

'What is My True Path?': The Participants Quest in *Holy Bone*

by Shelby-Allison Hibbs

Photo 1: Urd in her sanctuary.

Photo: Alisa Eykilis

The framework of a traditional theatre experience encourages distance; through the “fourth wall,” an anonymous audience eavesdrops on the lives of characters and contemplates the actions of a play separate from their own circumstances. Conventional theatre cannot tailor itself for individual audience members unless that imagined “distance” and anonymity evaporate. If a work of theatre could transform the homogenous audience into individual participants, how would that kind of performance function?

Dead White Zombies (DWZ), an experimental performance ensemble in Dallas, Texas, elevated the individual’s role through a promenade performance entitled *Holy Bone*. Initially Thomas Riccio, Artistic Director of DWZ, conceived this project as a reaction to a series of arts venue shutdowns in 2016-17 due to Dallas building code violations. In order to utilize a space previously occupied as a “warehouse” for an “assembly,” the total number of occupants inside the space could not exceed thirteen people (including performers, technicians, and audience). These restrictions provided an opportunity to reconfigure the audience/performer relationship, significantly elevating the individual audience member’s role in a performance.

In the fall of 2016, DWZ produced “Phase 1” of

Holy Bone in retail stores and public places through Dallas, as unannounced happenings. The company infiltrated these spaces with scenes and interactions with an unsuspecting audience. In May of 2017, “Phase 2” of *Holy Bone* consisted of a formalized performance, operating subversively within the occupancy restrictions of thirteen people. I served as co-director for this project due to the geographical scope of a performance in six buildings. Instead of keeping the entire audience under thirteen each night, Riccio used multiple locations and move the audience from building to building. Inside each structure, performers operated “venues,” stations within the property that the audience encountered individually or in small groups.

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With this approach, 50 people could still experience the production by entering in small, continuous waves.

The restrictions also provided an opportunity to connect Riccio's performance research on indigenous groups [see TF8 and TF10] to western dramaturgical conventions, particularly the holistic nature of the human and spirit world. *Holy Bone* asserts that individuals recognize their active participation in the world; they are never a passive agent. The work also emphasizes the merger of the real and metaphorical, rather than compartmentalizing. *Holy Bone* places the individual participant as the protagonist of their own journey—or quest; this journey merged performance with the participant's real self rather than establishing an escapist imagined space as in other theatrical environments.

Riccio approached the project as a kind of "initiation," both for the performers as generative artists and for the audience to reconsider their role in a theatrical event. Riccio and I worked individually with each performer to create their venue and series of interactions with the audience. Working in this manner altered the performers' relationship to the work as they did not have the safety of a "fourth wall," unalterable dialogue, or scene partners; the performers were called to directly activate each audience member.

Holy Bone's approach to audience interaction eliminates the safety within traditional conventions—a handful of planned moments in which the audience can contribute. *Holy Bone* continuously positions the audience members in an active role: making choices, navigating a real Dallas neighborhood, offering embodied responses, and answering personal questions. In fact, it is incorrect to refer to the ticket buyers as an "audience" as that suggests a passive, receiving role in the work. Instead, this essay refers to the audience as "participants" to accurately reflect how the performance emboldened each person to engage at every step of the journey.

This essay examines how the performers crafted individualized experiences for each participant and the outcomes of pursuing truth from each participant. The sequence for *Holy Bone's* promenade includes thirteen separate venues and this essay focuses on five of those stations within the journey. *Holy Bone* begins with introspective questions, as a way to re-orient the participants from passive to active. The next series of venues emphasizes breaking

down psychological barriers (defense mechanisms and falsehoods), favoring authenticity and open hearts. The final series of venues re-calibrate the participant's perception of their life journey and make them whole for re-entry back into the world.

QUESTIONS

The expectations of an ordinary night at the theatre derail from the participants' arrival. The address listed for *Holy Bone* is not a theatre but a local taco joint. This area, Trinity Groves, is an emerging district formerly populated by warehouses and manufacturers. Several buildings have been purchased by developers to slowly turn into restaurants, retail, and luxury apartments. Cars speed in both directions as participants make their way to the first location. At the restaurant, Riccio meets each participant and makes sure that only a few people at a time start the journey. When the time arrives, Riccio teaches each small group a "pass gesture" (a physical movement to gain entry to some venues) and says, "611" indicating west down Singleton Blvd. "That's where your journey begins."

