loom work itself is attached to a small branch by looping strings of beads from the top of the work over the branch. Most of the loops consist of the matte black beads of the night sky, but where the northern lights extended to the top of the loom work, those same beads loop over as well, symbolizing the boundless and cyclical nature of our Ancestors. The Anishinaabeg consider ourselves to be Star People; we have an understanding that we came from the stars and that we will return to them when we pass

[49] AB (aurora borealis) is a very thin metallic coating used on beads that give them a unique lustrous finish, illuminating a variety of colours. All of the beads used in the northern lights have this AB finish on them.

over into the spirit world. Additionally, as a way to honour both my great-uncle and my own citational politic, I include multiple renditions of his poem behind the hanging loom work. These were all typewritten on sheets of silkscreen that I cut roughly to the size of the loom piece, and are spaced out along two nails that jut out from the wall. This mode of installation grants a ghostly reading of the poem as the silkscreen is translucent, allowing a blurrier glimpse into the one behind it, and so on and so forth. In a more animate fashion, there is a fringe of white beads from the bottom of the piece that, again, speaks to this notion of spilling over as it extends past the rigidity of the loom woven beads, allowing for a more tactile interaction with the piece.

I was deeply inspired by Rolland's poem and took many of his words to heart, weaving them directly into this work. He begins the poem with *some still remembers ride otter far beyond bounded horizons,* so I included a traditional Anishinaabeg beadwork pattern known as an Otter track along the bottom of the piece, which is depicted as long hexagons between small diamonds. Namely, he writes *renamed the northern lights, shimmering and dancing;* we as Anishinaabeg believe that the *waawaateg*[50] are a manifestation of our Ancestors' spirits communicating with us as they dance among the night sky. With this in mind, I used clear matte AB beads to transition from the northern lights *into the curved roof of a sweat lodge, where spirits enter and sing* to symbolize the spirits descending from the sky into the sweat lodge. This is a token of appreciation for our Ancestors, the old ones, who love us unconditionally and always reassure me that being Two-Spirit is beautiful, natural, and sacred. It is also a testament to the survival and resistance of Two-Spirit people, highlighting how we are able to theorize our own lives into futures that centre our inclusion and self-determination.

[50] Northern lights in Anishinaabemowin.

TIPTOEING TRADITION:
HOW TO BECOME YOUR OWN MEDICINE

Culture is living.
We move, we dance, we speak in ways our ancestors didn't.
And they moved, danced, and spoke in ways their ancestors didn't.

– Christi Belcourt[51]

I grew up reconnecting. As a result, I also grew up full of shame. Convinced that I was never going to be "Indigenous enough" (whatever that means), I thought that I needed to embody tradition to be accepted. Consequently, when I was young and saw all of the jingle dress dancers at the Cape Croker Powwow, I was filled with envy and desire. I was jealous that I did not grow up learning to dance. I was even jealous that my aunt had made my older cousin a ribbon dress and I think my aunt could sense this. So, before the next summer she took me to Fabricland where I picked out a baby blue paisley fabric for my own dress, with blue, pink, yellow, and white ribbons to match.

When the next summer rolled around and it was time for me to wear my ribbon dress to the powwow, I felt like an imposter. I tried everything in my power to blend in; I braided my hair and had my mother place a matching beaded barrette at the back of my head, although I am sure I stuck out like a sore thumb in my Chuck Taylors. The powwow would grant free admission to

[51] Belcourt, Christi (@christi_belcourt), June 10, 2024.

those in regalia, but you had to enter the circle and dance as well. This only made me feel even more ashamed because I did not know how to dance. So, during intertribal, I shielded myself with the presence of my younger brother to evade my inability to perform tradition.

Fast forward to over a decade later, where I entered grad school. This desire to understand myself as a queer Indigenous person had followed me throughout my life, a multiplicitous feeling, assembled from prior experiences,[52] and I felt that this was my opportunity to research traditional Two-Spirit people so I could connect to that part of myself and my culture. I had read Smithers' *Reclaiming Two-Spirits* and learned about some of the traditional roles associated with being Two-Spirit. Yet, Indigenous peoples are not monolithic; each nation had, and still has, different roles, responsibilities, and views associated with their distinct gender-diverse peoples. Despite this, some commonalities amongst Two-Spirit people include playing important roles ensuring the health and balance of their communities, such as overseeing ceremonies, acting as medicine people, warriors, diplomats, and transcending male and female roles by performing work associated with both sexes.[53] Two-Spirit people also held powerful spiritual qualities, with some assuming positions of leadership and acting as cultural brokers, bringing people together in alliances, trade, and friendship.[54]

As interesting as it was to learn about historical Two-Spirit people, I began to feel like an imposter yet again. How could I write my thesis on being Two-Spirit if I was not participating in these community roles? How could I claim this identity if I was not following its traditional protocols? As I sat with these questions, I began to interrogate the definition and meaning of

[52] Tuck, 'Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities', p. 418.
[53] Smithers, *Reclaiming Two-Spirits,* pp. 72-92.
[54] Ibid*,* pp. 89-112.

traditional. This term often references pre-contact practices among Indigenous peoples, positing the notion of tradition as tantamount to cultural purity. This is highly problematic as the very reason Indigenous peoples have been able to survive and protect their cultures in the face of colonialism is through their ability to adapt and evolve their traditions.

As I took a step back and realized that I wanted to employ my own citational politic within my thesis, I prioritized reading and citing works by queer and trans Indigenous people themselves. This brought me to folks like Kai Pyle (Anishinaabe/Métis) and MJ Laing, who have written extensively on what it means to be Two-Spirit. However, unlike many of the non-Indigenous authors who wrote about the gender variance of Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, these scholars were far more critical of this perceived boundary between traditional and contemporary. On the topic of roles historically held by Two-Spirit people, Pyle states that "while these are all admirable things, requiring them of Two-Spirit people simply in order to claim the term itself forces Two-Spirit people to conform to unreasonable standards of tradition"[55] Finally, I felt validated. I felt seen. I felt like I was no longer an imposter, that I could claim being Two-Spirit, and do so with pride. Pyle continues to share that "although these roles are important to know and recognize, they can sometimes obscure the fact that our Two-Spirit ancestors were also regular people who laughed, loved, worked, cried, and lived their lives, just as their non-Two-Spirit siblings did."[56]

Correspondingly, Muscogee Creek-Cherokee author Craig Womack offers an alternative meaning to tradition(al), stating that it should be considered "anything that is useful to Indian

[55] Pyle, 'Reclaiming Traditional Gender Roles: A Two-Spirit Critique', p. 118.
[56] Ibid, pp. 118-119.

people in retaining their worldviews, no matter how much it deviates from what people did one or two hundred years ago."[57] Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples have survived due to our ability to transform ourselves, and that we are part of dynamic, living, and ever-evolving cultures. Likewise, there are times when tradition is indeed generative and useful, but it seems to do the most transformational and non-harmful work for Two-Spirit folks when it is accompanied by modes of transformation that employ change and contemporality. This brings me to the first time I really felt seen and welcomed as a Two-Spirit person; the evening of Saturday, December 9th, 2023. I invited Catherine Blackburn (the only other Indigenous person in our cohort) to see Jeremy Dutcher, a Two-Spirit Wolastoqiyik composer, perform at Massey Hall. His work embodies this transformative tradition as he combines archival recordings of traditional Wolastoqiyik songs with lyrics he writes in both the Wolastoqiyik and English language alongside classical musical composition. Dutcher is able to weave together traditional songs and his Indigenous language with his artistry as a Two-Spirit person to disrupt this rigid notion of tradition. Additionally, that night he covered Terry Callier's 1965 song "Johnny Be Gay If You Can Be" and made it his own; singing "Johnny, be gay if you can be. Be trans if you can be. Be queer if you can be. Be who you are if you can be." The entirety of Massey Hall erupted in applause, cheers, and trills, simultaneously making me laugh and cry. It was the first time I saw someone like me on a stage, being celebrated. It was the first time that I did not feel like the only one in the room. Instead, I was surrounded by other people who were just like me. That whole evening was medicine and when it came time to create work for this thesis, I began to think about how powerful and transcendental that night felt and how I could replicate that feeling in my own work.

