

Two Snake

The Realities of Being

Talon Micco Claybrook

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Thesis Report
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I am a Native person living in two realities...

In one reality, I am educated. I have a bachelor's degree in art with a background in Native American and Ethnic Studies and will soon complete a master's degree in fine art. In this reality my education has taught me that white supremacy is omnipresent. In response, I make interventional artwork for a prominently white audience. The goal of this artwork is to educate and create situations that confront people with their own relationship to white supremacy. This work takes many forms—video, performance, conversation, storytelling, etc. Because this work deals with both personal narrative and heavy subject matter, I find myself easily frustrated and sometimes angry. I want so badly for people to acknowledge the destructive nature of settler colonialism and to act against it. I don't know if art is capable of doing this, and in many instances it has been proven to me that it is not. When I make work in this reality, I know it is important to consider the colonizer's gaze. For some, I am a mystic. For others, I am sub-human. In this reality, I will fight the rest of my life to claim an Indigenous identity and to dismantle white supremacy.

In another reality, I am the son of a strong Mvskoke woman. From her I was given a clan. I am ecovlke. In this reality, my people give me purpose. I have learned that the continuation of my people is contingent on my participation in ceremony and reciprocity. In this reality, humility is important and seeing the strength of a Native community is inspiring. In this reality, I have traveled two thousand miles from home, only to find that I have a family in the Northwest. In this reality, water is life and humans aren't commodities. I want so badly to take care of my grandparents and to be a strong person for my family. In this reality, I make objects that are enacted by the community, and I tell stories for survival. I play stickball and have a relationship to the food that gives my body nourishment. In this reality, I will spend the rest of my life being human.



Dead or Sleeping, Talon Claybrook, Performance, 2019

Deep in the heart of what is now modern-day Alabama and Georgia, there are Earth mounds scattered next to the waterways of the local river systems—the Ocmulgee, Tallapoosa, and Coosa rivers. The people that called these places home for thousands of years are the ancestors of my people, the Mvskoke. The word Mvskoke is a broad term for a confederation of people and tribal towns of the Southeast created to strengthen our diplomatic voice and to fight Western expansion post-contact. Overtime, the Mvskoke name became a way to identify the many peoples of the Southeast. In actuality, my clanship and identity are tied to the Tuckabutche and Tallahassee tribal towns. Mvskoke people have several ways of identifying tribal members, the first being our traditional clan system. My mother is ecovlke—I am ecovlke (deer clan). As long as I carry a clan, I have a place within my community. With my clanship comes certain responsibilities that are important to both our ceremonial life and the overall health of our community.

The second way of identification is through participation. It is important for me to note that my people claim me, not the other way around. In this sense, participation may be even more important to our Native identity than clanship. The continuation of Mvskoke people is contingent on the community's ability to practice our sacred

From the late 1800s through the mid-1900s, the United States government took Native children from their communities and placed them in boarding schools. Henry Pratt's model of “kill the Indian, save the man” led to the death of hundreds of Native children across the country. Although the physical deaths of children may not have been the intent of all teachers, the death of Native culture was.

I have heard the story of Plenty Horses from two different people: Dr. Jerry Bread, a member of the Kiowa Nation and recent retiree of the Native American Studies Department at the University of Oklahoma; and Cannupa Hanska Luger, a social engineer of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota, Austrian, and Norwegian descent. The story was the same in both tellings, but it was told for different reasons.

Plenty Horses spent five years at the Carlisle Indian School, the prototype of Native American boarding schools. After returning home to his people, the Lakota, he found that he could no longer speak the language. Lacking crucial knowledge of Lakota life and without a way to communicate, Plenty Horses was without a people. During what was supposed to be a peaceful exchange with the military, he shot and killed a U.S. lieutenant so that he would have a place among his people as a warrior. The shooting took place eight



Two Snake Ceremony, Talon Micco Claybrook, Image still from video performance, 2018

ways of life.

