

# Making-with: Clay, Community and Facilitator as boundary-crossing tricksters

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## Abstract

This abstract describes an ongoing exploration into the emerging role of the trickster as a designer-facilitator-maker, an ecological design thinker, working within communities to enable co-design, co-making and experimentation. Encompassed in the ancient archetype of the 'trickster', the role involves disrupting but, most importantly, rebuilding culture, intervening and acting as the flexing boundary within a community, facilitating the movement of information, of matter, across difference and between people. In studying the possibilities of such a role, I will explore how a designer-as-trickster can model how a community can further take on that role for each other, can see alternative futures, and can hope. Furthermore, I will investigate clay as boundary-crossing, mutable matter, and how it can act as a trickster material, with each clay pot existing betwixt two materialities- suggesting both the form of the finished object, and also the humble ground from which it was won, in turn providing an invitation for community conversation, for collective experimentation with matter in flow. Through a series of making experiments at festivals across the South West of England, and a craft camp at Dartington during the Summer of 2017, I will investigate the role of the trickster through first person enquiry, taking on the position myself and inviting making communities to become tricksters for each other within the frame of craft, and craft workshops. In doing so, I will explore the implications for all designers working with and within communities, co-designing and exploring possibilities through making. Exploring the role of a trickster, I will also interrogate my own practice, studying the potential for ecological design thinkers to act as tricksters within and for communities, enabling communities of tricksters to arise, creating, melding, and refiguring their own cultures. Working largely with clay, I will begin to examine its great potential as a trickster material, and a fellow experimental collaborator. Finally, as a woman working within communities of a variety of genders, I will be enacting a role seldom seen within traditional literature - that of the female trickster. The results of these trickster experiments with clay and communities will be documented in the form of photos of the making process, and objects made during the events, alongside the thoughts of those attending the workshops, and finally these will be examined against models of the trickster, and of transition design within communities. The objective is to reframe the role of a designer-facilitator-maker as a modern trickster, identifying opportunities for this vital role to enact creative interventions and to introduce experimental approaches, both in traditional craft contexts, and also within a wider field of making activity. In doing so, the aim is to encourage the practice of boundary-crossing creative conversations that nurture a sense of tangible possibility, with communities, through making, with clay.

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**'Sympoiesis'** is a simple word; it means "making-with." Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing... That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. It is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company.' (Haraway 2016:58)

This paper explores how bringing people together transforms how we live, and how, through making together we come into relationship and community with people, place, and material, a process that transforms all involved.

I suggest that designers, makers and craftspeople find themselves on the edge of a dramatic redefinition of what it actually means to be in the practice of designing and making things, and facing very real complex crises, connected and emerging wicked problems. The result of this is that designer-makers are required to seek to include rather than exclude challenging opinions; to truly co-operate and collaborate, and to position themselves as connecting individuals, nurturing a sense of tangible hope, and to explore possibility.

I set out within this context of hope and possibility to reposition the role of the designer-facilitator-maker as the archetypal trickster, exploring this ancient boundary-crossing archetype that exists on the edge, the crossroads, as a disrupter, an agent of change, but also a position of cohesion, one of rebuilding after crisis- a relevant and vital role that designers and makers are called ever more to inhabit.

The paper further considers the boundary-crossing nature of matter and material. I focus on clay and making with matter dug from the ground- malleable dirt- as the frame for a series of experiments within community, in which the community themselves have dug, processed, made pots with the clay and finally returned it to the ground. Clay also provides a clear representation of place, in allowing participants to begin dialogue with both matter and their surroundings, in a variety of settings.

Finally, this paper considers Haraway's concept of **sympoiesis**- 'making-with'- and what happens when communities make things together, what happens when a group of people dig and process and make with clay, through interrogating experiments at a series of sites across the UK, and by looking at examples from other creative professionals.



*Participants treading the clay in preparation for a workshop in Wales, 2017 © Kate Bowman*

We must begin somewhere, whether in a book, a field, or a ditch.

And this beginning or tumble into the arena is crucial. As Pinkola Estés asserts- 'If you don't go out in the woods nothing will ever happen and your life will never begin'.

We are all here but we are simultaneously, somewhere else.

Standing, collectively facing the wicked problem before us- an interconnected mass of challenges of unprecedented scale and scope, complex and centered around living systems, moving evolving and morphing with no clear solution or potential resolution.

We are all somehow involved, snagged in this web, wriggling.

Armed with a radical, resilient form of hope.

Hope that gives an opening, an invitation, a door to step through and a threshold to cross. Hope is a tricky customer, always close to chance and uncertainty, a beautiful bird of a word rather than a vague wish for change, it is the sledgehammer used to affect revolution.