[57] Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism,* p. 42.

Fig. 5. *Do You Hear That? I Am Medicine Too.* Brain tanned smoked deer hide, thread, bias tape, jingle cones, invisible zipper, wooden dowel. 12.5in x 14.5in. 2025.

I decided to become my own medicine and defy the presumed border between traditional and contemporary through making my own jingle garment. Returning to my jealousy of the jingle dress dancers and combining this with my identity as a trans person, I crafted my own jingle binder. A binder is a contemporary gender-affirming garment that flattens one's chest and is something that I wear every day. I made the binder out of deer hide, which is seen as a "traditional" material. By combining the material, the aesthetic of a jingle dress, and the contemporary style of a binder, this piece refutes the "colonial preoccupation with authenticity"[58] and aims to advance the theory that Two-Spirit people are change makers. Correspondingly, Pyle shares that "our ancestors were not only passive objects of the changes caused by colonization,

[58] Laing, *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit,* p. 16.

they were also active participants in creating and recreating their culture in ways that demonstrate both continuity and change."[59] This sentiment still rings true today, for we as Indigenous peoples, are not stagnant, nor are our cultures. We are living and always evolving. This hide-jingle-binder is a testament to the truth in Pyle's words, an affirmation of Two-Spirit brilliance, and an ode to Indigenous cultural resilience.

In the gallery, *Do You Hear That? I Am Medicine Too.* hangs from the ceiling, suspended from a wooden dowel, existing in a liminal space. The binder itself is made from a White Tail Deer hide that was brain tanned and smoked by hand. The tanning and smoking was done by Two-Spirit artist Hunter Cascag (Georgian Bay Métis), and was softened by Cascag and their Two-Spirit partner Beze Gray (Anishinaabe/Lunaape/Oneida).[60] To achieve its beautiful deep colour, the hide was smoked for three hours on each side using rotted sugar maple wood. The Deer was sustainably hunted by Cascag's kin from the Southern Georgian Bay, Lake Couchiching region of Ontario. Thus, not only is the materiality of the piece important, but the material coming from around the area where my *Nokomis*[61] was born, and being prepared by fellow Two-Spirit people adds another layer of significance. The piece gets its name from the understanding that each step taken by a jingle dancer is a healing prayer as the dancer keeps one foot on the ground while the sound of the metal cones against one another creates an energy that moves through the air. The jingle dance came to the Anishinaabeg during the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic as a method of healing because many of our people fell ill from this flu. The

[59] Pyle, 'Reclaiming Traditional Gender Roles: A Two-Spirit Critique', p. 116.
[60] See Hunter Cascag and Beze Gray's small business Medicines From The Land for herbal medicines, skin care, antler jewelry, hide tanning, workshops, and more.
[61] Grandmother in Anishinaabemowin.

jingle dancer often creates a serpentine path with their dance which was thought to fool and lose the virus, which is why it is often referred to as a medicine or healing dance.

For me, even the creation of this work was medicinal. This piece is an embodiment of my informed seeking, whereby I counteract my childhood jealousy of the jingle dress dancers through the juxtaposition of my desire and gender identity. Rather than letting my jealousy fester and allow myself to be consumed with disappointment and shame, I took my unique experiences and created something healing for myself. Just as the quick footwork and winding path of the jingle dancers worked to trick away sickness, my hide jingle binder defies both the gender binary and boundary between traditional and contemporary, actively engaging in alternative world-building. When I wear this binder, I am filled with the most conflicting emotions: I think of the rich history of Two-Spirit people and ponder what it might have been like to exist in community prior to contact. I feel the pain of those who were shamed, ridiculed, harassed, exploited, dissected, abused, and even killed because of who they were. I feel for those who had to hide who they were as a means of survival. Yet, just as Eve Tuck reminds me, we are not broken and there is more to us than just our damage. Then, I am reminded of all the powerful Two-Spirit people who are radically taking up space today, thanks to all of our Two-Spirit Ancestors who carved this path for us. I pause and take in the feeling of the soft hide against my skin, the smell of the wood used to smoke it, the sound of the jingles against one another, and the sight of myself in the mirror. I am grateful for all those who came before me and made a world where the creation of this piece was possible, yet I also dream of a future where so much more is on the horizon.

KITCHI-MANITOU'S GIFT TO CREATION: THE MURKY BRILLIANCE OF ANISHINAABEMOWIN

the clarity of unspoken words while sound crashes earthbound
because it is in what is not said that the truth sits
the knowing
the peeling back of ones own skin
to discover that the lizard sleeping against your spine
was born the same moment as you
because she knew that one day you
would need her sharp tongue to survive

– Connie Fife[62]

I return to the writings of Basil Johnston, a language teacher and author born in Neyaashiinigmiing, for guidance in Anishinaabemowin and stories from my community. In his 1995 book *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway*, Johnston begins by writing about the Anishinaabe creation story. Every creation story varies from each individual who tells it, but I grew up hearing a rendition as follows, which is very similar to the one Johnston details: Long ago, Kitchi-Manitou was inspired by a vision and created the world, filling it with plants, two-leggeds, four-leggeds, flyers, swimmers, and other manitous, but then came a great flood. While this world was under water, a new world was beginning in the skies as Giizhig-Kwe conceived. Suddenly, she fell from a tear in the clouds, but was caught on the wings of Nika who flew down and rested her upon the back of Mishiikenh. Upon settling, Giizhig-Kwe asked the

[62] Fife, 'the knowing'. In *Speaking Through Jagged Rock,* p. 16.

animals who survived the great flood to search for a morsel of soil. One by one, Amik, Maang, Ojiig, Nigig, and many others tried to swim down, but came back up unsuccessful. The depths were too profound for any of them to reach the bottom. Then, a quiet voice could be heard. It was Wazhashk. All the animals laughed at little Wazhashk, the least of the animals, for there was no way one so small could achieve something so great. Despite this, Wazhashk took a deep breath and dove down beneath the water, swimming as fast as he could. A long time had passed and all the other animals were sure Wazhashk had passed on the journey and would not return. Suddenly, Wazhashk floated to the surface, with a small piece of earth tucked away in his tiny paw. Giizhig-Kwe took the pawful of soil, thanked Wazhashk for his sacrifice, and etched it around the rim of Mishiikenh's back. Then, she breathed the breath of life into the earth, infusing it with abundance, nourishment, shelter, and inspiration. Only then did she give birth to twins, whose descendants took the name Anishinaabek, meaning the Good Beings or Original People.[63]

Following his rendition of the creation story, Johnston explores the etymology of Kitchi-Manitou, stating that "by combining *kitchi,* a prefix meaning immense and preeminent, and *manitou,* the Anishinaubae people coined a term for the creator."[64] Additionally, he posits that Kitchi-Manitou means The Great Spirit or The Great Mystery and is "of the supernatural order, one beyond human grasp, beyond words, neither male nor female, not of the flesh."[65] Next, he conveys the ambiguity of the word manitou, stating that "mystery is but one of the connotations of the word *manitou*. The word has other meanings as well: spiritual, mystical, supernatural, godlike or spiritlike, quiddity, essence. Manitou refers to realities other than the

[63] Kitchi-Manitou (Great Spirit), Giizhig-Kwe (Sky Woman), Nika (Goose), Mishiikenh (Turtle), Amik (Beaver), Maang (Loon), Ojiig (Fisher), Nigig (Otter), Wazhashk (Muskrat).
[64] Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway,* p. xxi. Emphasis in original.
[65] Ibid*,* p. 2.

physical ones of rock, fire, water, air, wood, and flesh—to the unseen realities of individual beings and places and events that are beyond human understanding but are still clearly real."[66] I became interested in the different interpretations of this word as it formed part of the Anishinaabe name given to me, *Ziigwan Waagosh Manitou,* and has played an important part in queer Indigenous history as it inspired the term Two-Spirit.

