

Indigenous Creative Spaces Project, ArtsBuild Ontario

# Paddling Upstream

LOOKING OUT ON THE LANDSCAPE,  
WITH A PLAN TO TRAVEL

Prepared by



for



Supported by



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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As the CEO of Inclusive Voices Incorporated, I, Terri-Lynn Brennan, would like to thank everyone who took the time to share in these conversations. I have listened

to and learned from your stories, your experience, and your expertise, and am humbled and grateful for your knowledge, honesty, and guidance.

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## THE JOURNEY

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For only about 50 years have Indigenous Performing Artists in Ontario been publicly recognized within the mainstream arts ecology, and not just “circus or side-show acts.” It was through the determination of a handful of Indigenous performing artists in the early 1970s that a core troupe formed in T’Karonto, Toronto on the shores of Oniatari:io, Niigaani-ghiigami, Lake Ontario. The intention to build safe and brave creative spaces was an imperative goal from the outset of the troupe’s convergence. But while those spaces remained elusive as physical entities, a central theme of staying alive, loud, and proud to tell Indigenous stories remained and remains in the hearts of Indigenous creatives.

However, the greatest of challenges to these Indigenous artists, then and now, lies in the roots of colonial racism. The toll that centuries of violence, ignorance, bias, and judgment faced by Indigenous Peoples around the world can be seen not only through the ongoing legally and constitutionally existing texts of the Canadian Indian Act 1876 but in the expectation that Indigenous Peoples should become fully assimilated to be seen as successful in a Euro-colonial world.

Establishing an Indigenous arts ecology that travels in parallel to a Western-based arts model has long been discussed. But sitting down with a diverse range of Indigenous artists from across the province to share travel stories and vision

paths has never been undertaken on this scale. In documenting over 35 hours and 700 pages of recorded transcripts, 183 voices contributed to this text. We not only sat at the feet of these Indigenous artistic leaders and creatives to hear their stories, but we intently focussed on understanding how Indigenous-led artistic spaces have evolved across the Ontario landscape over this past half-century.

Through **ArtBuild Ontario’s Indigenous Creative Spaces Project**, which began in 2019, and is still evolving in 2023, we learned from many voices the depth of struggles and accomplishments in building and sustaining spaces for Indigenous artists. Stories that all culminated in the same goal: for Indigenous artists to truly feel respected, relevant, and proud of their identity and practice, the whole of the Ontario/Canadian arts ecology needs to accept and embrace **Indigenous Self-Determination in the Creative Arts**. This goal needs to be at the foundation of all performing arts conversations within Indigenous Circles and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous sector colleagues and funders. The words and language proceeding from here are the results of all those who have helped describe the Indigenous Creative Spaces landscape to date and provide plans for travelling upstream and away from the polluted waters of colonialism to achieve future sustainable successes within an Indigenous self-determined arts ecology.

## Indigenous Self-Determination: What does this mean?

Indigenous self-determination is a priority within a state of **reconciliation**. To reconcile the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous is to lay bare the truths and stories of the past and walk honestly, with equal power into the future. But reconciliation is also a state that Indigenous Peoples need to hold within their own communities to rise above the ongoing colonial violence that plagues Indigenous hearts and minds. Self-determination is also tied to **reclamation**: the reclamation of knowledge, land, and Indigenous voices in an Indigenous governance system supporting a path toward knowing and being with pride. The Creative Arts sector should not sit outside this good house. By accepting reclamation, any group, community and/or institution can then engage in equal, beneficial collaboration to smoothly navigate the stream while avoiding rapids and waterfalls.

Western knowledge thinkers are taught to look for answers through a binary lens, for results to fit into an either/or metaphorical box. Indigenous knowledge thinkers approach answers through an inclusionary lens of finding equal ground, demonstrated by the original intentions of the Two-Row Wampum Covenant of 1613. Indigenous Leadership presupposes that the collective voices of the community will guide its priorities. Indigenous governance systems are therefore based on collaborative leadership held by multiple voices and multiple decision makers, who are all called to guide and sustain healthy relationships. There is no autonomous leader, no one voice to direct the canoes, and no one point of influence exerted over other people to structure activities and relationships. Reclaiming Indigenous leadership is about raising awareness and reaffirming collective voices in consensus-based decision-making outside of a hierarchical structure. Reconciling with Indigenous leadership relies on listening to the

community to shape, organize and embrace the vision, values and knowledge that resonates within the community it serves.

Opening a pathway for Indigenous voices to direct and lead their own contribution and commitment to the arts sector need not be divisive; nor will it separate Indigenous Peoples from the sincere intentions of non-Indigenous partners. Instead, it will foster an arts sector ecology in which Indigenous thinkers are not measured against Western knowledge structures but by an integrated knowledge system that supports the success of Indigenous creatives as well as all others. By working together, Western-thinking and Indigenous organizational policy creators, decision makers, and funders can create this path, and this will deliver respectful **reciprocity** between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Creatives.

The benefits of Indigenous ways of thinking, knowing, and doing will complement the dominant Western system and result in a new level of potential and innovation under the leadership of an Indigenous self-determined direction. All organizations based on Western knowledge systems must evolve to honour the equal legitimacy of Indigenous thinking, planning, and doing while accepting Indigenous leadership in all matters involving Indigenous initiatives. Therefore, if a true and sincere approach to **reconciliation** with Indigenous artists is desired by any organization or individual, then non-binary actions and understanding must be prioritized. To coin the now very well-worn phrase with an extra ending offered by myself, “Nothing about us, without us [at the helm]!” But to get to a point of reciprocity in relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, artists and their communities need to lead in the rebuilding of canoes to take them through an Indigenous-only journey back to the purity of knowing and being, deep inland and upstream.

## Indigenous Self-Determination: Where have we travelled from? Where are we travelling to?

This project afforded the opportunity to visit, listen, and learn in person and virtually from those who have been walking Indigenous creative paths for over half a century. Collected in over 35 hours and 700 pages of recorded transcripts, 183 voices contributed to this text, and these voices speak directly in this document. This project grew out of a vision that JP Longboat held onto for many years. He recognized and felt the violence of colonial restrictions placed on Indigenous creatives when trying to express Their art in Their own way; to share Their truth in Their own safe and brave spaces. So, in the early spring of 2019, JP began a dialogue with Alex Glass, Executive Director at ArtsBuild Ontario, which planted the seed. Applications were then made to the Department of Canadian Heritage, Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for funding to support a research project in building Indigenous creative spaces.

In late 2019, JP told me, Terri-Lynn Brennan, about this project, and invited me to support him as a Co-Convenor. Our role was to bring strong, experienced, and available Indigenous artists into an Advisory Circle while nurturing and encouraging the seedling in a healthy and intentional way as learned through our own Indigenous teachings and knowledge.

The original intention of this project was to visit in person eight Indigenous artistic groups or communities around Ontario to learn the evolutionary story of those groups or communities from incubation to the present. We titled this portion of the project **Legacy Stories**. The goal of these story circles was to listen and understand the successes and challenges of (co)creating and showcasing Indigenous-designed and developed creative performance or visual art, in spaces that

had colonial roots, (that is to say, spaces built, owned, and operated by non-Indigenous creatives), as well as some Indigenous-led spaces that were young on the landscape.

Listening to the journeys already taken is essential to understanding and learning lessons from those worn paths. But this project also wanted to look to the future, in developing a bundle of thoughts, ideas, needs, and desires to mould creative spaces as rooted in Indigenous designs, ownership, and operation. With that in mind, we then planned to visit or hold 10 **Community Gatherings**. Some of the groups/communities engaged in the legacy conversations also brought people together for a community gathering. But some voices were new to the project and came with a perspective or plan already underway of establishing an Indigenous creative space with decision-making about the space in the hands of Indigenous artists and management.

With processes mapped out for two community conversational phases — Legacy Stories and Community Gatherings — and even before the funding was secured, the timely and critical nature of proceeding with this project physically brought together (yet socially distanced) Indigenous artists and creatives at the Center for Indigenous Theatre (CIT) in Toronto during the summer of 2020. An excited group of like-minded thinkers who believed in the possibilities of this project, we discussed what the project could look like in real time, as a global pandemic continued to restrict human-to-human contact.

The Advisory Circle, which became the true guide and leadership of this project, blossomed out of that initial meeting in the summer of 2020. Eventually, the Circle comprised artistic representatives from nine different Indigenous groups or communities and their associated creative spaces from across Ontario. Unfortunately, due to the challenges of the pandemic, people were too busy with their jobs, scheduling conflicts,

or other commitments to participate. In the end, we could only proceed with six Legacy Stories and seven Community Gatherings, but the depth and richness of these 13 encounters offered a truth, that those who are meant to be involved and participate will be those who show up and contribute.

Stories were gathered by Advisory Circle members at:

- Aanmitaagzi and Big Medicine Studio with Sidd Bobb and Penny Couchie (Nipissing First Nation/ North Bay)
- Centre for Indigenous Theatre with Rose Stella (Toronto)
- Debajehmujig Creation Centre with Lynda Trudeau (Wiikwemkoong First Nation & Manitowaning, Manitoulin Island)
- Native Earth Performing Arts and Aki Studio with Keith Barker and Isaac Thomas (Toronto)
- Nozhem First Peoples Performance Space with Marrie Mumford and Jenn Cole (Trent University/ Peterborough)
- Woodland Cultural Centre with Janis Monture (Six Nations of the Grand River/Brantford)

Gatherings were held with Advisory Circle members on/in:

- Friday's Point, Bear Island (Temagami) as hosted by Christine Friday
- Kingston as hosted by the Agnes Etherington Arts Centre with Sebastian DeLine
- Manitoulin Island as hosted virtually by Arts Animators with Debajehmujig Storytellers
- North Bay as hosted by Big Medicine Studio/ Aanmitaagzi with Sid Bobb and Penny Couchie
- Six Nations of the Grand River as hosted virtually by Woodland Cultural Center with Janis Monture
- Thunder Bay as hosted by CO. LAB Gallery & Arts Center with Shelby Gagnon and Lora Northway
- Toronto as hosted virtually by the Centre for Indigenous Theatre with Rose C. Stella

This document, therefore, is a collection of the stories learned from those thirteen encounters: Stories of the past. Stories of remembrance. Stories of struggle. Stories of hope. Stories of wisdom. Stories that relayed unique routes of navigation, while also revealing many paths of convergence.

As we travelled and listened, patterns began to emerge that inspired a connection between this project and what I have come to understand through the words of Elder Edna Manitowabi as an Indigenous Renaissance<sup>1</sup>. Renaissance in this case is not particular to the European time in history that carries its name, but rather it speaks to a revival of art and culture as once seen when Indigenous Peoples were at peace on their homelands and dominated these landscapes, prior to European interference.

