

COMMUNITY ARTS
AND (DE)COLONIZATION:
PART ONE



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COMMUNITY ARTS AND (DE)COLONIZATION

BY NIKKI SHAFFEULLAH

Early in 2015, as I was slowly making a move from Edmonton back to my home city of Toronto, my friend and collaborator Bruce Sinclair phoned me with an encouragement: “You need to get on the Train of Thought.” I did not immediately register that this invitation, from a man who often speaks in both pun and metaphor, was to board a literal train.

Bruce explained that he was helping to organize events in Edmonton and Saskatoon for a travelling community-arts project called Train of Thought, and was seeking my collaboration in hosting when the train stopped in Edmonton. He suggested I connect with Ruth Howard at Jumblies Theatre next time I was in Toronto to talk about the project; and within a few weeks, I was in deep—preparing both to receive travellers in Edmonton and to jump on as a travelling artist. I came to understand what Train of Thought was: a coming together of artists who are using or are seeking to use their work to build connections across cultural difference—across the multitude of colonially imposed barriers that keep communities, particularly Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, from knowing each other.

It’s difficult to describe Train of Thought without using imperfect binaries like “Indigenous and non-Indigenous,” but knowing that this project intentionally brought people together in this way is key. “The silence between us has been legislated,” Train of Thought traveller Columpa Bobb said at one point on the tour; Train of Thought was about listening to each other. The travellers were to be an evolving and shifting group, ranging in age from teen to seniors; the stops would be anywhere from a few hours to several days. At the stops, hosts, some of whom doubled as travellers, would

program activities for the travellers and local folks to meet each other. They would share what artists there were up to through however they chose to host: multi-day arts conferences in Vancouver and in Winnipeg; collaborative performance creation process in Nipissing First Nation and in Halifax; Cree language lessons and cabarets featuring local artists in Edmonton and Saskatoon; a laid back group dinner in Six Nations; and so on. Beyond the hosts’ curation of the stops, artists carried out personal projects individually and in small groups as we traversed the land, as well as the implicit project of the tour—that is, to bring people together. While Jumblies Theatre was the spearheader of the tour, Train of Thought’s vast array of artists, communities, organizations, activists, and others took it, intentionally, out of any one person’s or group’s hands.

I’ve chosen to conclude that the most valuable part of Train of Thought was its function as a laboratory for conflict. The project brought people together in an explicitly high-stakes way. Train of Thought was at its halfway point in June 2015 when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report; the journey and its aftermath is taking place at a point in time when the Canadian mainstream is slowly but finally beginning to confront the history and ongoing reality of the colonization of this land and its first peoples. High stakes—to enter into (re)conciliation through art and art-making, more than through simple conversation, inspires hope that meaningful change might actually be possible. I recall artist Ange Loft saying many times on the tour that “it’s not enough to reconcile; we have to *make things together*.” Making things together, imagining new possibilities together, *getting your hands dirty* and *making things with others and their dirty hands*, is hard. Sharing space is hard. To put into practice the various ideals about

intercultural (and intergenerational, interdisciplinary, interregional . . .) collaboration and social change that one might think about or talk about or put into grant applications—to really put those ideals to the test—is hard. Questions emerge that are difficult to answer at all, and more difficult to answer together: How much time should we allocate to doing things, to making things, to processing what has happened? Who can or should lead the making? What does *collaboration* look like? Train of Thought was a laboratory for conflict in that it gave people across the land a chance to feel in their bones the discomfort that comes from trying something new and scary and important and potentially transformative.

At the same time, I moved through the project with trepidation. I wondered why are we taking a train—does taking a “counter-colonial” route (west to east) mitigate the reality that Canada’s transnational railway played a lead role in colonizing the land, and that it was built through the exploitation of migrant labour? Will this project challenge existing hierarchies or reinforce them? Will people and organizations who hold power ultimately share or release that power in the moments where it is most difficult and most important? Or—heaven forbid—might Train of Thought become or be co-opted and remembered as a sparkly, state-celebrating joy ride? For some of the hundreds involved in this project, I suppose that may have been their experience; and others still may have wished for that kind of experience, although to me it’s a neoliberal nightmare. Would Train of Thought become something very capital-C Canadian, drenched in the kind of capital-M Multiculturalism that contains difference through “diversity”; the kind that uses metaphors of mosaics to invisibilize the genocide upon which Canada was built; the kind that sanitizes the state and, with expert covert-ness, upholds the Eurocentric, white supremacist, settler-colonial status quo? Hopefully not, for if the consciousness of the country is indeed shifting, we’re collectively developing increased capacity to recognize such traps, as well as increased commitment to avoid them. We must learn to engage with conflict: to not conceive of conflict as a problem to solve, but as an ongoing, evolving, healthy, and necessary part of intentionally existing together.