Growing up I was taught that manitou broadly meant spirit, similar to how we would think of the word soul in the Western world. However, this is a rather shallow interpretation because "depending on the context, they [the Anishinaabeg] knew that in addition to spirit, the term also meant property, essence, transcendental, mystical, muse, patron, and divine."[67] While Johnston describes how manitou is an essence that exists within everyone and everything, I find it fascinating to compare this conception with the experience of being Two-Spirit as the notion of mystery and transcendence feel intrinsic to my identity. Transcendence is described as being beyond or above the range of normal or merely physical human experience or surpassing the ordinary, and similarly, mystery is described as something that is difficult or impossible to understand or explain. These two words aptly describe the experience of being Two-Spirit and the difficulties of explaining Two-Spirit identity because "people want clarity, but what two-spirit offers is something different: murkiness, impreciseness, and elusion."[68]

Although this thesis began with questioning what it means to be Two-Spirit, I think there is equal solace to be found in the fact that Two-Spirit identity is something that, perhaps, cannot be explained or understood unless you are Two-Spirit yourself. Just as the Anishinaabeg

[66] Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway,* pp. xxi-xxii. Emphasis in original.
[67] Ibid, p. 2.
[68] Laing, *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit,* p. 53.

understood the myriad contexts and applications of the word manitou, it is also important to understand that complexity, ambiguity, and murkiness are indeed part of what it means to be Two-Spirit, and that Kitchi-Manitou made it this way. Upon describing how Kitchi-Manitou brought about the world, the manitous, plants, animals, and human beings into existence, Johnston expands on how this serves as a model to emulate:

> Following the example set by Kitchi-Manitou, every person is to seek a dream or vision within the expanse of his or her soul-spirit being and, having attained it, bring it into fulfillment and reality. Otherwise the dream or vision will be nullified. Furthermore, every person is endowed with the gift of a measure of talent or aptitude to enable him or her to bring the vision or dream to reality, to shape his or her own being, as it were, and to fashion an immediate world and destiny. But finding this substance deep within one's innermost being is not an easy task. One must descend to the depths or ascend to the very height of one's soul-spirit being, by means of a vision or a dream, to discover and to retrieve that morsel of talent or aptitude.[69]

As the creation of this world came from a vision brought to fruition, Kitchi-Mantou gifted that same ability to the Anishinaabeg, and this "grant of freedom to human beings to seek and fulfill their visions and dreams according to their individual abilities was an act not only of generosity but of trust."[70] Johnston's dissection of Kitchi-Manitou's belief in the Anishinaabeg is indicative of Two-Spirit identity as well because freedom, generosity, and truth are deeply connected with our experiences.

Existing as a queer person in this world takes immense courage and faith, and this is how the notion of freedom, generosity, and truth are inextricably linked to our identities and experiences as Two-Spirit people. Just as Johnston describes the difficulty of finding the substance to discover and retrieve your own talent and aptitude, it is also arduous to fulfill one's dream of becoming who you truly are in terms of sexuality and gender identity. It took me nearly

[69] Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway,* p. 4.
[70] Ibid.

two decades to even begin to understand who I was and what being Two-Spirit meant for me. This journey was, and still is, difficult. I not only have to contend with transphobia and racism from other members of the queer community, but I also have to unlearn the shame I associate with being a reconnecting urban Indigenous person. For a long time I felt that I was unable to claim Two-Spirit identity because of my experiences, but through research, community engagement, and self-reflection, I have come to understand that being Two-Spirit is an extremely personal identity that can only truly be understood by the person identifying as Two-Spirit. Thus, this journey comes with the freedom to explore and the generosity to learn, but you must also have trust in yourself to traverse both the depths and heights of your soul.

While Nishnaabeg stories encourage us to fulfill our own destinies and shape our own being, the history of Two-Spirit people seeking out the visions they had for themselves is one deeply rooted in harm and extraction. By this I mean that to speak of queer Indigeneity "is to speak of colonialism and anthropology, as these are means through which Indigenous peoples have been known and sometimes are still known. In different moments, anthropology has imagined itself to be a voice, and in some disciplinary iterations, *the* voice of the colonized."[71] However, I reject the idea that anthropology acts as a voice for the colonized, and put forward that rather, we are the experts of our own lives. Additionally, anthropological categorical forms of recognition (and misrecognition) have been used, and still are used, to disempower Indigenous peoples and communities.[72] This is why it is important to "move away from "difference" and its containment"[73] and instead, employ ethnographic refusal to better encompass our murkiness which spills over these colonial containers.

[71] Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, p. 95.
[72] Ibid, p. 100.
[73] Ibid, p. 97.

For Audra Simpson, ethnographic refusal is a position taken by both researchers and researched communities that is animated by placing limits on what knowledge is shared with the academy."[74] This thesis takes a similar approach by actively choosing what information to share, and what information to keep hidden, encoded, or sacred. At the moment I am writing this, I exist within the sphere of academia. Thus, I must write this thesis document and follow certain guidelines to meet the requirements that the institution has set in place so I can write three capitalized letters (MFA) after my name upon graduation. However, all of the work, research, blood, sweat, and tears that I have poured into this work is not for those in their ivory towers to understand. It is for the queer and trans Indigenous youth. It is for those who have felt lost and invisible. Here is where I return to Morrill and Tuck's prose: "I am interested in only telling certain parts, untelling certain parts, keeping the bodies and the parts from becoming a settlement. I keep a list of theories of change in my pocket so I can remember something more meaningful than raising awareness. Something more material than raising consciousness. Something more to the touch than visibility."[75] To me this work is worth something more than being understood by those whose understanding does not define me. It is true that I have spent most, if not all, of my life feeling misunderstood. Yet, perhaps being understood is overrated. Perhaps understanding that comes from within is the most rewarding.

This thesis attempts two things: one is to understand myself better, and the second is to provide a feeling of belonging for others like me. Thus, there are certain things I have hidden, encoded, or even kept sacred in order to achieve these goals. Just as my Two-Spirit Ancestors refused to divulge certain aspects of their identity, gender, sexuality, roles, or responsibilities to

[74] Laing, *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit,* p. 4.
[75] Morrill, Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Qollective, 'Before Dispossession, or Surviving It', p. 3.

ethnographers to maintain cultural and personal safety, I employ this same mode of ethnographic refusal for similar reasons. As a means of sovereignty over my own research, creation, and self, I enact my own "right to speak and, in this case, to not speak."[76] As Simpson recites, "to think and write about sovereignty is to think very seriously about needs and that, basically, it involves an ethnographic calculus of what you need to know and what I refuse to write."[77] As stated above, my needs or goals are to refuse to write certain things as a means to protect myself and my Two-Spirit relatives from further exploitation, harm, and extraction.

