Five Poems: Artistic Pedagogy of the Migrant Soul

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WITH DECOLONIZING CANADA THROUGH ART AND ARTISTRY

Abstract

Between November 2016 and November 2017, a group of creative scholars, international, and domestic graduate students gathered to explore topics related to immigration and Indigenous culture through artistic practices. The goal was to construct scenes that would be put together to build a play. The scenes were shaped in different ways, through poetry, music, literature, movement/dance, and drama. In this way, playbuilding became our methodology. Through semiotic, social, and critical authorship practices the actors engaged in a dynamic and participatory drama. Schools and classrooms might consider using an artistic, embodied pedagogy, such as the artistic pedagogy of the migrant soul explored in this paper, to engage elementary and secondary students in active, thoughtful approaches to understand diverse and critical issues, including forced migration, marginalization, truth and reconciliation, and co-existence.
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They Want Our Children/Learning to Survive

You must stay.
You must stay.
Your children will be confused.
You must go.
You must go for your children’s sake.
You must stay.
Your children will be uprooted.
Your children will never go hungry again.
They will lose our language, our ways.
We will give up our education to protect our children.
We don’t count. They want our children.
We must go.
We will be safe there.
We will.
We WILL stay.
We WILL go.
We MUST stay.
We MUST go.
Yes!
I DON’T want to go!
We are going to Canada.

(Neelofar, Snežana, & Brianna)

Between November 2016 and November 2017, a group of creative scholars, international, and domestic graduate students gathered to explore topics related to immigration and Indigenous culture through artistic practices. The goal was to construct scenes that would be put together to build a play. The scenes were shaped in different ways, through poetry, music, literature, movement/dance, and drama. In this way, playbuilding (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995) became our methodology. Through semiotic, social, and critical authorship practices, the actors engaged in a dynamic and participatory drama. Here, ideas were shared, experiences were lived, and
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scenes were created. Together, we argue that humans will feel like legitimate authors of stories only when they are offered diverse multimodal, social, and critical opportunities to participate in their own socio-cultural communities (Winters, 2013).

Figure 1. Coming together to celebrate diversity and artistry.

Our creative inquiry underscores five premises that emerged from Snežana Ratković’s (2014) dissertation and from our own (the actors’) lived experiences. Our Indigenous participants found these immigration-inspired premises also true for their peoples and communities still struggling in Canada. Although these premises can be regarded as universal, through playbuilding practices, personal experiences, and embodiment they became uniquely ours:

1. **We don’t count. They want our children.**

From residential schools to adoptions, immigration, and welfare systems. Taking children into government systems because of different parenting beliefs and cultural practices is still common practice in Canada (Crichlow, 2002; Muir & Bohur, 2014; Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). The fundamental belief is that adults are set in their ways and cannot assimilate in the Canadian
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culture as easily, whereas children are more flexible. For an adult, it is too late to become Canadian (Francis, 1992; Ratković, 2014).

2. **Your education does not count.**

Too much emphasis on universities and the written word determines who in a society can be a knowledge carrier. What about workmanship? Shouldn’t that count as knowledge? Isn’t oral storytelling also a way of knowing (Hibbin, 2016; McLean & Wason-Ellam, 2006), a pedagogical tool for cultural and cross-cultural understanding (Cortes, 2016)? Stories and experiences must be considered as a valuable educational practice (Ratković, 2015, 2016).

3. **Shelter is not enough.**

People need their whole identity. They need professions and artistic expression. Reserves or housing for refugees provide shelter, but people need more than simply shelter to live full, authentic lives. Fullness of life includes contributing to the community professionally, as well as through artistry and cultural practices (Ratković, 2014).

4. **Multiculturalism is a gift to Canada.**

Although multiculturalism is considered a gift to Canada, systems don’t pay attention to having Indigenous peoples and refugees succeed. Tokenism—the ways symbols are taken from cultures, used, and often exploited—demonstrate the ways in which multiple cultures in Canada are devalued (Lee & King, 2017; Ratković, 2014). Rather than valuing certain ways of knowing, the focus highlights the material item or the token.

5. **Silences and gaps in our stories.**

Certain perspectives and stories are silenced or buried (Brant, 2017; Lavell-Harvard & Brant, 2016; Ratković, 2014). People leaving their homelands face challenges of loss—losing their belongings, their credentials, and social networks. People leaving reserves lose their status. Indigenous families lose their women, mothers, and daughters due to racism, sexism, and misogyny (Lavell-Harvard & Brant, 2016; Walter, 2015). Highlighting particular perspectives while sweeping others under the rug leads to unattainable historical loss, including loss of languages and culture.

