Spiraling Through 500 Years: Art-full Learning

This is Part 2 of Spiralling Through 500 Years*, focusing on the use of Indigenous art and cultural forms in the eight-month Naming the Moment workshop series in 1991-1992.*

The heartbeat of the EagleHeart Singers pounding their drum, the compelling echoes of their welcome song. Monique Mojica's unearthing of the mournful and revengeful cry of Malinche, traitor/translator for the *conquistadores*. Susan Aglulark finding her voice through waves of Inuit suicide and genocide. Filipino theatre artists offering satirical sketches of the history of the Catholic hierarchy in their homelands. A procession of giant puppets bringing alive Sally Gaikeezhayangai's telling of an Ojibwe prophecy. Stories of 500 years of repression and resistance pulsating in our bodies, minds, and souls through myriad forms of cultural expression.

Though there is no word for "art" in Indigenous languages, I claim that word to describe how art-full ways of knowing and learning were woven into our gatherings in the basement of the Native Canadian Centre. The process we created for the monthly workshops on "500 Years of Resistance and Survival" was as important as the content. In other words, there was a message in the mediums we used. This is a thread through many of my experiences with Indigenous friends over the decades; I keep learning that ways of knowing are central to a way of being. The *how* as important as the *what*…or perhaps the *how* IS the *what*?

I have always brought art - theatre, music, visuals - into my life, from directing (and starring in!) Snow White at the age of six to leading singing as a counsellor at summer camps. As an adult, my Central American popular education friends introduced me to many creative techniques and the more holistic notion of *senti-pensando* or *feeling/thinking.* While I use my own photos of Indigenous peoples to reveal a personal perspective in my memoirs of adventures from the Amazon to the Arctic, it was clear in 1991 that only Indigenous artists could represent themselves as we revisited five centuries of colonial history.

Circles and ceremony

Ceremony framed the 3-hour workshops, beginning and ending with the drumming circle. The circle itself was the intentional architecture for our seating arrangement. We adapted a Medicine Wheel design to create three layers of the circle to accommodate 50 participants, with aisles offering breaks within the circle at each of the four directions.

I recall an early steering group meeting when Anishinaabe Jackie Jocko-Alton challenged my proposal that we recover the history by starting in 1492 and work our way through the centuries, naming events from the past to present, replicating an historical timeline exercise we often used in the Moment Project. "Why not start in the present," she suggested, "and recover stories from our oral histories and creation stories?" A more organic and cyclical approach, compared to our linear notion of time.

This was one of many uncomfortable moments in our steering group planning sessions, which in themselves were mini-workshops. I remember an outburst from Jackie when in December we proposed breaking into small groups based on colonial geographic constructs: “You’re trying to put squares into circles” she spoke out of frustration, “but they will never fit!” Further arguing that “Everything can fit into the circle”, she proposed that the big differences we were confronting could only be worked through in the form of a talking circle, where all voices are welcome. And that it takes time to listen, to speak honestly, to work through the tensions to come to some sort of consensus, or at least mutual understanding.

Circles have often shaped my own approach to teaching and learning, harkening back to Paulo Freire’s “cultural circles” in the Brazilian literacy classes of the 1960s that were the subject of my doctoral thesis. Or perhaps even further back to the dining room table, where my parents instituted Family Council Meetings (a talking circle around a rectangular table!). There I learned how democratic process could even inform family decisions, with us children having a say around issues like household chores or vacation plans. Not that we always got our way, but at least we were heard…!

Storytelling

Storytelling was the primary form of knowledge sharing in the Moment Workshops. Countering abstract academic discourse, the resource people we invited often grounded their presentations in their own personal stories. From Anishinaabeg Maddy Harper recounting her traumatic experience with residential schools to Inuit Susan Iglukark sharing her personal loss of young friends to suicide.

