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# UPCOMING in alt.theatre

## 12.3 and 12.4: Community Arts and (De)Colonization

An exploration of the coast-to-coast participatory arts journey, Train of Thought.

**ARTICLE** Using a multicultural framework, Fiona Clarke reflects on how to decentre the settler experience in intercultural artistic collaborations. **DISPATCH** A group of non-Indigenous artists in Kingston reflect on key questions: What do we as settlers and immigrants want to share? What do we need to acknowledge? **SCRIPT EXCERPT** A passage from *White Man's Indian* by Darla Contois. **BOOK REVIEW** Annie Smith reviews *From the Heart of a City: Community-Engaged Theatre and Music Productions from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, 2002-2013*, edited by Savannah Walling and Terry Hunter.

Train of Thought was an evolving community arts journey exploring collaborations and alliances between First Nations and settler/immigrant artists and communities, produced by Jumblies Theatre and over 90 other partners in 2015.

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*alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage* is Canada's only professional journal examining intersections between politics, cultural plurality, social activism, and the stage.

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"Change the World, One Play at a Time"

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© Andrew Paul, Ben Gorodetsky and Todd Housemann  
as the intercultural improv duo, Folk Lordz

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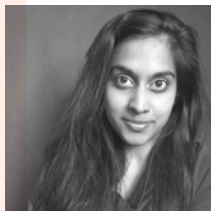
# CONTRIBUTORS

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### NIKKI SHAFFEEULLAH

is an artist, activist, researcher, and the editor-in-chief of *alt.theatre*. Based in Toronto, Nikki is artistic director of the AMY Project, an arts company focused on gender and youth empowerment, and is a lead artist with Jumbles Theatre. She recently received an MFA in Community-based Theatre and her research explored de-colonial practices of theatre creation. Nikki has served as an executive of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research and has taught in the University of Alberta Department of Drama.

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### SARAH WOOLF

is associate editor of the *Montreal Review of Books (mRb)*. A community organizer (Tadamon!, Israeli Apartheid Week), writer (*The Nation, mRb*), and researcher, she curated an exhibit on twentieth-century Jewish migrant labour in the garment industry for the Museum of Jewish Montreal. In another life she performed musical theatre, proudly voicing a certain man-eating plant, Audrey II.

Fictionalizing the Holocaust:  
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### DARRAH TEITEL

is a graduate of The University of Toronto and The National Theatre School of Canada's Playwriting program. Darrah's play *Corpus* is the winner of The Calgary Peace Play Prize, the In The Beginning Playwriting Award, and the 2011 Canadian Jewish Playwriting Award. Darrah currently lives in Ottawa, where she is the playwright in residence at the Great Canadian Theatre Company and works for the Federal NDP.

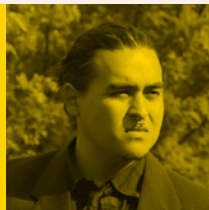
Fictionalizing the Holocaust:  
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### JAMIL KHOURY

is the founding artistic director of Silk Road Rising. A theatre producer, essayist, playwright, and film maker, Khoury's work focuses on Middle Eastern themes and questions of diaspora. His most recent play, *Mosque Alert*, explores resistance to the building of mosques in communities across the US. Silk Road Rising will produce the Professional World Premiere in March.

Mass Media Muslims:  
**PAGE 16-19**



### TODD HOUSEMAN

has been improvising professionally with Rapid Fire Theatre since 2009. Todd also brings his improv knowledge to inner-city youth at the Boyle Street Education Centre. Todd has worked as an Aboriginal Peoples Interpreter, Education Programmer, Program Researcher, and Blacksmith at Fort Edmonton Park. As an actor Todd has appeared on TV in the new APTN sitcom, *Delmer and Marta*. Todd's first comic, *Ayannisach*, will be published in 2015 as part of Moonshot.