The poem that opens this inquiry, *They Want Our Children/Learning to Survive*, speaks about the feelings of a Pakistani mother, who realizes it would be safer for her children if they leave their homeland. Using a drama strategy called *alter-ego* where two perspectives of an issue are highlighted, Neelofar and Snežana stand over Brianna, trying to persuade her to think about
what might happen to Brianna’s family if she decides to stay put or if she decides to go to Canada. This poem speaks to premise number one: bringing up the ways that children (as opposed to adults) are viewed in Canada. These perspectives weigh heavily on Brianna’s mind during the physical scene, as shown by her facial expressions and subtle gestures (e.g., touching her daughter’s head, putting a hand on her son’s shoulder). In the end, after weighing the decision in the scene, Brianna takes her children’s hands, leads them off stage, and clearly states: “We are going to Canada.”

Another poem, *The Rabbits’ Alphabet/Learning to Cope*, draws upon similar feelings of unrest.

**THE RABBITS’ ALPHABET/LEARNING TO COPE**

Away we go! The **Beginning** of most great adventures I wave my baggage and stake a **Claim** in a new world The **Desert** wasteland of promises With **Exit** signs at every turn, telling me how to leave but never how to stay Feeling **Frightened** is an understatement I am petrified the **Goal** is not what I imagine The journey seems to **Hurt** more than help I am relying on **Intuition**, but the spear of my sixth sense **Jabs** at my heart Ties it in **Knots** I am **Lost** Everywhere I **Move** Barely **Noticing** what home looks like **Overcome** by the sense that it is entirely invisible But maybe also **Powerful**

I sit in the **Quiet**
Try to be **Resilient**
I try to be **Strong**
Try not to let them **Take** everything
**Use** everything, I am something until I am nothing
I try to hold onto the **Vision** of a better life
Breathe in the **Wisdom** of my ancestors
Ignore the **eXpired** passport
Forget my far away, my **Youth**
And remain **Zealous** in my pursuit of peace for my children
(Shannon and Brianna)

Here, actors were asked to use a picture book and embodied movement as inspiration for scene work and poetry (Figure 2).
Because of time restraints, this poem did not appear in the final version of the play; however, the intention to animate it for the stage was to use a drama/dance strategy called *fill in the space*, where a few participants create tableaux (still poses) to represent aspects of the poem, and where other participants would then enter the scene, creating other tableaux and filling in the negative spaces. Brianna and Shannon’s poem draws upon the metaphor of coping and upon the element of tension, both physically showing tensions in the scene itself (e.g., physical obstacles blocking and or surrounding the speaker) and emotionally (e.g., feelings of courage, stillness, heartbreak, and confusion). With this scene, the poem was created first and the movement came secondary. The poem itself draws upon premise number four, reminding listeners to pay attention to relationships of multiculturalism and co-existence on this land, recognizing that immigrants and Indigenous peoples can live together respectfully.

Shannon, who immigrated from Jamaica, used a different process to create her poem, *Am I Home Now?/Learning to Move*. Here, the movement was the inspiration for the poem.
Am I Home Now?/Learning to Move

First there was the time of watching
They are watching me
We are watching too (I will protect you)
I roam through this land of mine
    This home
    I roam, I reach
Each of us packing up
    Messing up
Life has never been so messy
    Scrape, squeeze
    Cleaning these spaces
    that used to be home
    Spit, switch, swishhhhh
I wish I could protect us all
See what we’re forced to do?
    See into the future and
    find some hope
Learn to cope, learn to be fine
Making time, to make this
    new land mine
Am I home now?

(Shannon)

Using a strategy of movement based on Jaques Lecoq (2006) work, called verb chains and a metaphor of brushing their teeth, the actors portrayed a scene of a refugee's journey—from escaping a war-torn country to arriving (and eventually belonging) to Canada. Specifically, to begin creating this scene, the process of tooth-brushing was broken down (step by step) and examined carefully. However, instead of miming the tooth-brushing (the person holding the brush), the participants were asked to become the toothpaste. This meant bigger, more interesting movements. For example, the actors embodied what it would feel like to be spat-out, swished around, squeezed, and scraped. The verbs used to describe this process were highlighted and
written on cards, and then laid in a sequence on the floor. Then after many practices of perfecting the movements, Shannon was invited to write a poem using the verbs. The poem later had musical accompaniment added to it. This original music was composed by Spy Dénommé-Welch. The poem itself touches on and exemplifies the emotional challenges and insider thoughts that come with migration, which is highlighted in premise five (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Silences and gaps in our stories.