611 seems to have been unoccupied for some time. It is an unmarked building with a mint green door with peeling paint and rust. Metal grates cover the windows. Upon arrival at 611 some participants, unsure how they should proceed, turned to each other asking, "Do we knock?" Through a mail slot, a pair of eyes appears asking for the "pass gesture." Upon gaining entry, participants observe a menu with 24 questions written in chalk; the woman inside instructs each participant to select one of the questions for their journey ahead. [Photo 2] Riccio enjoys utilizing chance in DWZ's work, and by giving the audience choices like these questions, the participants

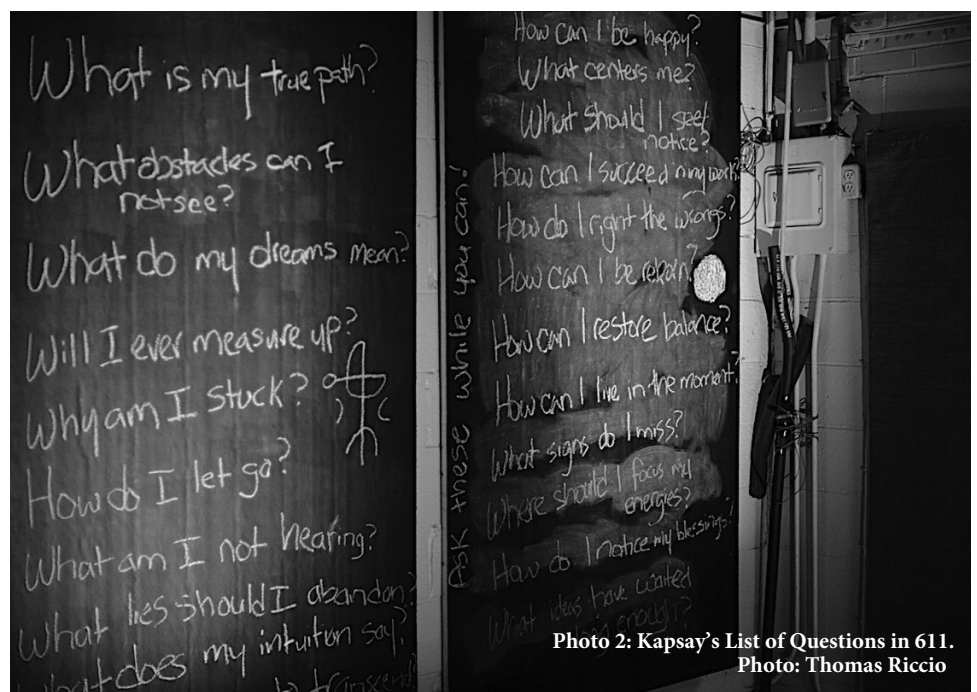


Photo 2: Kapsay's List of Questions in 611.
Photo: Thomas Riccio

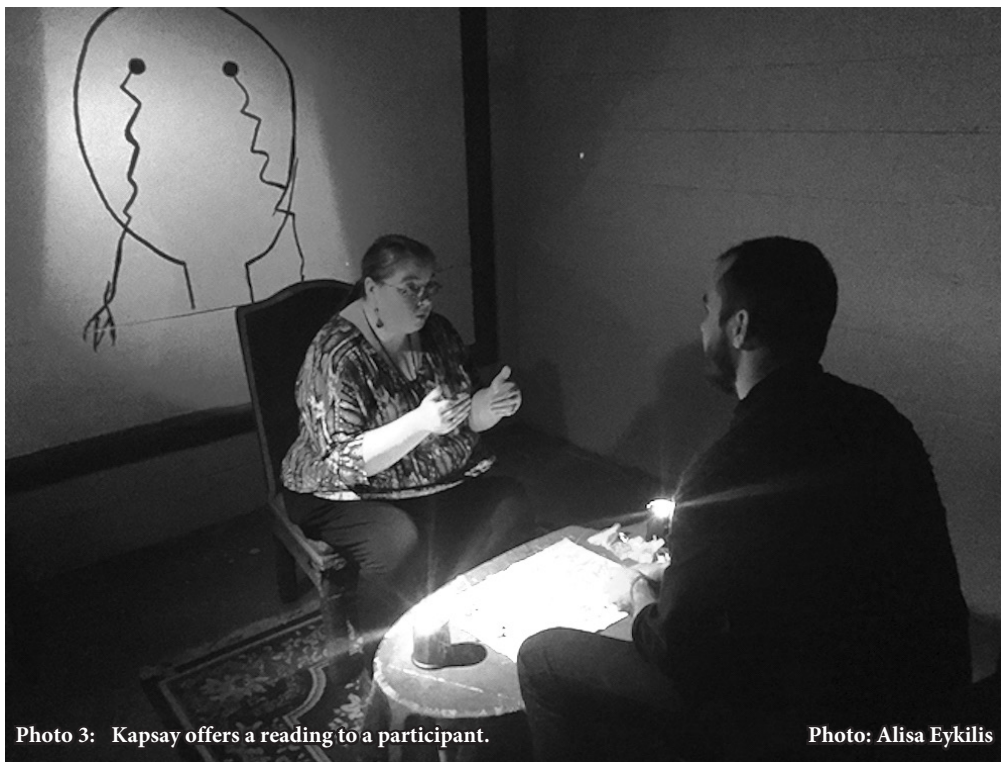


Photo 3: Kapsay offers a reading to a participant.

Photo: Alisa Eykilis

questions from the source material followed a “yes” or “no” format, but Culver altered the questions into open-ended phrasings to allow for multiple interpretations for the participants. She notes, “In divination, you only see questions in a handful of categories. There are ‘universal’ concerns and the questions are meant to reflect that.”

The questions coincide with the twelve other venues participants encountered through the evening. She notes, “So there were always questions for example about listening. ‘What am I not listening to?’ or

claim more ownership of the experience. Rather than simply watching a performance that others enact, the participants re-position themselves as seekers of the *Holy Bone* through the self-reflective questions

These questions instigate the introspective journey of each participant. The participants choose a question that seems to resonate with their current circumstances: “What is my true path? What do my dreams mean? What obstacles can I not see? Will I ever measure up? Why am I stuck? How do I let go? What should I see or notice? How can I live in the moment? What signs do I miss? How can I be reborn?”

DWZ performer Jennifer Culver, who portrays Kapsay in *Holy Bone*, created this list of questions to create a unique divination for the beginning of each participant’s journey. Culver has participated in DWZ productions previously in a similar role—using runes, dice, and stones to offer readings for audience members. She is a practicing pagan and teaches divination, but her work with DWZ serves a unique dramaturgical function to merge the participant’s real life with the performance. In previous DWZ productions, audience members had an option to meet Culver for a reading (some did not due to hesitancy towards divination); for *Holy Bone*, an individualized reading is compulsory. No individual was allowed to progress forward without selecting one of the questions for their personal journey and participating in a reading about that question.

