

**Final Report and Personal Reflections: *We Are the Land & The Land Is Us***

“Eagle feathers floating down  
 To brush away yesterday’s tears  
 Waves crashing in to my heart  
 Breaking my soul open  
 Women’s voices echo love back into my skin  
 I hear my Indian name once again  
 Ka-tsi-tsa-kat-ste  
 A strong flower, a lasting flower  
 That lives through tough winters  
 And hard rain  
 Instill back in me  
 What I have always known”

By: Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde

There is an expression within Indigenous communities that says “my heart is full”, which is usually expressed after a ceremonial gathering, potlatch or feast. This saying means that the work done within that time enriched the people with spirituality, connection, and the receiving of ancient teachings. We leave these sacred moments knowing that we have been filled by the sunlight of the spirit, and that we are all connected—we are all one. I had the privilege to witness the Haida people share their stories and love for their culture. I have been humbled by the grace and generosity of their dancing spirits and feel “my heart is full”. I am deeply grateful to have been pulled into their community, nurtured with food from their ocean and waters, and to have walked and eaten from their lands. I was not only embraced by the people but by the plant medicines too, like: horsetail, devils club, huckleberries, blackberries, and also, greeted by the flying and four legged relatives: the bear, eagle, and deer. This reflection expresses the impact of being in the territory of Haida Gwaii I felt the power of the land, waters and the Haida people.

*We are the Land & the Land is Us* was created by seven community members of the Haida Gwaii First Nation, ranging from ages 24- 70 years old. The scope of the project was three days of experiential community-based workshops on the land and waters of their territory. The framework of this project was structured using land-based pedagogies, Indigenous epistemologies and devising methods to support the community in developing an original performance on the land. The project focus was to create an artistic and exploratory creative

environment to support participants to embody teachings of the land and to tell their personal story of resilience through movement. Participants were able to establish and discover a deeper sense of belonging within their own bodies and territories through song, dance and story-telling. The overall vision was enriched with unexpected gifts and the presence of witnessing beautiful moments of healing stories through song, dance and reengaging in conversation with the land.

One key aspect that made the project so powerful was the zoom meetings with community prior to actualizing the project vision. *We are the Land & the Land Is Us* was developed in consultation with local Knowledge keepers, and traditional dance teachers from Haida Gwaii which included Jenny Cross, Gwaii Edenshaw, and Nika Collison. The proper protocols were established through community consultation to ensure cultural competency and safety present, and mostly to be granted permission to bring this project into the community. The participants of the project were also recruited by this circle of knowledge keepers. Planning for this project was directed and determined by the community members which ensured that autonomy, transparency and ethical considerations were at the center.

One challenge that became apparent was the hesitancy to contemporize traditional Haida mythologies, origin stories, songs, and dances. This challenge is common when Indigenous peoples are to create performances that are embedded within sacred knowledges that are meant to remain private. Another reason to uphold protocol is that far too often outsiders have exploited traditional knowledge for their personal gain without giving back to the community they take from. We decided to create new stories rather than create performances based on traditional Haida epistemologies to ensure the protection of sacred knowledge.

Other ethical considerations were to acknowledge Haida traditional law system. There are sacred laws of the Haida Gwaii people respect, reciprocity, interconnectedness, making a wrong right, and that everything effects everything else. These laws were incorporated within our project guidelines for the purpose of creating Indigenous-centered protocols. Participants were able to determine what protocols and guidelines from their Haida law system and other values could be used to ensure their sense of trust and vulnerability within a group context. I posed the question, “what do you need in order to arrive in this space in a good way? How can each of us co-create community-care? Each participant had the opportunity to contribute to the list of protocols while we feasted together.

Ethics in relation to working with Indigenous communities were woven throughout the entire creative process. One way to ensure this was to begin everyday with an opening and closing of ceremony, prayer and song. The presence of a Cultural Support Elder named Vern Williams created the space for Indigenous spirituality and healing to become foundational in our work

together. Vern was invited to *We are the Land & the Land is Us* by the youth center coordinator Julia Weder. Having Vern in the space not only as the spiritual and cultural support person, but also had him join the participants in activities and exercises. This allowed Vern to learn and contribute to the collective stories and choreography. Vern was present to offer brushings off—a spiritual cleansing ritual—to people when they became emotionally triggered. He took people aside and attended to their emotional release by using smudge and an eagle feather. The success of holding emotional spaces to reclaim body and personal stories can be most successful when co-facilitated with knowledgeable safe spiritual elders who are trusted in community. Building trust within an intergenerational group of participants and diverse ages it was critical that I presented the exercises, warm-ups and activities and offer potential moderations and alternatives. All exercises of activating the body through experiential learning was based on consent. Each participant could choose to opt out of any activity. For example, the first activity was drawing participants bodies in the sand on the beach for the purpose of creating their inner emotional landscape. One of our elder participants did not feel like they wanted to lay on the ground, and they had their partner draw their shadow instead. This participant was still able to do her land-based drawing and successfully derive gestures and personal choreography that captured her emotional body. Having a trusting relationship enabled the participants to openly express discomfort, and come up with solutions that ensured continued participation.