This freedom, the possibility of movement from one state to another, with both individual and collective agency, is complexity- is the freedom of all beings to, seemingly chaotically, but with purpose and a simple sequence of processes, to complete complex actions. It is the resilient connections between all beings that create change, as minute fluctuations in the environment ripple out through this linked web and have lasting implications, at least until the next change. Nothing is isolated. Everything responds to everything else.

These complex, wicked problems can allow great opportunities for change, in that they inherently create capacity for movement- so immediately there is a sense of physical space within hope, an inherent spatial sense of a 'beyond'.

So, what lies yonder?

Across this boundary there is dirt.

To explore the spaces beyond the boundaries, the potential possibilities that lie waiting and dormant, and to enable a tangible interaction with the raw matter that makes up hope itself, we will need to become comfortable experimenting and interacting with the dirt that lies beyond, just out of sight. For, it is it out of the dirt- in all of its wonderful guises- that our future, and so our present, will be built. It is from these boundaries that the stories that change the world will arise.

The writer Mary Douglas defines dirt as 'matter out of place'<sup>ii</sup>, and clay, as a dark, damp substance unearthed, brought up, dug up, carried up, could be our most literal definition of the word.

Dirt is controversial. It asks questions that do not want to be asked. Its materiality can never be ignored- all but the finest china speaks of being made of something removed from the ground. It is difficult, and very real.

Clay is a so simple, basic, and lowly material, that it is often disturbed rather than dug by choice.



*Digging the clay at Glastonbury Festival, 2017 © Kate Bowman*

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When making with groups of people at Glastonbury Festival they often remarked ‘Oh that! I’ve got that at the bottom of my garden’, or were utterly perplexed as to why anyone would bring hulking boulders of mud into the middle of a perfectly green field.

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And clay as dirt encourages the kind of thinking that wicked problems require- trans-disciplinary, with a high level of imagination.

The professor of the history of consciousness Donna Haraway explains how 'It matters what worlds world worlds'<sup>iii</sup>, and so who better to hold such an open moment of creation as a 'facilitator'- the term for which seems to conjure up memories of strip lighting, air conditioning and airless corporate rooms- but which is an undeniably utterly vital role, an individual who has the capacity to act as a medium, a storyteller, or even a sculptor of space and experience.

When we begin to explore which ideas are we using to think our ideas, by readdressing the ideas we are using to think our ideas, we get to reframe the story. Our story.

Martin Shaw describes how 'the stories we need turned up, right on time, about five thousand years ago'<sup>iv</sup>, and so we see how we have the raw materials that we need, the powerful myths that matter.

Here we meet the trickster.

Lewis Hyde describes the trickster as the 'god of the hinge'<sup>v</sup>, as 'a boundary crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and the trickster is always there, at... the gates of life'<sup>vi</sup>, and it is this archetype, disrupting and rebuilding community, enabling hope through what Solnit describes as 'digging tunnels, cutting windows, opening doors,'<sup>vii</sup> and in doing so allowing a new culture to be born, wriggling and messy and birthed by the community.

The definition that I created within my work is that a trickster is a:

'boundary crossing being, or group of beings, who disrupt, challenge and disobey a culture, challenging its very foundations, openly and fairly, enabling and encouraging conversation and the enacting of the 'dirt work' of a place, before rebuilding community and doing the work that needs to be done to form a new culture, to encourage a sense of hope and possibility.'

Existing almost solely along the threshold, the trickster is not limited to simply crossing to-and-fro, but also explores the murky, unfathomable bounds of possibility, experimenting.

And in occupying this space, the tricksters pull a community with them, to the edges, to the doorway, this seam in lived reality that the tricksters managed to pry open, whether with a limb or a crowbar, it matters. It matters that a community can experience the possibility of what lies beyond, even for a moment, that they can have a collective, lived experience of fundamental change, in order to then enact further change for themselves and each other, communally taking on the role of the trickster.



*Participants making pots at the edges of the workshop, 2017 © Kate Bowman*

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When working with a group of adults with Down Syndrome during a clay workshop, none of whom had ever used clay before, their support workers and parents stood at the edge of the room, incredulous at the dynamic that emerged in the group as they began helping and supporting the making efforts of others, becoming tricksters for each other, teasing other group members over boundaries and into spaces of possibility, of experimentation with matter.

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In the physical processing of plastic clay, digging the clay out with the arms; breaking up the pieces with the fingertips; treading with the feet, the heels; kneading with the hands; and witnessing huge chunks of 'dirt' interlaced with duck egg blue alluvial mineral deposits, midnight navy in places, becoming workable, mouldable matter- we change how we understand ourselves.

