

**Where the Stage Meets the Land: An Autoethnographic Journey to Decolonized,
Arts-Based Pedagogy**

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Content warning: To begin to decolonize educational practices we must acknowledge the Truth of the harm that has been done in the past - and in the present - to Indigenous people by the colonial education system. This content of this play will address violence, residential schools, murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, the exploitation of the land, and exclusionary teaching practices that devalue Indigenous worldviews.

TERRITORY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

(Lights come up on an empty stage with a spotlight on the spot where an actor might stand to deliver their lines. Applause.)

SUSAN'S VOICE (offstage)

Boozhoo, Aniin, Tansi and welcome to Where the Stage Meets the Land: An Autoethnographic Journey to Decolonized, Arts-Based Pedagogy. In this play, I am engaging with the work of decolonization as a non-Indigenous drama educator and school leader in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on Treaty 1 territory, traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Aniniwak, Anishininiwak, Dakota, and Dene peoples and the national homeland of the Red River Metis Nation. As a student at the University of British Columbia, I am also learning – virtually - on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people.

(Blackout)

PROLOGUE

Title card: Prologue

(Image: An empty stage.)

SUSAN'S VOICE

I see myself here.

(Image: An empty classroom.)

SUSAN'S VOICE

I hear myself here.

(Image: A forest.)

SUSAN'S VOICE

I come to know myself here.

(Susan walks onto the stage, stops centre.)

SUSAN

I see myself here.

(Susan stands at the front of a classroom.)

SUSAN

I hear myself here.

(Susan stands in a forest.)

SUSAN

I come to know myself here.

(Susan stands on the stage.)

SUSAN'S VOICE

The stage.

(Susan stands at the front of a classroom.)

SUSAN'S VOICE

The classroom.

(Susan stands in a forest.)

SUSAN'S VOICE

The land.

(The images cycle from stage to classroom to forest, growing more rapid as Susan repeats...)

SUSAN'S VOICE

The stage, the classroom, the land. The stage, the classroom , the land...

(And so on, until all three settings seem to blend into one space.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE 1

Title card: CONUNDRUM

SUSAN

This play is all about stories. This play is all about the places and spaces that are the settings for these stories. This play is about me and my stories. This play is about me in the places and spaces that have shaped my stories. This play is about me and my multiple, interwoven identities. This play, in fact, explores three important identities in the story of me. This play is about me as an artist, a teacher, and as a researcher¹.

(pause)

This play is aware that it is a play, and this play is aware that the repetition of three is a time honoured theatrical convention.

VOICE FROM THE DARKNESS

Colonial!

SUSAN

(Correcting herself)

A time honoured, *colonial*, theatrical convention. Now that it's come up, this play is also about a colonial conundrum. We will get to that soon. First, I want to tell you a story.

(Blackout)

¹ In this play, I express my story through the interwoven roles of a/r/t/ography: artist, researcher, and teacher (Irwin, 2017, p. 140).

SCENE 2

Title card: “Scene 2: Stories”

Title card: “The truth about stories is that’s all we are.” – Thomas King

(Sound effect: school bell)

(The setting is a classroom, with typical sets and props used to depict a learning environment from an earlier era, such as a blackboard with chalk, picture books by Dr. Seuss.)

SUSAN

When I was little, I would play at being a teacher. Even though I hadn’t even started Kindergarten yet, I was so excited about being a student that playing pretend, for me, meant playing school. I would switch roles freely, playing the teacher, dutifully creating question and answer worksheets about my Dr. Seuss books, and the student, eagerly completing my own assignments. To my young mind, school was reading and writing. To my young mind, being a teacher was being an English teacher.

(Susan snaps her fingers and the location changes to a real classroom.)

Thankfully, when I became a real teacher at age 22, I wasn’t quite as traditional as my five year-old mind imagined a teacher should be. I was experimenting with all kinds of creative, arts-based modes of communication, but looking back, my classroom was still colonial as heck. Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Frost, and Fitzgerald were all on regular rotation...because...that’s what was available in the ELA book room.

(Image: A hand reaching for a green light)

One day, while discussing symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* with my grade 11 students, one of them asked in earnest, “Ms. K, who CARES about the green light?” And I stopped, and thought to myself, “Who *does* really care about the green light?” And I immediately hit pause on *The Great Gatsby*. The students picked their own novels and wrote letters to the principal explaining why their book should be purchased for the class. I won’t say that that was the moment I decolonized my classroom - far from it! But looking back, that pause, that shift in my priorities, was the start of my journey toward a new way of thinking about literacy.

(Blackout.)