Ten year later, when we brought the educator/artists of the VIVA! Project to Toronto, storytelling again was central to our exchange. For Day of the Dead in 2003, we in fact met at the same Native Canadian Centre to share our diverse beliefs around death through stories. Panamanian educator Jesús Alemáncia, for example, offered a story of the ceremonial burning of cacao at both the birth and death rituals of his family in Guna Yala.

Jesús Alemancia at the Native Canadian Centre for our Day of the Dead storytelling

Even more recently, I have promoted storytelling as a core research method in the Earth to Tables Legacies Project, grounding the photo essays and videos in our educational website. And now, as I dig into my own memories to write my personal history, I find myself trying to craft my own form of storytelling for these memoir vignettes.

Good storytelling, however, also requires good listening, and I recall non-Indigenous participants in the 500 years workshops complaining that we had to sit as long as an hour while an Indigenous elder spoke. As an organizer of the workshops, I also found myself looking at my watch, anxious that we might not get through the whole proposed agenda in the allotted three hours, as a speaker dragged on. Why were we so adverse to listening for longer than a sound bite? Perhaps we were uncomfortable with what we were hearing – often learning about the destructive and damaging impacts of colonization. Listening that required us to consider our own ancestors' complicity in this history. And our own responsibility to redress it in the present.

Fast forward to our current Legacies project. As Chandra, Rick and Ryan introduced us to the Great Law of Peace in Haudenosaunee philosophy, I was reminded that Elder Jake Swamp would take as long as ten days to recite the Great Law. Once again, we clash around conflicting notions of time. I think, too, of my friends who complained when they had to listen to the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address offered in its original Mohawk language. We get restless listening to even fifteen minutes of this prayer in a language we don't understand. Yet how long have Indigenous people had to listen to the languages of the colonizers? Although I understand this intellectually, I still find myself anxious when my plan for a Legacies gathering or zoom conversation gets waylaid by someone's brilliant intervention that takes up time and offers unexpected insights. I have to learn over and over how to let things flow organically.

Awakening the voice of Indigenous women

We brought other artistic forms of storytelling into the 500 Years Workshop as well. Guna and Rappahannock playwright Monique Mojica performed excerpts from her play "Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots," a creative retelling of colonization through the eyes of Indigenous women. She revived the character of Malinche, the translator and mistress of Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortez. Malinche is at the same time credited with starting the Mestizo race in Latin America and cursed as the one who sold everybody out. Monique's re-embodiment of Malinche rang out with anger and strength:

Puta! Chingada! Cabrona! India de mierda! Hija de tu mala madre! Maldita Malinche!

They say it was me betrayed my people. It was they betrayed me!

I am the only one can speak to the Maya, to the Mexica. It is my words that are of value.

I am christened Doña Marina. They call me "Princess." I am a gift claimed as value by this man in metal. I can change the words. I have power. Now I ride at the side of Cortez, the lady of the conquistador.

Smart woman. I am a strategist. Dangerous woman.

Besides turning upside down the stereotype of Indigenous women, Monique's performance marked the beginning of an important friendship for me. I was so moved by her deep probing and powerful voice that a few years later I invited her to bring the one-woman play to York University for International Women's Day. I remember that it felt quite different to see and hear her embodied passion in a university space compared to her performance in the basement of the Native Canadian Centre. A kind of travesty. Monique brought a counter-story of colonization into a major colonial

institution in a visceral form that rattled rationalist academic discourse – long before there was a public conversation about “indigenizing the university.”

I followed Monique’s excavating of her own Guna roots in the early 2000s, through her play “Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way.” She invited me to rehearsals when she was still workshopping the play. I was intrigued with how she articulated her dramaturgy methods as based on Guna epistemology, a way of thinking and creating revealed in the famous molas. Guna women create molas for their blouses by cutting into multiple layers of cloth, what they call “painting with scissors.” Monique constructed her play in layers as well, a way of knowing, thinking and being distinct from conventional dramaturgy. The mola methodology itself carried a deeper message, which she has articulated in a recent book, co-authored with Brenda Farnell.