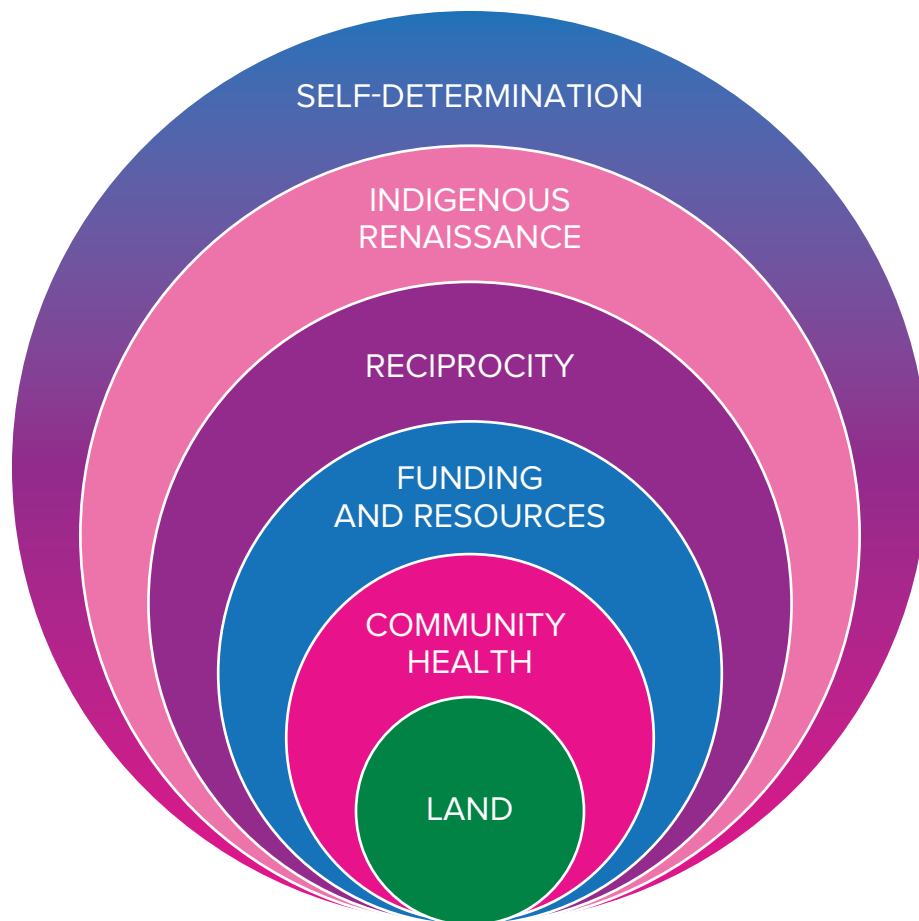
Today, there are many exciting actions happening across Ontario with many Indigenous communities and especially artists finding the strength and pride to honour the ways, teachings and path of their ancestors. In so doing, they are travelling, most often now, upstream and deeper into colonized spaces to reclaim the land and revitalize individual confidence while furthering healthier relationships in and across families and communities. The challenges that persist stem from non-Indigenous arts sector associates who do not understand of the importance of Indigenous Self-Determination. The ongoing confluence of Indigenous artists and non-Indigenous associates could be compared to the muddy, brackish water at an estuary, like where the St. Lawrence River meets the Atlantic Ocean; an estuary that has become polluted by the violence of colonialization, and yet if properly tended to, has the potential for great abundance. Without accepting that Indigenous artists need to be the leaders and decision makers in telling their own stories, with equitable resources and financial support within their own spaces, disparity rooted in colonization will continue.

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<sup>1</sup> Edna Manitowabi, Elder at Nozhem First Peoples Performance Space, refers to a renaissance as a point in the early 1960's when the drums were no longer silenced by colonial violence, and Indigenous artists began to rekindle and heal their bodies, hearts, and minds.

Under a sky of self-determination, and a canopy of an Indigenous Renaissance, this project proposes that four bundles hold the essential tools to map out a course for travelling upstream. The stories spoke to the circular nature of how each bundle cannot be seen as a single canoe, siloed from the intentions and actions of the other bundles. Rather, the reciprocal iteration of each bundle, and between each bundle, relies on the tethered progress of the bundles to achieve the vision of Indigenous Self-Determination in the Creative Arts. To understand this flow of knowledge, experience and wisdom is to understand how a canoe is built,

who needs to paddle and steer the canoe, what resources need to be packed and stowed, and how the stream will be navigated. This outline will empower Indigenous artists to reclaim and revitalize the relevance of their identity to rebuild reciprocal relationships with each other, and eventually non-Indigenous associates. Each bundle speaks to the prominent themes we heard throughout our journeys across the province, and through these stories, we have started to plot an inland waterway map rooted in the clarity and renewal of Indigenous arts and culture across representative territories.





## THE 1<sup>ST</sup> BUNDLE HOLDS LAND

A **Reclamation** to honour who we are.

**LAND** – positioning and prioritizing Indigenous-focused initiatives and restorying<sup>2</sup> on the landscape. Being on and at one with the land is who we are. We need to be rooted and routed to reclaim all that we are with pride and rewrite the narrative of how we have been falsely portrayed in history. Sharing narratives of process and planning that are local and tied to a sense of once again being on our lands and territories offers a critical lens to understanding Indigenous responsibility to community.

**Challenge:** Without multiple safe, brave, and welcoming spaces, tied to a sense of being on the land, Indigenous artists and external communities are at risk of never feeling a sense of place in any colonially designed venue.

## THE 3<sup>RD</sup> BUNDLE HOLDS FUNDING, TRAINING & MENTORSHIP

Toward **Relevancy** of identity/story, and commitment to community.

### FUNDING & RESOURCES, TRAINING & MENTORSHIP

– identifying decision-making opportunities to promote the role and responsibilities of Indigenous artists trained in arts sector technology and operational skills, so that Indigenous thinkers are both on stages and scattered behind the curtains.

**Challenge:** The broader relevance and role of Indigenous-led arts projects, programs, infrastructural and operational builds is not fully understood or integrated into the development, planning and strategic priorities of provincial venues, programs, or funding streams.

## THE 2<sup>ND</sup> BUNDLE HOLDS INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, & COMMUNITY HEALTH

In **Responsibility** to self while honouring essential relationships.

**INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, & COMMUNITY HEALTH** – enabling individual arts sector members to stand with both family and community to teach, share and grow in a healthy, peaceful, and culturally empathetic ways across the region. With a focus on family and community, Indigenous Artists can steer through a leadership approach that keeps relationships at its core.

**Challenge:** Indigenous relationships and the need for restoration of pride in identity are misunderstood and minimized when it comes to the levels of participation, commitment, and respect for Indigenous Artists and Creative processes from non-Indigenous arts sector colleagues across the province and nation, especially from funders.

## THE 4<sup>TH</sup> BUNDLE HOLDS RECIPROCITY

To **Revitalize** trust in working with other Indigenous artists/communities toward building alliances of safety and protection before expanding to work with non-Indigenous artists or arts communities.

**RECIPROCITY** – growing connections between Indigenous neighbours, communities, and organizations to ensure Indigenous stories, knowledge, and lifeways flourish. Restoring trading networks based in knowledge, teachings, and learning is essential to re-establish the vision of the Two Row Wampum Covenant as well as the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Covenant, where Indigenous and Western worldviews coexist in sharing the landscape without interfering in the decisions and choices of the other.

**Challenge:** There are not enough open and healthy lines of communication between artists, Nations, and non-Indigenous arts sector colleagues to harness the wisdom, knowledge, experience and stories of Elders, Knowledge/Faith Keepers, community leaders and academic changemakers.

<sup>2</sup> Many Indigenous writers, like Thomas King (2008), Lewis Mehl-Madrona (2007), Audra Simpson and Dale Turner (2008), and Jo-Ann Archibald (2008), approach their work with a focus on storytelling to restore Indigenous ways of thinking and doing. Restorying, as process that is at the core of an Indigenous Renaissance, reclaims a participatory and reciprocal process between listener and teller. Restorying can also share narratives that express Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing in a modern, global context to assert their respective community rights and interests.

# BEFORE GETTING INTO THE CANOE: FOR ALL WITNESSES TO THIS JOURNEY

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To those who are choosing to sit in this canoe and listen to our travels, be cognizant of the words you are reading, and the voices and bodies you are learning from. Our intentions here are to guide Indigenous artists and their communities on a path of visioning, reflection and construction of Their own creative spaces grounded in Their ways of thinking and doing. If you do not share in this worldview, take care not to extract anything learned here without acknowledging from whom you acquired that knowledge and without permission to do so. The first part in honouring each other is humility and respect for what is not yours, in this case Indigenous knowledges, voices, and lived experiences.

I would also like to express that the words used in this text are written in a language that does not often capture how Indigenous thinkers think. For those of us raised within an environment where our family and/or leaders spoke from a perspective based in Indigenous understandings of relationships, responsibilities, and intentions, we recognize the limitations of the interpretations offered here. Laid out before you is a plan within a plan to break out of the colonial mindset that plagues us all. Each person, family, Nation and/or community will take their own, centuries old understandings of this text.

Indigenous languages are often metaphoric, and more nuanced than English can capture. Understanding that every Nation holds different interpretations in translating English into their own words acknowledges the bridge that exists between our ways of thinking; a bridge at the mouth of the waterway we are about to travel. This document is a living thing, subject to change and interpretation and it carries with it all our relations from the four directions, the sun, the wind and rains to the land and oceans, who are also constantly living with change in each moment of every day. This understanding represents both the joy and/or peril of the journey.

## The Process

### BUILDING A BUOYANT CANOE

The vision for the Indigenous Creative Spaces Project has evolved over many years in the heart and mind of Kanien'kehá:ka multi-disciplinary artist and performer, JP Longboat. In 2019 he approached Alex Glass, Executive Director, ArtsBuild Ontario (ABO), to pursue the possibilities of creating such spaces across the Ontario landscape. In Alex, JP found a true ally who is determined to listen and learn how to support such a build and the steps needed to craft an actionable outline for creating Indigenous-invested and controlled art spaces.

JP wanted to balance the project with a voice from the administrative/operational side of the arts and culture sector, and in turn reached out to me, with my background in inter-cultural planning. From there, 11 regional communities with known and active Indigenous performing/cultural artists were invited to collaborate in finishing the design and structure of the project with all 11 agreeing to join us in the very beginning.

Artists and creatives representing Aanmitaagzi and Big Bear Medicine Studio, the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, Debajehmujig Creation Centre, Native Earth Performing Arts and Aki Studio, Nozhem First Peoples Performance Space, SAW Gallery, and the Woodland Cultural Centre became involved. These spaces were joined with community voices from such creative landscapes as Friday's Point and Bear Island, Sudbury, Kingston, and Thunder Bay, all of whom gathered their tools as a family to craft their unique canoes.

