

Indigenous Cultural Exchange: A Reflection

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Connecting Through Water

I am so grateful for being chosen to experience this amazing Indigenous Cultural Exchange to Australia and New Zealand. I feel as if there were a lot of worries, concerns, and anxieties for the whole group pre-departure. This program is relatively new and there were still a lot of unknowns close to the trip date. I did know that I was excited to return to Australia, see a little more of it and return to some previous locations, and I was excited to see New Zealand for the first time. I was looking forward to seeing these locations from the Indigenous perspective and connection to the land and water. I went into this trip not knowing what to expect. I can say with full confidence that this trip exceeded my expectations as it will for every other student who has the opportunity to experience this program. It's almost impossible to put an amazing experience like this into words, but I will try.

All of my favourite experiences of the trip involved water. I have a spiritual connection to the water, and it was amazing to find others with that same unstoppable attraction to the water. In our first destination, Hobart, Tasmania, I got to re-connect with the friends I made with the group of Indigenous students and staff who participated in the inbound program. The thing that stood out to me the most was the new connections I had made with more Indigenous peoples in Tasmania, that felt as strong as the other relationships I attained prior to the trip.



While witnessing a “blend of music, visual imagery, storytelling, and scholarship, in a presentation/performance that utilized Coyote stories about the Columbia River and its tributaries as a springboard for examining the current state of river health” (University of Tasmania, 2019), from professor Chad Hamill, I learned about the Indigenization of academia. Indigenous professionals are trying to introduce traditional practices into education systems and make our different way of knowing valid. It brought to my attention a whole new way of

learning, a blend of modern academia and traditional Indigenous knowledge. A new way of learning that would be more relatable and accessible to myself and other Indigenous students. This changed the way I view my education. I also had a very educational experience at the Tasmania Museum and Art Gallery. We walked through the “tense past” about the history of the Pakana people of Lutruwita. I had very intense feelings because their dark history of their people is so similar. With our similar history, we were all healing together.

We travelled around the beautifully pristine island of Lutruwita (Tasmania) by bus, and we reached a spectacular place called the Bay of Fires. This was our first and our only chance to go for a swim in the Tasman sea. As clear as the ocean I was swimming in, I knew that this is exactly where I was supposed to be. The people, the land, and the water are what made this



experience so special in this location. The bonds that I have made on this trip are unbreakable. The connection to country that I witnessed and being welcomed by the traditional owners of the land created a necessary connection from me to the lands which I feel allowed me to understand the history and culture on a deeper level.

After multiple heartfelt goodbyes in Tasmania, our next stop was Sydney, Australia! While in Sydney, it was harder to connect to the land. I am not an urban person. I really had to use my imagination when listening to the stories of how their people used to live on the natural landscape, where now a big city stands. I got to learn through the stories and shared experiences. What stood out to me the most is how resilient and adaptable the Eora people of that land are. They have a beautiful community centre and an amazing Indigenous school program in the city.

I had been to Sydney before during my Study Abroad semester in the Gold Coast, about a year prior. It was amazing to be back in a famous city again, when I never thought I would have that chance. My 'borrowed sister' from the Australian family I lived with came to visit me during some free time in Sydney, I loved seeing her again. When I was visiting it before, I was all alone. I decided to buy a treat for myself from this bakery at the Sydney Harbour to cheer myself up. I was all alone in a big city and feeling homesick. I walked two steps outside went to take the first bite and a seagull dive bombed me and threw the pastry out of my hands. I was very sad and couldn't afford another one. This last trip, Matty joined me at the bakery and I bought another delicious treat from the exact same shop. This time I stayed inside and guarded my pastry fiercely. I was able to laugh at the hard time I had experienced prior, because this time I was not alone.



It was nice to return to a city but see it through an Indigenous lens. I got to experience Indigenous activities that were unavailable for me the the previous year. We got to experience an amazing boat cruise around the famous Sydney Harbour based on Aboriginal history. We viewed tourist sites like the opera house and the Sydney bridge. My favourite part of the cruise was hearing stories about how the Aboriginal people lived on the untouched banks and lived of



the water. We stopped at a small island where we heard more stories, listened to the yidaki (didgeridoo), and viewed some traditional dancing. We got to experience traditional practices in a very urban environment which was unique. At the university of Sydney we participated in a smoking ceremony and heard a fantastic lecture from

professor Lynn Riley. Lynn showed us her beautiful kangaroo cloaks that she made only recently, which taught me that it is truly never too late to learn your culture. She invited all Aboriginal people from across Australia to put on a cloak to show us the diversity and the unity. For me this symbolized the Aboriginal flag, all nations are connected and are represented together. Later in the week, we had the chance to get out of the city to a beautiful place called La Perouse. Where we got to collect shells on the beach, weave grass bracelets, go to a cultural museum, and eat at a nice restaurant overlooking the ocean.

We also got to do more things that I was unable to do on my last trip to Sydney. One thing I was sad missing was visiting the famous Bondi Beach. Being at the beach made my heart sing, I was skipping and jumping around. It was hot in the Australian winter and I was having the best time with two of my close friends on the trip.



After our afternoon at the beach, we went to a local rugby league game! We got to run around on the field after the game. Matty and I both play rugby so we were running around and having a blast. Sydney was so much fun, and we really got to experience a lot.