Fig. 6. *Enacting My Own Creation.* Hydrocal, porcupine quills, dirt, tobacco. Dimensions variable. 2025.

Just as many participants in Laing's research "did not believe that change would come from non-two-spirit people learning about the complexity of the term and modifying their

[76] Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, p. 104.
[77] Ibid, p. 105.

behaviours accordingly; instead, participants offered a theory of change in which they and their communities are the agents of change."[78] Thus, *Enacting My Own Creation* is an embodiment of my ambiguity and refusal to be understood because I do not need to be understood to be valued. My own hand, cast in hydrocal plaster, arises from a pile of dirt on the gallery floor. An array of porcupine quills emerge from the morsel of dirt held within the palm of my hand. The dirt is an ode to the creation story, and a nod to the notion of transitioning, while the quills act as a mode of refusal, of not sharing everything. The juxtaposition of the gracious gesture of an open hand with the impending threat of the sharp quills embodies what it means to exist as a Two-Spirit person, for we must be gracious with ourselves in order to attain our vision, yet we must also remain guarded against others so as not to exploit our identities, minds, bodies, or spirits.

Fig. 7. *Enacting My Own Creation* (detail). Hydrocal, porcupine quills, dirt, tobacco. Dimensions variable. 2025.

[78] Laing, *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit.* p. 5.

AANIKOOBIJIGAN:
A CHAIN, LINKED ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

> *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.*
>
> – Sebastian De Line[79]

Although we only met a few times when I was too young to be able to remember him, I have always felt an enigmatic connection to my great-grandfather, Bernard (Bernie) Reuben Nadjiwon. This connection likely stems from the fact that Bernie and I share the same birthday, just eighty one years apart. Since we were born on the same day, I have always had an inclination that I would pass away on the same day that he did. It was not until I was in university and had grown an interest in learning Anishinaabemowin that I discovered the term *aanikoobijigan,* which only made me feel stronger in this connection to my *Kitchi-Mishoomis.*

It is common to hear both queer and Indigenous communities refer to those who have passed on as Ancestors, but what makes someone an Ancestor? Ancestor is defined as one from whom a person is descended and who is usually more remote in the line of descent than a grandparent, but in Anishinaabemowin we use a different word; *aanikoobijigan* can be used interchangeably to mean great-grandparent and great-grandchild, but can also refer to an

[79] De Line, 'Clay and Common Ground: Clanships and Polyspirited Embodiment', p. 96.

Ancestor more generally. Although in English Ancestor is usually designated as someone more distant than a grandparent, *aanikoobijigan* references Anishinaabe worldviews and the concept of Seven Generations because between a great-grandparent and their great-grandchild, there are seven generations. The root of *aanikoobijigan, aanikoo,* means linked or tied, and in this word family, *dakobidoon* means to string it together or to extend it by tying. Similarly, *kobade* means a link in a chain, a link in the chain between generations.[80] Thus, the term Seven Generations and the word *aanikoobijigan* is used to refer to an ethic that requires us to think about our impacts and responsibilities in seven-generation increments.

Anishinaabe/Métis Two-Spirit scholar Kai Pyle coined the term trans*temporal kinship which refers to the "ability of transgender and Two-Spirit Indigenous people to establish kin relations across time, with both ancestors and descendants."[81] When I read this, I was immediately reminded of the day I got the opportunity to be in the presence of Ancestor beadwork. In January of last year, I applied to take an undergraduate beadwork course as I had always wanted to learn how to bead. The professor managed to get our class to the Royal Ontario Museum to visit with Ancestor beadwork in the archives. It was a cold and windy day in March when we arrived at the side entrance of the museum. We walked through metal detectors, went down an elevator, weaved through various hallways, and were told to place our coats and bags in a staff room. Then we were brought to a large archival room. Instantly, an uncomfortable feeling washed over my whole body as I walked slowly and glanced at artifacts from around the world placed on tissue paper on exposed metal wire shelves. Then we were brought over to a large table where various pieces of beadwork were laid out next to one another on pieces of paper.

[80] Simpson, 'I Am Not a Nation-State', *Unsettling America: Decolonization in Theory & Practice*, par. 6.
[81] Pyle, 'Naming and Claiming: Recovering Ojibwe and Plains Cree Two-Spirit Language', pp. 576-77.

Fig. 8. Table with various pieces of ancestral beadwork. Photo taken at the Royal Ontario Museum, March 2024.

Some of the items included an Ojibwe bandolier bag, a Métis vest, leather jacket, and fire/octopus bag, Haundenosaunee pin cushions and scissor pouches with raised beadwork, Dene moccasins, wall pockets, bonnets, and even antique bead samples. Next, we were brought over to temperature controlled storage units where they kept moccasins, headdresses, moss bags, cradles, and much more. A staff member opened one of the storage units to reveal many stacked drawers which could be pulled out to reveal an array of moccasins. Each drawer housed half a dozen moccasins or so, each with a printed piece of paper at the front that gave information on the catalogue number, object name, source, and presumed nation of each Ancestor piece.

Fig. 9. Drawer with various styles of moccasins. Photo taken at the Royal Ontario Museum, March 2024.

The entire experience felt conflicting. On one hand, I felt unbelievably grateful to be in the presence of Ancestor beadwork; to witness an array of different beaded items from moccasins to sheaths to bandolier bags, to examine the intricate beadwork patterns up close, and admire the different beading techniques from nations across Turtle Island. Yet, on the other hand, it felt disconcerting to pay witness to these objects in such a clinical and detached way. I understand that these modes of conservation are necessary to preserve these items, but it does not negate the uncomfortable feeling that persisted in the air. It was surreal to be able to look at these drawers of moccasins up close and witness the different styles of beadwork and quillwork from (what was thought to be) the Stoney, Assiniboine, Nakoda, and Sioux peoples, but all I could

think was that someone wore these on their feet at some point. Yet now, they were here, sitting in a drawer, locked behind a cabinet, only brought out when someone decides to pay witness.

It was difficult to contend with the fact that someone used to *live* in these. Someone used to wake up and tie these around their feet in the morning, walk across open fields, pick medicines, prepare food, be in ceremony, and just *be alive* while wearing these. Someone made these for this person. A community once came together to hunt an animal, scrape and smoke its hide, trade items for beads, pick, clean, and dye quills, and sit for hours with a needle and sinew to create these for someone they loved. I was overcome with such intense emotions because it was hard to bear witness to items that real people used to wear and to see them look so lifeless now, stuffed with tissue paper to keep their form. This is where I return to that term, trans*temporal kinship, and recognize the truth behind it. Although these items were not made or worn by people related to me by blood or nation, I still felt connected to them, as Ancestors. It was this experience, my connection to Bernie, and my understanding of the word *aanikoobijigan* that led me to create this work I titled *Always Connected, Across Time and Space.*

