

Article

Unsettling the Settler: An Arts-Based Exploration

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Abstract: This article considers how meta-narratives can be created through arts-based educational research as a way to shift personal positions and values, using a monologue called *Unsettling the settler*, written by the author. The creation of meta-narratives that disrupt ideas of national identity, the safety and security of patriarchal and colonial regimes, and who gets to decide what knowledge is worth knowing are essential as antiracist solidarity processes that seek to create belongingness, care and responsibility. This article picks up a thread from a long-term research project in which the author learnt from her participants (actors, audience members and the production team) that performing anti-racist, decolonizing work necessarily begins with an examination of one's positionality (i.e., body/position/identity/race/cultural background, etc.). "Doing the work" means that one must be committed to sitting with discomfort and accept that there are no easy solutions as a part of the process of change.

Keywords: arts-based educational research; monologue; self-study; unsettling the settler

1. Introduction and Context

It is the strangeness of difference—the unfamiliar space of not knowing—that is so hard to tolerate for the colonizer, whose benevolent imperialism assumes both herself or himself as the centre of knowing and that everything can be known. For the colonizer-settler engaged in critical inquiry, there is an inevitable and disturbing moment when the Indigenous teacher or informant speaks. It is a moment of recognition—perhaps unconscious—that some things may be out of one's grasp [1].

How can we, as non-Indigenous people, unsettle ourselves to name and then transform the settler—the colonizer who lurks within—not just in words but by our actions, as we confront the history of colonization, violence, racism, and injustice that remains part of the IRS (Indian residential school) legacy today? [2].

We have to examine the system itself, because the systems were created to reflect the society that put them in place. This means that we put in place laws that reflected what we believe about Indigenous people. What I want people to understand is that even those who support doing away with racism are themselves caught up in a system that almost forces them to continue to adhere to policies and beliefs that come from a history of racism [3].

In *Smallest circles first: Exploring teacher reconciliatory praxis and agency through drama and theatre education in Canada* [4], the experiences of pre- and in-service teachers in Quebec, Canada are examined in order to understand what is possible when seeking to integrate the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's [5] (p. 7) Calls to Action for education (#62 i and #63 i, ii, iii and iv) into Canadian classrooms. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was officially launched in 2008 as a part of the Indian Residential Schools Agreement. Intended to be a process that would guide Canadians through the discovery of the facts behind the Residential School system. *Smallest circles first* uses posthuman autophenomenological underpinnings [4] and curricular understandings to consider the importance of teacher agency, creativity, and risk taking when centering collaboration with/in communities of belonging. *Sing the brave song: This isn't over!* (STBS) [6] was a play that was created by four volunteer actors as a part of the larger research project



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written about in *Smallest circles first*; it articulates the importance of starting with the self when considering one's responsibilities for redress in the decolonizing project in settler societies [7]. In this devised theatre example, arts-based counter-narratives were a way to shift personal positions and values, and to disrupt ideas of national identity and colonial ideologies. Findings from this devised research play indicated that deconstructing one's positionality is an essential first step for understanding antiracist solidarity processes that create belongingness, care and responsibility. In *Smallest circles first*, participants (i.e., pre- and in-service teachers) in the various research projects discussed between 2015 and 2019 consider the privileges they hold as a result of the body/position/identity they inhabit, and how this may be re-inscribing difference in decolonizing/anti-racist work [8]. In this way, a deeper understanding of how systemic racism and oppression in Canada are a politics of positionality [2] become clearer for settler and newcomer participants who experience sitting with discomfort and accepting that there are no easy solutions [9] when they are committed to reconciliatory praxis.

