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Jill Carter

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“It’s About Becoming”: Indigenating¹ Research Practice at the CDTPS

JILL CARTER

I talk about the fact that many Indigenous people resist calling themselves Canadian because we do not feel a part of the narrative of this land, and even as I am saying it I am thinking about the medicine of telling our stories, in our way, to the others who live here on this land with us. “It’s about becoming,” I say to my seatmate, “what this place is going to become when our stories become visible.” (Nolan 135)

When we are young, birthdays are a time of gratitude and celebration—gratitude for the gifts we have been given in our lives and for our lives themselves. As we age, we begin to season these rites of celebration with remembrance and reflection. And when we hit particular milestones, we (with our communities) are called upon to reflect—to take stock of the resonance of one life and its reverberations in the greater context of creation. In 2017, as Canada celebrated 150 years since Confederation, the Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies (CDTPS) at the University of Toronto celebrated its own milestone and reflected upon fifty years of a life well lived. For both celebrants, this became a time to remember and celebrate great achievements and laudable moments. The months that follow these celebrations have afforded us time to acknowledge and own missteps and time to develop a plan of action for the coming years.

As a nation built on the Doctrines of Discovery, Extinguishment and *Terra Nullius*, Canada is, understandably, a precocious and forgetful entity. Her very existence, as an internationally recognized sovereign state, relies upon that forgetting—upon her refusal to acknowledge that there are stories that precede her recent genesis, stories that inhabit and reverberate throughout “deep time” and upon a rigorous and methodical campaign to sanitize the present moment of Indigenous presence and eventually to erase all traces of Indigeneity from living memory. Prior to this nation’s last federal election, and immediately following thereupon, Canada’s current Prime Minister committed this nation to honoring the ninety-four Calls to Action set forth in the Final [2015] Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). In these are included a call to this nation to partner with Indigenous peoples to develop a Royal Proclamation of Reconciliation (Call Forty-Five) and no fewer than four calls to repudiate the Doctrines of Discovery and *Terra Nullius*, the cornerstones of Canada’s claim to sovereignty. This new Proclamation of Reconciliation, then, would require the dissolution of these cornerstones and the reconfiguration of Canada’s identity as a fully invested treaty-partner. This is not a task for governments alone: “It is important for *all Canadians* to understand that without Treaties, Canada would have no legitimacy as a nation” (TRC 33, emphasis added). Further, as John Ralston Saul cautions, without

a bone-deep and heart-felt understanding of “the role and implication of the treaties” and the inescapable fact that all Canadians “are treaty people” (318), treaties will continue to be dishonored, treaty negotiations will continue to be delayed, treaty battles will continue and intensify, and any form of conciliation will prove itself an impossible project.

What role might the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies (CDTPS)—a Centre that investigates, stewards, disseminates and, on occasion, midwives the Stories that build or break nations—play in the national project of visioning forward to negotiate a just and equitable future for all who live within Canada’s borders? As an Indigenous scholar who has been afforded the privilege of researching, teaching, and practicing at the CDTPS, I am also invited to reflect—on my own experiences here and on the opportunities I perceive for our Centre to transform its practices in scholarship and stewardship to more boldly illuminate and more widely disseminate the truth and to more effectively participate in the processes of Conciliation.²

To do our work, theatre and performance studies scholars must enter into a relationship with artists, texts, and the communities for and about whom they create and in which their performed (hi)stories are rooted. These transcultural (and often, transdisciplinary) encounters are performed regularly in the “dramas” of information gathering, data interpretation, knowledge creation, and the dissemination of results/findings. At the end of the day, the product of the research encounter is a performance of relationships across disciplines and cultures.