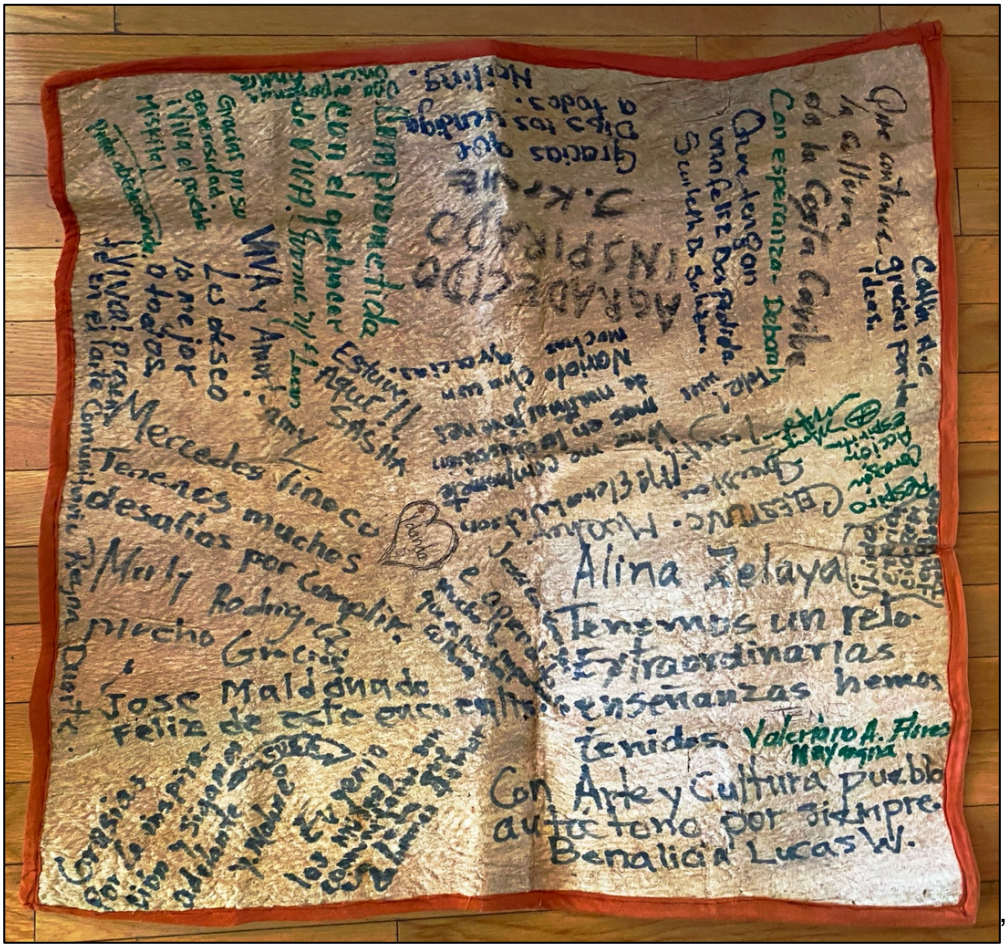
A mola made from 6 layers of colourful cloth, the design created by cutting through 1 to 5 of the layers.

Coincidentally, at the time that Monique was creating this play, I was coordinating the VIVA! Project, an exchange of popular educators and community artists in the Americas (2003-2010). I had dreamed up this exchange with my dear friend Raúl Leís, co-founder of CEASPA, a major popular education centre in Panama that had inspired my own shaping of The Moment Project in the mid-1980s. When we officially launched the VIVA project in 2003, Raúl pulled out, arguing that Panama should be represented by Jesús Alemancia, CEASPA’s first Guna director. I felt abandoned at the time, deeply disappointed that Raúl would not bring his special energy to the project. Jesús came to our first gathering in Canada, when all partners identified a community arts project to reflect on and document. He proposed recovering the story of a series of art workshops

with Guna children in the 1970s, a cultural revitalization led by José Colman, the first Guna professionally trained in theatre.