Here, Shannon underscores the challenges of loss that people face when migrating across and within national borders, including newcomers to and Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. The movements of the actors, alongside the music and the words, embody a sense of urgency, protection, and community.

Stemming from a doctoral dissertation, created by Snežana, this next poem invites audiences to consider premise three: shelter is not enough. The transcript poem was originally created by Snežana and was inspired by an interview with Zlata, a refugee woman teacher from the former Yugoslavia.
We want to Paint on the Walls of the Cave/Learning to Resist

As humans
We first thought about biological survival
But at the same time people thought about art
Describing their lives everyday
And that is missing you know, missing
Something is missing
Those paintings on the walls of the cave
I don’t have it you know?
It’s biological existence only
Only?
Only.
And I’m lucky to have the theatre
And our stories.
Our drawings are already here
And people
Lucky to learn something new
To write a poem or two
My freedom is my teaching
It makes me happy
It keeps me alive
My office work doesn’t give me that motivation
To be alive
Alive!
To be brave
Brave!
To paint on the walls of the cave.
(Zlata with Decolonizing Canada Through Art and Artistry)

Beginning with the poem, we used a choral reading strategy to highlight the ideas expressed by Zlata. She stated: “I am not just a refugee woman.” She suggested that people
cannot be just immigrants, refugees, or workers; they need opportunities to express themselves and create/re-create their lives. Zlata stressed that she wanted to contribute to this society, to leave her mark, and to reclaim her multiple-identities. She wanted to paint on the walls of the cave, to resist deskilling and marginalization, to transcend her biological existence. As we were practicing the choral work, Vicki and Catherine expanded Zlata’s poem. Rooted in their Indigenous heritage on Turtle Island, Vicki and Catherine spoke about the interferences of immigration on the lives of the original people as the "historical reality of Canada" (Bohaker & Iacovetta, 2009, p. 461): "And our stories. Our drawings are already here. And people". To honour Zlata, extend her ideas, and connect them with our lives, we created a large, colourful mural that actors painted with their hands (Figure 4).

This mural did not only become a part of the set design for the play, the creation of the mural was also video-recorded, edited, and integrated with original music. This video became a part of the poetic, choral presentation.

Following the 12 public performances, Shihui created an afterpoem that highlights premise four. Her intention was to explore notions of belonging and what it means to live together in peace and harmony.
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Migration/Learning to Belong

Birds hurt and wonder
why rainstorm hits in day and night
no safety anytime

Decide to leave away
birds struggle but fly to desire
Another place to shine

Under the same sky
colorful birds settle on trees
twitter in the peace.

(Shihui)

Artistic practices such as poetry, movement, drama, art, and music create embodied and modal opportunities to learn about immigrant and Indigenous lived experiences, such as the synergies and differences in the contact zone. Here, we explored an artistic pedagogy of the migrant soul, including the five premises mentioned above. Through artistry and playbuilding, the participants gained a deeper understanding of how immigrants and Indigenous peoples, when moved from their land (e.g., due to forced migration, residential schools, and welfare and government systems), face challenges and losses. Some of the struggles that were performed through the play included: resisting marginalization, reclaiming identities, connecting with new communities, learning new ways of knowing, retaining values and beliefs and teaching them to others, and re-building lives (Figure 5).
We discovered through this process that we needed to move physically and intellectually to express emotions, losses, and hopes to better understand these migrant movements, as well as silences and gaps in Canadian stories. Another discovery was that theatre is elusive, here and gone. To capture the lived experience of this project, we hired a local filmmaker, Mike Enns, to create a film.