It is sobering to recall, then, that while the CDTPS (then, known as the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama) was still in its infancy Canada’s Residential Schools³ were flourishing; the sixties scoop was in full swing; status “Indians” under the Indian Act could not pursue a post secondary diploma or degree without forcible enfranchisement; and in the name of a “just society,” Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau and his Minister of Indian Affairs Jean Chrétien presented their Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, 1969 (The White Paper of 1969) to the House of Commons.⁴ In the same year, Ukrainian-Canadian playwright George Ryga’s indictment of Canada’s institutions (social-welfare, educational, jurisprudential, and religious) for their failure to live up to a “duty” to “save” an intellectually-challenged, morally-flaccid and spiritually bereft race from certain self-destruction opened at the National Arts Centre, staking its place in the national imaginary as Canada’s “first Native play.”⁵ Given the national context within which it began to grow, and given the fact that there was no such thing as an Office of Aboriginal Student Services (First Nations House) or an Indigenous Studies Program at the University of Toronto until the CDTPS’s twenty-sixth year of life, it can come as no great surprise that Indigenous presence at the Centre—students, faculty, works—has not been ubiquitous.

In recent years, however, the CDTPS has done much to foster relationships with Indigenous artists and culture workers. When I entered the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama in 2001 as its first Anishinaabe student (MA and PhD), Robert Appleford had already completed his dissertation *The Indian “Act”: Postmodernism and Native Canadian Performance* while Anthony Adah’s dissertation *Embodying the Screen: Body and Identity in Aboriginal Cinemas* (2008) was well underway. Ric Knowles, renowned for his dramaturgical and research partnerships with myriad Indigenous theatre workers, was an adjunct faculty member. While I was a student 2001-2010, the Centre, under the leadership of Stephen Johnson, began to partner with the Aboriginal Studies Program to bring in Indigenous artists (e.g. Muriel Miguel, Gloria

Miguel, Monique Mojica, Tomson Highway, Thomas King, Yvette Nolan, and the late James Luna) for speaking engagements, workshops, and mini-residencies. Additionally, the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama provided early sponsorship and resources to Gloria Miguel and Spiderwoman Theater for the development of her *Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue* (2008) and to the Chocolate Woman Collective for the Canadian premiere of Monique Mojica's *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way* (2011). Certainly, much good work has been accomplished here: it is a laudable beginning.

But it is *only* a beginning...

In 2015, Algonquin playwright Yvette Nolan published a survey on Indigenous theatre in Canada. Her *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture* traces the historical development of Indigenous theatre in Canada, highlights milestone productions, illuminates the barriers that continue to confront Indigenous artists within the nation's theatres, and outlines the shifts these artists have identified as requisite to the continued health and growth of Indigenous performance culture on the contemporary Canadian stage. Reporting back from the 2013 Sharing Perspectives session at Full Circle's Talking Stick Festival, Nolan writes,

I have been part of the Sharing Perspectives sessions for as long as Talking Stick has been hosting them, and as far as I can remember, this was the first time that "critical discourse" has been articulated as a need. We need more critical work, the assembly said. We need more Indigenous scholars, more writers, more people thinking about the work. We need to be having more public discussions about the work. (132)

Since the early 2000s, steady growth in the "critical discourse" for which Nolan calls has occurred. But it cannot be denied that relatively little scholarship still exists around a rapidly expanding body of Indigenous performance in North America, and much of the work in circulation today has been undertaken by non-Indigenous critics and scholars. Hence, apart from some very few notable exceptions, product and process are too often misunderstood and misrepresented across popular and scholarly media. Further, little serious interrogation of Indigenous creative processes (outside of a few dialogues and reflections by Indigenous arts workers) exists in publically accessible formats to aid audiences as they receive the work and to aid artistic development by bringing the artists into deeper conversation with each other and with the various communities they serve.

Nolan's book invites us to imagine a space in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture-workers might come together to strategize ways in which to productively intervene upon the dis-ease that directs Settler-Indigenous relations (21). This dis-eased relationship reveals itself in the dearth of Canadian audiences who seem to fear having their complacency shaken by the hard truths unearthed in Indigenous performance (18); "purposefully obtuse" (107) and/or outright racist reviews; and the "centuries of [Indigenous] invisibility" (117) that have engineered a disconnect between mainstream Canadians who have been taught to imagine that their concerns are vastly removed from the concerns of their Indigenous neighbors. Exacerbating these challenges, there are the exigencies of trying to produce within an infrastructure that affords little to no cultural control to the Indigenous artist and a troubling paucity of critical discourse that emerges from any place of cultural awareness.