When it was time to build the canoes, the Advisory Circle that came together overflowed with the experiential wisdom of Keith Barker, Sidd Bob, Jenn Cole, Penny Couchie, Sebastian DeLine, Christine Friday, Rose Stella, Lynda Trudeau,

Shelby Gagnon, Taqralik Partridge, Janis Monture, Lora Northway, Isaac Thomas, Tam-Ca Vo-Van, and Clayton Windatt. Their combined wisdom was and is imperative to successfully chart the journey and keep the canoes buoyant. Yet due to the human capacity limits of some of the Circle members, by the time the initial canoes were built and ready to embark on collecting legacy stories and listening to community gatherings, SAW Gallery and Clayton Windatt were unable to join us.

## WHO'S STEERING THE CANOE?

Indigenous Peoples have seen much change at the roots of governance and community leadership since the time of colonial interference. Prior to European arrival, decisions that affected those beyond a single-family unit were made through a conversation of multiple respected voices in a circle or council. There was no one decision-maker dictating important actions or processes that would affect the whole community. Decision-making was decided through dialogue and consensus, which required much flexibility, patience, and humility on the part of those around the circle. These qualities exemplify effective leadership today, as they did in the past, so it is the Advisory Circle that steers the canoes. The Co-Convenors, alongside the ABO observers, help paddle the vessels in facilitating the conversations and continue to humbly support the wishes and actionable intentions of the Circle.

Under the Advisory Circle's direction, much like the creative differences in constructing individual canoes, self-determined approaches to community engagement, from how to formulate invitations to the layout of how conversations were to happen were designed by each member of the Advisory Circle to serve the needs and interests of their community. But these approaches were not discussed in secrecy, but candidly, in the long tradition of transparency and trust that has existed among Nations to learn from one another and to share and respect our differences in protocol and practices.

One major approach to initiatives that is indicative of Indigenous ways of doing, knowing and being, and is very unlike settler ways and worldviews, is the act of storytelling in all conversations. From teaching to community planning, storytelling was the way to bind people to the land, each other, and their responsibilities to both. Storytelling flows through kinship ties, across and between generations, to ensure that the lifeways of the ancestors and their knowledge continues to be imparted through family lines and across clans to community houses. Storytelling is not shared for only entertainment but contains the wisdom to understand relationships with all things, and most of all how to live each day in a good way. Therefore, just as is the nature of this document, storytelling guides how this project is told to the wider world.

## Forging a Route Within an Indigenous Renaissance

### PACKING THE CANOE (WITH LEGACY STORIES)

Knowing what one will need on critical journeys requires a strong awareness of the landscape one wishes to travel into. Storytelling as a cultural narrative provides this project with a solid tether to the landscape from those who have walked these shorelines. Through Legacy Stories, each spatial location provided a story map from inception to the present day. These Legacy Stories were gathered both in situ and virtually given the restrictions and obstacles of the Covid pandemic.

Six spaces were visited from the summer of 2020 to the winter of 2022. All revealed enduring financial struggles over the years, and most have also been challenged by staff instability, governance conflicts, and systemic inequities. Yet in looking back at their individual journeys, their different experiences were and are rooted in shared, similar desires for a creative space that offers cultural renewal and self determination based on each communities' principles.

Full transcripts captured through audio recordings were created with each engagement. Yet as directed by the Advisory Circle, the complete transcripts will remain exclusive to the communities and spaces that provided their stories. What is captured here is simply a snapshot of the evolution of these important Indigenous creative spaces, and these legacy stories provide the much-needed knowledge and experience for controlling our canoes once embarking on journeys upstream.

### Woodland Cultural Centre (established 1972)

Following the closing of the Mohawk Institute in 1969, the oldest residential school in Canada, the Six Nations of the Grand River Elected Council, with the support of the eight Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians (AIAI) member bands, commissioned a feasibility study for the creation of the Woodland Cultural Centre (WCC) within the still standing walls of the Institute. The AIAI became heavily involved in planning for the conversion of the building into a cultural educational centre where the focus of the building would be to preserve and promote Eastern Woodland cultural heritage and to collect and store cultural resources and materials. Tom Hill undertook the feasibility study in 1971, with construction beginning in January 1972, and the WCC officially opened to the community on October 6, 1972. “It was to build a cultural centre with culture and community at its root; it wasn’t to present us to others; it was us for us.”<sup>3</sup>

Once opened, the Six Nations Elected Council, who owned the property and buildings on the site, requested that the AIAI undertake and operate the cultural centre programming until a permanent council body was established. Keith Lickers was hired as the WCC’s first Executive Director and one of the stand-alone buildings was made into a museum/gallery. The classrooms in the main building were retrofitted to establish offices and with the development of a language program coming soon afterward, a library was also created

to house literature including audio-visual materials. To “preserve, promote and educate” became the mandate of the WCC.

Through the 1970s the space housed arts and crafts shows, with dancing and activity, yet the Mush Hole, (the ominous title of the space reflecting on the daily diet for students who attended the school), continued to hold its infamy in the community. “In that weird sense, knowing that it was the school, ...nobody knew the actual history of it, people would be like, ‘oh, the school was not good,’ yet they didn’t really know that the devastation of it [affected people] so much.”<sup>4</sup>

From the beginning of the WCC being open, ownership, operational and governing stability were routinely pressured by community and board conflict. The Mohawk Chapel believed that they held personal ownership of the school for some time. Additional risks and challenges ranged from funding to the collection of cultural artifacts and training Indigenous personnel. A difficult period of financial loss came “in 1986, [when] the Board of Governors decided to implement its long-term plan to upgrade and increase the physical plant and secured funding to add on a large orientation room. Although at this time it was also apparent financial restrictions were beginning to hamper program development and delivery.”<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. Mohawk Institute and Woodland Cultural Centre, Six Nations of the Grand River, Brantford

3 Tara Froman, Collections Registrar, Woodland Cultural Centre July 22nd, 2021

4 Santee Smith, Artist, Choreographer, Producer, Educator, Six Nations of the Grand River, July 22nd, 2021

5 Janis Monture, Executive Director, Woodland Cultural Centre, July 22nd, 2021

Through the 1980s and 90s the WCC struggled financially to stay operational, and many Indigenous staff left the institution. Santee Smith shares that Tom Hill's vision in the mid-to-late 1990's, was to have performances in the space. "[Tom] produced dinner theatres, and those were always fun. They collected different local artists, and then they had some specialty hosts like Lorne Cardinal. ... I feel like that was a bit of a miss because that didn't bring a lot of people in. I always felt there was this potential. It was a little bit stunted for marketing: how do you market certain things to the local community [to make them] want to come in? I always felt there's this issue with marketing, getting the word out, and then having people invited in. I think that depends upon the programming. ... I feel like there's always a potential and sometimes it's not a hit."<sup>6</sup>

Although federal funding has consistently come for educational developments through what was then the Department of Indian Affairs and now Indigenous Services. It has only been in the last ten to fifteen years that funding has also started to come from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Community Museum Operating Fund to get the building to a point where a full restoration plan could be developed and acted upon. "Where I see the amazing potential is with the Save the Evidence [Campaign]... because of the residential school legacy. I feel like there is a chance to be internationally recognized as an educational Holocaust Museum and this would be incredible."<sup>7</sup> To this end the renovations have been directed toward creating more of a museum space, resulting in the WCC not being an ideal performance space for physical performances especially dance. We heard that the gymnasium space is like a black box, but that it would have to be reconfigured to include specific lighting requirements, a new floor, new entrances and exits, etc. The plan is to make it more of an inclusive space for a range of community events. But it will offer the capacity of a place of history and repatriating those stories which were lost through the brutality of the Mohawk Institute Residential School.

6 Santee Smith, *ibid*

7 *ibid*

## Centre for Indigenous Theatre (established 1974; the first Indigenous Theatre School)

Prior to the 1970s there were few to no Indigenous theatrical works being produced in Canada. In 1972, Jim Buller, a Cree actor, opera singer, and arts administrator, founded Canada's oldest Indigenous arts service organization known as the Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts (ANDPVA) and he maintained an office in down-town Toronto. Under ANDPVA, Jim founded the Native Theatre School (NTS) in 1974, which was a four-week-long performing arts training program that operated at Kimbercote Farm, a property west of Barrie, Ontario.

ANDPVA however, quickly felt the Native Theatre School program was too short and they had many other endeavours on their plate, such as Elaine Bomberry's Aboriginal Music Program (AMP), and a new Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance. Therefore, it was decided that the NTS should separate and be its own organization so that ANDPVA could focus on these other programs. As its own entity, NTS still under the guidance of Jim Buller, was created to support Indigenous theatre and performing artists at a time when there were few training opportunities available. In 1975, NTS joined up with the NDWT Theatre Company which toured all over Canada starting in 1977. The NTS toured remote fly-in communities in northern Ontario, the North-West Territories, while most often performing for student groups on rural First Nations. NTS students also visited and performed for inmates in correctional institutions in those early days.

Although Jim passed away just prior to the Peterborough Celebration in 1982, NTS continued to persevere and found reciprocal support in the Native Earth Performing Arts organization which became established in that same year. By this time, Marrie Mumford was keeping the doors of NTS open. Throughout the 1980's and early 1990's, NTS stayed nomadically rooted in downtown Toronto, now shifting between office and studio spaces on Carleton Street, St. Joseph's Street and at

one-point sharing space with ANDPVA and Native Earth at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT) on Spadina Avenue. NTS finally moved its office space across the street from the NCCT on Spadina Avenue, while continuing to share performances spaces with ANDPVA and Native Earth. Through these years the artistic direction of NTS rested under the governing and spiritual leadership of Cat Cayuga, Marrie Mumford, Edna Manitowabi, and Floyd Favel. But it was the change in provincial governments in 1995 that put the greatest of financial stresses on all cultural institutions, and entities like NTS were no exception.

While juggling funding challenges through the late 1990's, NTS was still finding the money to develop programming. With a name change to the Centre for Indigenous Theatre (CIT), the four-week long training program of the 70's and 80's had now evolved into a one-year program. Unfortunately, CIT still did not have any studio space to call its own, so Artistic Director Carol Greyeyes rented teaching space at the Canadian Children's Dance Theatre on Parliament Street, while the new administrative office became located at 401 Richmond Street West.

The uniqueness of CIT and why it was continually sought out as a training institution was described as a space which provided opportunities for Indigenous performers to express themselves both physically, musically, and culturally - as opposed to being rooted down in just the reiteration of settler playwrights' scripts. Also, for many of the students being drawn to the school at this time, there remained an inability to read and write with clarity, a residential school survivors' legacy. So, due to the comforts of being in a school with students that looked like them and being understood in an educational environment, many CIT students who graduated through the program, gave back to the school by helping to train and support new students coming up.