Schools and classrooms might consider using an artistic, embodied pedagogy, such as the one explored here (see specific activities and teaching methods in the Appendix A) or filmmaking (see https://youtu.be/aUM3sHdBzr8), to engage elementary and secondary students in active, thoughtful approaches to understand diverse and critical issues, such as forced migration, marginalization, truth and reconciliation, and co-existence. This artistic pedagogy of the migrant soul can teach students, and teachers, how to survive, cope, move, resist, and belong.
Acknowledgement

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Snežana Ratković (Artistic Director/Producer/Dramaturge/Collaborative Playwright) is a refugee teacher from the former Yugoslavia who immigrated to Canada in 1998. She is the Research Officer in the Faculty of Education at Brock University, an award-winning scholar, and a published poet in the former Yugoslavia. Snežana's research interest lies in migration and indigeneity, transnational and transdisciplinary teacher education, social justice leadership, decolonizing methodologies, academic writing and publishing, and knowledge mobilization.

Kari-Lynn Winters (Drama Director/Dramaturge/Collaborative Playwright) is an award-winning children’s author, scholar, playwright, and performer. Since 2007, she has had more than 25 books published with 4 more in pre-press production. She is also an Associate Professor at Brock University, where she teaches drama-in-education, dance-in-education, and language arts to teacher candidates.

Shannon Kitchings' (Poet/Narrator) arts-based work in community stems from her outreach experience with youth in Ontario. In addition to arts-based community development animator and playwright, Shannon is a spoken word artist, performing her poems throughout southern Ontario. She is also a trainer, director, and singer.

Shihui Yang (Actor/Dancer) is a diversely talented and experienced individual in the fields of fine art, music, and sport. Yang achieved a BFA in oil painting from CCNU and she is an experienced sketching and drawing instructor. In addition to being an accomplished pianist, Shihui is a recognized National Second-Level Athlete in China. Yang holds a Master of Education degree from Brock University.

Brianna Spratt (Stage Manager/Actor) is a multifaceted academic and instructor. She is involved in numerous foundations and committees that focus on health, fitness, and overall well-being. Her background in applied science, education, research, and fitness provides her with a wealth of knowledge in embodiment and in the collaboration of fields and topics.

Neelofar Ahmed (Actor) holds an M.A., M.B.A. specializing in Human Resources and Marketing, an M.S. in Computing Sciences from eminent universities in Pakistan, and an M.Ed.
from Brock University. Currently, she is a doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Her interest lies in war and terrorism-affected children’s education, and physical and mental well-being in schools and communities.

Sajitha Vinod (Actor/Dancer) is an M.Ed. Graduate, Leadership and Administration in Education, Brock University, and a science teacher from United Arab Emirates. She writes poems.

References


Appendix A

Here, we offer some specific playbuilding activities for educators who are interested in a playbuilding method of practice and instructions.

**Alter-ego**
During alter-ego activities, inner voices are highlighted. Specifically, this strategy appeals to the conscience – the morality of our being. The often-used angel versus devil on-the-shoulder personas symbolize this strategy and can be translated easily for the stage.

**Step one**
Three group members stand together. Group members 1 and 3 take on two different perspectives of an issue. Group member 2 assumes the role of decision-maker.

**Step two**
Group members 1 and 3 take turns stage whispering their perspectives to group member 2 (The whispers indicate thoughts in group member 2’s head). This middle actor, gestures his/her thoughts/reactions about/to what is being whispered.

**Step three**
Group member 2 announces his or her decision then exits the scene.

**Fill in the Space**
Here group members use their bodies to create body shapes and to fill in the spaces surrounding others. It is an excellent strategy to use when thinking about obstacles.

**Step one**
Group members stand in a circle.

**Step two**
Group member 1 enters into the circle and creates a shape with his or her body, representing a concept or theme. For example, a person showing residential schools may create a shape that shows tension and expanded space.

**Step three**
Other group members, thinking about the same theme or concept, might fill in the open spaces around, between, above (without touching) group member 1.
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Step four
Adapt this idea for the stage by having everyone face the audience, instead of standing in a circle.

Verb Chains
This embodied strategy focuses on verbs, as well as the movements that are shaped by these words.

Step one
The facilitator or the group decides on an action that acts as a metaphor for the play’s theme. For example, brushing teeth.

Step two
A list of action verbs is created—for example, squeeze, scrape, spit, etc.
We asked students to: a) mime brushing their teeth, and then, b) with full body movements, be the toothpaste being swished and spat out. This switch from “doer to done-to” results in instant, dynamic, full-body “kinetic roleplay.”

Step three
The verbs were then rehearsed, a poem was added, and a full-body movement scene began. All group members were to ‘be’ each verb simultaneously.