Conciliation begins and relationships endure only through sustained and honest conversation. Indigenous theatre workers have long labored to initiate these conversations in public spaces of performance across North America, but the one who speaks his truth *converse* requires a partner who will receive (listen) and respond. As Nolan cautions us, “dialogue is only possible if the audiences are in the theatre” (16). Whether we are scholars of theatre, commercial reviewers, artistic directors, dramaturges, producers, or any combination of these, our work concerns itself with gathering and disseminating Story. As readers and auditors, we are responsible for the meaning we make and what we do with the stories we are given, and as tellers, we are responsible for the consequences of the stories we tell (King 29). Moreover, as Nolan has asserted of those who are privileged to hold such positions in Canada, we are the curators of the stories that build and break nations, and we are the “gatekeepers” to their dissemination. If we are reviewers, “our negative response to the work can be an obstacle to even garnering an audience” (107) and can shut down dialogue before it has even had a chance to begin. If we practice what Sam McKegney terms “strategies for ethical disengagement” (39), which include excluding Indigenous works from the discourse altogether or privileging settler reception, analysis, and aesthetic evaluation of these works (39-40), an invaluable opportunity to engage in fruitful encounters with “what this place [Turtle Island] is going to become when our [Indigenous] stories become visible” (Nolan 135) is lost.

In a 2015 blog post, Sioux Lakota playwright Larissa FastHorse, with blunt eloquence, enumerated a crucial difference (in intent and process) that separates the Indigenous theatre worker from her non-Indigenous counterparts and colleagues:

Do white playwrights ever think about this? Do they worry about losing jobs for white actors? Do they question if they are writing about enough white issues? [...] Do they fear [their work may somehow prove itself to be or be reimagined by the dominant culture into a tool that facilitates] the genocide of their race? (np)

As an Anishinaabe researcher and educator, I find myself preoccupied (and my work *occupied*) by similar concerns. Do non-Indigenous researchers experience the same anxiety around harming those about or for whom they write (whether they are doing research among their own people or among other communities)? Do non-Indigenous researchers (and their funders) privilege the needs and aspirations of the communities in and with which they work over the demands that are made upon them either to produce and publish or to languish irrelevantly?

Why do we do the work that we do? Of what value are our questions, explorations, and theories to the artists with whom we engage (if we actually do engage) and to the audiences for whom they create? Does our work support the work of Indigenous theatre workers? Does it truly support the work of non-Indigenous theatre workers who may work with, within, and for those communities comprised of the racialized, the disenfranchised, the othered, the endangered? Does it misrepresent that work, obfuscate that work, dismiss or erase that work? Do we regard our own work as a sacred trust? Do we handle each story, with which we engage, *gently*, as we would a vessel that contains the life and essence of a people?

“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (King 2). They are the “vital” matter out of which Indigenous survivance has shaped itself (Qwul’sih’yah’maht 178); they are “such stuff as” Indigenous continuance is made on. The truth about the stories that we tell about stories is that they too *contain power*: the stories we tell can lift up the artists, their works, and their communities or they can silence, denigrate, and destroy. The stories we tell can open up spaces of fruitful encounter between Indigenous artists, their communities, and non-Indigenous peoples, or they can engender disaffection, distrust, and disengagement. The stories we tell are the fruits of our engagement — of our commitment to engage and to facilitate engagement. But is our engagement enough? *Is it not the process we employ that shapes the character of our engagement with Indigenous artists and their works?* Is it not the process we employ that ultimately determines the extent to which our engagement (and the fruits thereof) will stimulate conversations that bring Indigenous peoples and settlers together and move us forward in a good way towards the Eighth Fire?⁶

Within the academy across Turtle Island, the research process, rather than serving as a constructive site of collaboration, remains a site of collision in which relationships become strained. Time and again, across national and international landscapes, transcultural conversations regarding Indigenous performance practices have engendered great discussion at conferences; however, a large majority of critical scholarship fails to acknowledge Indigenous knowledge systems outside of Occidental critical frameworks. Thus, well-intended research collaborations inevitably perpetuate colonial mentalities, even when “decolonization” is at the forefront of such work. How then might we develop and perform generative research collaborations governed by the ethics of respect and reciprocity?