Upon entering into the new millennium, CIT still found itself without a permanent home. Jani Lauzon was the Artistic Director through the early 2000's, and it was during this time that CIT began offering a two-year program, with classes continuing to be

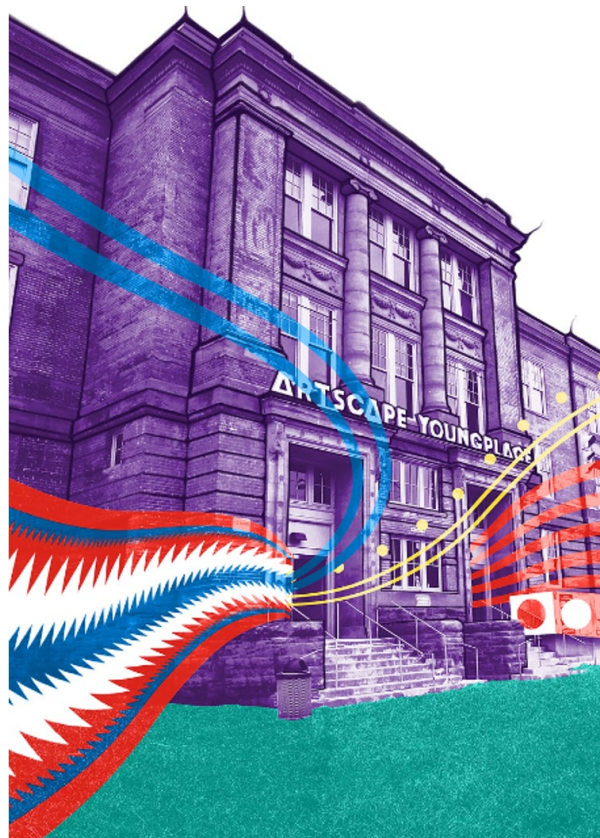


Figure 2. Artscape Youngplace, currently houses both the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, and Native Earth Performance Space, Toronto

taught in various locations on Parliament Street, Carlton Street and Dufferin Street. By September 2002, CIT grew to the point of introducing a 3-Year program.

Rose C. Stella took the helm in May 2003 and found studio spaces on the 9th floor of the Darling Building on Spadina Ave. In 2006 due to condominium development, CIT had to move their training and performance event to new studios on King Street. However, some classes were now also being held at Second City on Peter Street and at the Academy of Spanish Dance at 401 Richmond Street.

The dance space at the Richmond Street West location soon became a wonderful central location for CIT to move it's office into; however critically in 2009 much of the history and paperwork associated with the evolution of CIT perished in a flood at the building. The bulk of the NTS/CIT written story to this point in time could not be salvaged and had to be thrown away.

It wasn't until 2014 when CIT moved into its current location at Artscape Youngplace on Shaw Street that the organization saw the administration and classes in the same building on a full-time basis. As the current Principal and Artistic Director, Rose C. Stella shares, "That's a lot of years to be running around, but the importance of not letting the school disappear remained. Everyone has been committed over the years to making sure that Jim Buller's vision of training doesn't disappear, because the artist's voice, as Gary [Farmer] was saying, means that we're not going to disappear."<sup>8</sup>

CIT continues to contribute to the highest level of theatre training for Indigenous students, and now has a 4-Year training program.

### Native Earth Performing Arts and Aki Studio (established 1982; the first Indigenous Theatre Company)

Founded in 1982 by Bunny Sicard and Denis Lacroix, Native Earth performed its first show, Native Images in Transition at the art gallery at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay. Monique Mojica was in that first show, and was invited by Bunny, Denis, Tomson and Rene Highway to come to Toronto and take on the role of Artistic Director in 1983. "During that era, most of the shows that were being done with Native theatre were about... explaining ourselves: who we thought we were in the whole search for identity with much angst. What I would call 'community theatre'.<sup>9</sup> And as Monique Mojica suggests, for many years there was tension across the landscape between "community theatre" and establishing "professional Native theatre" and "in some ways, that tension still exists".<sup>10</sup>

Over the decades, Native Earth has seen many Artistic Directors come and go, with up to three Artistic Directors being in the space at any one time. While funders saw this as instability, the Indigenous arts sector interpreted multiple voices of leadership as refreshing, with divergent potential

and new ways of doing and being. Native Earth was also another Indigenous Theatre group, like Debajehmujig and the CIT, which was often on the move, performing in a multitude of different locations such as at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT), Buddies in Bad Times, Theatre Passe Muraille, Factory Theatre, and Winchester Street Theatre, while touring across the country as much as they could.

Denise Bolduc appears to have held every possible position in working for Native Earth, (except, in proudly stating, never as Artistic Director), from the earliest years of its existence to within the last few years. She remembers the move from Jarvis Street to 37 Spadina Avenue, and across from the NCCT in the mid-1980s, identifying that the organization remained at this location throughout the 90s. Many local performances occurred in the NCCT as a result.

By the late 2000s, Native Earth was in a small office space in the Distillery District and had recently expanded to occupy a board room. The Native Earth Board contracted a feasibility study to secure physical space that met their needs, and as Jed DeCory offers "...the goal of the Board was to:

1. Create a feeling of permanence in keeping with Native Earth being Canada's oldest Indigenous theatre company;
2. Allow for workshoping and development of plays and playwrights; enable Native Earth to reach out to the Indigenous community – and it could be a space that could be used to celebrate Indigenous culture of all types;
3. Enable the training of theatre professionals.

When moving from theatre to theatre, Native Earth had little control of the technical crews and front-of-house staff. Having a space would enable Native Earth to be a place to provide experience and training Indigenous technicians and theatre professionals."<sup>11</sup>

8 Rose C. Stella, Principal and Artistic Director, Centre for Indigenous Theatre, January 28, 2022

9 Monique Mojica, former Artistic Director, Native Earth Performing Arts, December 17, 2021

10 ibid

11 Jed DeCory, Former Chair of the Board for Native Earth, December 17, 2021



Figure 3. Native Earth Performance Space's Aki Studio, Toronto

By Fall 2010, Tim Jones (CEO of Artscape) engaged with Native Earth to ask if they would like a spot at Daniels Spectrum. “Negotiations ensued as Native Earth and Artscape tried to figure out how we could take the space that was already on the architectural drawings with minimal disruption and within Native Earth’s operating budget. (Native Earth was not funded as a company with a presentation space at this time.) [Simultaneously], the neighbouring space was being offered to an African dance and drumming group. That led to the need for retrofitted soundproofing between the spaces. Artscape also was willing to create a separate HVAC system for the theatre space so we could do smudging within the space without triggering the smoke detection system or bothering the other tenants. There were also changes to the stage floor to accommodate dance as well as traditional theatre, and there were changes to the backstage area and the box office.”<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the building process, Artscape held monthly construction update meetings with all the tenants and solicited tenant feedback at these meetings. Upon moving into the space as a charter tenant in 2012, Native Earth and Aki Studio (“Aki” is an Anishinaabemowin word encompassing “earth, land, and place”), proudly opened the doors of their 40x40 foot black box theatre space with a capacity of 120 that same year. The space is regularly available for Indigenous arts organizations such as CIT and the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (IPAA) to animate.

<sup>12</sup> ibid

## Debajehmujig Creation Centre (established 1984)

The origins of the Debajehmujig Creation Centre, or Debaj for short, rested with Shirley Cheechoo and Blake Debassige. They had created a script for a young people’s theatre performance while at M’Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island. It was 1984 and these artists wanted to encourage youth to come up with ideas about sharing how their lives were evolving, real issues in real time. But attracting adult audiences for training and performing seemed easier, and over the next five years, Debajehmujig, or “Storytellers” in Anishinaabemowin, operated out of an old nursery school on M’Chigeeng FN. Until the school was condemned. From there, Larry Lewis moved the organization to Wiikwemkoong First Nation to try and take advantage of the community’s larger population. He felt that with larger audiences, their performances could make a bigger social impact in the community. It was 1989, and training and performances continued in community members or church basements. But there was also now an opportunity to take advantage of the old Holy Cross Church grounds, built in 1852 by Indigenous members of the Catholic Church community. The Ruins, as the location was to become known, became the perfect staging area for Debaj to host performances.

In 1993 Debaj put together one of their first large-scale productions outside on the land at Wiikwemkoong FN. With a cast of twenty-one, the open-air performance was seen as magical with local families bringing their lawn chairs to enjoy full days over a weekend. But even with the success that this event generated, its sustainability came into question, especially as winter weather interrupted the success of on-land performances. In the late 1990s, Debaj shifted back to working with youth and creating custom shows modeled on Shirley’s original ideas, animating topical issues with youth performances in the community and through touring opportunities.



Federal funding agencies recognized Debaj as a creative training organization in 2001, and money started to appear for regular programming and teaching. Thanks to this funding, the troupe could split their performances between the Ruins in Wiikwemkoong and the off-reserve community of Manitowaning. Yet a permanent location continued to elude Debaj, and training continued in basements, including one in a funeral home.

Over the decades, financing to establish a permanent home remained difficult. As governments changed both provincially and federally, funding programs also came and went for capital construction projects as well as money for training and education programs. Yet, during the search for a more permanent home in the early to mid-2000s, the century old Mastin General Store on the main street of Manitowaning became available, and through Rennie Mastin, an early member of the Debajehmujig Board of Directors, the space was offered to Debaj for a dollar. The well-worn store needed serious structural repairs compounded with the need for a rebuild that would suit a creative performance training centre. Starts and stops occurred during the renovations because of unforeseen challenges, such as a backyard oil tank and associated contaminated soil which prompted a much larger excavation of the backyard. But after several years of renovations jointly paid for through inconsistent government

funding, corporate and philanthropic donations, Debajehmujig moved into their current location at 43 Queen Street, Manitowaning in 2014.

The Creative Centre consists of a black box theatre, a soundproof recording studio, gallery space, a store, a digital lab, various break out rooms and offices, as well as a multi-purpose room and adjacent kitchen. “This is where a lot of magic happens: greeting people and sitting down at the table to be more comfortable. We have our staff meetings here and all our meals come out of here. So, this is our board table. ... our staff worked at [carving] the sacred teachings [into the table]: the cycles of the moon, morning and night, and the seasons. Those are really what time is; a story about your freedom, freedom of choices; we have our diamond teachings; We talk about being sustainable and... thinking about the future, not taking more than we need, but making sure that everybody has the ability to build, plant, harvest. You don’t have to rely on anybody else if you know how to do those kinds of things. This is about ceremony; the preservation of humanity, and we make sure we are coming together in a good way.”<sup>13</sup> At present Debaj continues to maintain their main headquarters in a portable trailer, on reserve at 8 Debajehmujig Lane in Wiikwemikong while still performing at the Ruins, and hosting all of the operations out of the Manitowaning Centre.



Figure 4. Debajehmujig Creative Centre, Manitowaning, Manitoulin Island

13 Lynda Trudeau, General Manager, Debajehmujig Storytellers, September 10, 2020

## Nozhem First Peoples Performance Space (established 2004)

In 1998, Trent University began a capital project-building campaign called the Beyond Our Walls Campaign. The goal of raising \$17 million dollars was led by the Friends of Native Studies Council at the university. The primary goals of the campaign were: develop space for Indigenous [Aboriginal] education; support Trent's Native Studies Program; create ceremonial space; and provide an opportunity to reach "beyond the walls" of the institution to Indigenous communities, private sector academics, and the wider Peterborough area.