Title card: “Poem: Colonial Violence I”

SUSAN

To be, or not to be²

To de or not to de -colonize my teaching practice?

There is no question.

If it be done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly³.

I must make haste and rid my class of the colonial,

² My poem references *Hamlet* in its borrowing of the famous line “To be, or not to be - that is the question” (Shakespeare, 1600-1601, 3.1.64)

³ My poem also references *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 1606, 1.7.102)

the canonical,
 the traditional belief
 that reading
 and writing
 and words, words, words⁴
 are the only real way to know the world.

I have unwittingly caused harm.

Will these hands ne'er be clean⁵ from the stain of my red pen?

(Pause.)

What it would be like to be free?

To shuffle off this mortal coil-bound gradebook and get to something real, not merely a
 dream.

Something authentic.

Something reflective of the people sitting in front of me,

begging me

to see themselves in those words, words, words.

⁴ In *Hamlet*, Polonius asks Hamlet what he is reading. "Words, words, words" is his reply (Shakespeare, 1600-01, 2.2.210)

⁵ This line references Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 1606, 5.1. 43)

Different voices,
 using different words,
 telling different stories
 from the ones our colonial, canonical fathers taught us.
 If two roads diverged in a yellow wood⁶..
 Could we take the one less travelled?
 Could we abandon the five paragraph essay on the side of the road and simply...talk?
 Good talking⁷ ...
 about what we think, feel, and dream when we read?
 If we went to the woods because we wished to live deliberately,
 to front only the essential facts of life,
 and see if we could not learn what it had to teach⁸...
 Could we simply listen to what the woods had to tell us?
 Could we smell the scent of the earth deep in our nostrils?
 Feel the wind ticking our cheeks?

⁶ A reference to the poem *The road not taken* (Frost, 1946, p. 117).

⁷ Dr. Jan Hare (2005) notes that “good talking” and “good walking” are important aspects of Indigenous literacy (p.243).

⁸ A reference to *Walden* (Thoreau, 1946, p. 1).

See the colours and pause,

silently⁹

in a moment of true and delicious beauty?

If we stood at the end of a dock, overlooking dark water, what would we reach for?

Would we reach, trembling, for the green light¹⁰?

or

Could we yearn for something different?

Something that isn't merely a metaphor¹¹?

Something embodied.

Something living.

Somethingreal.

(Blackout.)

⁹ “This dramatic script challenges the reader to attend to how our silence may be interpreted, how our voices can be used, and when decolonization demands us to quiet ourselves and listen and learn. In colonial classrooms, speaking is often valued as a way to demonstrate learning, and as such the act of quieting ourselves can feel uncomfortable” (Duchscher & Lenters, 2023, p. 28).

¹⁰ A reference to *The great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1953, p. 21)

¹¹ “When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p.3).

Title card: “Interlude: Healing”

(On the screen, we have a moment to pause and reflect in nature –
or as close as we can get to it in this theatrical setting.)

SCENE 3

Title card: "Scene 3: The Empty Space x 3"

Title card: "Does it matter who is telling these/our stories¹²?" -Spy Dénommé-Welsh

Title card: "One"

SUSAN

(Susan walks on stage and stands centre.)

Peter Brook, a white man¹³, once wrote, "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged".¹⁴ Walking along the Assiniboine River a few weeks ago, I found some spaces that seemed to me to be wonderful little stages where outdoor performances could take place.

(Videos: Susan in three different outdoor locations that appear to be stages.)

¹² (Dénommé-Welsh, 2009, p. 15)

¹³ By defining him in this way, I cast Brook in the role of the colonizer, as he claims the space of the stage as a terra nullius upon which he can create the world he wants.

¹⁴ (Brook, 1968, p.7)

I look uncomfortable, don't I? Not just because it was forty below, but just standing there, being watched but not really doing anything or saying anything did not an act of theatre make.

(Blackout)

Title card: "Two"

(The lights come up, Susan walks on stage and stands centre. She then reconsiders, and moves off to SL, leaving the middle of the stage empty)

SUSAN

Sandra Styres, an Indigenous woman¹⁵, once wrote, "Space requires the substance of stories and culture to render it placeful"¹⁶ and to me, this more accurately describes the heart of what theatre is all about, and what a decolonized theatre experience could be. You may be wondering why I've chosen to stand off to the side in a one-woman play - it may seem a little "strange and awkward."¹⁷ Well, I've learned an important aspect of decolonizing spaces of learning, be it the classroom or the stage, starts with decentring

¹⁵ Styres' view of space is relational, interactive, and contrasts Brook's viewpoint. I highlight her femaleness and Indigeneity to bring attention to the difference between colonial and decolonial notions of space.