As the CDTPS celebrates its fiftieth year and looks ahead to its next half-century of departmental life, it has already begun to consider these questions and to embrace the opportunity to reflect and intervene upon unhelpful or destructive research practices, to imagine a model for Eighth Fire scholarship, and then to activate it. Our first task is multi-faceted: it requires an active embrace of new knowledge and a recovery of what has been forgotten. As non-Indigenous peoples invest time and energy in re-educating themselves, in listening to and learning about the lands upon which they live and the Indigenous peoples who continue to steward these lands, they must also invest equal portions of time and energy in *remembering* themselves. *How is it that this Centre and the scholars it houses come to be here in this moment? From what nations did we (or our ancestors) travel to these shores? What has been left behind? What languages, spiritual beliefs and practices, attitudes, lifeways, and knowledge systems have been forgotten, ignored, or discarded? What may be worth retrieving and preserving and sharing with (not imposing upon) others? Why do we do what we do? What do we hope to achieve through our research endeavors? How deeply invested are we in the communities with and for which we work? Does the work we do serve the lives of those with whom and for whom we do it?* This process of rigorous self-examination seems to me the first of a series of “act[s] of faith” (see Tallbear 4), demanding from the researcher a humble acceptance of and enacted respect for what Métis scholar David Garneau terms “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality” (27). It is in the willingness to respect those “sovereign spaces,” leaving them to be solely dramaturged and inhabited by Indigenous agents (see Robinson 215), and in the mindful investment of significant energy in carving out uncertain, unsettled spaces in which to reflect upon these questions that settler-researchers might prepare themselves to truly “stand with” the communities with and

for whom they have been called to do their work (TallBear 1). These “acts of faith”—which call upon our reserves of courage, respect, and rigor—afford us an ethical (and eminently *human*) foundation in the construction of a research methodology that resists colonial imposturing by its refusal to extract “data,” opting instead to “stand with” colonized subjects and to share the labor, costs, and rewards in a collaborative project of re-worlding.

Here, authentic communication might ensue and a first tentative step towards conciliation might be taken (see Chambers 292). In this historical moment, conciliation—a forging of right-relationship through redress and resolution—is an urgent and, at times, seemingly impossible project, not only between Indigenous peoples and those who have made their homes on Indigenous lands but also between the settlers themselves (newcomers from myriad backgrounds who carry to these lands many good gifts packed in with ancient feuds, unaddressed traumas, competing cosmologies, and oppositional lifeways).

Research is about working that connection, and maintaining relationships between Indigenous and settler peoples, researchers and communities. And settlers need to take some responsibility focusing on the Settler problems, and I think some of that will happen by analytical comparison to Indigenous histories from the settler side of things, with the idea, especially in historical work, that creating a usable past for a future relationship, one that is much more balanced and just, can help us create the kind of future that we want. (Lowman, qtd. in Gaudry 262)

Certainly, as one of the institutional midwives of this nation’s *re-creation* stories—the stories that are shaping the world our grandchildren will occupy—the CDTPS plays a key role in these processes. It is incumbent upon us to engineer the processes through which the settler-researcher might begin to recover a “usable past that supports the kind of deep change that is needed” on the occupied territories we now call “Canada” (Lowman, qtd. in Gaudry 262).

Looking ahead to the next fifty years of a life in art, the CDTPS is reflecting upon her own usable past and supporting the scholarship of activist-practitioners who labor to write and re-right oppressive histories of and possible futures for the lands from which they have travelled to live as treaty partners on these shores. In our research endeavors, we have moved beyond studies of the comparative to scholarship as intervention, activism, and activation. Since my own graduation from the CDTPS (2010), I have been blessed with the opportunity to work with two additional Indigenous graduates of the CDTPS—Charlie Carragher (MA 2016) and Dr. Jenn Cole (PhD 2017). I have also been privy to the work of settler scholar Dr. Alexandra Kovacs, who completed her doctoral studies at the CDTPS in 2016. Her recent work around E. Pauline Johnson Tekahionwake and Pauline’s sister, the historian Evelyn, exemplifies, for me, the highest thought in research and demonstrates that when we are willing to expand our methods, to search diligently in unlikely places, and to allow our assumptions and pre-suppositions to be overturned, we can be transformed as researchers, producing transformative work that contributes to the crucial project of re-worlding. Kovacs’s recent work enjoins us to consider the damage to “early Indigenous performing subjects” that has occurred as a direct result of a research methodology built upon personal bias and professional “oversight” (49). Employing all the tools of academic privilege, Kovacs