With the building campaign underway, Edna Manitowabi joined the Indigenous Studies program in 2001 to take over teaching Shirley Cheecho's courses while Shirley was on sabbatical. Once there, the university administration asked Edna to develop a theatre course. The institution was without a theatre space on campus, and classroom space was rented out in a local high school. As Edna developed the course, former Indigenous Studies Professor Peter Kulchyski asked her to "make a wish" regarding her most desired acquisition for her students. Edna's wish was the creation of a theatre space on campus. "We needed a place where our stories can be shared, where our songs could be sung, and where our dances, that movement, could happen... and we needed a place for the students to celebrate who they are. We needed to be able to have a place that is safe because... we were realizing that some stories are heart-wrenching, and so... we needed to create a safe place and a sacred space for everyone."<sup>14</sup>

Architectural drawings then came forward for a First Peoples House of Learning and Humanities Centre and a First Peoples' Performance Space as part of the goals for the ongoing funding campaign. Both additions would be part of the new Enwayaang



Figure 5. Nozhem: First Peoples Performance Space, Trent University, Peterborough

building on the main campus. Enwayaang is an Anishinaabemowin word meaning 'the way we speak together'.

Edna was then tasked to find a name for the space. Thinking about those Elders who had guided her life to that point, one mentor, whom Edna describes as 'a strong, strong grandmother...and who looked like a bear' came to mind. This mentor's name was Nozhe Kwe, and as Edna wanted to honour her, she chose the name Nozhem, or Bear in Anishinaabemowin, for the new theatre space at Trent University. Bears are protectors, healers, and they have great power and strength to heal the body, mind, and spirit, a perfect name for the intentions of the space.

By the end of 2003, Edna was preparing to retire, and unfortunately had little time to use the space. In choosing a successor as Artistic Director for Nozhem, Edna automatically thought of Marrie Mumford, who was just finishing up her time at the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts. Marrie arrived in January 2004 and in October 2004, Enwayaang, also known as the Yellow Wing, opened its doors to the First Peoples' House of Learning, Nozhem First Peoples House of Learning, and Peter Gzowski College.

<sup>14</sup> Edna Manitowabi, Elder, Nozhem First Peoples Performing Space, Trent University, Peterborough, December 17, 2020

Along with Shirley and Edna, Marrie began to develop relationships with educators from the closest First Nation to the university, Curve Lake First Nation. This collaboration led to language classes that were interwoven with theatre classes at the university. A youth theatre company from Curve Lake FN began to utilize Nozhem periodically. Nozhem also partnered with the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte on Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory to build a language program, as well as with Kehewin Native Theatre and the CIT to produce and tour performances. The space is available for students and some community events, as “we also said it was a sovereign space because it was a vision of the Native people, and because the money that was raised for it came from Native people, we would then share it [with all the local Indigenous community].<sup>15</sup>”

Yet, working within the rigidity of a university setting has proven challenging to this sovereignty and to decisions made around when and who occupies and utilizes the theatre. Marrie began working with an Aboriginal Education Council in Nozhem’s early years and continues to seek guidance and direction from the Elders, who provide solace to the unsettling pressure that routinely comes from the university. As Marrie approached retirement over the last couple of years, the Artistic Director reigns of Nozhem have passed to Jenn Cole, while the university continues to battle for supremacy over this Indigenous space. To this end, Nozhem First Peoples Performance Space continues to remain the only publicly funded Indigenous theatre space in Canada.

## Aanmitaagzi and Big Medicine Studio (established 2008)

Aanmitaagzi, Anishinaabemowin for “they speak” is a collective that came into existence in 2008. From 2008 to 2010, meetings of a core group of people including Perry McLeod-Shabogesic and Carol Guppy occurred most often in Co-Artistic Directors’ Sidd Bobb and Penny Couchie’s personal home. “[W]hen we first started we had Elders come in for dinner, and we had people coming into the house at different times to brainstorm. It was really inconvenient for Penny and Sid! It was their home...”<sup>16</sup> Performances and rehearsals happened throughout the community and on tour, but the need for a space to brainstorm grew ever more critical during those first two years.

Penny’s nighttime dreams, however, provided some direction to what the space could become, and by the end of 2010 Big Medicine Studio was built. Located on Nipissing First Nation, the dance space evolved as Penny describes with a “whole bunch of ... going forward and coming back, and going forward, and coming back”.<sup>17</sup> Between contractors, architects and “...the bureaucracy of trying to get other people like the school or the Band to give us space” was an ongoing challenge which resulted in building on family-owned land.

Through previous and ongoing collaborations, donations came in the form of the floors, acquired from Citadel & Compagnie, who collected them from the National Ballet, which was disposing of them. The vision of the space continued to evolve. For once the 30X40 foot space was created, without bathrooms or any other functional spaces outside of the studio box, Carol Guppy suggested taking down one of the exterior walls, thus providing instant access to create and perform outside on the land with the ancestors. “[With] that infrastructure... we really do need to celebrate where we’re at. We really do need to understand

15 Marrie Mumford, Artistic Director, Nozhem First Peoples Performing Space, Trent University, Peterborough, December 17, 2020

16 Carol Guppy, Cultural Advisor and Elder, Aanmitaagzi and Big Medicine Studio, October 29, 2020

17 Penny Couchie, Co-Artistic Director, Aanmitaagzi and Big Medicine Studio, October 29, 2020

where we come from and where we're hoping to go. But we also have to understand what we're struggling against. We certainly didn't start with hundreds of thousands of dollars of a budget to make this space. We started with, you know, borrowing money from my parents!"<sup>18</sup>

Over the last 15 years, partnerships have prospered with the likes of the White Water Gallery and the biennial Ice Follies festival. Many young and emerging artists have visited Aanmitaagzi to create or "find their way through something."<sup>19</sup> To that end an adjacent teepee which holds up to 15 people in a circle has been pitched on the property. Nestled beside a grove of trees, it is used for ceremony and special teachings, processes intrinsic to the local Ojibway community. The studio space remains small enough to allow for the donation of it to people who don't have the means to pay for space.

And as Penny suggests, "Your space is only ever... a space unless people activate it. You need to have that buy-in from the community: they need to have belief in it, so they see the possibilities. They'll walk into your space and go, 'oh, I see what it is you're doing here' and then you can ask them, 'what is it? What do you see?' Then, you try to grab onto that!"<sup>20</sup>

As Penny and Sidd had their own children with them at the beginning of Aanmitaagzi's evolution, creating a space that was just as welcoming and safe for young children and their family members was also critically important. Many young families have come through the studio over the last decade, and although the children have grown, their mothers return to support as volunteers or as artists in performances. With time, the studio has added bathrooms, a kitchen, an office, storage space, and a meeting room, while visioning continues.



Figure 6. Aanmitaagzi and Big Medicine Studio, Nipissing First Nation, North Bay

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18 ibid

19 ibid

20 ibid

## Mapping the path (through Community Gatherings)

From listening to the Legacy Stories, we relearned many things that would help guide our journey from the estuary at the mouth of the river along its winding and narrowing channels. Every space visited offered a multitude of shared teachings, while some unique teachings, or should we say relearnings, required more consideration. From the Woodland Cultural Centre, we relearned to bring hope for acquiring spaces on the land, even if the land is tainted and hurting. From the Centre of Indigenous Theatre, we relearned to remain determined in pursuing the dreams of self-determination within our own creative spaces. From Native Earth Performing Arts, we relearned trust in the leadership of multiple voices at the helm. From Debajehmujig Storytellers, we relearned patience in acquiring the education and training needed for Indigenous People to populate all roles across the creative arts ecology. From Nozhem First Peoples Performing Space, we relearned the critical need to let the Elders and Ancestors guide the journey. From Aanmitaagzi and Big Medicine Studio, we relearned the importance of love – love for self, family, community, land, and relationships.

Now, the canoes are built, packed, and boarded by experienced and knowledgeable artists and creatives from the six spaces visited at this confluence of mixed saline and fresh waters, brackish pools where Indigenous thinking and knowing has been contaminated by the pollution of colonialism that came from across the sea. Yet, as we pushed off from the shoreline and repeatedly dipped our paddles heading into the cool fresh waters upstream, we knew that only half of what we needed to take with us was nestled at our feet. We needed to stop at a further seven communities near the beginning of this voyage to understand where the waterways might further challenge our journey of relearning. The next stage of holding community gatherings was critical to rounding out an understanding of what was needed to safely travel the distance inland to build self-determined Indigenous Creative Spaces.

We had some tools and resources, but we were sure that more knowledge about what these spaces should and will look and feel like would complete our preparations for travel.

The Advisory Circle members had, up to this point, guided a journey to honour the goal of Indigenous-conceived and led artistic creative spaces that had already begun to root across the landscape. But now was the time to explore the routes of travel to ensure that the current era of an Indigenous Renaissance could continue to flow along those waterways and landscapes. To achieve this, we asked the Advisory Circle to gather the voices of artistic leaders in their communities to come together and envision what awaits us upstream. We grounded these conversations in the Indigenous principle that there is no single leader, no one voice to direct the path, and no one point of influence exerted over other people to structure activities and relationships. We needed to listen to the voices who will shape, organize, and embrace the vision, values, and knowledge for raising these spaces in ways that resonate within the communities they serve.

Advisory Circle participants hosted artistic community members at Friday's Point on Bear Island, in Kingston, Manitowaning, North Bay, Six Nations of the Grand River, Thunder Bay, and Toronto. These community gatherings were extremely powerful in their depth of sharing truths, lived experiences, and teachings. Emotions ran high during every conversation, from the rawness of pain and struggle to the exuberance of joy and laughter. Most in attendance remarked that this was their first opportunity to gather with like-minded local people.

In these conversations, we learned how each community envisioned a safe, brave, healthy, and sustainable creative artistic space: how these spaces would physically take form and, how they would operate in relation to their communities; what aspects of the arts ecology most needed to be supported and nurtured; and finally, if, when, and how these spaces should open their doors to members outside their own communities.

And so, with the sharing of community stories, we were offered four directional bundles of knowledge as the final resources needed for our voyage. But just as the ripples of the water flow behind the stern of the canoe, and the paddles form separate ripples out to the sides of the vessel, multiple options, like multiple truths, can be taken with every stroke, and no one stroke or truth is right or wrong. As we saw through each Legacy Story and each Community Gathering, there are many routes to reach a good place upstream, some perhaps safer than others, with resistance in rapids and hidden currents. Waterways, like all trails, can cross over, join, and separate throughout any journey, and these four bundles share many interrelated aspects or synergies, as is common in Indigenous storytelling.

The bundles hold many teachings and truths. Their contents will be interpreted differently through the diversity of oral traditions held by each community. Moreover, the English language used for this report cannot fully capture the nuances of Indigenous thoughts. But the contents of each bundle are firmly presented with the intentions of this project in mind: for the Ontario/Canadian arts ecology to accept and embrace **Indigenous Self-Determination in the Creative Arts**, and most particularly in the building of **Sovereign Indigenous Creative Spaces**.