Monique had also discovered José on her trips to Guna Yala. She invited him to Toronto in the spring of 2010 to direct her Chocolate Woman play, along with Guna painter Achu de Leon Kantule and Guna musician Marden Paniza. In a poignant example of how our relationships intertwined, I found myself with these four artists in my spiral garden in April 2010, creating a ceremony to mourn and celebrate our common friend Raúl on learning of his tragic and untimely death in Panama. The Guna artists remembered Raúl as a great defender of Indigenous peoples, honoured with the Guna name Olotilakiler which means “Señor of the Bees” (coincidentally my name “Deborah” also means “bee!”)

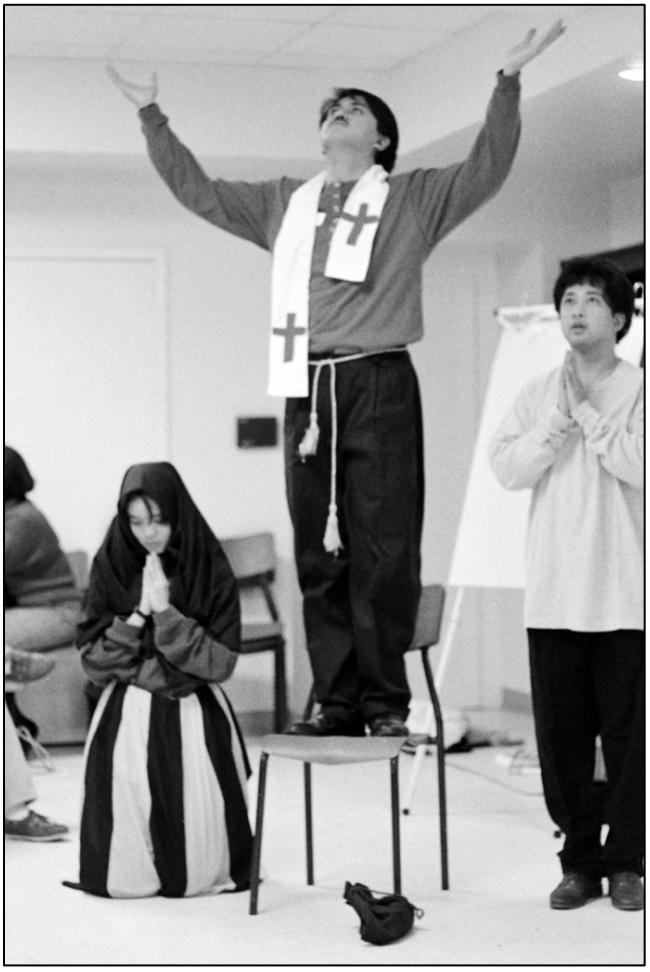
These intersecting passions and relationships led me to invite Monique to accompany me in 2010 to Bilwi, Nicaragua, where our Nicaraguan partner, Miskitu journalist Margarita Antonio, organized a cultural gathering and the launch of the Spanish edition of our collective book, *VIVA! El Arte Comunitario y la Educación Popular en las Américas.* Echoing the cultural dynamic of our Moment workshops, Margarita integrated ceremony, song, dance and bark drawing into the gathering which brought Indigenous educators and artists from around the country. (photo of bark drawing and of Miskitu dancers)



Bark drawing: "With Art and Culture, Autonomous People Forever"

Satirizing the colonization of the globe

Ever since the first 500 year workshop activity with the two-row wampum provoked a tension among us, we began a process of unpacking the boats and the canoes. We had to recognize the many different ways that settlers had arrived in Canada, from European ship owners to African slaves brutally chained in the galleys. In fact, we had consciously recruited participants from immigrant communities whose countries of origin also had a colonial history. In our December 1991 workshop, a Filipino theatre group, the Carlos Bulosan Workshop, represented through short skits their history of both Spanish colonization and U.S. Imperialism. Common among European colonial powers were the dual weapons of the sword and the cross. The Filipino actors represented the impact of Christianity in a form of satire:



(Chanted)
Do-mi-nus Fa-bis-cum

The first commandment:
Love and honour the friars above all.