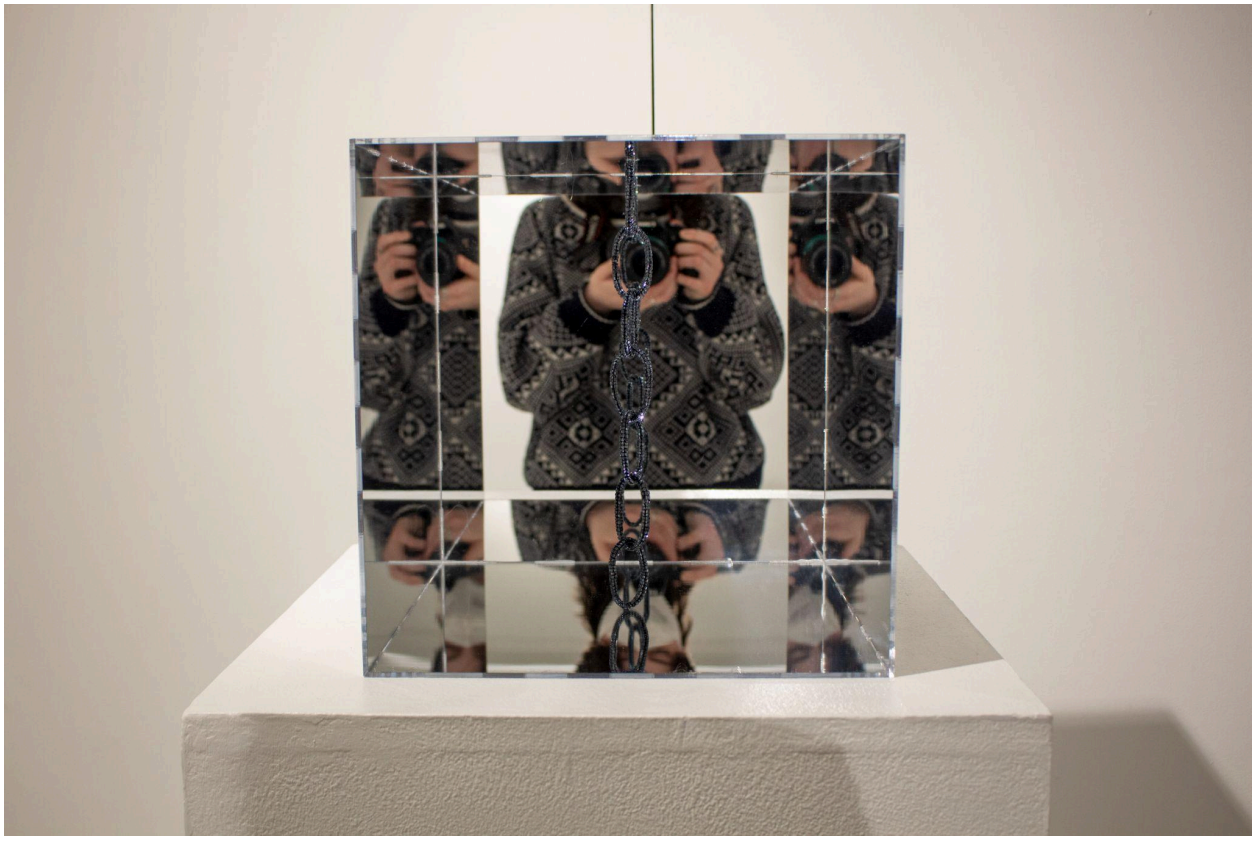

Fig. 10. *Always Connected, Across Time and Space.* 9/0 Czech 3-Cut Rocaille beads, FireLine, silver mirrored acrylic. 11.250in x 11.250in x 11.125in. 2025.

In the gallery, an open box sits atop a plinth. The box is made from silver mirrored acrylic and a beaded chain is suspended vertically in the middle of the mirrored box. As the mirrors are reflected off one another, the chain in between creates a series of smaller and smaller reflections that appear to recede into infinity. This visual simulation exemplifies the notion of *aanikoobijigan* as something that is boundless; something that has existed since time immemorial and will continue to exist long after you, reader, and I, have returned to the cosmos. Importantly, the chain itself is made up of seven individual links, representing the seven generations that are deeply embedded in the Anishinaabemowin word which inspired the work. Although there are seven links in the chain, the mirrors create an infinite *kobade,* one that connects all of these generations together into an ever-evolving web of connections. This optical

illusion reinforces the fact that our arms are always linked, embracing those who have come before us and those who have yet to arrive. It is a reminder that I am a link in a chain, that you are a link in a chain, that we are all links in a chain.[82]

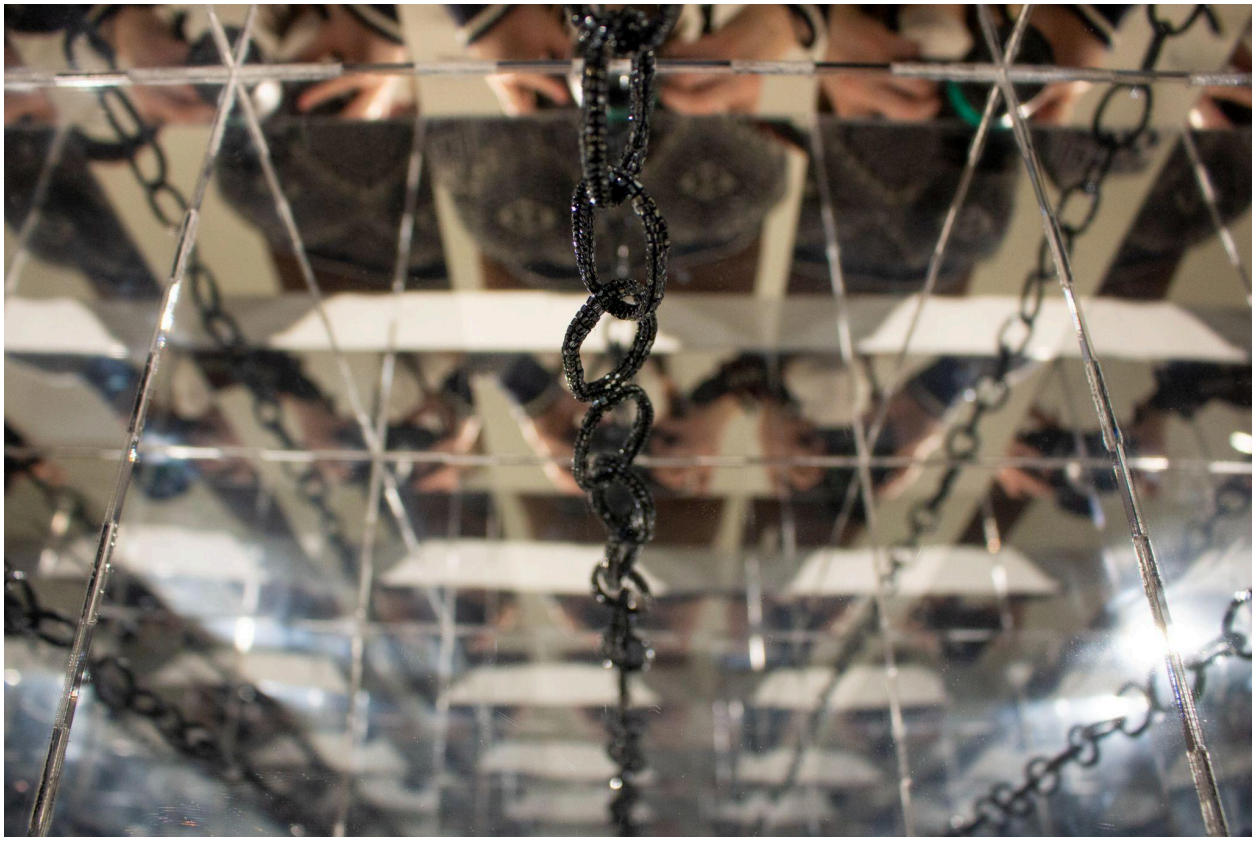

Fig. 11. *Always Connected, Across Time and Space* (reflection detail). 9/0 Czech 3-Cut Rocaille beads, FireLine, silver mirrored acrylic. 11.250in x 11.250in x 11.125in. 2025.

