

Beyond Apologies: The Forest of Healing and Indigenous Reparations in the Netherlands

By Elena Ruiz, 25.06.2025

Amid rising calls for reparatory justice, Indigenous communities and allies envision a radical new space of healing in the Netherlands—one rooted in land, memory, and resistance.

A Forest of Healing, a Space for Justice

“How beautiful would it be if Forest of Healing arises, that the Netherlands, as a small European country, gives the Indigenous people a piece of land back?” asks Sherlien Sanches (Interview, 2025). Her words capture a bold and hopeful vision: the creation of a forest, stewarded by Indigenous people, with an Indigenous Knowledge Centre at its heart. A place for cultural reconnection, community healing, and decolonial learning.

This vision—while still in development—is being fought for by the Indigenous Knowledge Centre International (IKC-Int), as they enter dialogues with Dutch ministries, nature conservation organizations, and civil society. It emerges in the context of the Dutch King Willem-Alexander and former Prime Minister Rutte publicly apologizing for the country’s involvement in slavery. But for many Indigenous people, apologies are only a beginning.

Centering Indigenous Voices

In collaboration with Aralez and IKC-Int, I was invited to conduct a research project as my Bachelor thesis. The task was not to evaluate logistics or map stakeholders, but to engage with Indigenous perspectives on the proposed Forest of Healing: Can this project contribute to reparatory justice? And if so, how? How can we guarantee it also serves Indigenous people in the frontlines?

I developed this research to gather insights of Indigenous stakeholders to the project in the diaspora in the Netherlands and in the frontlines abroad on the topics of colonial damage, understandings of healing and visions for the Forest of Healing. The research included interviews, a focus group and a survey.

Colonial Damage: More Than History

Participants described colonial damage as a multi-dimensional and enduring reality that reaches from ontological damage, over structural & historical damage, and cultural damage to psychological damage. Invisibility is a frequently mentioned form of colonial damage, resulting from the cultural erasure and systemic oppression under the historical colonial and persisting neo-colonial system. The Indigenous stakeholders consulted in this study speak not only of the erasure of Indigenous cultures but of their epistemologies (their ways of knowing) and of their ontologies (their ways of understanding reality).

Healing as Reconnection

Healing is understood as a combination of reconnection to identity & culture, to community, and to the land, as well as the continued struggle for their rights. Participants mention music, ceremony, language, food, and collective storytelling. These acts were seen not only as cultural expressions, but as forms of resistance and survival.

The Forest of Healing is envisioned as a space that can enable this reconnection. A place where Indigenous people can gather and practice ceremonies, share knowledge, and simply be together—outside the pressures of capitalist productivity or the need to explain themselves to outsiders.

For many, just having a place to be—on land that is theirs to steward—would be a profoundly decolonial and healing act.

A Space Beyond the Capitalist System

The forest is imagined not just as a sanctuary, but as an alternative space—one grounded in Indigenous ontologies of relationality, where all life is seen as interconnected. In this way, it challenges dominant colonial and capitalist logics. This vision includes creating learning spaces where non-human teachers (like the land, the trees, the animals) are honored, and where community is valued over individualism.

Questions and Cautions

While the potential of the Forest of Healing is clear, the Indigenous research participants also drew attention on some key issues and challenges concerning the Forest of Healing project:

- How will inclusivity and opportunities for decolonial learning for non-Indigenous people be balanced with the need for a closed space for Indigenous people to engage in healing rituals and share their pain with each other, without having to explain themselves to anyone?
- How can it be assured that the project does not get co-opted by the western capitalist system and instead is rooted in Indigenous values and historical memory?
- How can ceremonies be conducted in a respectful, authentic and spiritual way, bearing in mind that they are traditionally linked to a specific territory, language and people?
- How can the voices and needs of frontline Indigenous people effectively be included, recalling the difficulty encountered in this research to secure participation from the frontlines?

These questions are not barriers, but vital considerations for the next phases of the project.

Dialogue as Healing

One powerful discovery in the research process was the role of dialogue itself. During the focus group and the interactive consultation, Indigenous participants described the conversations as deeply enriching. Being heard, being together, and jointly imagining a better future offered glimpses of the very healing the project seeks to support.

As one participant reflected, it is difficult to hold onto Indigenous values of interconnectedness while navigating a society that thrives on disconnection. In this context, coming together with other people that share Indigenous values is acknowledged as empowering.

A Living Reparation

The Forest of Healing is not a monument, nor a museum piece. It is a living project—rooted in justice, memory, and the future. It is a response to centuries of damage, and a space where repair can begin, not through symbolic acts, but through land, language, ceremony, and community.

It strongly emphasizes self-repair within Indigenous communities, aiming to restore dignity, agency, and well-being. The project also embodies transformative justice, challenging neo-colonial systems and advocating for structural change beyond symbolic apologies. Ultimately, the Forest of Healing is a powerful example of “reparation as a space to think, and enact, the impossible” (Huard and Moser, 2022) striving for true repair within a neo-colonial society.

As one survey respondent powerfully stated:

“I carry within me a deep love for my people, for the forests that shaped us, and for the future we are still writing. I believe healing is not only possible—it is already happening; in all the quiet and fierce ways we choose to remember and reclaim ourselves... May this be the beginning of something rooted and real.”

The question now is not whether such a project is possible—but whether Dutch institutions and society are ready to listen, to support, and to step aside where needed.