

Question and Answer Summary

Unceded Expressions: Seeing Yourself Reflected Back on Your Own Territory

with Faith Sparrow-Crawford and Salia Joseph

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Q: You're talking about Vancouver having tried to make shifts, or maybe they haven't taken it far enough. Could you speak more to that—if you are seeing shifts happening, where the positives are and where they could be going further.

Salia: Yeah, even the airport example, which used to be such a polarizing example. Some of Bill Reid's biggest pieces ever are in there, multi-million dollar art acquisitions. But now, the first things you see are large-scale weavings from Faith's Auntie, Robin Sparrow, and a huge spindle whirl installation from Susan Point. It's not without care and consideration.

I tend to not emphasize the good work of a colonial body itself but rather commend the soldiers within it that are forcing the needle forward. People within the city, like Salish individuals such as Dionne Paul, and other forces have been advocating and pushing things forward. There's also enough advocacy from our Nations that continues to move the needle.

Like Faith mentioned, there's a growing interest in recognizing MST people here. I think some people do it out of tokenization to check a box. I think some people do it out of fear of not wanting to have backlash and get in trouble. But regardless of the intention, if the commissioning body—the people wanting the artwork—are working with us, we have all of our mandates laid out.

It doesn't necessarily matter where they're coming from, because we have our bottom lines in terms of how we work with artists. We ensure that we are the people working with the artists and can shield them from certain dynamics. That's a broad, sweeping response, maybe not super pinpointed, but it's still very varied.

Faith: Yeah, ultimately, there are so many good people on the ground trying really hard to change systems from within, which is thankless work and can be really soul-defeating, because you're up against systems that were really not built for that kind of challenge. It's important that Salia mentions that distinction of where the positives are. There are lots of positives, but it's because there are people who are being warriors for that kind of work, wanting to see that kind of revolution and change happening.

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We have been really lucky to have worked with such amazing people, bringing us into the fold, trying to make change. It hasn't always been easy—it's definitely challenging work. Oftentimes, people just don't really see that in spaces like development. Sometimes our voices aren't trusted. We are three young Native women, and sometimes we say things, nobody hears it; somebody else says the same thing, they hear it that time. But we're still going to be there saying it. And more and more people hear us the first time now. We're seeing and feeling a lot of change.

Participant shares experience of being a First Nations woman working in the Provincial Government in the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and not always being heard initially. She shared about her intention in her work of moving from “us vs them” to “we AND” or “Us-And” to create things that Government, First Nations and all Canadians see value in.

Faith: Thank you, that's really powerful words, thanks so much. It's important to think about the work that we're doing. Some folks really see it as, “Oh, you're doing work for your people.” The kind of work that you do is for Indigenous people only, and that can ring true for all the ways Native people work in different spaces. But really, we know that we're doing work for everybody. Our communities having a say, having sovereignty over our own territories, is for the benefit of everybody.

It's that idea of who holds the keys to the territory and promises this longevity. It's people who've been here the longest. Salia mentions this a lot—it's a frame of thinking that the late Leonard George spoke to about welcoming people on these territories as long as they're going to love the land the way his ancestors did, and our shared ancestors have, and that we are all working together in common cause for a better future. We are working for our children and your children. We're all working together for this. It might seem like the work we do is just ornamental, making the city beautiful, but really we're offering medicine and healing the territories for all of us.

Q: I love your passion! What are your thoughts for artists from other Nations (living in the lower mainland) that make a living at this time with sale of their works? Are you saying the pie is big enough?

Salia: Definitely. Faith mentioned earlier in the presentation that many Nations call Vancouver home, and we've had the pleasure of working on some developments where we've said it would be really beneficial to do a call for just Host Nation artists for certain aspects of the development, and then do a broader call for urban Indigenous artists in other aspects so that it reflects the people that live here.

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In the Downtown Eastside, you have a gathering of Nations—people from all over Canada, including unhoused people who can't live in their territory because it's too cold. When we had a development there, we thought it was important to ensure a broader call to other artists as well because many people call this place home. It's not that we think other artists shouldn't make a living or have opportunities here—of course they should. Our issue is seldom with the artists, but with a city that has tried to use them to erase the Host Nations and, in turn, erase their responsibility to the people they have displaced and removed from their land. We take issue when other artists are being used to snuff out our own rights and identity here, but it's not an issue with the artists themselves. There are lots of opportunities and ways for collaboration.

Would it be appropriate for someone from a different Nation to erect a welcome figure for their nation at the doorstep of Musqueam's Reserve, or Squamish's Reserve, or Tsleil-Waututh? No. I wouldn't go and put a Squamish welcome figure in Old Masset on Haida Gwaii. There are protocols in terms of our responsibilities to each other as Nations, where certain things can cross the line.

