

## Practice-Based Research as Reciprocal Protocol: Constellations of Care in *The Seventh Fire*

Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen

*Constellation 1: The sounds of a warm fire crackle, voices laugh, drawing the audience—who we acknowledge as visitors—in from the foyer into the 4D sound system of the Lobe presentation space for *The Seventh Fire*,<sup>1</sup> an eighty-minute immersive audio performance inspired by ceremony, serving as a portal to dreams and the story of sisters Daanis and Nimise, and their grandmother Nokomis. As we enter the space, we walk under cedar boughs and the studio transforms into a lodge. Lighting suggests early dawn. More cedar, some boughs resting in a circle in the centre—a nest disguised as a fire. Dark mats spin out from the centre like petals. Some chairs hold the outer area of the lodge. A “Lodge Keeper” hands out blankets and smaller cushions as visitors settle in. They are invited to lie down, stand, or sit for the duration of the piece; their comfort is their prerogative. The fire sparks and the lodge darkens, a feeling of shadow.*

This place. This lodge. . . is made for dreams.

As a theatre maker, I am learning that my research practice comes from within. It comes from a practice of beingness that we as Indigenous people have carried for millennia; it’s a practice that we’re remembering and it’s a practice of reclaiming and it’s a practice of ongoing defiance and peacekeeping. We keep the peace because we understand what it is to lose access to our privilege: forced onto small plots of land, waiting in the silence until our children return to us season after season, to not know how to enter a lodge or hold a pipe or speak a greeting that our great-grandmothers can understand.

*The Seventh Fire* is a new theatre form, and it was a long journey to realize it, birthed through many women’s hands, particularly with sound designer Mishelle Cuttler and a matriarchal creative team. Could we create a show that would allow our visitors to experience feeling how I feel after I’ve done ceremony? How could we invite visitors to connect to the medicine that lives within them in order to co-create a future we all need? Our deep collaboration involved myself and our associate sound designer/technical director as Anishinaabekwe artists; the rest were settler and racialized artists: all questions were always welcomed and always considered. And as is frequently the case with theatre, questions often centred around whether or not settler audiences would understand, whether they needed more or less (insert blank here). Eventually, I realized I wasn’t making this for them, I was making it for us—for my Anishinabek and Cree and prairie cousins, and also for my Coast Salish relations on whose territory I have been visiting for over thirty years.

*Constellation 2: Land acknowledgements are actually a very old protocol. The ones that have become common pre-show speeches are only a part of a longer and much more enmeshed practice. The protocol acknowledges the way that the land meets itself and our relationship to that meeting. We speak our names as a way to acknowledge our lineage of responsibility—who we are representing and who we are responsible to. We speak our intentions so that the circle holds*

---

**Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen** is a tawny mix of Ojibwe/Swampy Cree and English/Irish. She is a mother, multi-hyphenate theatre artist, and scholar working across Turtle Island as a performer, playmaker, director, writer, dramaturge, curator, space-holder, and teacher. Lisa is an Associate Artist with Full Circle: First Nations Performance and Advisor for Indigenous Futures at the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival.

*us accountable. We often bring gifts. For The Seventh Fire, we acknowledged that we have come from the four directions, arriving to this land between ocean, river, and mountains. Sometimes we mentioned all the things that happened in our many-year journey and how the land has held us and our growing relationships to one another through it. We also mentioned the cost of our presence to the host nations and we sometimes presented the other communities close by (Chinatown, Hogan's Alley, Downtown Eastside) and the communities affected by the colonial project called "Canada." This was our reciprocal action. This show is our gift.*