The bounded nature of the play format for STBS provides a mechanism for participants to work within, and a purpose for grappling with the topics being considered. In this context, the participants had to come to some sort of consensus about what needed to be learned and how to present the explorations in a respectful way for an audience. Ultimately, the synthesis of these conversations and explorations is prompted and guided by the playwright/director from STBS, who offers a blueprint for the ways in which other educators who want to take up similar work in their own classrooms might do so. Based on the feedback from the participants that took part during the play creation process, the following steps were deemed to be important when using devised theatre for anti-racist work [4]:

1. start with a personal exploration of one's own positionality and privilege(s) or barriers;
2. be open to learning more about something you may only have a general knowledge of;
3. be prepared to individually and collectively explore the topic/issue through the available texts (through reading, conversation and embodied explorations such as books, news articles, and survivor testimonies), and to listen to these texts (and one another); and
4. actively work to co-create scenes/dialogues around the topics/issues that the individuals and the group need to learn about/explore, as a way to start dialogue and learning.

By researching the experiences of the actors, playwright, stage manager and audience members during the creation and production of *Sing the brave song: This isn't over!* my journey (blinded for peer-review) into understanding how colonization has affected me as a white, cis-gender, able-bodied woman of settler (Scottish-Presbyterian, Irish, Welsh) emerged, and I realized that it needed to be examined and deeply reflected on. In Sherry Bie's [10] PhD dissertation *Unsettling actor: Reading the 94 calls to action out loud*, Bie focuses on Paulette Regan's consternation that "non-Indigenous people (must) unsettle ourselves to name and then transform the settler-the colonizer who lurks within-not just in words but by our actions, as we confront the history of colonization, violence, racism, and injustice that remains part of the IRS legacy . . ." [2] (p. 11). Bie takes this direction to unsettle the settler within by creating a decolonizing space for Indigenous history, as told by Indigenous people themselves, by bringing together professional actors to read aloud the TRC's 94 calls to action (2015) using storywork as a methodology.

When thinking about the original intent of the STBS research-based play, to explore research data from phase one, which explored how drama education with pre-service teachers could explore the educational aims in the TRC, I did not expect to be challenged. However, while observing the participants make sense of their own experiences with white fragility and white tears [11], among other topics as a researcher, I was prompted to seek out more information around race and the triggers that white people experience that cause emotional reactions such as anger, fear or guilt. In order to understand what I was researching, I had to read more about how to (in this example) move reactions that can

reinstate racial equilibrium and maintain racial hierarchies to productive spaces [12–16], so that the audience talk-back session post-performances could lead to generative conversations. Simultaneously, as I learned more, I began teaching about these concerns in my graduate classes for the first time, despite not quite knowing exactly where or how to begin. Byrne [17] refers to this decolonization process of the “white” subject, as one that is different from other decolonizing projects, such as the one described by Smith [18] that focuses on social change. For the white subject, deformation/reformation needs to happen to the “I” or “autobiographical subject” (p. xvii), one that, for white women, addresses hegemony and colonization. The decolonization of the white subject is thus best seen as a subset of a larger project of decolonization: “If a field of ‘white studies’ exists at all, it is at most a subset of other concerns around ‘race’ and identity” [19] (p. 117).

As Allan Vicaire, Mi’kmaq from Listuguj and the former director of the First Peoples’ House at McGill University, reminded me during our collaborative work using reader’s theatre with pre-service teachers to explore Indigenous topics from pre-contact to the present day, we all need to “do the work”. “Doing the work” meant (for me) committing, on a continual basis, to accept that actively listening, feeling challenged, uncomfortable, and struggling, is an essential part of engaging in anti-oppression work. Personally, this meant that I had to place myself in a continual state of (un)becoming, and to listen and dwell betwixt and between. I had to learn to unlearn, and be accepting of my own intersectional identities, which sometimes forced me to confront difficult lived experiences, i.e., to experience an “unsettling process”, as Paulette Regan [2] describes in *Unsettling the settler within: Indian residential schools, truth telling, and reconciliation in Canada*. Following Regan’s [2] example, I have drawn on autoethnographic writing [20,21] in the form of a monologue (which uses playwriting as a form of reflection) and scripted analysis to draw implications. This monologue unearths my own settler colonial heritage as a response to my process connecting to Chamberlin’s provocation: If this is your land, where are your stories?