¹⁶ (Styres, 2018, p. 26)

¹⁷ "Non-Indigenous researchers can and should conduct critical research in the messy space of decolonizing education, but that it is a strange and awkward space should be acknowledged" (Thunig and Jones, 2020).

whiteness¹⁸. According to my students, I am a “nice white lady”. How do I decentre myself in an autoethnographic, theatrical performance, and at the same time be non-performative? This is part of addressing my colonial conundrum. I want to place myself at the border of the stage¹⁹, almost in the wings. I want to get off the stage and hide behind the curtain so that this empty space can be filled with the gifts of knowledge from Indigenous women from whom I have learned: Elders, scholars, teachers, and artists.

(Their names echo in the theatrical space)

SUSAN’S VOICE

Dr. Elder Mary Courchene...

Elder Lorie Thompson...

Dr. Marie Battiste...

Dr. Sandra Styres...

Winona LaDuke...

Dr. Cindy Blackstock...

Ramona Elke...

Dr. Pamela Palmater...

¹⁸ “One important element to disrupting the colonization embedded in our literacy pedagogy is decentering whiteness” (Duchscher & Lenters, 2023, p.3)

¹⁹ “Metaphorically, these borderlands are acts of métissage that strategically erase the borders and barriers once sustained between the colonizer and the colonized” (Irwin, 2017, p.140)

Dr. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson...

Dr. Alex Wilson...

Dr. Joanne Archibald...

Dr. Jan Hare...

Yvette Nolan...

Jaimie Isaac.

SUSAN

We are on our way to decolonizing and feminizing this empty space, but we need to fill it with some warmth, some stories, some relationality. We need to get cozy, up close, and personal. How do we do that when I am on stage by myself and you are out there?

(Susan pauses and thinks for a moment.)

I think we can achieve it with a little bit of theatre magic.

(Susan snaps her fingers and the setting changes.)

Title card: “Three”

(When the scene resumes, we have been transported to a rustic kitchen. There’s a table with a blue checkered table cloth, a pot of tea, and two cups.)

Let's imagine we're in a cozy kitchen, sitting together at a table, enjoying conversation and a cup of tea²⁰. This teapot is a prop, and the tea is real, but lukewarm. We're not really in a kitchen but you, my audience, and I can suspend our disbelief and meet together in this imaginary space. If my stories and poems resonate with you, stir emotions in you, teach you something you didn't know, or make you loosen your grip on a firmly held belief, then we can truly connect in a really meaningful way in this empty space.

Title card: Poem: Colonial Violence II

SUSAN

What would a young woman learn

From reading plays in high school?

What would she learn about her value in the world?

Would she learn to dare not dream of being swept off her feet

Suddenly lithe and perfectly lovable-

Not quirky and broken like a glass unicorn²¹.

²⁰ "Within Indigenous communities, the act of gathering, reflecting, and exchanging knowledge through personal visits and informal spaces, such as someone's kitchen table, holds deep significance" (University of Alberta, n.d.)

²¹ Laura in Tennessee Williams' (1949) *The glass menagerie*, is made to feel by her mother that her only chance for joy in the world depends on finding love via a gentleman caller.

Would she learn to be suspicious of her future spouse?

To check his pockets for silk stockings intended for his mistress

While she toils endlessly, mopping up the failures of her husband and sons²²?

Will she learn that unrequited love leads only to death?

Will she, like Ophelia, be driven to madness by her desperation?

Will she dare to let her shrewishness be untamed²³?

And what, then, of young Indigenous women?

Will they ever “make bronze²⁴,”

be seen, take up space on the stage?

²² In Miller’s (1948) *Death of a salesman*, Willy Loman has an affair, buying the mistress silk stockings.

²³ In Shakespeare’s (1593-94) *The taming of the shrew*, Kate is seen as a “shrew,” or a difficult woman.

²⁴ In Ryga’s (1970) *The ecstasy of Rita Joe*, Rita’s teacher proclaims that she will “never make bronze,” (p. 66) meaning that she will never assimilate to western ways and become part of the melting pot: “You put copper and tin into a melting pot and out comes bronze... It’s the same with people!” (p. 64).

Through settler's eyes they are marked for death,

From inamorata to ingenue,

Swept off the stage like yesterday's trash²⁵.

When faced with invisibility or the murderer's blade²⁶

Is there really an option or a choice to be made?

Can the spotlight ever belong to her?

Can the spotlight *ever* belong to her?

Yes, with her stories

Yes, with her laughter

Yes, with her dancing

Yes, with her drum

Yes, with her singing

²⁵ The remains of several missing and murdered Indigenous women in Winnipeg have been recently discovered in a Winnipeg landfill (Shebahkeget, 2025, n.p.)