But just as the estuary swirls with the contaminated waters of racism, assimilation and inter-generational trauma, inland waterways flow from a source that is pure, cool, and refreshing. And returning to the source of the waterways is to reclaim the knowledge and wisdom of why and how

Indigenous Peoples have for millennia been the original stewards of the land, seas, and skies. For if the inland waterways represent Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and the ocean carried to us the violence perpetuated through the mindset of Eurocentrism, the estuary is where these knowledges mingle. But first, Indigenous Peoples, at this time of an Indigenous Renaissance must pull each other out of the polluted water to relearn how we can thrive in our canoes and on our lands again. Only then can we travel back to the estuary as equal partners to collaborate with non-Indigenous Peoples to heal the waters from the pollution of colonialism and together create something new and beautiful.

For we are always reminded how Indigenous ancestors landed from the sky to begin creation on the back of a turtle, surrounded by ocean. The fissures that flowed on the top of the turtle's back became inland waterways to explore and protect. As the oceans offered up visitors from other lands who did not understand how we care for or live in balance with creation, Indigenous Peoples grew empowered to ensure that within the transition zone of fresh inland water and the saline waters of the ocean, the estuary would continue to be a neutral yet most productive natural habitat between our Peoples. And so now as we paddle out of sight from the estuary, we take out our bundles to honour the teachings and knowledge shared with us during community gatherings and listen to those stories instinctively as we navigate the streams, tributaries, creeks, and rivers before us, back to our homelands, back to our ancestors, back to ourselves.

# 1<sup>st</sup> BUNDLE – IN HONOUR OF RECLAMATION

**Land** for Indigenous Peoples is not about the ownership of property. Land is the clay that creates us and all things. Land is synonymous with sustenance, language, and learning, and therefore forms who we are and how we think about and know the world. Being in relationship with the land is essential to teaching what is most important, and storytelling is always connected to the land. Therefore, reclamation of land is synonymous with restoring the land, connecting place to memory, truths, and the body of our collective knowledge. So, as the land remains resilient despite climactic and environmental crises, Indigenous People remain resilient in honouring and restoring (restoring) land to a sustainable balance. As Sidd Bobb shared “We talked about how we don’t just want to be in the city imagining what our culture is and pontificating what our culture is. Our ancestors built a canoe, hunted the moose, gathered the wild rice, and they had a direct relationship with the land.”<sup>21</sup>

Art and culture are inherently tied to land and language, and oral traditions express these connections most sincerely. Restoring the land will therefore revitalize how Indigenous lifeways and Peoples identify with place, for land reminds us of our responsibility for stewardship of all life. Stewardship implies respecting and maintaining our balanced relationship with the land while making it safe and welcoming for all Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. This stewardship and the embrace of knowledge that comes from the land will only thrive once colonial constraints and systemic barriers are removed.

Most buildings that currently occupy the Ontario landscape, including on First Nations reserved territories, hold an architectural and spiritual essence that is rooted in European transaction. From the building materials to the natural resources (hydro, heat, and water) that sustain them, these structures exist thanks to extraction

and consumption, as opposed to reciprocity and stewardship as seen through Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. Spaces designed without regard for Indigenous stewardship of the land overrun our colonized landscape today.

The massive cutting of trees for lumber in shipbuilding from the 17th to early 20th Century permanently scarred the land. With the loss of forests came the loss of homes and sustenance for hundreds of creatures. The winds and rains found unnatural routes through the clear-cuts to blow havoc across the landscape. The alteration of waterways for the creation of thousands of arable acreages for farming, damming, industrial shipping, and hydroelectricity projects disrupted the geological balance of our landscapes, bringing more flooding and aggressive erosion. These landscape changes have in turn threatened species or caused their extinction. They threaten the food chain that sustains us. We must therefore return to a harmonious, unharmed relationship with the land. A relationship based in respecting the circular reciprocity of sustaining the land through our lifeways.

To that end, spatial designs should orient a building around the centrality and balance of a circle to see and hear all those in a space, positioned on an even and level floor or stage, where hearts and eyes facing hearts and eyes. Large windows, doors or sun-rooves can connect a space to the land and nature. A space that is flexible and able to respond to diverse needs is more human. Facilities to prepare food and share a meal will bring the work back to the land. Furthermore, “to have really low cost or no cost accommodations, where people can stay, and could cook for themselves, with the flexibility and space to be able to make it accessible for everyone, is super important. To have a space that doesn’t create infrastructure that’s inaccessible or is exclusive is so important.”<sup>22</sup>

21 Sidd Bobb, Co-Artistic Director, Aanmitaagzi and Big Medicine Studio, October 29, 2020

22 Penny Couchie, *ibid*

Community voices most strongly echoed that an Indigenous artistic creative space should most prominently be connected to the importance of place and a First Nation's legacy to territory. These spaces need to reflect Indigenous culture and teachings, such as the Ceremonial cycles, the Four Directions, Grandmother Teachings, or Haudenosaunee Legal Principles associated with the Great Law. They expressed how land, art and culture are interconnected. A space needs to be located on land where artists can access natural resources for their artistic practice. It should be governed by the understanding that everyone is equal and respected for their individual identity and experiences. As Christine Friday noted, her vision to create a space on Friday's Point, family land, allows her to carry family on her journey and create a stronger presence in the territory. In doing so, it is a way of protecting a family's clan systems, kinship networks and territories. "Our land is a vast area of cultural space, and we only just need to be out there, as it's always been there for us, and is still with us."<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 7. Friday's Point, Bear Island, Lake Temagami

## Mapping the Land

- Acknowledge that personal creative journeys begin in nature; creative spaces where there is a direct connection to water, earth, winds, and storms.
  - › *Acquire land that can breathe with the earth's elements, near to water, near to vegetation.*
- Respect that creative spaces are physical structures, as well as spiritual spaces without physical form.
  - › *Architectural designs should come from a lens of cultural understanding and inflection, as well as ceremonial and spiritual practices.*
- Offer visitors spaces that do not overlay any feelings of insecurity, anxiety, or cultural judgment in the space. Visitors should know that no harm will come to them in this space.
  - › *Ensure that multiple respected Elders are overseeing the creation of this space from inception through design and building.*
- Honour the space with physical and spiritual care, as if it was a living being.
  - › *Obtain a commitment from caretakers and schedule for caretaking.*
- Explore and activate land-based artistic performance and presentation opportunities.
  - › *Begin to envision and develop art on potential landscapes for occupation to garner an understanding of how the land and surrounding relations feel toward achieving inner and outer balance.*

<sup>23</sup> Christine Friday, Artist, Choreographer, Producer, Educator, April 20th, 2023



## 2<sup>nd</sup> BUNDLE – IN HONOUR OF RESPONSIBILITY

Thoughts and feelings around how a self-determined Indigenous creative space could support kinship relations, the rebuilding of inter-nation relations, **individual, family, and community health** through artistic programming were repeated at every community gathering. Indigenous creative spaces will assist people to connect with and bring forward the canon of their cultural knowledge and oral traditions. Listening to community stories and learning from their wisdom, guidance, and direction, will honour ancestors and teachings in a holistic way. These spaces can support individual artists and their families to feel comfortable and proud of their culture and art while anchoring communities in a safe, brave, and culturally sensitive place. For as Christine Friday shares “Part of why I joined this group is that I wanted to show others that you don’t have to leave community to do this work, in activating spaces in/on your own spaces.”

Christine Friday continues that as a member of this project and Advisory Circle in particular, taking part in discussions around building “... on sovereign territory, creating sovereign spaces with families that make up our community... [it feels that] the Advisory Circle brought a ‘kinship’ or ‘self-help group’ into being. Bringing together the local artistic community helps to build healthy relationships that take time, listening and requires being together.”<sup>24</sup> Coming together as a community to envision the creation of spaces where arts-based programming is rooted in traditional Indigenous practices and knowledge is critical to ground these spaces. Creative spaces that epitomize and come about through Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination can give communities space to grieve and heal.

Even though colonial places still hold varying levels of stigmatizing trauma, some artists can see beyond a landscape of pain and engage with

these spaces to exercise this past and transform stories moving forward. Such as Santee Smith who shared “My history of working inside the Mohawk Institute is working in the boys’ playroom, and being inside the building is very inspiring. My investment in animating that space is very deep and expansive. My family went there. It’s always a learning experience, a response, and an activation. It’s not just, ‘oh, let’s do a show and put it on,’ it’s obviously much deeper than that. The commitment to working with survivors has been ongoing.”<sup>25</sup>

These spaces can also represent places of strength and courage in reminding artists and their families about healthy approaches to collaboration and responsibility to others. As Sidd Bob shared, “Muriel [Miguel] has that democratic process. She’ll say, ‘come on, tell me a story,’ and everyone gets up and tells a story however they want. You can sing, you can dance, and you can perform it how you see it. Then, the play is a democratic manifestation where every person has a piece of the pie. So, it’s not an elitist idea of one person at the helm of everyone, with a chorus holding a spear or war club in the background. Everyone is represented...”<sup>26</sup> Brefny Caribou-Curtin expanded on how Indigenous creative spaces nurture natural approaches to animate spaces in an Indigenous way. “I feel [Western training evokes] the image of something being very tightly wound, like a really tight knot... In Western training I found there was a lot of rigidity and rigour. I appreciated the rigour, but I strongly disliked the rigidity; and so, coming to Native Earth and starting a relationship with Native Earth, the invitation was like a slow undoing of that really tight knot. [There was an understanding that]... I didn’t need to arrive fully formed that day, or to that presentation, or to whatever the moment was.”<sup>27</sup>

Spaces should also not take artists and community members away from what they want to do, such as singing songs of traditional or ceremonial

24 Christine Friday, *ibid*

25 Santee Smith, *ibid*

26 *ibid*

27 Brefny Caribou-Curtin, Artist, Native Earth Performing Arts, December 17, 2021

importance, which are often difficult, or even impossible, for Indigenous artists to do in colonial spaces. This is an extremely hurtful feeling to experience in settler spaces. Christine Friday shares “As a solo performer I felt left out of the larger fabric of the Indigenous Performing Artists Community, and although I tried to build community spaces in other places, it wasn’t until I moved home to create a space that the ache inside went away.”<sup>28</sup>

As Penny Couchie shares, “Another consideration I’m constantly thinking about is ... if the steps that we’re taking are actually impeding what we want? Values are important... Is anything ...we’re doing ...going to take away from what is already here? Intergenerational feelings are super important, because this is a place for people with special needs, a place for creative outlets, a place that has enough direction to mobilize people, but not so much that it stifles what they are going to come forward with.”<sup>29</sup>

Brefny Caribou-Curtin further explains that “What I appreciate so much about Native Earth is that as I continue to find my voice and put my stories out there, assembling and then scattering them apart, trying different things with this material... I’ve never felt bound by any sense of convention. I’ve never felt bound by any sense of time, any sense of structure in... I guess a Western [framework], especially coming from someone who had a lot of Western training. Even the idea of a deadline... there was never any pressure and there continues to just be this very open invitation to explore [my art with Native Earth.]<sup>30</sup> Christine Friday further shares, ‘the importance of making these spaces, is for future generations of children, for nurturing kinship, clan and a family’s cultural meanings ... for these spaces are about a reclamation through sovereign art/culture-making within communities.’<sup>31</sup>