In the 1830s the government removed the Mvskoke people from our traditional homelands to Indian Territory—modern day Oklahoma. As we were being removed from our homelands, we picked up the sacred fire of our tribal towns. We carried the fire to Oklahoma, and when we arrived we used these fires to kindle the spirit of our new tribal towns. These fires still burn today and if you happen to be in the countryside of eastern Oklahoma during the summer you may be lucky enough to hear our songs. In modern day Okmulgee, Oklahoma the Mvskoke Nation built a mound building to house our tribal justice system. In a new place among different people, the Mvskoke continue on.

Growing up around the Keystone Lake area of Oklahoma, my father taught me to farm, hunt, fish, and trap. To do these things you must be conscious of your surroundings. In Oklahoma we have extreme heat, extreme winters, tornados, lightning storms, polluted water, and three venomous snakes: copperheads, cottonmouths, and rattlesnakes. So, if you want to survive in Oklahoma, caution is a good skill to develop. Because we lived in a single-wide trailer deep in the woods, my brother, sister, and I had to be cautious when we went

days after the 1891 Wounded Knee Massacre.

Although this story took place over a hundred years ago, its themes continue to resonate for many Native people across the nation—and especially for me. After twenty-one years of an American education, I have come to the conclusion that academic institutions are assimilation chambers. Black, brown, yellow, and red faces smile from three-fold pamphlets, websites, and posters with a message of inclusion. Their faces tell me that an education is a path to a better life, but I'm not fully convinced. One person's perception of a good life isn't the same for everyone. Furthermore, smiling students aren't the ones steering the ship—that position is reserved for the colonizer.

The colonizer is the manifestation of white supremacy. His goal is to make a world in his image, and anything that threatens his mission will be consumed, co-opted, or extinguished from existence. The colonizer takes many forms—in this setting, he is the institution.

Academic institutions cannot accommodate Indigeneity because they do not value or allow for compassion or reciprocity, and they do not take responsibility for the ways in which they inherently exclude everything but whiteness. The institution of academia is an allegory. It is the story that Indigenous people are forced to live on a



Crawling Cowboy, Talon Claybrook, Image still from video performance, 2019

outside to play. Our idea of fun was catching crawdads in the creek with our hands. It was a slow, tedious process that took a steady hand and a lot of patience. I often joke that my dad taught me patience much like Mr. Miyagi taught Karate to Daniel-san.

The first year I lived in Oregon, I went hiking in the Willamette National Forest with two friends I met through the art department. We walked a total of ten miles, stopping only three times. We walked so far so quickly that I was out of breath and sweating the entire time. Before that day, I never knew it was possible to walk through the woods while acknowledging so little. That day helped me fully realize that I was a visitor to the Pacific Northwest. I am Mvskoke, a Native person of the Southeast, and I learned that this takes on a different meaning while living in the Pacific Northwest. This is the home of the Kalapuya. I don't have the same relationship to the people and place that I had when I was in Oklahoma, but that's okay. Being Mvskoke is important to me, but so is the health of Native communities throughout the world. Part of being Native is acknowledging the people of the land. Understanding this has helped remind me of two things: I have obligations as a Mvskoke person to continue our way of life, and belonging to a community is vital to our survival.

daily basis: one of assimilation or one of continuation. From the moment we are born we are political beings. It is a crippling predicament.

Ridding oneself and others of white supremacy in a society that rewards whiteness is a hard sell and, ironically, it is a burden placed on the oppressed. I know this because it is the position I have found myself in for the last eight years. The notion of decolonizing communities is heavy, problematic, and easily co-opted by the colonizer—but it is not pointless. I have gone toe-to-toe with the colonizer on a physical, mental, and spiritual level. It has been draining, scarring, and eye-opening. Was it worth it? For me it was. I am a stronger person because of it. My shoulders are now strong enough to carry a tremendous amount of weight. Do I wish others the same experience? Never. Will I continue to fight white supremacy? Always.

Audre Lorde is known for proclaiming that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” Academic institutions are one of the master's many houses, and because art is part of academia, it has become one of the master's tools. The moment art was named and institutionalized it became a commodity to be owned and sold.



Many Nations Longhouse Community, Micco, Cast of *Sliver of a Full Moon* play reading, 2018

I am incredibly thankful for the Many Nations Longhouse community here at the University of Oregon. Without their continuous love, support, and generosity, I would never have made it through graduate school. Becoming part of this community has taught me that no matter how far away from home I am, there is always a Native community practicing reciprocity. In this community I feel accepted, I see the faces of my relatives, and I now proudly call many of them family.