We also witness our behaviours changing, growing, becoming as we experience ourselves within this complexity.

We feel the process and the methods that we choose to use, the ways in which we gather and work with clay, including what happens to the clay pots afterwards, becomes of magnificent importance.

Our process, the relationship that we begin with clay, becomes us. We see each of our selves, our communities, in process.

Thus, we begin to see our own physicality as malleable, we perceive possibility, freedom. We recognise hope, in its rawest form.

As a representation of place, of a non-human being, clay can form the basis of our culture, the story we use to tell our stories, the world we use to world our worlds, as we become beings fully part of the complex web in which we all exist.

As we experience working with clay, we see, close at hand how boundaries can be relaxed, crossed, how matter can play with one another.

The process of working with a clay cycle therefore allows making to exist firmly in process, partway between winning the clay from the ground, and returning it back to the earth, allowing the community of participants to view themselves within process also, with freedoms, possibility and within complexity.

This making, crafting, utilises connections currently in place, and also forges new ones, knitting them together in an intricate web of shared tools, joined conversations and enjoyed work. It involves exploring the importance of collective making, and in practicing what Haraway terms **sympoiesis**, defined as,

'making-with... a proper word to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company.'<sup>viii</sup>

Sympoiesis involves truly making together across boundaries (spatial, temporal and ideological) in which all beings are seen as one – equal – in which a whole system of interaction and dialogue is created by the collective that systematically evolves and holds great possibility, surprising even those parts of the sympoiesis, shocked by whom and what they are actually making-with.

We are part of what is being made, we, as connected beings, are in fact what is being made.

We are also the processes.

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At a clay workshop in Wales, participants of all ages finished making their pinch pots and began a huge coil pot. The adults of the group wandered away, leaving the younger participants begin the pot, a vessel that would become a stadium, filled with a rock band in concert, and a crowd of supporters. As the stage filled, adults began slowly making too, adding instruments, bouncers, a back stage area and a sound system. Nobody in the group, adults included, thought they were making simply a model- they were making the real thing. Once finished, a member of the group played Queen on their phone and the entire group cheered and swayed along from behind the tiny clay crowd. Their collective realities were different.



*Collectively making pots in Wales, 2017 © Kate Bowman*

Clay, that piece of place that we are engaging with, is our culture, our common community, complex and free.

Clay is our collective collaborator, our commons.

The work of the Clayground Collective has proved incredibly inspirational for my work on how individuals and communities begin to literally grasp ideas, to see around problems, to physically understand solutions, and also on how the external reality can create an internal perception of what is coming.

When making-with, in symposium, we communally traverse the boundaries of possibility, allowing the freedoms of a community to be given form, and for all beings, making collaboratively, to become an expression of what is possible. Together we nurture and extend the moment of creation, of imagination, of what could be.

We, the community, become resilient, lungs full of the breath of possibility, bodies in dialogue with clay, covered in midnight matter, changing our story.

Becoming something more ancient, tricksier.

In relationship with something that matters.

So, to conclude, with great crisis comes great possibility, and facing a vast array of deeply connected complex problems, we could also be said to be in the presence of complete possibility.

This research has demonstrated a way of working, an open, collective, creative approach to facing great complexity, and working with it, nurturing resilience and connection through co-design and making-with, together. It has also demonstrated how it can be possible for the designer-facilitator-maker to act as a trickster, gently urging a community into spaces of possibility and encouraging them to in turn do the same for each other, working with dirt and moving beyond to where things are different.

Making-with proved a beautiful demonstration of imagination with bonds and connections between individuals, material and place suddenly profoundly visible, made tangible, able to be seen and witnessed by all.



*Making-with using local clay and foliage in Wales, 2017 © Kate Bowman*

The research has also subtly redefined the role of the designer as a 'connecting person', the one who shows the relationships and bonds, and also makes them visible in such a way that others can contribute, can further the knowledge, the story, so that then, the designer, the maker can let go.

This research is also not static but is an effort to distil something truly alive and moving, it is a representation, as much as is humanly possible, to show an ever-unfolding process. It has been full of wonder, full of possibility. And it has been covered in clay.

This paper has aimed to demonstrate how tangible hope, malleable dirt, boundary-crossing tricksters, and making-with and what happens when communities make things together, has the power to change our lives.

With hope, the practice begun in this work will also be a starting point for others, a beginning.

Perhaps even a cycle of ideas about a cycle of clay.

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  - ii. Douglas, 1966: 36
  - iii. Haraway, 2016: 35
  - iv. Shaw, 2016: 2
  - v. Hyde, 2010: 209
  - vi. Hyde, 2010: 7
  - vii. Solnit, 2005: 142
  - viii. Haraway, 2016: 35