2. Arts-Based Educational Research

The monologue as a form for the exploration of my research and personal questions is a format that is familiar to me as an actor, director, stage manager and producer. I have used the monologue as a convention in several instances as an arts-based educational research (ABER) methodological underpinning that allows one to weave together qualitative approaches and arts-based inquiries and engagements into data collection and representation. ABER offers a way to connect with topics and content using arts-inspired forms. Furthermore, arts-based educational research offers a way to use art to create openings/ruptures for conversation, questioning, and reverberations that other forms of research do not value or prioritize. As I engaged with texts, people, ideas, and emotions during the six years of data collection that led to *Smallest circles first*, I turned to ABER to make visible some of the invisible fears, assumptions, limitations and emotions that I have been confronted with while engaging in decolonizing and anti-racist work. In this way, ABER provides a space for the use of drama and theatre to complicate and create counter-narratives that provoke, promote and provide productive, paradoxical spaces from which new understandings of being and becoming can emerge.

3. Arts-Based Exploration: Monologue

Unsettling the Settler

Actor stands in the center of the stage, hands by her side and looks directly at the audience. She is wearing a suit and her hair is pulled back tightly in a bun or low ponytail. She wears pearls.

Sometimes I feel stuck.

(She pantomimes her feet are glued to the floor and she is using all of her energy to try and get one of them to move off of the ground in order to take a step forward. Screaming,

she finally collapses to the floor, but her feet are still planted in the same place. She begins to cry, but ends up laughing at the futility of the situation).

I mean, what is the point?

Here I am, trying to move . . . somewhere . . . But, I'm not quite sure where I need to go, or what exactly I need to do . . . and staying still kind of, well, sucks . . . and you know, I'm a runner. I don't generally like to walk places. I love the feeling of getting somewhere fast, and it's practical. It keeps me warm, because I'm always kind of cold. Except, well, you know, in the middle of summer when everyone else has the air conditioning on, and is sipping ice tea, or something stronger, and the ice melts in your glass before you can finish your drink . . . the kind of heat where most people don't want to move! *(She starts to fan herself).*

Well, then I'm ok.

Then, I'm finally warm and happy. It's like I can feel the sun permeating through all of the layers of my skin and muscle and bones, to somewhere deeper, some place inside where if I am warm enough I can find this place that will let me finally relax and feel like I'm . . . me . . . you know- not frozen. *(Carter loosens her hair and take off her suit jacket during this time).*

I'm also not such a bitch then.

Because, well obviously, I'm not frozen . . . or stuck.

(She looks down and tries once more to move her feet, but can't).

AAAArrghhhhhh.

(She looks up at the audience and realizes she has been screaming again and begins to apologize).

Oh, shit. I mean, sorry. This wasn't supposed to happen like this.

No, really.

Really. I'm not normally so . . . so . . . well, you know . . .

Frustrated, er, angry, ah . . . I don't know, you know?

Stuck!

Yes, stuck. This is really hard for me.

I, you know, get paid to know the right thing to say, the right thing to do. To teach other people about interpreting ideas and helping them to think about the ways that they live in relation to thoughts and the world and themselves.

You know? All of that "let's make the world a better place kind of stuff". You know what I'm talking about, right?

(She interacts with the audience until they begin to nod in agreement and launches into one of her lectures on social responsibility—or something impressive).

So phenomenology is when you go back to the thing itself-when you-ok, here- think about this pencil-imagine for a second that you had never seen a pencil before. You don't know what it is, what it does, what it's made of . . . and you get to discover that for the first time.

So . . . What do you do? Do you taste it, smell it? What does that moment of discovery feel like when you figure out its potential?

That subjective experience is emotional and intellectual and thrilling, right?

Then what?