Folk Lordz: **PAGE 20-27**



### BEN GORODETSKY

is a Canadian Comedy Award nominated improviser, actor, and associate artistic director (promotions) of Rapid Fire Theatre. Ben has been improvising since 2004 and in that time has performed and taught improv in Austin, Detroit, Toronto, Vancouver, Bellingham, Montreal, and the French island of Reunion (near Madagascar). Ben holds a BFA in Acting from the University of Alberta.

Folk Lordz: **PAGE 20-27**

**MATT**

**MIWA**

is a theatre, video, and performance artist, and, along with Julie Tamiko Manning, is the co-creator of *The Tashme Project: The Living Archives*. Based in Ottawa, Matt's recent projects include the short narrative video *Murder at the Circus* (with Lesley Marshall) and a series of performance pieces invoking Amy Winehouse. Matt proudly serves on the board of the Ottawa Japanese Community Association.

*The Tashme Project:*  
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**MENKA**

**NAGRANI**

founded Les Productions des pieds des mains in 2004 and has won several awards for her creations, including a Quebec Arts Council award for her artistic career. A leader in integrating artists with disabilities, Menka is often invited to present at conferences and workshops around the world. As a musician, Menka is also interested in rhythm and percussive dance. She had a chance to explore contemporary stepdancing, working as a performer for choreographer Marie-Soleil Pilette. She is now using this new style in her own creations.

*Owning Our Roots:*  
**PAGE 30-31**



**LOUISE**

**FORSYTH**

has served as head of the French Department at Western University, as dean of Graduate Studies and Research at the University of Saskatchewan, and as an executive member and president of the Humanities and Social Science Federation of Canada. Her research focuses on Quebec literature by women, and she is currently preparing the first book manuscript ever on Quebec women playwrights. Louise has always been involved in social justice issues and has worked hard to oppose sexism, racism and ethnocentrism, and homophobia.

*History, Memory, Performance:*  
**PAGE 32-35**



**STEFANO**

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is associate professor of Intercultural Theatre at the University of Alberta. He is a theatre historian, dramaturg, and translator who has taught in Italy, England, the US, and Canada. He was awarded the Andrew Mellon Predoctoral Fellowship for 2007-2008, and is the recipient of a 2012 KIAS Cluster Grant to research the post 9/11 Mexican-American border. He is currently working on an academic book about Jesuit theatre in the seventeenth century.

*Latina/o Canadian Theatre:*  
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# STORYTELLING ACROSS GENERATIONS

BY NIKKI SHAFFEEULLAH

How do we tell stories across generations? How do we do it unconsciously? And in what ways should we do it intentionally? These are the key questions that seem to be occupying the minds of the contributors to this issue of *alt.theatre*.

We were struck by the congruity of these pieces: we did not seek them out by theme, but they all happened to come to us at the same time. Of course, the handful of artists and writers featured in these pages aren't necessarily demonstrative of the pulse of performance creators in Canada. But the thematic alignment and urgent tone of their current projects do invite reflection on why performing artists of different disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and regional locations are searching for new ways to connect the stories of their grandparents and ancestors with their contemporary creation processes.

We're always pondering identity in this bilingual, multicultural, colonial settler-state, but perhaps 2015 has been an especially remarkable year for critically assessing what it means to be (a) "Canadian." In June, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee released the final report of their six-year long examination of residential schools, a document holding monumentally important recommendations, including that Canada must move from "apology to action" to begin to achieve reconciliation with the indigenous peoples of this land. In September, then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper referred to "new and existing and old-stock Canadians," immediately triggering national conversations on what these categories mean and who holds them to be true. The next month, voters overwhelmingly decided to end Harper's six-year reign, the byproduct of which gave Justin Trudeau's Liberals a majority government. The terrorist attacks in Paris in November provoked

empathy for victims and their families across the ocean, but also catalyzed charged conversations at home about who is welcome to the title of "Canadian"—conversations ranging from social media banter, to violent acts of xenophobia,<sup>1</sup> to public and private commitments to reject racist backlash and build safe spaces for newcomers, in particular refugees from Syria. It has been a year of asking *Who belongs here? Who are we? What stories are we telling? What stories are we not telling?*