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It was apt that I connected to Train of Thought through Bruce. He and I first met in 2010 at the Prismatic Arts Festival and conference (a Halifax-based summer event that features Aboriginal and culturally diverse artists), and in 2014 began a collaboration that brings artists from racialized communities and artists from First Nations and Metis communities together in conversations about what we know about each other, in part by hosting talking circles with colleagues and friends in various locales. Bruce is Metis and I'm the daughter of Indo-Guyanese immigrants, and we each have a variety of reasons why our collaboration is important to us. Bruce and I share a love of theatre, improv, wordplay, community building, music from the sixties, and nomadism, but in most other ways are pretty dissimilar, which is certainly related to us being from different generations, cultures, geographic regions, life experiences, and more. And that's part of what makes the collaboration work: we get to test out whatever it is we want to invite others into by first navigating our own collaborator relationship. The conflict we experience is so central to how we work—it's difficult, but it's generative, and we root it in a place of risk-taking and trust. The art is in the conflict. The art *is* the conflict, and the conflict is a necessary condition for growth.

The unanswered questions, ongoing conversations, evolving relationships, and other conflicts that inspired and were inspired by Train of Thought all resonate with urgency, and are all deeply relevant to *alt.theatre's* focus on the intersections of politics, cultural diversity, social activism, and the performing arts. This is the first of a two-part *alt.theatre* special issue entitled "Community Arts and (De) Colonization" that invites you into Train of Thought and into the legacy of work and discourse coming out of it that ripples from coast to coast.

Train of Thought was produced by Jumblies Theatre in collaboration with hundreds of artists and over ninety organizations, including: From The Heart, Vancouver Moving Theatre, Vancouver Parks Board, Round House Community Centre, Runaway Moon Theatre, Splatsin First Nation, Ground Zero Productions, Rising Sun Theatre Society, Common Weal Community Arts, ACI Manitoba, Urban Indigenous Theatre, The Ortona Armoury Arts Building, Arts Hub, Kenora Association For Community Living, Community Arts and Heritage Education Project, Municipality Of Sioux Lookout, Myths And Mirrors Community Arts, Thinking Rock Community Arts, Mississauga First Nation, Debajehmujig Storymakers, Aanmitaagzi, White Water Gallery, AlgomaTrad, Jumblies Theatre, Arts4All, MABELLEarts, Making Room, Community Arts Guild, Cedar Ridge Creative Centre, Arts Council Windsor and Region, Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, Makers and Shakers Society, Canada's Magnetic North Festival, Ottawa Valley Creative Arts Open Studio, Kahnawake Mohawk Territory, Concordia University Theatre and Development Program, Contactivity Seniors Centre, NDG Senior Citizens Council, RECCA, Art Hives / Ruches d'Art, Halifax Circus, The Deanery Project, Abegweit First Nation, Rock Barra Retreat, and others. It was supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, Toronto Arts Council, Ontario Trillium Foundation, The J.W. McConnell Foundation, Inspirit Foundation, Metcalf Foundation, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, VIA Rail Canada, B.C. Arts Council and other local and provincial funders.

The route, roughly (since some stops happened simultaneously), was¹: Victoria, unceded Coast Salish territories → Vancouver, unceded Coast Salish territories → Enderby and Splatsin First Nation, unceded Secwepemc territories → Edmonton/amiskaciwaskahikan, Treaty 6 territory → Saskatoon/saskwaton, Treaty 6 territory → Winnipeg, Treaty 1 territory → Kenora, Treaty 3 territory → Sioux Lookout and Lac Seul First Nation, Treaty 3 territory → Thunder Bay, Robinson Superior Treaty → Nipissing First Nation and North Bay, Robinson Huron Treaty → Wikwemikong First Nation and Manitowaning, unceded Anishinabek territory → Blind River and Mississauga First Nation, Robinson Huron Treaty → Sudbury, Robinson Huron Treaty → Toronto, Treaty 13 Territory → Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation → Six Nations of the Grand River → Windsor → Kingston, Upper Canada Treaties → Ottawa, unceded Algonquin territories → Killaloe and Pikwakanagan First Nation → Kahnawake Mohawk territory → Montreal/Tiotia:ke, Mohawk Territory → unceded Wabanaki territories → Halifax/K'jipuktuk, unceded Mi'kmaq territories → Ship Harbour, unceded Mi'kmaq territories → Abegweit First Nation → Rock Barra, unceded Mi'kmaq territories

NOTE

1 In listing the stops of the Train of Thought route, I have used a combination of colonial place names, Indigenous territory names, and treaty names for places where treaties have been made. I acknowledge that this list is imperfect in its organization. I thank the many teachers, elders, and community members who have helped me in my education of Indigenous place names and of treaty history, in particular those who were part of Train of Thought. I thank Sasha Tate-Howarth for her great assistance in charting these learnings onto this Train of Thought stop list.