Do you want to share this with someone else? What if it wasn't a pencil you were curious about? What if it was something like, a body, or a language or a feeling . . . like that first moment of falling in love? Amazing, right?

She looks at the audience. Great! Super. Well, exactly! That's me.

Ms. Happy-go-lucky, Ms. glass half full, Ms. "let's do this together". That's the kind of gal I am.

. . . really . . .

Who am I kidding?

(She sits down on a chair someone brought out when she was talking about phenomenology).

Oh!

Oh.

Hey!

HEY!

(She “goes through the steps of “discovering” the chair as if for the first time, as she just described).

Hey, thanks.

Hhmpf. *(she sits on the chair)*

So, what now?

Do you want me to tell you a story?

About . . . *(she nods her head)* . . .

right.

The one I don't want to.

I know.

Me too. *(there is a long pause)*

Well.

I guess I'm tired. I have *tried* you know?

But now I am *tired* of being here in Québec as an Anglophone.

I don't even get to call myself English here, and I hate feeling like this. I really hate feeling like I never do anything right, that there is this unspoken sense that I don't belong. I feel like I am being treated poorly, and helpless, that there is this government taking away my rights and the opportunities of my children through legislation and those of others—through like what's happening with Bill 21 and the changes to the English schoolboards. But I'm just too tired to try when there is this paternalistic agenda that just keeps moving along no matter what.

But, you know? Even more than this, I hate feeling *like this* because I know I am this white, cis gendered, able bodied woman with so much to be thankful for. I am lucky. And I'm Miss. Glass half-full, Miss. Let's make the world a better place.

And, I know! You look at me and say, what does she have to complain about?

She has a great place to live, her health, a job she loves, a husband and kids and all the things.

And, you're right. Why the fuck should I be up here complaining about feeling stuck when I am privileged? When all the indicators should suggest “it's all good”? She's fine. I'm fine.

Sings:

Altogether now, Grey skies are going to clear up! Put on a happy face. Wipe off those tears and cheer up! Put on a happy face. Wipe off that face of tragedy, it's not your style, and put on a happy face . . . (the last note is drawn out for a long time, as Carter tap dances her way to a grand finale).

It's just that, you know? I'm not. There. I've said it. I don't feel ok . . . or privileged.

I've moved maybe 45 times or more, I can't even remember, in 41 years how many times, and I grew up primarily in NWO where my mom lived . . . my mom still lives in subsidized housing . . . and when I was younger she and my brother and I lived with her and she was on welfare—what else can a single mother with a high school diploma who delivers flyers to support her family do?

I just remember feeling so cold all of the time. Of being outside in the winter, alone in the snow, and my legs and fingers going numb and then warm and there was no one around to tell me not too because no one was there to take care of me. And I just wanted this home that I thought everyone else had. Not someone knocking on our crappy townhouse door delivering a Christmas hamper. My Christmas presents used to be labelled “Girl” 10–12 years old.

But now, I buy someone else's fucking Christmas turkey and deliver the hampers. Every year. Every year I wonder if it's because I am trying to erase that from happening to me or to do something kind for a family during the holidays.

Every year I wonder if I will finally be able to forget about having to use flour and water to make pasta for my brother and I for dinner for nights in a row, when we were left alone as children and the heat went out. I don't want that to be a part of my story. I don't want to be that little girl who was so scared to speak that the school nurse gave her a second round of immunizations because the adults in her life neglected her.

That's all, you know? Inside of me. And I have tried never to share that part of me (*Carter takes off her blouse and dress pants and puts on a comfortable flowing dress and lets her hair down. She stands barefoot*). I want to be me, but I am tired.

And so, when I start thinking about truth and reconciliation, or social justice and teacher agency, or seeing something for the first time . . . like me . . .

I'm broken. I miss this home I never even had. I miss knowing my extended family because we moved so much and then I went away to University which was following my heart but, also running away.

I feel stuck between these places that I don't know how to bring together, or accept.