### **What's the point in carrying something for people who don't even care?**

I have heard theatre teachers and leaders speak of theatre spaces as sacred when, in fact, theatre spaces are the opposite for some of us; in particular, they dispossess Indigenous bodies. Alongside this, the story lineage of "Canadian" theatre replicates the oppressive supremacist systems that birthed them. What is sacred is our first relation: the first fire. Star people. Animal and plant nations who kept (and keep) us alive. The embodied treaty of Indigenous theatre practice activates the sacred relationship between story and spirit through reciprocity. We can't assume ownership when we are only carriers and keepers, when our modes of research enact things like ancient protocol, lineage, ancestorship, and stewardship. Our research becomes a constellative assertion of story sovereignty, privileging what's been lost or forgotten. There is no new land to discover; there are only new relationships to honour so that each show is an act of recovery and remembrance. And each time we enter a theatre or a rehearsal hall is a moment to recognize that we do not activate spaces; rather, we meet what has pre-existed our arrival.

*Constellation 3: The lights slowly shift and the lodge brightens enough for the Lodge Keeper to ceremonially walk clockwise around the room. They hand each visitor a small bundle of seven raisins (because eight hundred blueberries would never last the run). Each palm holds their small red cloth, tied with red yarn. A prayer is spoken in the language Anishinaabemowin, and together, they are invited to pause, to see one another and eat together. We feast our ancestors. Those who chose to, do.*

### **Biskaabiiyang. We return to ourselves . . . to the light that lives inside us.**

Research as reciprocal action reminds us that before we are storytellers, we must first practice being better story keepers. After all, we do this culturally each time we ask our Elders who we've been, who we are, and how to become an ancestor the future needs. With or without theatre, the lineage of our sacred stories occupies our bloodlines and speaks through us. When we aren't busy monopolizing and extracting, we practice honouring the story bundles of our flesh. Some of us in Ndn Country are starting from scratch, thanks to the legacy of political dispossession (of land and language and lived ancestral knowing). Colonization has taught us that harm is a cultural right. We take our losses out on each other: we stop inviting, we stop allowing, we compete and grapple with the extractivism of our practice with every grant and invoice and award. We forget that long before Aristotle, Shakespeare, or Beckett, each gathering invited us to be in relationship with the sacred.

Can theatre create softer spaces where an ethos of care is equally necessary for a braver, more embodied theatre experience? Artistic Indigenous sovereignty has the potential to reject and disrupt predominant practice-based research systems so that a collective practice that honours feelings, protocols, colonial and decolonial needs, and lateral power dynamics can be legitimized in both the academic and the artist practitioner. Rather than separate the practice from the research, ancient protocols can guide us toward more fulsome contemporary relationality so that with each story, with

each teaching, with each exchange, we unlearn in order to do the undoing. Even the simplest of protocols—meeting the sunrise or asking Elders for guidance—is a circular venture that honours these notions: seek/receive/enact. Repeat. Perhaps, if we do this, political notions like “land back” might evolve theatre spaces to activate somatic care for body, mind, and spirit. Carrying such notions, practice-based research begins to invite and enable new and necessary care structures through reciprocal financial, hierarchical, and political actions of care, all while reclaiming and gathering sacred stories that assert Indigenous artistic sovereignty.

*Constellation 4: At the end of the piece, final words of thanks are spoken. Then the Lodge Keeper closes the circle by completing one final clockwise walk around the space, raising their hands to all their relations, to thank them for journeying with us, to honour the light in each visitor and the ancestors who have shared in this telling with us. This is the ceremonial way; it is our responsibility to seal this shared experience in the time and place it occurred. There is no applause, only the collective experience. Natural light spills in as the door opens. Visitors depart in their own time. It is more often quiet than not after each show. The cloth and ties are returned to a traditionally woven basket that sits beside tokens of the four elements: fire, water, earth, and air. Freshly made cedar tea awaits.*

**I am grateful for what I carry inside, for the medicine I am. Aho.**

### **Note**

1. Drawing from Anishinaabe stories and oral traditions, artist Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen invokes sound and story as the somatic link to ancestral realms. This new creation blurs time and space, bringing emotional and ancestral connection into being through deep collaboration. *The Seventh Fire* takes place in past, present, and future, above and below the earth. It is the realm of the spirit, where a better future can be co-conceived.