Trans*temporal kinship reminds me that my Ancestors are always with me, and that I too, am someone's Ancestor. When I am in the depths of despair, longing, shame, I know I can look in the mirror and be reminded that generations of humans came together to create who is staring back at me. I am reminded that I am alive and that we are always connected. This infinite reflection of my Ancestors is a testament to the ways in which we are able to connect with each other, across time and space. With this work, I think of my Ancestors—queer, trans, Two-Spirit,

[82] Simpson, 'I Am Not a Nation-State', *Unsettling America: Decolonization in Theory & Practice*, par. 6.

Indigenous—who fought for my right to exist right now, writing these words, and am filled with a special type of decolonial love. One where we are all linked together, embracing one another in the absence of hierarchy, and I think of a future where what my Ancestors wanted for me is no longer a dream.

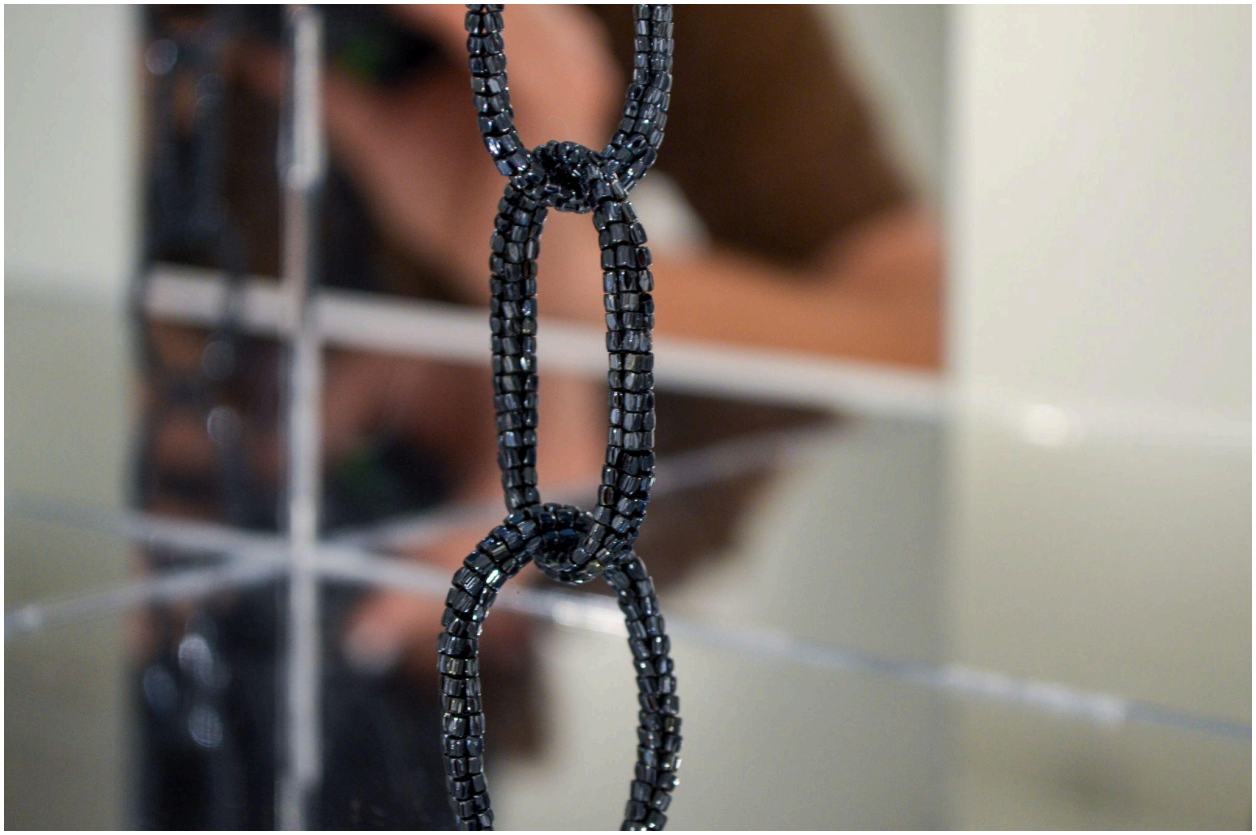

Fig. 12. *Always Connected, Across Time and Space* (chain detail). 9/0 Czech 3-Cut Rocaille beads, FireLine, silver mirrored acrylic. 11.250in x 11.250in x 11.125in. 2025. Photo by Laiken Breau.

BUILDING MY BUNDLE OF DECOLONIAL LOVE: MELANCHOLIC, BUT SO MAGNIFICENT

she just carefully planted those seeds.
she just kept picking up those pieces.
she just kept visiting those old ones.
she just kept speaking her language and sitting with her mother.
she just kept on lighting that seventh fire every time it went out.
she just kept making things a little better, until they were.

– Leanne Betasamosake Simpson[83]

I remember going to Full Moon ceremonies as a teenager where my mother and I would arrive around the same time as the knowledge keeper, Kim Wheatley. Before everyone else arrived, Kim would unpack her bundle on the creaky wooden floor of the log cabin. Some things would change from month to month, but most of the items would remain the same. Spread out among a circular quilt in the colours of the medicine wheel she would place an Eagle feather, small wooden bowls each filled with one of the four sacred medicines, blueberries and strawberries, shakers, stones, and other personal items. Each month we would bring water in whatever vessel we could manage, whether it be a water bottle, a mason jar, a copper mug, or a plastic cup found in one of the cabinets. Everyone in the circle would place these vessels, open, on the floor as we began the ceremony. We would open with a smudge inside the cabin and end the night with drumming and singing outside, by the fire, under the moonlight. All of our prayers, conversations, tears, laughter, and songs would be embedded in the *nibi* in these vessels.

[83] Simpson, 'for asinykwe'. In *Islands of Decolonial Love,* p. 129.

My mother would tell me to keep this moon water with me throughout the month and drink some of it when I needed power, energy, or guidance.

Over the course of creating this thesis I have read many pages, highlighted many phrases, written in many notebooks, bent many needles, spilled many beads, shared many laughs, shed many tears, and had many sleepless nights. All of this work came to fruition over the five days of my exhibition where many of the people who made this possible came out in support of me and this journey. My partner Zach, my father Simon, my advisors Susan and Julia Rose, performance artist and professor Peter Morin, my dear *neechie* Catherine Blackburn, my friends Amy Noseworthy and Emília Nahdee, peers from the IAMD cohort, and the presence of my *Nokomis*, Wilmer, Rolland, Bernie, and all of my *aanikoobijigan*—you are my moon water. You are how I regain my energy, how I remind myself of my own power, how I seek guidance. You are how I take a breath and continue to live. While much of this process was spent alone, buried beneath books and beads, I could not have done this without all of you. You are all part of my bundle, and it is bursting at the seams with decolonial love.

Decolonial love helps us to "reimagine reparations as a radical transformation of communities and [...] attempt to repair broken societies, histories, and identities destroyed by colonialism and the coloniality-of-power"[84] Decolonial love has permeated my life, research, and creation over the past year. I felt decolonial love in every visit with Susan; when she read out a list of words and had me decide whether I would accept or refuse them in my work[85], when she

[84] Figueroa, 'Reparation as Transformation: Radical Literary (Re)Imaginings of Futurities through Decolonial Love', p. 47.