I started my research to open up conversations about the things that need to change in Canada so that all people can find a way to be together.

But, the truth is, I can't help anyone because I am hurt. I need to forgive and I need to be forgiven.

The truth is, reconciliation is my story too and I am afraid that if I can't figure out how to heal me, and the trauma I experienced, I have no right doing this work. This research.

But I have struggled to forgive lots of people; and sometimes I think I have. But sometimes the person who I feel has done this significant "wrong" doesn't really understand the extent of pain they caused for what they did. And I wonder if that's what this means.

How can the people who inflict the pain ever really be forgiven, if they don't really truly understand how it feels?

How can reconciliation take place if you never really believe you did something wrong because your truth needs something else to exist? You'll never understand the pain your decisions caused.

But, I do.

I do.

And sometimes, I know the politicians who talk about the TRC just don't comprehend what they are asking in the calls to action. Like, this book about "Reconciliation: The false truth of Trudeau's sunny ways" that talks about this notion that colonial states make for poor friends. You Know? "Colonialism is not a 'behaviour' that can be superficially changed by a prime minister professing 'sunny ways,'" or for us tearful Prime Minister who cries while saying all of the right things, but is fundamentally re-inscribing the status quo through the existing foundational system in Canada.

All I know, is that it hurts to open up the scars and to dig out the poison that lies inside. That hurt and painful experience that has been laying there for so long. (*She begins to pick at her arm trying to dig out the "poison"*). I know it's there. I know its sitting just beneath the surface. But its pooled there in a spot and If you don't touch it it can't spread everywhere again. See? SEE? The scar? Its healed, as much as it can.

Why do you want to open it up? Why are you asking me to be brave?

Does it make you feel better? Does it look like it makes me feel better? I bet its easier than actually doing the real work.

That's the truth. That's what you're asking. You're asking people to open up their trauma, to rip out those emotions and memories and then to leave us standing here, stuck to figure out our own next steps. (*She throws the chair she was sitting on and again falls to the ground*).

I thought about it for a few months. I imagined moving away and teaching in a small town and living this simple life. But, I gave my heart to the work I'm doing, and I don't understand why,

So, I just can't. But, I'd love to be able to.

But, I can't because I have this feeling inside that things can be different. That something has to change and that it is happening and it's going to be better for more people and systems.

That we need the conversations where we stumble and try to understand something differently than before. That we, you know feel unsettled and stuck but then . . .

(the child who brought out the chair returns and smiles holding out a hand. She looks down at her arm).

My grandfather lost a leg in the second world war and lived with the phantom pain for the rest of his life. Those things-you know- those stories that make up a life, they give this narrative inheritance for going on.

Maybe we re-write this story together and the pain and the joy, and the being stuck and unstuck are all just parts of the larger narrative we learn to tell.

Maybe those stories I don't want to be mine, that I feel ashamed to tell, are trying to tell me something. And it's hard to listen to them, and to accept that they are mine. But, maybe my stories are trying to teach me that the journey of truth and reconciliation needs to start with me, and that's the only story I can tell.

What's yours?

4. Analysis: Unpacking the Monologue

This monologue was written during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020, while I was simultaneously working on the data analysis and writing *Smallest circles first*. As I dug deeper into researching "truth" and "reconciliation", the theme of "forgiveness" continually came up. In parallel to the experiences of my participants in this work, I was simultaneously living through my own reckoning with childhood traumas and triggers, and finding way(s) to forgive. In order for me to focus on my research, I turned to writing about my own experiences—which were also related to being of settler descent—which emerged in the piece: *Unsettling the settler*. Jan Hare [20] contends that in order for the settler to move beyond reconciliation as a conceptual understanding that leads to absolution, one's active participation is needed. Writing a monologue exploring my experiences with the challenge of being "unsettled" while learning more about the TRC and how pre- and in-service teachers could take up this work in their classrooms was an active experience for me, which—as I have described—helped me to move from feeling "stuck" to "unstuck":

Maybe we re-write this story together and the pain and the joy, and the being stuck and unstuck are all just parts of the larger narrative we learn to tell.