Culver formed the list of questions, drawing inspiration from manuscripts like Napoleon’s Oracle. Before “Choose Your Own Adventure,” manuscripts like this point the reader to random pages to gain insight for decisions. The

‘What am I not hearing?’ That prepped them for Bailee [Rayle as Vig.] And questions like, ‘How do I pursue different desires?’ That prepares them for Stephen [Gardner as Que] and Charles [Ratcliff as Rem]. I looked at the audience’s journey and tried to find ways so that I wasn’t the only one answering their [selected] question, they were getting answers to their question at multiple spots.”

Once the participant chooses their question, they step behind a curtain to speak with Kapsay. [Photo 3] A few candles light the interior space with just enough room for a small table and two chairs; a fabric map with petroglyphs representing each future venue lay on the table. Kapsay sits with a collection of small fabric pouches—real bones from foxes, deer, squirrels, turtles and other animals. Culver chose bones as the material of her reading because they seemed to have the most authentic connection to *Holy Bone* as opposed to cards or runes.

Kapsay offers the bones and shells to each participant, instructing them to whisper their question into their palm and throw the objects on the map. The shells determine whether the question was a good choice for the participant; if the shells said “no,” Kapsay asked the participant to choose a new question. With the bones, Kapsay interprets what the participant should be mindful of during their journey, often in terms of listening, awareness, and focus. The combination of the question, type of bone, and position on the map offer unique insights; creating numerous potential readings for each participant. [Photo 4]

Through the selection of questions and an individual reading, a paradigm shift from observer to engaged participant occurs. This first venue establishes that the

participants will be asked to take this work quite personally and their full presence is necessary for the performance. Kapsay's questions establish that the subject of the work resides within the participant rather than something seen at a distance; the experience each participant has will be determined by the choices made by each individual.