²⁶ Ryga's (1970) protagonist Rita Joe is raped and murdered at the climax of the play. The line also references Cree playwright Yvette Nolan's (1995) play *Blade*, about the murder of a young Indigenous woman's and her subsequent mislabelling as a prostitute.

Yes, with her art²⁷

Yes, with all the joy, sadness, fear, and anger she has.

Yes.

Let her show us a different ending to this play.

(Blackout)

Title Card: Interlude: Healing

(On the screen, we have another moment to pause and reflect in nature.)

²⁷ “Rituals, ceremonies, dance, music, song, storytelling, visual arts, drama, and theatre can be ways to transmit knowledge, restore relationships, and resist colonization” (Hradsky and Forgasz, 2021, p.966-967).

SCENE 4

Title card: “Scene 4: Listening to the Land”

Title card: “If you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it” – Leanne Betasamosake Simpson²⁸

(Lights up on Susan sitting at the kitchen table with her tea)

SUSAN

There is a wealth of amazing artists in our local Manitoba theatre community that I have been lucky to share with my students to show them just a small part of Indigenous theatre history, but my personal favourite is Tomson Highway. I used to love doing read-throughs of *The Rez Sisters* with my drama students. I wanted them not only to experience a great script by a playwright who spent his teen years at Residential School in Winnipeg, but a script that tells a completely new kind of story, a script that features seven Indigenous women characters, a script that uses the Cree language throughout. I wanted to, alongside my students, feel the way that Cree, one of the original languages of Wînipêk²⁹ feels to try to speak. I loved that so many young white male students eagerly wanted to read the part of their favourite character, whether it was gentle Marie-Adele who was battling cancer, or the tough, brash Emily Dictionary.

(pause)

²⁸ (Simpson, 2014, p. 17-18)

²⁹ “Wînipêk is a Cree and Anishinaabe word derived from *winaad*, meaning “dirty” and *nibiing*, meaning “waters” (Sinclair, 2024, p. 11).

But this still seems like one small gesture in my responsibility as an educator.

I can bring Indigenous literature, plays, and voices to the classroom and the stage, but still I wonder, how and where the stage meets the land? To truly decolonize my pedagogy, I know that bringing my students to the land is crucial. How can I create meaningful drama experiences that go deeper than simply performing a play outside? Where can I find the answers?

(pause)

Let's go outside to listen to the stories the land wants to tell us.

Title Card: "Poem: Colonial Violence III"

SUSAN'S VOICE

Our colonial fathers taught us how to know papers³⁰,

but they neglected to teach us how to know the land.

I consider this at 40 below, walking on the Nestaweya River Trail.³¹

The path is cleared for me,

conveniently.

³⁰ Hare, J. (2005) notes that print literacy (reading and writing) was a goal of colonial education (p. 243)

³¹ The Nestaweya River Trail "was re-named in 2022 to honour the original Cree name used for the site of The Forks and the area we now call Winnipeg. "Nestaweya" means "three points" and depicts how people have accessed the area by river coming from three directions" (*At last: The first section of the Nestaweya River Trail presented by the Winnipeg Foundation is open!*, 2024)

The snow crunches beneath my feet, hard and sturdy.

At this temperature, the ice is thick and will not break,

sending me down into icy water.

As I walk, I take notice of the sights and sounds around me.

I hear the church bells echoing from Westminster United

“Oh Lord, our God; thy children call...”³²

And I think of the children

who lost their families,

lost their language,

lost their childhoods

in the name of God.

Who heard them call for help?

The wail of an ambulance siren interrupts my thoughts.

Someone else is hurt.

³² The name of the tune is the “*Westminster chime melody*” but I have a strong memory from childhood of this song as the “Brownie taps”:
<https://youtu.be/qimeE7Q4mX4?feature=shared>

Above my head I notice a life preserver dangling,
Swaying back and forth without purpose or urgency.

Will anyone be rescued, city of Winnipeg?

I carry on down the trail,
and the sharp scrape of skaters' blades
and the screams of children playing
are almost drowned out by the raging wind.

The constant pounding of a pile driver

Breaks through the howling.

To pound concrete down into the earth is progress.

To pound concrete down into the earth is to move

Upwards

Building higher and higher.

The original people of this land

came from three directions

to meet at this confluence of rivers

But now,

Our colonial fathers who built up this “terra nullius,”³³

Never satisfied with the land they lusted for

Now lay claim to the sky.

I stop walking,

finally,

at a lonely granite monument.

She stands alone in the snow,

casting a long shadow.