Maybe those stories I don't want to be mine, that I feel ashamed to tell, are trying to tell me something. And it's hard to listen to them, and to accept that they are mine. But, maybe my stories are trying to teach me that the journey of truth and reconciliation needs to start with me, and that's the only story I can tell.

The reflections and understandings that emerged in the monologue require a confrontation of one's own experiences that inhibit engagement because of personal pain and hurt, and an acceptance of the self in order to engage with others.

Derrida talks about going beyond the feelings when thinking about reconciliation and forgiveness. He says that we need to move beyond those emotions in order to change the systems of oppression that Foucault describes being re-inscribed into institutional forms of oppression after struggles around issues take place.

We must all confront the truth of our shared his/her/their stories in order to

Open up the scars and to dig out the poison that lays inside. That hurt and painful experience that has been laying there for so long (She begins to pick at her arm trying to

dig out the “poison”). I know it’s there. I know its sitting just beneath the surface. But its pooled there in a spot and If you don’t touch it it can’t spread everywhere again. See? SEE? The scar? Its healed, as much as it can.

The embodied and visceral description and experience, when putting this monologue on its feet (i.e., rehearsing it in an embodied way rather than just reading it aloud, in preparation for performance), of “digging out the poison” moved the ideas of reconciliation and forgiveness from conceptual understandings for me, to active engagements. Active engagement in reconciliatory praxis through a theoretical and arts-based lens offers a way in which to engage in the discussing topics with others and making connections between experiences. By exploring the actor’s “not-me and not-not-me” [21] (p. 72) through *Unsettling the settler*, I was able to consider the four steps for engaging in ABER that participants I observed experienced when creating their devised theatre piece. Specifically:

1. I began with my personal exploration of my positionality, privilege(s) and barriers, as the character in this monologue literally and figuratively goes from a “stuck” person with pearls, hair tightly wound, and uncomfortable heels to someone who names their own fears and trauma in order to let their power go (i.e., being abandoned as a child and growing up in poverty).
2. I had to confront the fact that I had to learn and grow as a result of what I was researching (i.e., to be open to learning more about something I may only have a general knowledge of) because the research participants were going deeper into their engagement with the TRC, systemic racism in Canada, and anti-oppressive language. In order for me to honour and listen to the stories of my participants, I also had to learn and grow and listen (i.e., “do the work”).
3. I had to individually read more books and texts on race, racism, anti-oppression and anti-oppressive language; then, I had to participate in reading groups and bring these conversations into my own classes.

5. Reflections

Unsettling is a work in progress. It is a making and a remaking. It is about learning to be vulnerable and to listen. For me, it has also been an acceptance of my own experiences and a journey into forgiveness. This is a process that has felt painful at times. It has also been a process of learning to listen to the voices and stories of others. I have had to find my own voice, and had to learn to speak when the time for truth is in season. As Patsy Rodenburg reminds us: “More and more today we are in danger of losing our voices for the simple reason that we are losing our connection to oracy. Perhaps we need to conserve the traditions of oracy like we would a precious rainforest. Both transform the air we breathe into a capacity for words” [22] (p. 23). Beyond writing *Unsettling the settler*, performing and speaking this monologue aloud is an unearthing process, in which I engage in an experience of bodily affect (bringing hope into action); as the body and mind relax, the breath is deepened, and encounters with text in my mouth dance between the silences that resonate in my body and in the spaces I occupy. Sharing a monologue with an audience is both a gift and an act of vulnerability, a waiting for a response that might never come, an offering that you alone can give and which might not be accepted. Engaging with the TRC’s calls to action, learning more about anti-oppressive language, and reading texts with unfamiliar cultural contexts are movements, and without movement there can be no restitution or redress.

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