BREAKING BARRIERS

From this point, the performers displace participants from comfort, intentionally agitating them with a sequence of venues. This section of *Holy Bone* suggests that in order to initiate one's self to a new consciousness, one must remove impediments such as fear, defense mechanisms, and a closed mind. These venues remove the safe barrier of anonymity, which can lead to disconcerting emotions.

After three other venues in "611," they move to another structure. To find the next venue, participants walk across an abandoned plot toward a boarded mechanic shop with a graffiti sign: "Area 51." As participants carefully progress into the building, motion-sensor lights flicker on; around the corner a solitary man in a suit stands by a desk, electric scale, and ficus tree.

"Hello I'm Agent Zay. I'll be processing you this evening." He evaluates the participants using a series of tests to see if they are open to the unexplainable. He asks them to complete physical tasks and answer nonsensical questions. He makes notes on each participant's response, like a doctor make notes in a patient file. Wes Ferguson (who portrays Agent Zay) notes, "Questioning always starts off with easily provided, concrete information like one would expect from

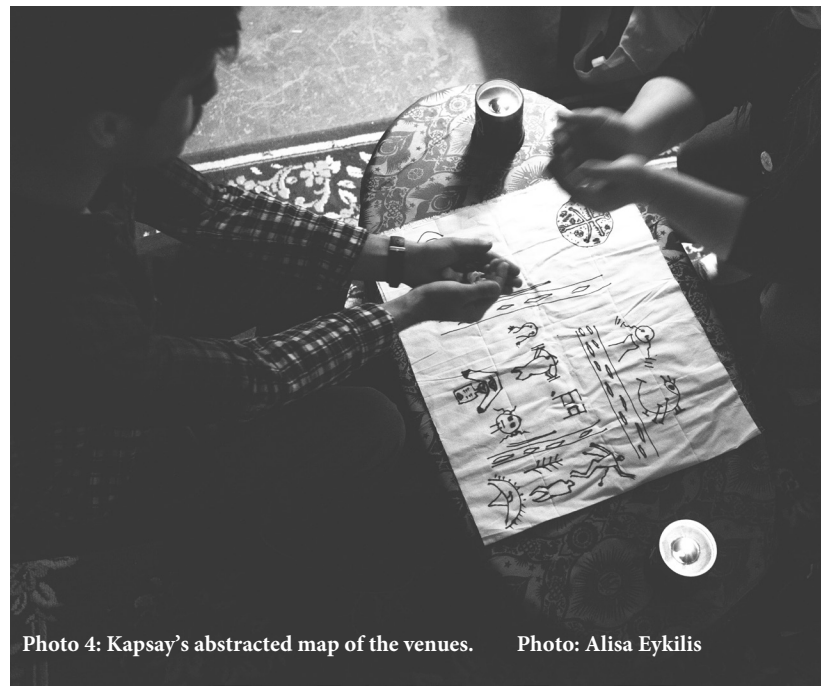


Photo 4: Kapsay's abstracted map of the venues. Photo: Alisa Eykilis

a government employee. For example, name, date of birth, time of arrival, etc. But then the questioning becomes more existential and abstract."

Some of these evaluations involved physical actions that forced the participant to consider the merger of the physical and metaphorical, such as inspecting a person's hand or listening to a stone with a stethoscope. [Photo 5] Zay also gave a series of impossible instructions, "Put your arms out, touch your index finger to your nose. Now take both thumbs and point them to the center of your belief system." Agent Zay aims to relinquish hostility or distrust to the unexplainable. "The goal with the interactions was to make the people aware of any combative behavioral responses that they might have been inclined to fall upon and realize that it was behavior that could be adjusted" (Ferguson). If Agent Zay approved their worthiness, he gave them a note with an address: 500 Singleton

For those who attended previous DWZ productions, this was no strange address. *Fleshworld* (2012) and *(w)hole* (2013) were produced at this venue, using much of the abandoned welding factory's work room. Like many buildings in the area, the copper wire and electrical infrastructure has been ransacked by criminal activity. For *Holy Bone*, a handful of puck lights illuminate a few spots in the empty space, but a solitary figure can be discerned. He seems to float in darkness as no other obstructions surround him. He calls out somewhat impatient, "Next in line, please." Each person must walk the dark path alone to reach this man's venue. Upon closer view, you can see that he smokes



Photo 5: Agent Zay inspects a participant's hand for metaphysical signs. Photo: Alisa Eykilis

a cigarette—almost like a noir scene; he’s not entirely alone, as a woman stands at his side.