Hush now.

I stand

silently.

Looking through her³⁴

I can see the river beyond.

³³ Indigenous lands were, to colonizers, considered “terra nullius” or “nobody’s land,” thus giving the Europeans claim to the territories (Hele, 2023, n.p.)

³⁴ The monument for Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls represents a female shape and has a cut out circle where her head is. “The circle represents the connection between two worlds and allows light to pass through” (*Winnipeg monument honours missing, murdered Aboriginal women*, 2014, n.p.).

And I wonder how many sisters are down there,

below the ice

waiting to be found.

I stand

silently

in front of her

and for a moment the screaming

and the wailing

and the howling

and the pounding

stops.

There is silence

for a brief moment

to listen for the voices

of the missing ones.

(pause)

And then -

Gently breaking the silence,

a lone chickadee

intones

A gentle elegy.

Title Card: Interlude: Healing

(On the screen, we have another moment to pause and reflect in nature – we see a still shot of the monument, and hear the chickadee's song)

SCENE 5

Title card: “Scene 5:Untangling the Colonial Conundrum”

Title Card: “Journeying is a process of coming to know.” – Sandra Styres³⁵

(Lights up. Susan is standing on the stage.)

SUSAN

Here we are back on the stage for what might *seem* like a finale, but the work of decolonization is far from over. It is ongoing, and in my own pedagogy, I will continue to untangle³⁶ the colonial conundrum, to unlearn the “rules” about the way I was taught to make sense of the world, and to undertake the work with respect for the gift of Indigenous knowledge. I do this so that the many spaces in which I teach become warm, welcoming, and relational places where my students can tell their stories. This play itself shows how the “colonial 4th wall”³⁷ of the stage can be broken, thus opening new spaces and multiple modes for sharing this autoethnography with you, my audience.

³⁵ “Journeying is a process of coming to know. It is essentially learning through the chaos of moving from the familiar through to the unfamiliar while maintaining and observing a reflective frame of mind” (Styres, 2018, p. 29)

³⁶ “Living inquiry plays an integral role in a/r/tography because it welcomes entanglement. Relational and reflexive in character, it is a continuous state of movement that is not about an arrival, but is about lingering in the emergent, unforeseen, and unexpected events it provides. Sometimes this entails encountering a disruption in which we may discover new ways of knowing and understanding (Irwin, 2013).

³⁷ Dénommé-Welsh (2009) refers to the ability of Indigenous theatre to “chip[...] away at the colonial 4th wall (p.15).

(pause)

But I have much more to learn, and so my journey to decolonized, arts-based literacy pedagogy continues on. Admittedly, it can be disheartening to witness the colonial violence that still exists in the classroom, on the stage, and on the land. But taking the time to pause in that space where the stage meets the land reminds me that there can be hope and healing.

(The scene changes to Susan on the land, walking)

Title Card: “Poem: Where the Stage Meets the Land”

SUSAN’S VOICE

Coming back to this place -

this not-so-empty space -

the land,

reminds me that I

continue this journey

with love³⁸.

Walking in this place,

³⁸ Land-based dramaturgies [...] are transforming theatrical terms and methodologies. The dramaturgical and methodological explosions that I see are delicate, supported by love, and flow alongside the rivers of our homelands (Lachance, 2021, p.58).

this full-of-giving space,

the land,

reminds me that I

am a guest here.

And so, I am thankful

For all the land offers me.

Imagining in this place,

This rich-with-meaning space,

the land,

Reminds me that it is

filled with stories,

poems,

art,

for those who pause,

look,

and listen³⁹.

In this space,
where the stage meets the land,
this place of learning,
I see
my students learning from Elders
through teachings
shared with generosity.

I hear
my students communicating
through songs, dance, and drumming⁴⁰,
reclaiming the language

³⁹ Simpson (2014) encourages “consensual engagements” (embodied/sensory interactions) with the land as a space of knowledge and learning (p.15).

⁴⁰ “Colonial definitions of literacy also devalue arts-based literacies. As mentioned above, the arts are central to both Indigenous and Black ways of knowing, being, and learning. We attend to arts-based research through sharing the ways that dance, visual art, and poetry all utilize the same literacy processes as reading and writing - namely decoding, encoding, meaning making, critical thinking, and expression” (Duchscher & Lenters, 2023, p. 4).

the stories
and the ceremonies
that were once forbidden.

It is here
in this place-
this powerful
and limitless space,
where the stage meets the land,
that my students
see themselves,
hear themselves,
and come to know themselves.

(The camera pans upward to the tops of the trees and the sky
above as the sounds of nature are heard)

CURTAIN