For the most part, there are so many opportunities. I'm wearing beaded earrings from my Anishinaabe best friend. We adore and celebrate each other's design forms, and there's a lot of room for that.

Faith: Vancouver is such a metropolitan city—people from everywhere are here. The only thing our Nations are trying to assert is let's remember this is someone's territory, someone's ancestral home. Being able to assert that is important, but we also recognize that many people love this land the way we do and want to call it home. We welcome folks here. We've always been gracious hosts. Our doors have always been open to others, especially other Indigenous people who share struggles the way we do.

It's just knowing where the line is. We are in awe of so much beautiful work from other communities and want to see other artists thrive here as well. We are not exclusionary at all—we think there is a way to honor both.

Q: Can you highlight a few more specific steps that people working in more admin-like roles can take to support artists? Are there any steps that either surprised you as really effective or that you just want to highlight again?

Faith: Honestly, for us, the most important thing we ground ourselves in is making sure we're maintaining a relationship and being as responsive to that relationship as possible. We never claim to be 100% experts on the golden standard of how you work with MST people. The only thing we claim is that we will consistently work to make sure we're responsive to artists' needs,

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keep our ears open, constantly learn, make mistakes, and continue to grow. The real core of that for us is staying in relationship with people—not just listening but adapting.

We alter our relationship to artists all the time, making sure we're following their specific needs, listening to what they're saying, staying in relationship, and taking those extra steps. Sometimes that means building a relationship from the ground up, meeting somebody new, and advocating for that to be embedded in your work. It can be challenging to convince people we're working with that this is necessary. Sometimes they see it as extra work or volunteer work, not something we should be paid for. But we try to make space for people to embed relationship into their work. The most important thing for us is staying connected to our people throughout our work.

Salia: In terms of tangible things, it's really a lot of relationship building. We're the only public art consultancy in our territories that's Indigenous-run and specifically working on public art. There's one other doing more architectural embedded design work. Before, all the rest of the public art consultants our nations reached out to were non-Indigenous. They had to go outside our nations to get that skill—someone who knew how to manage a public art budget and create an art plan. It's new for our nations to have people doing that in-house, and hopefully more of that can happen. It's been a learning curve, but there are certain things that can't really be taught to somebody who's not from these communities—our protocols and who we are. You can't teach lived experience. You can't teach somebody to be *skwxwú7mesh* or *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* or *səlílwətał*. It's who you are, who you're born as. So lots of public art consultants have to bring in Indigenous people to do parts of the job that we do in-house. It's still a big learning curve, and there's still lots of devaluation of us and our work, but we keep trucking along despite the challenges.

Q: I'm calling in from a small nonprofit on the North Shore on Tsleil-Waututh territory. I was curious because a lot of the scale we've been talking about today is really big—Nation-to-Nation. But I think everyone can be part of the amazing work you're talking about, and I'm wondering: for smaller nonprofits, what kind of approaches would you suggest for smaller pieces, so we can still be part of it but within a budget that works for a nonprofit?

Salia: Relationship building is invaluable. In Tsleil-Waututh territory, what are ways you could incorporate Tsleil-Waututh ways of being, knowing, and knowledge systems into what you do? Where are opportunities to bring in people from the nation beyond just the welcome? Openings and welcomes are good, but when can we also move into spaces where people from the nations are speakers and knowledge contributors to the events themselves? Once you create those relationships and they start to be sustained, it becomes easier to think about how to involve people moving forward. It starts with relationships first, and then it can move to working with artists or creating projects.

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I don't know what the specific nonprofit is or what you do, so it's harder to know exactly how to incorporate specifics. But relationship building and networking is the first step.

Faith: If you were speaking directly about commissioning art, it's about looking at scale and what's appropriate. You can talk to artists and talk to us—we're open to conversations about what's appropriate and how to work with artists in a good way. It's about being responsive and knowing what can and can't be done, and not asking artists to conform to something you have, but rather asking: how can I support an artist?

To connect with Salia and Faith at Host Consulting check out their website:
<https://www.hostconsultinginc.com/>

Host: Thank you both. Salia and Faith, this was very informative and will have a big impact on everyone who attended today. We really appreciate you joining us and speaking today.

Salia: It's an honour for us to be involved with the First Peoples Cultural Council because they're crucial for language revitalization and art revitalization in the province. Neither one of my fields—language or arts—could do what it does without FPCC's advocacy. We're really happy to offer this presentation and proud of the work you do. Thank you for having us and including us in your network.