The man in the chair is Que, he speaks only with questions targeted to the emotional core of each participant. Que asks, “So what brings you here?” The participant responds, usually with a literal response such as, “I’m here to see a play.” Que, played by Stephen Gardner, is not interested in surface-level conversation; he wants the participant to articulate what they are seeking in their life and the obstacles of their own creation—going back to the individual’s core question. Que continues, “Why are you here?”

The participant responds. Some said, “I’m looking for something different,” or “I want to be more successful at my work.”

Que responds, “What does that mean? Success?”

Gardner based his questioning partially on ELIZA, the computer processing program from the 1960s that utilized the user’s input to formulate questions for the user. For example, if a person typed: “I need to find happiness,” the computer could respond with, “How do you define happiness?” Instead of pre-determining dialogue with each participant, Que riffed on each person’s responses. As a result, the participant interrogates their own thoughts to continue the conversation with Que. Eventually, this leads to a conversation on overarching goals and big picture aims of each individual.

“Will I live another day?”

“I’m so susceptible to other people’s thoughts.”

“My life has grown. Evolved. I’ll never have the chance to do it again.”

If a person refused to open up, Gardner gestured to his companion to take over the interrogation. This partner, Bung, leads the participant to a secondary room—illuminated with a blazing red light and two classroom

chairs. Portrayed by Becki McDonald, Bung serves as an agitator, scolding the participants when she suspects that answers lack authenticity. She aims to exorcise out the truth from participants, particularly painful realizations often not shared with a stranger.

McDonald previously worked as a dominatrix; in that profession she utilized techniques to tap into a person’s psyche. Initially, she asked participants something simple such as, “What’s your high point and low point of the day?” After they offered a response, she asked “Why?” She paused until they offered an emotionally invested answer. McDonald notes, “I’d hold the silence and let tension build at times. People will spill the beans if you stare at them expectantly in silence. Almost all of the people in the hot seat rushed to fill the silence.” McDonald adjusted her approach to each person based on reading each individual, “Sometimes I was the inquisitive friend, the smoking therapist, the school yard bully. I had to think quickly and get a feel as to what tactic would work.”

McDonald had a number of memorable interactions in her “school” as she calls it. “There was a woman who seemed anxious when she sat in the seat.” After a short conversation about her high point of the day, McDonald asked the woman for her low point, she began crying uncontrollably, saying that she had just lost her job. “She was afraid. She felt she was too old to do anything else. She felt like she wasn’t talented or smart enough to do anything but the job she had. She felt out of options. That hit me so hard. I let her get it all off her chest and then I hugged her and let her cry even harder. I told her that she was going to be ok. She told me I was the first person to hug her in a long time. I think about her a lot.”

Not every encounter was as cathartic, but the questions illuminated protective walls invented to combat fear. In order to engage with the *Holy Bone*, participants had to find a path to open themselves to what they seek and eradicate barriers created to avoid pain—like fear, guilt, and uncertainty. Twenty-first century culture tells us to diminish pain as much as possible but *Holy Bone* suggests that discomfort is essential to the journey.

WHOLENESS

After Que and Bung’s venues, the participants endeavor into a new sequence. While they have been broken down previously, the next venues restructure the participant’s approach to their life journey without



Photo 6: Rem’s venue, examples of petroglyphs on the floor.

Photo: Alisa Eykilis

confrontation. The trajectory of *Holy Bone* alters with Rem's labyrinth, in which participants select visual metaphors for portions of their life. Located in another vacant area of 500 Singleton, the participants find a collection of petroglyphs covering the floor, candles, and a table with a basin of water. [Photo 6] Rem warmly greets each participant—a significant change from the other personas encountered—and asks if each person has their stone, one they received in “611.” Wearing all white garments—as a metaphor for the purity in rebirth—Rem gently walks with each participant through the images on the floor.

Charles Ratcliff, portraying Rem, connected his persona with Rapid Eye Movement, the deep sleep state with vivid dreaming. Rem tells each participant to gaze at the paintings; he says, “You probably have your eye on a lot. What do you see? What really calls you?” Designer Dale Seeds selected this series of petroglyphs from various ancient cultures—nothing recognizable or familiar—and painted them in a random order on the floor. Ratcliff recalls, “My initial thoughts were to create a space structured by ‘pathways’ of sorts which followed no particular course.”