Figure 8. Agnes Etherington Arts Centre, Kingston; Group activity identifying the desired Values of a Space

28 Christine Friday, *ibid*

29 Penny Couchie, *ibid*

30 Brefny Caribou-Curtin, *ibid*

31 Christine Friday, October 17th, 2021

Sidd Bobb perhaps summed it up best when he outlined a common vision that was shared at all community gatherings: “We’ve tried to create a safe space with ... people who are involved in a sovereign practice of cultural reclamation and healing. ... That’s what this is a part of: it’s a part of our own healing from family violence and alcoholism and ongoing colonialism. It’s a place for ceremony and healing... So, we build these [spaces] ourselves, they’re family-owned, and then they provide a platform for our politics, for our governance, for our eating, for the joy that comes from a Pow Wow, from a festival, or from a night out on the ice. ... I thought that in the best-case scenario, it’s a place where we can all exist, not with the fear of dropping an eagle feather or the fundamentalist slam of protocol. No, it’s like... the kids can run around, it’s intergenerational, and you can come to the degree that you want, to sell baked goods, or wares, or if you want to dance, or if you want to officiate. That’s how I feel.”<sup>32</sup>

### Mapping the Spiritual and Physical Health of Community

- Establish the community principles and values of a self-determined Indigenous Creative space.
  - › *Gather the artistic and creative community to discuss what the space must consistently commit to being/representing in the community.*
- Design a Governance Circle and Operational Framework that is rooted in Indigenous bodies, knowledge, and principles at its core.
  - › *Establish a governance and operational structure with clear roles and responsibilities.*
- Define strong leadership with multiple voices from the space’s outset
  - › *Develop a Leadership Model that puts Elders and Indigenous-only artists/creatives in a central circle of decision-making.*
- Create a physical presence on the landscape that ignites confidence and pride in community cultural identity.
  - › *Maximize opportunities to erect restorying/ storytelling cultural markers in multiple public spaces.*
- Elevate the focus on relationships so that ongoing communication exists between artists, the land, and the community.
  - › *Develop relationship protocols and practices that address issues such as communication, language, access, collaboration, and decision-making to build trust within Indigenous Nations.*
- Bolster new initiatives to bring communities together through art and creative activities.
  - › *Design artistic programming rooted in expanding inter-generational community relations and healing, through storytelling/ restorying in/on inclusively accessible spaces/landscapes.*

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<sup>32</sup> Sidd Bobb, *ibid*

### 3<sup>rd</sup> BUNDLE – IN HONOUR OF RELEVANCY

Community voices are most essential for driving growth and innovation, success, and sustainability across all landscapes. A resurgence of Indigenous artistic voices and presence within an Indigenous Renaissance will remind Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike that building and strengthening relationships is essential to ensuring progress and equalizing the value of Indigenous art and artists. The key measurement of the worth of Indigenous art and artists on a Western landscape is based on **funding** and how that funding needs to support equitable levels of **training and mentorship** for Indigenous artists across the whole of the provincial/national arts ecology.

Insufficient funding to address the disparities that continue to plague Indigenous artists and creatives, such as mental wellness supports, accessibility/transportation, and behind-the-camera training, has been a problem since Indigenous art was brought to Western stages and galleries over 50 years ago. Lack of funding forces Indigenous artists to routinely question the relevancy of their creations, and for whom is their work being made. Fighting the conceit that non-Indigenous arts are legitimate, supreme, or civilized, and Indigenous arts, in contrast, are child-like, simple, and immaterial, is like trying to paddle the canoe up a waterfall.

Monique Mojica shares, “By whose yardstick is success measured?”<sup>33</sup> And Denise Bolduc expands the thought with “I think our funding has put us in these niches of what is ‘professional,’ and what is considered ‘quality.’ It goes to what [Monique was saying], who is making that choice or decision, and what is it being measured against? I find that is a huge issue: how funding is designing who we are in some ways.”<sup>34</sup>

Keith Barker provides a critical example as experienced while working at Native Earth Performing Arts Center. “There are theatre companies that were started at the same time, so you can actually plot their trajectory. For example, there was one theatre that started roughly at the same time Native Earth did, and I think they had two Artistic Directors for the majority of their existence. [A funding body] consistently rewarded them with increases for their perceived ‘stability’ as they had one of the largest proportional and richest multi-year theatre companies operating grants because they matched those Eurocentric metrics of theatre. Native Earth was penalized throughout. We had artists coming in and out of these spaces that Native Earth activated. While that other theatre was being rewarded because the [funding body] saw stability in that they had one person’s vision. Whereas we had this community vision of people coming in and out, like people asking Monique to come in and be an Artistic Director [for example]. At one point, we had a consortium of three Artistic Directors, and as we move through directors, every time that happens, a funder would say, ‘well, they’re not stable, let’s wait for another year’ or they would take money off the table, reducing the operating grant. So, you watch Native Earth stay where they are, and probably at the beginning it was ok money compared to other companies. Other companies continued to grow money and resources and everything like that. Native Earth stays here or goes below and continues to be punished for not meeting the metrics. ...there’s lots of work and lots of peer assessment committees on Indigenous-specific juries who look at the work Native Earth does as different than a lot of other cultural work. Lots of community work is going to be presented in those spaces and it seems that that’s the thing you want

33 Monique Mojica, Former Artistic Director at Native Earth Performing Arts, December 17, 2021

34 Denise Bolduc, former employee Native Earth Performing Arts, December 17, 2021

to do... whereas we are asking these questions of, 'who is our theatre for, and whose stories are we telling?' That contemporary lens looks very different in those rooms when everyone else is doing cultural-based work and community work, and then you have this theatre company in Toronto that is showcasing work that isn't necessarily based on that. There's a storytelling version there that just doesn't look like all the other things. Even in those spaces, sometimes Native Earth would be penalized again because it didn't have the things that everyone else had."<sup>35</sup>

Some of the most prominent issues caused by the lack of healthy and sustained funding include accessibility and transportation. Having a reliable public transit system linked to Indigenous community spaces can increase access for artists and creatives, especially Indigenous youth as emerging artists. Many of the communities we chatted with alluded to having no transportation in place, especially from reserves or rural communities to creative spaces in general, let alone Indigenous-based spaces. Even in communities with a transit system, Indigenous artists often live in areas with limited safe public access to reach creative centres which are most often located in downtown or centralized core areas of larger populated towns or cities. Municipal decision-makers need to recognize that without access to a wider range of Indigenous welcoming creative spaces, artists must resort to continuing to operate out of basements and schools, and/or travelling unsafe paths with unreliable transportation to reach creation spaces. This makes Indigenous artists and creatives think that their art is not seen as "professional" enough, or at the same level of value as non-Indigenous art.

Having more Indigenous Peoples trained and skilled in both performance, creation, as well as behind-the-scenes roles from lighting to costuming,

to sound and video was also something that came up from artists conversations. For as Denise Bolduc strongly emphasized, "We need stage managers and designers. We need more people in producing roles. We need all of those roles if we really want to strengthen the industry."<sup>36</sup> Santee Smith further shared that while "... trying to separate the Mohawk Institute from operations in the WCC or weaving them into one another reminds me of what Kaha:wi was trying to do when we started to do education and training [for dance]. I said, 'There's no Indigenous dance training institute in Canada, and there's nothing for young potential performers in dance or performance.' We tried to fill that gap by doing our four-week training program, which ran for a little bit, but we didn't get a lot of support money-wise. Now we don't do it anymore."<sup>37</sup>

The lack of accreditation for Indigenous-based arts training and programming such as that at Debaj or CIT further undermines Indigenous creative arts. First Nation's band councils also compound this fact in their unwillingness to support students to attend these programs without accreditation at the end. Although she was discussing issues of land access and building policies, Christine Friday still says it well when she offers that "I can only grow so much in working within the Indian Act Band system."<sup>38</sup> Yet the frustration of never having enough or sustained funding often puts Indigenous artists into the precarious position of asking for a significant amount of money, especially capital-build creative spaces grants. We heard repeatedly that [Indigenous Artists] should not incur debt, and government capital grants should be approached with caution. As Christine Friday shares "...a completely new vision of a creative space is more important than the idea of investing in a million-dollar facility."<sup>39</sup>

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35 Keith Barker, Artistic Director for Native Earth Performing Arts, December 17, 2021

36 Denise Bolduc, *ibid*

37 Santee Smith, *ibid*

38 Christine Friday, *ibid*

39 Christine Friday, Artist, Choreographer, Producer, Educator, Friday' Point, Bear Island/Temagami, October 17, 2021

Clayton Windatt expanded on this point adding that “throwing money at it can’t always solve the issue. In a lot of circles where there’s advocacy being done, people will say, ‘oh, the arts need more money’ and I would say, ‘to do what?’ You need to say what you’re doing, because there’s an expectation that [Indigenous artists are] not able to say what they’re doing or what the value of it is.”<sup>40</sup> To affirm self-determination and sovereignty over spatial creations, Indigenous artists and creatives need to solidly reclaim their space at decision-making tables and have their voices and actions embraced by funders as legitimate and valuable. In turn, Indigenous artists should not necessarily wait for a space to be made for them while remaining cautious, if not trepidatious, toward approaching rapids and potentially stymieing the journey with reverse undertow. Because the domino effect of colonial racism on societal, political, and economic landscapes are real and continue to keep Indigenous artists from accessing the same opportunities that non-Indigenous or Western-trained/based artists enjoy.