pushes back against a long and powerful tradition of “critical shaming” (40) through which Pauline Johnson’s ethnic identity and allegiance have been called into question and through which Johnson’s sister Evelyn has been characterized as an envious (at worst) or irresponsible (at best) executrix and archivist. Kovacs’s defense of the much-maligned Johnson sisters who can no longer speak for themselves does much to recoup the tarnished reputations of two historically misunderstood Mohawk change makers.

For these scholars and for many within the current cohort at CDTPS, research is personal and the stakes are high. Young Turkish Academics for Freedom⁸ return home to visit archives, placing themselves in harm’s way to lift up the artists of their home country and to document those brave performances that bite down on the boots of tyranny, conjuring visions of usable futures. Young defenders⁹ of the land and waters script interventions (on the page and on the stage) to battle “Black Snakes” across Turtle Island (the Dakota Pipeline, the Kinder Pipeline, and Line Nine). Education-activists are dramaturging new pedagogical models to intervene upon the dis-ease and disaffection that afflict myriad young Canadians, now battling multiple barriers in the institutions that purport to prepare them for life on these lands. Others investigate the psychology of performative genres to teach us courage in the face of terror and to effect healing in the midst of trauma.

As our scholars invest their energies in the creation of “usable past[s]” (see Lowman, qtd. in Gaudry 262), the CDTPS has begun to carve out spaces—through working groups, within colloquia, in conference-planning, and in curriculum-development—through which to imagine ourselves as treaty people in Canada and to negotiate the terms of that relationship in the realms of performance, scholarship, and research. “[W]hat is our emotional investment in the truth and [conciliation] process with the Indigenous peoples whose homeland we call Canada? What does truth and [conciliation] mean to [us], [our] families, [our] communities, [our] children, and [our] grandchildren” (Chambers 285). How much do [we] personally know about the Indigenous history of the territories upon which [we] live and where [we] work? And how will our increasing understanding inform our assumptions around the value and validity of knowledge systems and the questions we ask in our research? How will it transform our processes of knowledge gathering? How will it reveal itself in the ways in which we co-create and share the fruits of our labors?

How does the land acknowledgement that is now included on the CDTPS website and in official email communications resonate with those of us who work at and out of the CDTPS? Does the Centre (and the individuals that comprise its family) have a functioning, clearly defined, and sustained relationship with the Indigenous peoples of these territories? How extensive our outreach towards the thousands of Indigenous people who live and work in Tkaronto and into the Indigenous communities that surround this urban center? How efficacious is our service to and within those communities?

These are questions that require from us personal reflection, community-conversations, and corporate response. These are the questions that keep us honest in our work—questions that demand from us a processual design that ensures we are creating space for our research partners, not taking it; questions that demand of us, at the end of the day, an assessment of the degree to which our research endeavors are actually helping our research partners. These are questions that solicit from the “objective” researcher an immense personal investment. And these are the questions—crucial questions for this historical moment, which the

scholars and artists of the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies are taking up with grace, courage, and rigor as they contribute to the crafting of a useable past—a legacy for Centre-celebrants yet to come.