The articles in this issue provide a survey of how artists use their craft to uncover stories from past generations and move them into the present and future. In "Fictionalizing the Holocaust: Apologism, Revisionism, and Evil-with-a-Capital-E," writer and activist Sarah Woolf sits down with playwright Darrah Teitel to discuss Jewish identities, Teitel's play *Corpus*, and the play's exploration of how, three generations later, we remember the Holocaust. Teitel describes never having the "privilege" of not knowing the stories of the Holocaust and Woolf notes how "experiences of trauma and memory morph" over generations (12) in their discussion of how *Corpus* plays out "the debate that Jews have had, both privately and publicly" about the nature of evil. Teitel's script is in part an intervention into how stories of the Holocaust are told—as she says, "We can't complicate things to the point of complete obscurity" (13).

In "*The Tashme Project: Revitalizing Japanese-Canadian Identity through Theatre*," Matt Miwa shares how he and Julie Tamiko Manning co-created a verbatim oral history piece about Japanese Canadian internment because they felt an urgent need to "articulate who contemporary Japanese Canadians are, and who we can become vis-à-vis our confrontation with the past and with each other" (29). For them, interviewing their

elders, bearing witness to their stories, and creating space for those stories on today's stages represent in part "an invitation to communion for Japanese-Canadian audience members" (29).

For some, the impetus to learn stories from past generations comes from a desire to render their current art practice more connected to their cultural origins. Improvisers Todd Houseman and Ben Gorodetsky created the long-form improv format Folk Lordz in an effort to integrate the storytelling traditions of their cultures—Cree and Russian, respectively—into their performance craft. As they share in "Folk Lordz: Northern Stories," a collection of travel diaries, the process of developing the Folk Lordz form led Todd, who identifies as "an urban Cree person living off-reservation," to develop a desire "to connect with Elders from First Nations communities in order to better learn and understand traditional storytelling forms" (22). Through their ongoing travels and studies, they are learning their own lessons about how to tell stories across generations: "If traditional storytelling forms are not practised, they are forgotten. But if they cannot adapt, they may lose their value (26)." For others, reviving stories from past generations is about helping one's culture resist assimilation. In "Owning Our Roots on Dangerous Roads," Menka Nagrani, dance artist and founder of Montreal's Les Productions des pieds des mains, describes her process of learning traditional Québécois step-dancing and finding ways to theatricalize it on the contemporary stage. She declares, "Returning to the basics, to the foundations of our artistic lineage, is a way for me to resist the influence of mass culture and the standardization that it generates" (30).

There are many ways in which artists arrive at cross-generational storytelling; but their reasons for doing so are concomitant: intervening in processes of memory-making and history creation; breaking silence around trauma; archiving the past; deepening and expanding contemporary artistic practices; and strengthening connections with cultural communities. What I find most exciting is seeing the incredible potential for practices of storytelling across generations to imagine, and influence, the future.



I feel a sense of communion with the contributors and their need to connect the form, content, and processes of their current art-making with that of their ancestors. As a teen growing up in Ontario who spent a good deal of time either making theatre or engaged in anti-racism activism, I neglected to see the connection between the two: I did not fully recognize how systems of colonialism had intersected with my artistic education to lead me to know and value the stories of Shakespeare and Arthur Miller and Oscar Hammerstein more than anything outside of the Western canon. Throughout school and the first few years of my career, I grew quietly curious and then loudly frustrated as I came to realize that what I had been taught was good art—or in some cases, was art at all—was based on Eurocentric standards.

And so, I began to explore what stories and artistic forms might be somehow more authentically true to me, artistically indigenous to my culture. But—what culture? India, where most of my ancestors supposedly originated? Guyana, the country where my more recent ancestors were brought to work as indentured servants and where my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents lived? Could the Quranic traditions from some lines of my family or the Biblical stories from others count—even if these religions, too, came to my ancestors through colonial systems? What about Toronto, where I was raised? Even if classrooms and theatres weren't providing stories connected to the cultures I came from, isn't the theatre ecology in Canada mine as much as anyone else's living and making art in this land, especially since I had come to love so much of it?