The ninth and tenth commandment:
Do not deprive the priest
of your wife and property.

As I consider the impact of the Catholic Church on the Filipinos, I remember how my parents and brother spent a year working as volunteers at a Christian college in the predominantly Muslim Filipino island of Mindinao in the early 1980s. How my father, a retired protestant minister, was inspired by the radical Catholics he met there, who identified with the anti-colonial theology of liberation emerging within Latin American revolutions. It was through this lens of liberation theology that my parents were finally able to develop a deeper critique of the U.S. role in the Philippines and by extension in Latin America, where I was working at the time within the Sandinista revolution, which also allied with a more radical Catholic theology. This was a turning point in our relationship, when my parents began to understand and affirm my work in popular education in revolutionary contexts as congruent with this theology. In fact, it set them on to their next political adventure, serving as U.S. observers for the Nicaraguan election and organizing caravans of humanitarian aid to Central American liberation struggles through Pastors for Peace.

In late 1991, our Moment workshop steering group decided to use the play as a catalyst for digging into the ancestral histories of participants, considering both similarities and differences between the Filipino experience and those in other colonial contexts. The collective creation of small groups was in itself fraught with tensions about identities and the contradictions of a complex global history. We ended up breaking into nine groups:

First Nations of Turtle Island, Central and South America, Caribbean, African, Greek Cypriat, Asian, Jewish, Southern European, British Isles. Talk about apples and oranges, and nuts and whales….! Just the naming of the groups reflected both the racist mapping of the colonial process as well as resistance to such labelling. The monolithic naming, for example, of the tremendously diverse continents of Africa and Asia. Not surprisingly, the tiny British Isles drew a large group of participants because of Canada's history as a British colony.

Small group discussions at the 500 Years workshops in the basement of the Native Canadian Centre

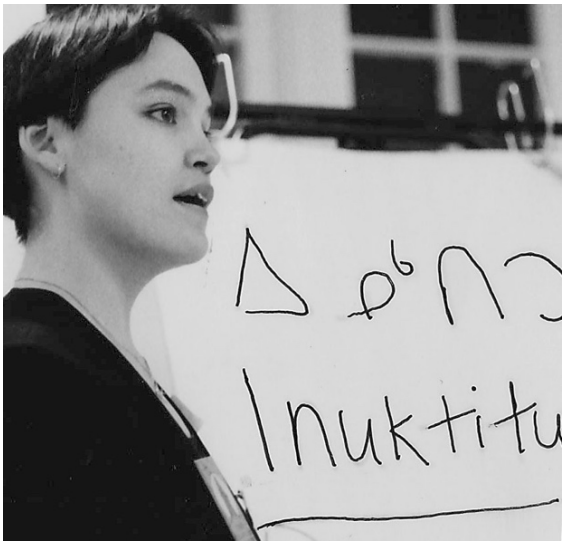
While these discussions raised more questions than they answered, they had several important outcomes. First, they deepened our critical analysis of colonial categories; secondly, they exposed common colonial experiences beyond the Canadian context (some immigrants were Indigenous from other colonized countries); they compelled all participants to dig into their own ancestries, a life-long process; and they identified the shared experiences of racism that both First Nations and refugees or immigrants of colour shared in the white colonial nation-state of so-called Canada. This last recognition led us to propose a second series of workshops for 1992-1993, to dig deeper into racism.

As I write this now in 2021, I realize how the language and the discourse around race has changed. Thirty years ago, while we were trying to name the power dynamic between and among settlers, and between and among Indigenous participants, we were not yet framing it within the ideology of "white supremacy." While many of us may have had the sentiment and analysis, we didn't even have that language. Nor did we use the word "Indigenous", adopting rather the state term "Aboriginal" or the more colloquial "Native." There was not yet a building of alliances between Black Canadian settlers and Indigenous activists, as we are seeing today. And thanks to Indigenous leaders like Secwepemc Dawn Morrison, an early advisor to the Legacies Project, I now speak of

“so-called Africa” or “so-called Canada,” emphasizing the arbitrary and racist acts of both “mapping” and “naming.”