### Mapping the Acquisition of Essential Resources

- Elevate the holistic bundle that Indigenous performing arts bring to the sector within every performance, engagement, and interaction.
  - › *Promote Indigenous Artists and their productions as more than a genre; creation is anchored to land, accessibility for all, education and mental health and wellness.*
- Continue to build a case to recognize accreditation of Indigenous-led creative training schools.
  - › *Grow partnerships with accredited Indigenous colleges and universities to create combined diploma/degree programs that require training/courses based within an Indigenous arts environment with Indigenous artists holding equal credentials to other lecturers/professors.*
- Create a massive appeal to all funding programs to account for the continuing range of skills and community approaches that Indigenous Peoples have yet to bring to the arts sector.
  - › *Develop a comprehensive and standardized funding strategy that streamlines procedures, promotes fairness, and enhances the efficacy of funding while maximizing community benefits.* Introduce a parallel program to fund Indigenous-only arts within all funding agencies, starting with a training fund.
  - › *Devise and pilot individual funding streams for Spaces/Capital Grants, Education & Training, and Cultural Reclamation (to cover artistic creation, language revitalization, and ceremonial [ways of knowing and being] recovery), where applications, timelines, qualifications, and results are based in Indigenous-ways of knowing and doing and adjudicated by all Indigenous decision makers.*
- Develop a navigational map between Nations and spaces that outlines the development of an Indigenous-informed governing system.
  - › *Create and develop a structural outline based in ethical and financial compromise and consensus processes to lead and manage a space.*

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40 Clayton Windatt, Artist, Multi-Media Arts at Aanmitaagzi and Big Medicine Studio, October 29, 2020

## 4<sup>TH</sup> BUNDLE – IN HONOUR OF REVITALIZATION

(Re)Learning to work together is an essential action needed for any space to survive with sincere Indigenous principles and teachings at its core. Programming should welcome many different cultures and backgrounds to respect all who visit and use the space. In this sense, programs have the potential to support generational knowledge across different cultures through the power of stories, including different aspects of cultural knowledge. Denise Bolduc shares that from her perspective Indigenous Theatre is synonymous with theatre for community “... I hate the word ‘audiences.’ I think it is ‘community’ and ... it’s our community who wants to see this work.”<sup>41</sup>

Layla Black offered that “I could definitely attest to the fact that in our state right now, [Woodland Cultural Center is] growing exponentially: our audience and our demand for culture, performances, art, and education. We are now getting requests from Sweden and Germany ... places around the world.”<sup>42</sup> Sidd Bobb also shared that “connecting with other people from across the world has been really amazing for me too... I have a place to go to have those positive relationships fostered, which is great especially if I can’t go out to travel all the time. So, it’s been really like a second home for me, to be able to do what I love to do and have community support around that. I think that’s important for [Indigenous creative spaces].”<sup>43</sup>

Ange Loft also shared that “the trajectory of students is also something that’s just super interesting to me because they take up with different organizations after leaving CIT. So, there’s kind of this network of support that’s not really talked about too often, but it’s like the network of other institutions in Toronto that are looking for Indigenous creators and performers that come directly out of CIT. So, we kind of have this process now. It’s underground, but it helps determine ... what your field is, who are you going to work with,

who we can set you up with, and who you can go to next. I find myself doing that with a lot of students that are leaving CIT, as being the person who can go, ‘ok, you need to work with them,’ and then getting them that connection. It’s not official CIT work, but we have that network of people that are familiar with our students. We can just send them to the next step. That’s something that’s been really interesting.”

Yet, in contrast to the success that Ange Loft sees for some Indigenous emerging artists, Penny Couchie cautions that there is also exploitation. “Exploitation in the arts is so bad, so bad... and sometimes we’re exploiting each other! Sometimes my work within the community opens them up to exploitation, and I have to be aware of that. I have to think, ok, I exchanged babysitting, or I cooked for them, or I provided training or something like that in exchange



Figure 9. Street Art provided by Shelby Gagnon and Lora Northway, an Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration, Thunder Bay

41 Denise Bolduc, *ibid*

42 Layla Black, Marketing and Programming Supervisor at Woodland Cultural Centre, July 22, 2021

43 Sidd Bobb, *ibid*

for what they gave. The minute that I engage with somebody else, that person has to also give ... something. I have to remind them, 'you cannot poach off of what I did with this exchange. You have a whole other exchange to do with them,' so that's something as well that comes into play."<sup>44</sup>

Conversations weighing the importance of transactional versus relational results across the current arts ecology were heard throughout this project. It is felt that doing business without any emotional connection to the performance, the product, the conversation, or interaction is consistent within Western-based spatial, funding, and/or organizational conversations today. Understanding that an exchange of goods or knowledge is a return to the ways of our ancestors and original intentions to living in community is critical for negotiating safe and brave spaces on a long-term basis and reminds People of their necessary relationship to the land and each other.

**Reciprocity** is at the heart of revitalizing Indigenous relationships between and within Indigenous Nations and Communities. Securing how we can support, work, and promote each other as Indigenous artists and creatives is critical not only in returning to our pre-European contact commitment to friendship and peace treaties but also to uniting as an impressively powerful single voice to ensure that Indigenous Self-Determination in the Creative Arts is achieved as the pinnacle of the Indigenous Renaissance.

## Mapping Respectful Reciprocity to Reach our Destination

- Expand community partnerships toward activating satellite locations of Indigenous arts spaces
  - › *Mobilize a fanning out of performing artists and creatives to (re) establish trade and bartering networks that increase Indigenous skilled workers and resources between Nations and Indigenous creative collectives.*
- Ignite localized arts networks to connect everyone's artistic strengths, knowledge, skills, and experiences.
  - › *Establish cross-community peer-to-peer learning networks where resources could be developed to fill knowledge gaps, including public funding support for Indigenous-led capital projects.*
- Develop opportunities for slow-touring residencies that connect Indigenous artists and cultural knowledge with communities not as audiences but as collaborators.
  - › *Provide multiple days/weeks of entry for Indigenous artists to engage with and lead non-Indigenous communities to build a cooperative performance that is embedded in/on the land of the host.*
- Invest and strategically support the transition of an Indigenous Performing Arts Sector to exist outside the current European-designed Performing Arts Sector.
  - › *Define and transition the Indigenous arts ecology to an equal decision-making body at all senior funding and municipal development tables.*

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<sup>44</sup> Penny Couchie, *ibid*



## THE RETURN TO PARALLEL PATHS

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Since the earliest days of the non-Indigenous occupation of Turtle Island, little by little, the power, voice and visibility of Indigenous Peoples have been clawed away to the point of erasure. The process of exchanging wampum between Indigenous and non-Indigenous became the hope for achieving and restoring balance to the relationship, with equal commitment from all sides. In the year 1613, a treaty was made between an Indigenous Nation (the Onkwéhon:we/5 Nations Confederacy) and a village of Dutch settlers in what is now known as the Mohawk Valley of Upper New York State. This treaty, believed to be the first between Indigenous and European Settlers on Turtle Island, is understood to be the original contract for all relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous on this land, and therefore a covenant to abide by today.

This treaty, known as **Kaswentha**, (Two Row Wampum Treaty) metaphorically outlines that in sharing the same land or waterways, the Indigenous Peoples will travel undisturbed in their canoes (as shown by one purple row of beads), while the Europeans would remain in their ship doing the same (the other purple row of beads) surrounded and bound by a river (the white beads) of commitment to peace, respect, and friendship. Through this treaty both parties agree to equally share the Creator's gifts (all the natural world) while never interfering or imposing decisions of governance, faith, or economy on the other party, for neither side may attempt to steer the vessel of the other as it travels along in its own self-determined path, for "as long as the grass grows, and the river flows".

For the last 410 years, this covenant has been routinely broken by settlers because of disrespect, greed, and colonially designed domination. The Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island continue to anticipate a return to the spirit of this treaty from the year 1613. Honouring this contract is as important

today as it was 410 years ago, and reminding non-Indigenous Settlers on Turtle Island of this original contract is an ongoing task. Indigenous People held the balance of power four centuries ago, but now after so much interference, there is a need to rebuild: ourselves, our communities, and our cultural ways of knowing and building. We need to rebuild the two-row relationship, and therefore non-Indigenous minds must show humility to grasp how Indigenous minds have been violently forced away from their original worldview and the river's path by systematic eradication.

We need to rebuild our canoes for multiple journeys inland and back to our original territories and ancestors who remain in the land of our histories and stories. Nurturing trees to eventually be culled, carved, and glued with sap to ensure buoyancy is like building a Creative Space from the land to the canopy. Indigenous Peoples need to see and



feel themselves in their canoes, journeying up waterways with these four bundles of knowledge, resources, and intentions at their sides. Placing artists and creatives at the bow of these canoes will ensure that every settlement along the waterway will be built through the restorying/storytelling of the land. This will bring peace to the Ancestors as well as future generations. We need to honour each stroke of the paddle as we travel upstream and continue to relearn how to be in relationship with the land as we rebuild our homes, communities, and territories. Only once we have relearned our responsibility and relevancy to reclaim and revitalize the land, ourselves, families, and communities, will we be ready to travel downriver to meet non-Indigenous settlers at the colonially polluted estuary as equals.

Meg Paulin offers an understanding that is at the heart of this project in circling back to Indigenous reclamation of the land. “My daughter made a list of people that she loves a couple of years ago, and Big Medicine Studio was on that list. I thought, ‘Oh, great, this place has personhood,’ but it really speaks to the space as a living entity and that each community deserves a space like this. Funding and building for indigenization are important but creating Indigenous-owned and operated centres is the greater feat. I came across the quote, ‘If you don’t create these spaces, it’s just more brown faces in white spaces,’ and that really rang true because I’ve witnessed how powerful Big Medicine Studio is to community and welcoming Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from around the world. It’s just been an incredible journey.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Meg Paulin, Artist, Visual Arts & Performance, Aanmitaagzi, October 29, 2020

# CHI MIIGWETCH, NYA:WEH'KO:WA, MARSI, THANK YOU

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Keith Barker	Edna Manitowabi
Joahna Berti	Jason Manitowabi
Layla Black	Sheldon Mejaki
Sidd Bobb	Brandon McDonald
Denise Bolduc	Nolan Moberly
Samantha Brennan	Monique Mojica
Kean Buffalo	Janis Monture
Brefny Caribou-Curtin	Marrie Mumford
Jenn Cole	Bruce Naokwegiig
Marcel Cooper	David 'Sunny'
Animikiikwe (Nimikii)	Osawabine
Couchie-Waukey	Liz Osawamick
Penny Couchie	Taqralik Partridge
Patricia Deadman	Meg Paulin
Jed DeCory	PJ Prudat
Chris Deforge	Diane Pugen
Justin Deforge	Daniel Recollet-Mejaki
Dane Dillon	Tasheena Sarazin
Gary Farmer	Santee Smith
Brian Fox	Sheri Smith
Ray Fox	Rose C. Stella
Tara Froman	Rulan Tangen
Kayana Garcia	Isaac Thomas
Carol Guppy	Lynda Trudeau
Mindy Knott	Marjorie Trudeau
Shelley Knott-Fife	Tam-Ca Vo-Van
Michelle Lacombe	Shirley Williams
Ange Loft	Clayton Windatt
Kanehtawaks	Tara Windatt
Lefort-Cummings	

- 6 Artists and Community Members from Manitoulin Island including Wiikwemkoong First Nation
- 17 Artists and Community Members from Friday's Point, Bear Island, Temagami, and Nipissing First Nation
- 16 Artists and Community Members from Kingston including Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory and Shabot Obaadjiwan First Nation
- 9 Artists and Community Members from North Bay including Nipissing First Nation
- 9 Artists and Community Members from Brantford including Six Nations of the Grand River
- 17 Artists and Community Members from Thunder Bay

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*Through your stories we have recognized the **Nibwaakawin** (wisdom) of Elders and Knowledge/Faith Keepers, our personal **Dibaadendiziwin** (humility) as Listeners and our inherent **Aakodewewin**, (bravery) to protect the land through self-determining processes. Through restorying we learn to **Zaagidiwin** (love) one another as a community should, while embracing our **Kahnikonriyo** (good mind), **Kahsatstensera** (power) and **Skennen** (peace).*

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