I don't know at what point I began to shift my thinking—and perhaps it wasn't a shift, so much as a concurrent process of realization—but I came to understand that I didn't have to uncover some pure, ontologically indigenous art form or story from my ancestors in order to make art that was literate and critical of the cultural systems in which they were created. It was slow but sweet relief to acknowledge that the post-colonial mess that is my ancestral history is also the world's history, and I did not have to negate any part of my (lived and ancestral) self in order to honour another.

In reflection, this process of growth resembles Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's familiar five cycles of grief: first, denial when I did not yet have the tools to understand the cultural normativity of the art that surrounded me; then anger, when I did; then bargaining, as I searched for something somehow "true" for me; then anger and depression when I had difficulty finding anything that made sense; and finally acceptance when I realized that my artistic and cultural "truth" was for me to decide for myself. Like Kübler-Ross's stages, the cycles are not necessarily linear, and they might occur more than once. But I wonder if there is a sixth stage for the postcolonial artist: imagination. Freed by imagination, the artist is able to intentionally seek stories from different cultural pasts, and weave them together in ways that are responsive, instructive, and elicitive for today's world.<sup>2</sup> I recall Walidah Imarisha's suggestion that imagination is "where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless" (4).

How are we carrying stories forward across generations? As artists we are fortunate that our work is explicitly about storytelling. One of my recent endeavours has been developing a theatre-devising series called *The Old Stories Project*, which I have thus far facilitated as artist-in-residence at Camp fYrefly, a national retreat for LGBTQ youth, and again as part of the Quebec Public Interest Research Group's event series, *Culture Shock*. In it, I work with participants to uncover cultural stories (myths, fables, bed-time songs, religious parables, and the like); analyze how power, oppression, and beauty work within the story; identify what it is about the story we wish to embrace and what we wish to reject or rework; and then adapt the story and give it new, resonant life.

While, certainly, this project is about developing methods of politically engaged art-making, it is equally meant to be a process of cultural healing—an invitation for participants to imagine new meaning in their ancestors' stories. Specifically, it is designed with individuals and communities who don't often see their cultural stories reflected in the mainstream, and those who have a hard time seeing their identities reflected in cultural stories in mind.

It is a process of taking stories from cultures that the mainstream renders invisible or deems to be backward and making those stories resonate here and now; of taking cultural stories that erase or reduce non-normative genders, sexualities, or abilities, and reimagining those stories in ways that centre and celebrate those perspectives. The project recognizes that while stories from past generations may not always be a perfect fit for our lives today, finding new ways to treasure them can be deeply nourishing for people from marginalized cultures and communities. For me, facilitating this project so far has been a great way to practice the process of reimagining ancestral stories, and has affirmed for me the transformative power of imagination.

Stories from past generations live in our selves and our communities, and they will find ways to surface. For even when we are not explicitly art-making, we are adapting cultural stories: We create new versions of old cultural stories when we move our selves from one land and rewrite our lives in a new one; when we build tiny or big communities that reject holding gender as its most salient principle of social organization; when we cook our grandmothers' recipes and substitute spices for ones available at the corner store; when we allow the necessity of our situations to not limit, but inspire our responses to them. The pieces in this issue encourage us to intervene in these inevitable processes so that we can tell stories across generations with care and make adaptations with intention.

## NOTES

- 1 For more on the Islamophobic backlash in Canada following the Paris attacks, see <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canadians-combat-muslim-hate-1.3324282>
- 2 For another multi-stage approach to post-colonial meaning-making, see Poka Laenui's essay "Processes of Decolonization," which describes another five-step process for indigenous activists engaged in decolonization: rediscovery and recovery; mourning; dreaming; commitment; action.

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