Only recently in the Legacies project are we exploring the growing alliances now identified as BIPOC, following the protests of the killing of George Floyd. We organized one of our monthly zoom conversations among collaborators around a dialogue between Leticia Deawuo, director of Black Creek Community Farm and a grass-roots leader in the Black Food Justice movement and Chandra Maracle, Haudenosaunee food leader at Six Nations. The year 2020 has been equated with both the horror of COVID-19 as well as the more hopeful uprisings against pipelines and anti-Black racism that have brought together not only Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour but also an increasing number of white allies or accomplices.

Song and language



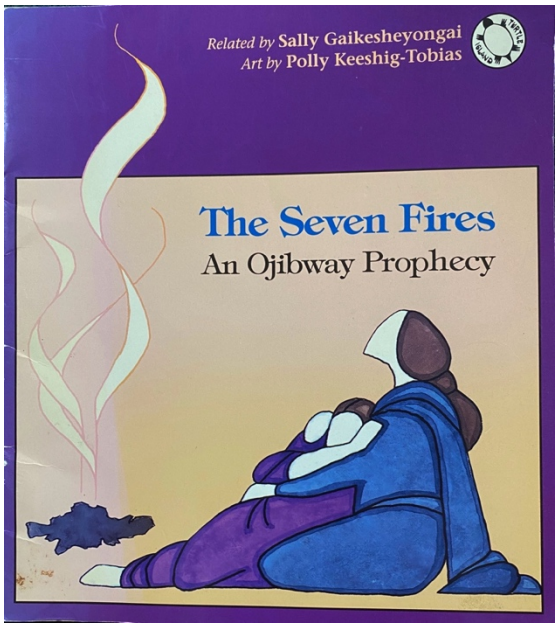
An unexpected musical performance came with the speaker representing the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami in the March 1992 workshop. The Inuit leader Mary Simon sent in her place her young assistant Susan Aglulark, a rising musical star, and now a mature and respected artist in Canada. When we coaxed her to sing in Inuktitut, she also shared the beautiful graphics of her language.

While we were in tears listening to Susan sing, she was in tears as she recounted the rising rates of youth suicide in the Arctic. I was reminded again of how invisible the north is to us living in the southern part of this vast country.

A couple of years later, I co-supervised the PhD thesis of Barbara Cassidy, an Indigenous student of Dine/Navajo and Irish ancestry. Red-haired, she challenged the “lookism” of Indigenous identity that often discounted anyone who didn’t have a long dark braid. But her major contribution was to reframe the suicide Susan had spoken of as “genocide.” One more student who became my teacher, one more prophetic voice breaking the silence, before that word, too, became mainstream.

October 12, 1992: Giant Puppets and the Seventh Fire Prophecy

In the last months of our workshop series, we focused on the kinds of actions we could take individually and collectively to support Indigenous rights, describing our efforts ”in solidarity with” and not yet shifting our responsibility to “decolonize ourselves and our institutions.”



One proposal was to use the “moment” of the so-called celebration of Columbus’s “discovery” on October 12, 1992, to further educate the public about the five centuries of colonization and resistance we had been learning about over eight months. At our very first workshop of the series in October 1991, Anishnaabe leader Sally Gaikeezhayangai had shared with us the Ojibwe Prophecy of the Seven Fires. It was revolutionary in several ways. First it offered a retelling of history that did not follow the conventional chronological linear timeline by years or decades or centuries, but rather defined eras reflecting major shifts in social relations, framed metaphorically as fires.

The First Fire refers to the time before colonization, when the First Peoples lived according to the Original Instructions: to live in harmony with all living things (the plant, animal and mineral families), with equal and complimentary relations between men and women, youth and elders.