[85] Some of these words include accountability, protocol, metaphor, responsibility, legitimacy, power, and academia. This is a deeply personal and powerful exercise that was very helpful in the early stages of my thesis exploration and development. I would encourage future graduate students and their advisors to pursue something similar with words related to their research interests, cultural connection, and artistic practice.

reassured me that Anishinaabeg thought and story teaches us to embrace ambiguity, and when she showed up to the opening night of my exhibition wearing Fox earrings, just for me. I felt it when Julia Rose helped me cast my hand in silicone and we filled the empty studio with our boisterous NDN laughter, when my father drove me to the bead store in North York and spent hours helping me find the perfect ones for my loom piece, and when Catherine invited me into her home to show me how to use her sewing machine so I could bring my hide-jingle-binder to life. I felt it every time my partner wiped tears shed over spilled beads (thanks to our dog, Bear) or chewed up thread (thanks to our cat, Willow), when Amy helped me hang up much of my work on install day, and when Emília and I both screamed out in excitement at how the bead soup she poured around my feet turned out.[86] Most of all, I felt it on the opening night of my exhibition when all of these wonderful souls came together to support me and on the drive home after deinstalling as I read the comments folks wrote in the little guestbook I left in the gallery:

> *Thought provoking.*
> *Beautiful, well-thought out, and lovingly made!*
> *Your work is so melancholic but it's magnificent.*
> *Lovely work, striking visuals. Serene and a little heartbreaking.*
> *Your work is gorgeous and truly so inspiring. Thank you for sharing it.*
> *I think you're brilliant. Your work is not only beautiful but it's refreshing.*

After an exhausting week, flipping through these pages made me think back to Morrill and Tuck when they wrote:

> I explore the residue horror that colonialism creates and I cannot forget. I am sometimes outsider and always fugitive, I have family, I belong to people and to places, to traditions. Visitations reinforce connections, create new ones, disrupt expectations. Visitations are not settling, they are not colonial exploitation. Visitation rites. Visitation rights. Visitation writes… They affirmed everything that I did, they told me I was good, I was doing good things. One day, after they had been visiting for nearly a week, I was talking to a friend on the phone and they let me know they were leaving, and before I could say goodbye, they were gone. But everything had changed. I can't tell this story without crying.[87]

[86] It is worth noting that this was for the *Waagosh Walks Between Worlds* installation and that the first day my exhibition was open was the first day of Spring. This is significant because my spirit name is Spring Fox Spirit.
[87] Morrill, Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Qollective, 'Before Dispossession, or Surviving It', pp. 17-18.

Although some comments were left by friends, family, and faculty I knew, a lot of them came from folks who were unknown to me. Somehow, these felt the most resonant because they were not bound by knowing me, they simply felt moved and connected enough to my work to gift a piece of themselves in return. Decolonial love reminds us that something is missing and is not "merely a state of feeling, but also a kind of performativity insofar as one does for oneself and/or for another, at the same time, toward the future."[88] It is an ethic by which we should strive to live, where we can acknowledge our differences and embrace our individual gifts in order to manifest the creation of new worlds, ones bursting at the seams with endless possibilities. This is where the power of my work lies; in its ability to connect those from all walks of life, to create a better understanding, to raise a new consciousness, to engage in world-building. The mark my thesis has left has indeed changed everything, and for the better.

[88] Belcourt, 'Masturbatory Ethics, Anarchic Objects: Notes on Decolonial Love', p. 5.

I AM NOT SYNONYMOUS:
SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

> *My concern is not with being included in Native Studies – as if being included was all that we wanted – but with the epistemologies that build worlds that can't hold all of us.*
>
> – Billy-Ray Belcourt[89]

This investigation began with a desire; one that has festered for over two decades, one that needed to be sought out. Engaging with a desire-based research framework was deeply important to this work because of something Avery Gordon calls complex personhood, which speaks to the fact that "the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward."[90] Although I had been, and likely will always be, stuck trying to battle the symptoms of my troubles (homophobia, transphobia, colonialism, racism, etc.), I was able to take these points of pain, and instead, transform them into something medicinal.

The creative production of this MFA thesis involves stitching, beadwork, and sculpture, that through methods of desire and dreaming, work together to envision an alternative world. Each art-object seeks out a specific desire; to visualize, to welcome, to comfort, to protect, and to connect. As Anzaldúa affirms, "the struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer

[89] Belcourt, 'Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?', par. 16.
[90] Tuck, 'Suspending Damage', p. 420.

terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads."[91] Thus, my desire was a starting point for materializing these images in my head into something capable of inciting change.

Before any creative production could occur, my desire surfaced through my research questions, which I can now answer. Firstly, what does it mean to be Two-Spirit, and who can define its meaning? Pyle answered the first half of this question well, stating that Two-Spirits are "Indigenous people who experience our gender, sexuality, and social/spiritual life outside the boundaries of colonially-defined cisgender heterosexuality"[92] It is also important to note that being Two-Spirit is not strictly a gender identity, despite what the history of anthropological research might insinuate, but rather that it is a queer and spiritual identity. This is to say that "when Two-Spirit is only understood in terms of gender rather than wholistically as many expressions of Indigenous genders, sexualities and spiritualities, then it effectively excludes many people"[93] from identifying as such. The answer to the second half of this question is that anyone who identifies as Two-Spirit can define its meaning. To be Two-Spirit is to experience gender, sexuality, and spirituality in ways that perhaps cannot and do not need to be described or understood. We as Indigenous people are not static, we as queer and trans people are not static, so neither are we as Two-Spirit people. There is a fluidity and ambiguity that comes along with this identity that not everyone will understand.

[91] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, p. 87.
[92] Pyle, 'Folks Like Us: Anishinaabe Two-Spirit Kinship and Memory Across Time and Space', p. 2.
[93] Wesley, 'Reimagining Two-Spirit Community', p. 50.

Next, what roles were held by Two-Spirit people prior to colonization, and how can we return to holding our Two-Spirit kin in high regard in our nations and communities? This is something that is difficult to answer as arguably, "there are no specific responsibilities associated with the term because it was designed to refer to Indigeneity and queerness,"[94] and the existence or nature of any roles and responsibilities associated with being Two-Spirit would be specific to the cultural traditions of an individual's Indigenous nation. As for how we can return to holding Two-Spirit kin in high regard in our nations and communities, we must actively resist the homophobia and transphobia that has infected so many of our spaces, peoples, and communities, and return to our Indigenous ways of knowing and being. We must "collectively oppose a system of compulsory settler sexuality [...] that marks Indigenous and other marginalized relations as deviant"[95] because Two-Spirit identity is not something new, nor did it surface as a result of contact. On the contrary, colonialism is what forced violence and hatred upon Two-Spirit people and has affected the way that many Indigenous people view queerness today. Two-Spirit people have existed since time immemorial and we will continue to survive, but for us to thrive, it is imperative that we continue to fight for a world that our Ancestors dreamt for us; one where we "practice grounded normativity in the way it was intended: to build strong societies of individuals who are functioning as their best selves."[96]

Finally, how can we collectively and individually create a future where Two-Spirit people feel safe, loved, welcome, and cared for? This is by far the most complex of my research questions and one that cannot be fulfilled solely within these pages. This question must be answered through both individual and community projects which need to be informed by

[94] Wesley, 'Reimagining Two-Spirit Community', p. 51.
[95] TallBear, 'Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family', p. 152.
[96] Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, p. 122.

decolonial love. We must acknowledge that there is no one way to be Two-Spirit because the notion of purity, authenticity, and tradition are all colonial notions that aim to shame Two-Spirit people for their nuanced experiences and ambiguous identities. Acceptance and inclusion of Two-Spirit people will bring about the resurgence of traditions and the creation of new ones that better suit the desires of queer Indigenous peoples and their communities. Simultaneously, this is also the question that has been best answered through the results of my research and exhibition. By this I mean that my exhibition brought together people from all walks of life into an open conversation about Two-Spirit identity, inspiring feelings of safety, love, welcoming, and care.