This was my first time visiting Aotearoa (New Zealand), and it did not disappoint. I feel as though as soon as we stepped off of the plane we were encased with Maori culture. Although this was the shortest segment of the trip, it by far was the most intense culture shock. We learned that the Maori people exchange songs with their visitors to share thanks. One of the busses were told to prepare a song to complete our part in the welcome ceremony that was all done in traditional languages. Two different Indigenous groups honouring and respecting the other during our welcome to country.

The biggest culture shock was the communal living they do and that we had to try. They have a strong sense of community. The Maori live together in the traditional Marae and eat together in a hall. For the first time on our trip, the entire group had to sleep in the same room all together. People got the time to play card games, share stories, and I mostly spent my time weaving with the flax grass that Taimeka and I collected. It mostly rained when we were there so we spent a lot of afternoons cozied up in the Marae.



Songs hold a great importance to the Maori, and I related to that because I love learning my peoples songs and being able to share them. I had the amazing opportunity to perform my clan song to the Maori Princess. I was so nervous to sing for her, but I felt extremely proud to sing in my language and represent my people. This was the first opportunity to share or perform during the whole trip, and I truly loved this exchange. We also got to participate in a Maori immersion class, we went around the room and the Maori and non-Maori students explained why they are in this class and why it is important to learn traditional language. The answers were so touching, it definitely inspired me to learn more of my Dakelh language. They taught us an easy song in the Maori language which was very cool, I still remember how it goes.

We had the opportunity to participate in another class, which was a traditional dance class and was taught by the Maori Princess. We broke into different groups of students from the class



and our visiting group. We had around 20 minutes to create a performance. We created a song with Dakelh, Palawa Kani, Spokane, and Maori languages for the lyrics. We accompanied the song with guitar and traditional Maori dance moves. This was truly a unique experience and an excellent way to blend and learn about other cultures. The sharing of songs was important during this stop in our trip.

What stood out to me the most was learning more about the Maori culture and their history. I did not have much knowledge about the culture prior to the trip. Cultural immersion is one of the main reasons I wanted to participate in this trip. We learned about the dark history at the battle ground site during a war against the British colonizers. They now have an art installation at the site that represents all of the men, women, and children who had a part in the war. I liked to view it as a symbol of resiliency. We had the spiritual experience of walking through the Maori graveyard where their past royals are buried, in the heart of the Maori culture along the Waikato river. Water is very significant to them as well. I got to view all of the natural plants with traditional significance at the Maori themed gardens at the Hamilton Gardens. As well as unique architecture, for example a traditional seed storage building lifted off of the ground.



We were given a goodbye dinner and celebration on our last night at the University and at the Marae. We watched an amazing song, dance, and haka presentation from the students of the Tewaioira Waikato performance group. I had never seen anything like this. I could feel the energy and power, and it shook the whole hall. The night was filled with games, good food, pictures, performances, and lots of love. After the dinner, we migrated back to the Marae and closed off our time here in Waikato with a reflection circle. I was very emotional during this time. Again there is such similarities in our history, I knew that opportunities like this provide a space to heal and inspire together.

Our schedule got switched up a lot during our time here, it was necessary to be flexible. The plans changed for our travel day back to Auckland and our leaders voted to go to the



beach. I was ecstatic! This was our only chance to swim in the ocean and I thought that we were not going to have the chance. It was absolutely beautiful and it was so fun playing in the big waves at Ngarunui Beach in Raglan. My friends Taimeka, Jeremiah, and myself brought our stuffed moose, Tasmanian devil, and kiwi to the beach. The sky cleared up as we headed to a fisherman's wharf to eat seafood for lunch.

Matty and I had a late flight the next day. I chose to take the bus into Auckland CBD and take in some sights of the city. I really enjoyed New Zealand and I took every opportunity that I could to explore. It was really hard saying my goodbyes to everyone and the land, but after all of the fun, excitement, and emotions it needed to happen. I was sad to leave , but was I ever returning home with some stories though!

Returning Home

Returning home felt almost impossible at one point during the departure process in New Zealand after three weeks of being abroad. We made it to the airport with plenty of time to spare. Checking in, getting tickets, going through security, was all difficult for me and it seemed as if I was having a problem that held me back at every step. Matty stopped me in the airport, she told me that I was not acting like myself, and honestly I felt empty and didn't want to leave. She told me that I needed to call my spirit back to me because it was lingering in the places we have been, in the hearts of the people we had met, and crashing in the waves of the ocean we were leaving behind. Tears finally came to me, I knew it was time to leave, and I was finally able to. This was such a powerful and overwhelming experience. I am so grateful that Matty was there to help me through that experience.

The woman who returned to Canada was a whole new person more confident in her culture and with her identity. I know who I am, I know that I am Indigenous, and I don't need to prove that to anyone. Through this journey I turned into a traditional artist. I found a passion and I took that opportunity to learn all that I could, and when I returned home I searched for more opportunities to learn. I learned how to weave baskets, bracelets, and necklaces, and how to make jewelry with shells. I gathered grasses and shells from both Australia and New Zealand to continue creating traditional art back home. The woman who taught me how to create these types of art also inspired me to learn more about my own cultures art. I was able to join a moccasin making class on my homelands, on my reservation. I made these with my own hands for my dear friend Taimeka, my Muka Nawnta (ocean sister). She came swimming with me at every destination. I plan on continuing my traditional art journey and remembering all of the great lessons I learned on the trip.