By the Fourth Fire there is a warning of the coming of another race, while the Fifth Fire signals the arrival of the Europeans along with their hierarchies based on race and sex. The Sixth Fire refers to both the loss of culture along with the resistance or struggle to keep it alive.

Sally Gaikeezhayangai speaking and chatting with other Indigenous participants, March, 1992

A new generation emerges in the Seventh Fire to reclaim their culture, while the Eighth Fire represents the hope for reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers. While in 1992, we were perhaps more clearly in the Seventh Fire, we might be moving

toward the Eighth Fire now. A time when we must all choose between continuing destructive ways or finding ways to live in peace and harmony.

This powerful prophecy got interpreted into two different art forms. First the Moment Project's resident artist Carlos Freire synthesized it in a cartoon story, which we then submitted to SisterVision Press who published it.

The second reincarnation of the story came in the form of a performance for a major public event at the Native Canadian Centre on October 12, 1992. During the late summer and early fall, a group of us gathered in the basement of the Jesuit Centre to produce visual props for this re-enactment. Steering Group committee member Chris Cavanagh asked Sally Gaikeezhayangai to retell the story of the Prophecy of the Seven Fires and invited Anishinaabeg artist Ron Momogeeshik Peters to lead the collective process to create a storyboard and props for the performance of this story. Ron's two-hour introduction surprised us organizers and once again forced us to adapt our schedule. But in retrospect, Chris and I agree that Ron's powerful speech broadened everyone's understanding of the history, culture, and Indigenous art. It also deepened their commitment to a collective co-creation, which welcomed the contributions of all participants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. In some ways, I wonder if the resulting aesthetic fusions prefigured the spirit of reconciliation of the Eighth Fire. I

I'm not sure that we could experience the same intercultural collaboration today. We are witnessing a burgeoning of Indigenous art and artists, who are reclaiming space and leading the way. Countering colonial practices of projects being led by non-Indigenous artists, there is a new commitment to programs controlled by Indigenous leaders.

In the summer of 1992, Chris had brought Vermont-based Bread and Puppet Theatre to Toronto to mount their mass participatory performance for the quincentennial, "The Columbus Trilogy: The New World Order." Inspired by their signature large puppets and masks, Chris encouraged our art-making workshop to imagine such impressive figures and invited those who had participated with Bread and Puppet to join in constructing them. The piece de resistance was a humongous trickster figure, Xixwe, which led the procession and public gathering on October 12 in the Native Canadian Centre.

Over three weekends, 50 people were drawn to this process. It took on the character of an Indigenous gathering, families participating fully and bringing food to share. Ron came with his partner Norene Christie and daughter Quill Christie-Peters, now a major artist in her own right. Today she describes her father's contribution to the Seventh and Eighth Fire in these terms:

> *Father, you are still so bright. When they stole all of the little Anishinaabeg bodies, the colour of our world reminded them of the hollowness of theirs. They cut you open to gaze upon your bright red blood, but they could not take the colour from your skin. Now you splash colour across canvas and we both laugh deeply into our bellies. We are all that they could never contain. (https://canadian art.ca/essays/stardust-and-blood-by-quill-christie-peters/)*

Chris and I remember our anxiety as we gathered at the Native Canadian Centre on the significant date of Oct. 12, 1992, while Spain and other colonial powers were spending millions to recreate and celebrate Columbus's epic voyage to the "new world." Would anyone come? The large room begin to fill up until there was not even space for a procession of big puppets among the crowds. The room vibrated with the pulsating rhythms of the EagleHeart Singers.

EagleHeart Drummers at Oct. 12 celebration in the Native Canadian Centre

The tree sculpture, masks and puppets made their way to the stage and we relived the Ojibwe prophecy but in a new way. Perhaps just by being there together to honor the "Stories of 500 years of resistance and survival." What "together" would mean for the next 500 years is still to be determined. It is up to all of us.

Large puppets in the background of Oct. 12 Celebration