Notes

- 1 I borrow this term from my colleague, Mohawk dancer Santee Smith, who rejects the concept of “indigenizing,” which connotes, for her, surface or cosmetic changes. During our work together at the Indigenous Directors’ Initiative hosted by Stratford Festival (September 2016), Santee introduced the term “indigenate” (which she had received from her Elder Louise Cook) to denote bone-deep transformation. Hence, to “indigenize” a research project might be to include an “Indigenous” research method (i.e. a sharing circle) without altering the extractive spirit and intent of the larger project, without altering the power-dynamics within the project, the manner of its dissemination, the narrative structures through which the data is “performed,” or the lens through which that data is being interpreted. Crudely put, this is research in “Red Face.” A researcher seeking to “indigenate” her project, by contrast, ensures that each stage of the process is rigorously informed by the Indigenous Knowledge System emerging from the territory upon which the project will ultimately unfold.
- 2 I deliberately identify the task ahead of us as “conciliation” because, as David Garneau observes, the term “reconciliation” is misleading in that it “suggests that there was a time of general conciliation between [Indigenous peoples on these shores] and Canada, and that this peace was tragically disrupted by Indian residential schools and will be painfully restored through the current process of Re-conciliation” (30). Indeed, if we continue to devote our labors to the “restoration of something lost (that never quite was)” (32), we are engaging in a futile exercise, rendering a dangerously fraught and complex task into an impossible project.
- 3 Indeed, the CDTPS is housed across the street and slightly south of the School for Graduate Studies, which ironically occupies the house in which Canada’s first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, resided when he affixed his signature to Canada’s Indian Act in 1876. Several years after this, in 1883, Macdonald set Canada’s residential school project into motion, building three federally-directed residential (a.k.a. “industrial”) schools. In 1920, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott amended Canada’s Indian legislation, compelling all children (recognized as “Indian” under the Indian Act) to attend residential school from the age of seven years old to the age of fifteen years old.
- 4 Through legislation, Prime Minister Trudeau and his honourable Minister of Indian Affairs Jean Chrétien proposed to abolish the Indian Act (thereby eliminating Indian status and treaty benefits), shut down the Department of Indian Affairs within five years, and divest the Canadian Government of all fiduciary responsibilities it had to Indigenous people (as per the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and historical treaties). In effect, the White Paper (1969) proposed to eliminate the “Indian problem” by legislatively eliminating the “Indians.”

- 5 George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* premiered at the Vancouver Playhouse in Canada's centenary year 1967. Although celebrated then (and by many, now) as a performative intervention focusing on justice for the Indigenous people of these lands, the good intentions of its author do not affect the final product, which is, as Peter Dickinson rightly contends, "a problematic and patronizing take on the 'doomed fate' of Canada's first peoples conceived by a non-Aboriginal playwright" (210).
- 6 The Anishinaabeg once lived on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Long before the first European ever came in sight of North America, the prophecy of the Seven Fires was delivered to the Anishinaabeg. The colonial encounter, our prophets told us, would unfold in seven stages (through seven eras, represented by seven fires). To reduce the impact of first contact (i.e. disease and/or outright massacre), the Anishinaabeg were instructed to migrate west and north away from the sea to where food [wild rice] grows upon the water. As it was prophesied, the agents of colonization have visited greater and greater destruction on the land and peoples with each new era. Today, many Anishinaabeg believe that we are now in the time of the seventh fire: in this historic moment, the dominant culture has the opportunity to consult Indigenous peoples and to respectfully integrate our ancient knowledge systems into their own practices at every level of existence. If this is done, the prophets promised, both peoples would enter the time of the eighth fire together—a time of peace and good life for all. If the disrespect and disregard for Indigenous Knowledge Systems continued, we were told, all life will end (see Benton-Banai 93).
- 7 In the spirit of dissolving dangerous oppositional binaries and in the spirit of humility, I utilize the pronouns "we" and "our." I am an Anishinaabe artist and scholar, but this does not make me an "insider" to all Indigenous communities; nor does my bloodline insure that I will not fall into old traps and old tropes that have historically rendered research in Indigenous contexts a destructive force. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith cautions, "Insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble" (139).
- 8 Deniz Başar has been investigating shadow-puppetry for three years as a doctoral student at the CDTPS. Her work as an activist is certainly related to her interest in insurgent theatre praxis in her native Turkey, but the danger she faces goes above and beyond any doctoral requirements. Her work with the Turkish Academics for Freedom is personally (not professionally) motivated. Unfortunately, for us Ms. Başar has decided to leave the CDTPS and complete her doctoral studies elsewhere.
- 9 Alexandra Simpson, for instance, began this work with her *Nexus* project, a play she created within her MA Program at the University of Toronto's CDTPS. Currently, she continues this work within her Doctoral Studies at York University.

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