Another factor that impacted the ways that the group could process was the weather. The climate in Haida Gwaii is quite damp and rains frequently. It was important for me to adapt the land-based activities to inside exercises that still supported the goal of creating choreography inspired by the local flora, fauna, earth, or waters. For example, the second activity addressing the physical connection Indigenous people have to land and waters was also adapted. Three out of the seven participants did not want to go outside when it was raining, so I adapted this land-based exercise into a guided meditation. Instead of being out on the land, they embodied the earth within, each becoming a seed and creating a dance of growth, expansion and life. The participants who were able to go outside also collected movement material and when the two groups reintegrated, they all had a moment to share their gestures with one another. The location of lands has potential to govern process, and have us rethink and adapt to the climate.

After the first day of workshops and building choreography I instinctively knew to hold off offering anymore activities. I chose to revise my planned outline and opt out of some activities, such as image theatre and creating a collective soundscape. I did not want to overwhelm the participants with too much choreography to create and memorize. The activities in nature accumulated enough material to then begin to weave a shared vision. We spent the second day creating a cohesive narrative that expressed the journey of healing and transformation. The sequence of choreography was co-created by the group which became: circle of life, interruptions/fragments, releasing, matrilineal power, contradictory/dichotomy, wisdom of our

ancestors, and the importance of humour. We used the rest of our time together in day two to learn everyone's choreographic stories, their meaning and established blocking and transitions.

Our end-of-day reflections and lunch breaks included one-on-one interviews with the videographer Cameron Watts who was hired to capture the creative process. The youth center received funding to document the participants journey and final performance for the purpose of creating a short documentary film. The project had a short timeline. We could not rally an audience quickly enough, so when the final film is complete the youth center will be screening the film and invite community to witness their work.

Witnessing each other while being present for their personal expressions and embodying each other's stories were the most powerful elements of *We are the Land & the Land is Us*. All participants have known each other for along long time, especially the older generation in the group. The comradery, laughter and genuine interactions expressed the deep love they have within their community—despite all life's challenges and impacts of colonization unto their hearts, minds, and bodies. Together we witnessed the power of the sharing circle and the courage it takes to become visible in the center. Together we watched the inner child become awakened and given permission to spin, dance, shake, twirl all while dissolving their inner critique and ego. The embodiment of community stories supports the expansion of how we understand ourselves in relation with one another; thus, building capacity for the body to receive and hold space for multiple truths. This interconnectedness nurtures the wellness of Indigenous communities

One aspect of wellness within Indigenous communities is the power to self determine their own representation and images within performance. The importance of representation was vital. Jenny Cross concluded "Haidaizing" the contemporary movement piece by bringing in traditional Haida elements. She began to incorporate Haida songs for the soundtrack of their new performance. She also brought forth Haida masks and regalia to make sure that the presentation of the performance "look[ed] Haida". As the facilitator I instinctively knew to step aside for the reason not to intrude on their cultural knowledge and traditions. The Haida people are the experts and know what is appropriate to share and what is not. I was able to integrate both contemporary movement and story-telling with traditional Haida song and dance because the participants self-determined and controlled how the final performance was to be presented.

*We are the Land & the Land is Us* was grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The land supported participants to reconnect to their own intrinsic knowledge held in their emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual bodies. Discussions of personal histories and love for their culture created a foundation of safety and familiarity. Developing this project through a wholistic approach and celebrating their resilience and strength made this project celebratory. Using performance and theatre skills from an applied theatre lens amplify the beauty of Indigenous

people, culture, history, and land wisdom. My passion as an Indigenous maker and story-weaver assures me of my place and purpose. My intent is to continue to courageously offer innovative and exploratory creative environments to Indigenous communities to support the expansion and evolution of their artistic expressions of dance, song and culture. Most importantly this approach to community-based performance practices is for the purpose of transformation and reconnection of Indigenous peoples to their bodies, land, and belonging.