The night of the opening reception Peter requested that I give a spiel about one of the works, but typical of us NDNs present, we were all busy chatting, laughing, and visiting, and the spiel kept getting pushed back. As the night lingered on and people came and went, Peter eventually rounded folks up and shared a story of something he used to do when he taught youth about art. When visiting a museum or gallery, he said he would have the group choose one work that they resonated with the most and he would tell them about it, and so, this is what he directed those visiting my show to do as well. I stood at the entrance of the exhibition, back turned and eyes closed, as Peter instructed everyone to take a moment and stand beside the work that they wanted to hear about the most. When I turned around, there was someone at every piece, but *Waagosh Walks Between Worlds* was the clear winner. Everyone cheered and then went quiet, awaiting my words. My voice shook and trembled, but as I felt the presence of Wilmer and Fox, I took a breath and began to explain how I came to create the work. I explained how I related to the words Wilmer wrote in his autobiography, about my spirit name, and where my research brought me. I told them how I knew I wanted to include Fox in my thesis and had kept the fur for

many months, but was not sure what to do with it. I explained that when I met with Susan and told her about my concerns, she told me to lay down tobacco and spend time with Fox, that eventually it would come to me—and so I listened, and she was right, and it did—and I am glad it did because it brought me to that night, where I felt everything that I can only hope our futures will be full of: safety, love, welcoming, and care.

That night, this paper, and my thesis work all came to fruition because I decided to defy colonialism; I decided to complain, to embrace ambiguity, to press on the soft spot, to follow my hopes, dreams, and desires. Following this path required both a recognition of suffering and a move towards survivance, a move "beyond our basic survival in the face of overwhelming cultural genocide to create spaces of synthesis and renewal."[97] That is what my thesis work has done for me and I can only hope that it can do the same for others. My hope is that this document, filled with the knowledge of myself and countless others who have influenced me to listen to my *inde',*[98] allows future generations of scholars, researchers, and artists to reimagine how these "findings might be used by, for, and with communities."[99] May this thesis comfort and uplift those of you who are queer, trans, Two-Spirit, and Indigenous. May it remind you that we are not broken, that we are more than our pain, and that who we are and what we experience does not have a synonym.[100] May it inspire you to follow your desires, envision expansive possibilities, shapeshift beyond colonial limitations, and make the worlds we dream of a reality.

[97] Tuck, 'Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities', p. 422.
[98] Heart in Anishinaabemowin.
[99] Ibid. p. 409.
[100] Tuck and Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', p. 3.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* 1st ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Belcourt, Billy-Ray, 'Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 18 April 2016, https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2016/02/01/can-the-other-of-native-studies-speak/.

———. 'Masturbatory Ethics, Anarchic Objects: Notes on Decolonial Love'. PhD, University of Alberta, 2016.

Belcourt, Christi (@christi_belcourt). "Many years ago I attended an amazing extravaganza…" Instagram, June 10, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8DUislPby6/.

Christie-Peters, Quill. 'Anishinaabeg Art-Making as Falling in Love: Reflections on Artistic Programming for Urban Indigenous Youth'. MA, University of Victoria, n.d.

De Line, Sebastian. 'Clay and Common Ground: Clanships and Polyspirited Embodiment'. *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (2020).

Fife, Connie. *Speaking Through Jagged Rock.* Fredericton: Broken Jaw Press, 1999.

Figueroa, Yomaira. 'Reparation as Transformation: Radical Literary (Re)Imaginings of Futurities through Decolonial Love'. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 4, no. 1 (2015).

"Greg Staats" Kamloops Art Gallery, n.d. https://kag.bc.ca/soundings/gregstaats.

Johnston, Basil. *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway*. Harper Collins, 1995.

Laing, MJ. *Urban Indigenous Youth Reframing Two-Spirit*. Routledge, 2021.

Morrill, Angie, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Qollective. 'Before Dispossession, or Surviving It'. *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 12, no. 1 (2016).

Nadjiwon, Rolland. 'Seven Deer Dancing'. MA, University of Windsor, 2000.

Nadjiwon, Wilmer. *Not Wolf, Nor Dog: An Ojibway Elder's Tales of Residential School, Wartime Service, First Nations Politics and Some Experience with the Great Spirit*. 2nd ed. Tobermory: Tobermory Press, 2012.

Pyle, Kai. 'Folks Like Us: Anishinaabe Two-Spirit Kinship and Memory Across Time and Space'. PhD, University of Minnesota, 2021.

———. ‘Naming and Claiming: Recovering Ojibwe and Plains Cree Two-Spirit Language’. *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018).

———. ‘Reclaiming Traditional Gender Roles: A Two-Spirit Critique’. In *Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020.

Roberson, Jehan. ‘“Come Think With Me”: Finding Communion in the Liberatory Textual Practices of Kameelah Janan Rasheed’. *Criticism* 64, no. 3/4 (2022).

Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. ‘I Am Not a Nation-State’, *Unsettling America: Decolonization in Theory & Practice*, 6 November 2013. https://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/2013/11/06/i-am-not-a-nation-state/.

———. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

———. *Islands of Decolonial Love*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2015.

Singh, Julietta. *No Archive Will Restore You*. punctum books, 2018.

Smithers, Gregory. *Reclaiming Two-Spirits: Sexuality, Spiritual Renewal & Sovereignty in Native North America*. Beacon Press, 2022.

TallBear, Kim. ‘Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family’. In *Making Kin Not Population.* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018.

Tuck, Eve, C. Ree, and the Super Futures Haunt Qollective, ‘A Glossary of Haunting’. *Handbook of Autoethnography*, 2013.

Tuck, Eve. ‘Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities’. *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009).

Tuck, Eve, and K. Yang. ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor’. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012).

Wesley, Dana. ‘Reimagining Two-Spirit Community: Critically Centering Narratives of Urban Two-Spirit Youth’. MA, Queen’s University, 2015.

Womack, Craig. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL FIGURES

Fig. 13. The house my family rented at “The Point” in Neyaashiinigmiing. Photo taken in August 2012.

Fig. 14. Eleven year old me in the ribbon dress my aunt made me, inside the Cape Croker Powwow circle with my younger brother. Photo taken in August 2012.

Fig. 15. *Waagosh Walks Between Worlds* (footprints detail). Cotton, Red Fox fur, 11/0 Czech seed beads, bugle beads, bicone beads, assorted crystals, Nymo thread. 3.75ft x 15ft. 2025. Photo by Laiken Breau.

Fig. 16. *Waagosh Walks Between Worlds* (beading detail). Cotton, Red Fox fur, 11/0 Czech seed beads, bugle beads, bicone beads, assorted crystals, Nymo thread. 3.75ft x 15ft. 2025. Photo by Laiken Breau.

Fig. 17. *Do You Hear That? I Am Medicine Too.* (detail). Brain tanned smoked deer hide, thread, bias tape, jingle cones, invisible zipper, wooden dowel. 12.5in x 14.5in. 2025.