Last year I was part of two life-changing community events: a play reading of Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Sliver of a Full Moon* and the Longhouse PRIDE Awards. *Sliver of a Full Moon* is a play about the Violence Against Women Act and its limited reach to protect Native women. Within it are stories of real people who have faced trauma with little or no justice. Because of its content, it is a difficult story to tell, but it is also an incredibly important one. I am not an actor, nor were many of the other participants, but together we found a unified voice. We used this play to bond, educate, and heal ourselves along with many others from the community. The PRIDE Award is an event in which members of the community nominate others for their selflessness and community-driven efforts. The award is commemorated by a dinner and the gifting of a print from a community artist.

I came to the University of Oregon to understand how to be an intervention artist, and as I made my way through the institution, I realized I am the intervention. I am the reality that the colonizer refuses to acknowledge and I need only to exist to disrupt white supremacy.

During the early 1900s, photographer Edward Curtis set out to document the "Vanishing Race." To him and many others, Indigenous peoples and cultures were disappearing. Curtis never documented the Cherokee people because he believed that we were already assimilated. The message is clear: the American Indian disappeared sometime in the early 1900s and the colonizer's gaze doesn't include a contemporary Indian. I am a Cherokee cowboy. The fact that I occupy an Indigenous identity while taking after my father's cowboy aesthetic is contradictory.

For the last six months, I have been performing myself. I make art as Talon Claybrook; I teach as Talon Claybrook; and I confront the institution as Talon Claybrook. Sometimes this takes the form of performative video pieces. *Dead or Sleeping* is an ongoing performance series where I force participants to spend time with my motionless cowboy/Indian body. This performance creates a situation for people to sit with their own stereotypes, ignorance, and projec-



Spider, Toad, and Mouse Save Man, Micco, Community PRIDE Award, Digital Print,

That year I had the honor of creating a print that could carry the story of *Spider, Toad, and Mouse Save Man*. I will remember that day for the rest of my life.

While sharing the story with the community, I was in turn gifted with a memory of Mvhayvce.

When I was an undergraduate, I was lucky enough to take three semesters of a Mvskoke language class. Mvhayvce (little teacher) was the name of my teacher. Together, her and her mother Mvhayv worked on restoring the Mvskoke language. Mvhayv passed away the semester after I completed the course. She was the heart and soul of Mvskoke language revitalization both on campus and in the community. Before her passing, Mvhayvce and Mvhayv accomplished many great things, including the creation of a Mvskoke dictionary and a book of traditional animal stories, both of which were written in Mvskoke and translated to English. I carry with me many stories, but none are more important than the time I learned why we tell stories.

One day in class, Mvhayvce ask the students to identify the reason Mvskoke people carry stories. The majority of people in class were scared of Mvhayvce because of her unapologetic and direct na-

tions of what they believe a cowboy and an Indian are. A companion to this work is my performance that I call *Crawling Cowboy*, in which I crawl in public places as a cowboy/Indian. The thought behind this performative work is to create a visual interpretation of what it means to live in a colonized world as an Indigenous person. The colonizer has turned the world of the Indigenous people upside down. Without access to our traditional ways of being and our traditional homelands, we have been forced to metaphorically crawl through life. In this piece I take this metaphor literally.

Indigenous peoples aren't the ones who created white supremacy, but we are the ones who feel its effects. It is my hope that by confronting white supremacy through art, I might help people better understand the condition of modern-day Indigenous peoples.



Talon Claybrook, Talon Claybrook, Performance, 2019

ture. Mvhayvce could be intimidating at times, but to me she was a strong Native woman with a big heart. I knew nobody would try to answer her question, so I gave it a shot. I raised my hand and answered,

"To know how to live right?"

She stared at me for a moment then shook her head and said,

"No, we don't tell stories for reasons of morality. We tell our stories to survive."



Two Snake, Talon Claybrook, First Generation Cherokee Beans, Paint, Pedestal, TV, Video, 2019

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