The participants maneuver around the images and choose a few that resonate with them, marking a moment of their life. Ratcliff notes, “This path would represent the life cycle; a cycle full of twists and turns in which a journey is chosen fully by its inhabitant.” Whatever the participant picked, Rem commented on that choice, not to give an interpretation like Kapsay, but to engage the participant with curiosity as to why that petroglyph holds meaning. They considered how the moments relate to their original question; participants created a variety of associations. Ratcliff notes, “After a while I realized the Labyrinth wasn't something that was compelling visitors to be truthful. It was just something that people projected onto.”

After walking the labyrinth, Ratcliff presents a basin of water in which participants cleanse their stone. As these venues were generated from the performers, Ratcliff aimed to infuse his with a nod to the Christian faith. Ratcliff notes, “The belief that new life and



Photo 7: Participants gather at Rem's table to add to the weaving. Photo: Thomas Riccio

internal cleansing could arise through a baptism in water allures me. I knew it had to be incorporated.” The stone is metaphorical, but an overarching interpretation is never revealed to the participants; they personally decide if the stone represents a burden, one's self, a memory, or something else.

Each cleansing of the stone impacted the participant in a unique way. Ratcliff encountered a participant who stared at one particular petroglyph for a prolonged amount of time in silence. Ratcliff told her that she could cleanse that moment of her life and move forward in the journey. Ratcliff recalls, “I told her it was time to cleanse the moment so that she may move forward on her journey. She slowly dropped the stone into the water. I continued the ritual and asked her to remove the stone. She would not. The young woman looked at me and said she could not take up the stone again. I reached in the water and took up her stone for her. I said to her ‘I will bear it for



Photo 8: The final venue, the Photographer's studio. A participant answers a question while her portrait is taken.

Photo: Thomas Riccio

you.” Afterwards the woman whispered: “Thank you,” continuing to the next venue.

516 Fabrication is the final destination of the *Holy Bone* journey, one that synthesizes the participants self and the world. The building previously housed an insulation warehouse, including a number of office rooms and industrial spaces. Three other venues take up some of these spaces, drawing attention to aural reception of the world and resonance within the human body. The final venue transforms a vacant garage to Urd’s meditative sanctuary. [Photo 1]

Alexandra Werle, who plays Urd, drew inspiration from her travels to Thailand and Cambodia. She wanted to create a venue of rest and reflection, with stations of quiet, solitary activities. As the participants maneuver through sheets of white fabric, a priestess-like figure named Urd quietly maintains a kind of industrial prayer garden. Urd does not speak to any of the participants, but uses calm gestures to guide them to a pillow by a low, communal table.

Urd offers each participant small objects—twine, shells, beads, leaves, moss—intended to be added to a weaving attached to the table. Participants added objects from the first performance, covering the entire structure by closing night. [Photo 7] Without instructions, participants were left to reflect and choose how to interact with Urd’s sanctuary. Werle notes, “Some people really got into it, they lit their own incense sticks and they prayed. Some people left coins or their stones.”

The sanctuary contains another room—a holy of holies—as the final point in the journey, a portrait studio. [Photo 8]. One at a time, Urd gestures to a participant and guides them to the room; The Photographer inside asks questions to each participant: “What will you take with you? How do you want to be remembered?” He takes a candid photo, capturing each person to make an ephemeral moment permanent. The portraits live on

through an online gallery, documenting each person that completed the journey.

RE-ENTRY

After their portrait was taken, the participants travel back into the world. Several blocks from their vehicles, they walk under the night sky and retrace their steps. *Holy Bone* evaporates, but perhaps these initiates look at the surrounding world with new eyes. The neighborhood holds new memories; objects and signs that were previously overlooked mean something different now.

Walking away from the experience, the participants may not necessarily reflect on plot devices and character development, because those entities do not exist in the traditional sense in *Holy Bone*. Instead, they reflect on personal interactions between the performers and themselves, the physical activities they engaged with, and the question they carried through the journey. Perhaps the participants received answers to that question, perhaps they did not. *Holy Bone* invites a new consciousness, one that encourages participants to find significance and meaning at every step within our life journey. This new consciousness asserts that meaning and metaphor can be found in a variety of places all around us.

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