

How, Why, and What: *Canadian Theatre Review in Performance Matters*

Selena Couture and Melissa Poll

In her article in this issue, “Here We Are, In the Middle,” Algonquin/Irish theatre artist and scholar Yvette Nolan asks readers to celebrate conversations across divisions and, consequently, to grow: “The back and forth of discussion is what moves us forward. . . . Hearing each other, hearing ourselves, being willing to say things out loud—or on the page—and then be challenged on them by others—editors, scholars, gentle readers—and be asked to re-examine them. Staying open to the possibility of change, of growth, of learning” (149). This message comes at a particularly fraught moment for freedom of speech on university campuses across settler colonial borders. In March 2026, the University of Alberta’s Board of Governors removed equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives from its hiring policy seven months after an Alberta government report argued that institutional commitments to EDI created questions about freedom of expression and recommended that all post-secondary institutions adhere to a “policy of institutional neutrality . . . to uphold and protect freedom of expression and intellectual diversity” (CCLA; Mintz et al. 56–58, 80). In a number of US states, gender, women, and sexuality studies and American ethnic studies departments are being cut due to federal pressure while political agitators are free to use harmful racial epithets on campus under the First Amendment. Here, we see freedom of speech being deployed to protect some while other voices are silenced. In this climate, Nolan’s thoughts offer a way forward. Her words sum up the impetus for this issue—through its publication, we are asking readers to preserve and reflect upon a critical moment in our field, one that raises pressing questions about freedom of speech, solidarity, and ethical discourse. This issue also holds broader meaning within ongoing discussions about the infrastructure of publishing in Canadian theatre and performance—and regarding whose

voices and stories are supported, silenced, or contested within our institutions. This moment will undoubtedly give rise to productive disagreements and conflict. As editors, we are impelled to trust that it is the community surrounding a conflict that is responsible for offering “alternatives of understanding and complexity” (Schulman 20). We want to start a broader conversation here, and to do so, we detail the events that led to *Performance Matters* 12.1.

In the fall of 2024, to both celebrate and critically reflect on the fiftieth year of publishing *Canadian Theatre Review*, issue 199–200, “Core Samples and Cross Sections: *CTR* at 50” was published. The issue was edited by Heather Davis–Fisch (who was the editor-in-chief at the time), Jenn Stephenson (*CTR* editor-in-chief, 2016–2023), and dance artist and scholar Seika Boye. It contained twenty-one articles, written by thirty-seven people. Shortly after the publication, they received a complaint about one of the articles that deployed an intersectional feminist critique. The editors and author worked to respond respectfully; the complainant remained dissatisfied and threatened a lawsuit. After many months of negotiations and against the editors’ wishes, the publisher eventually decided to remove the article to avoid this. In response to this censorship and in support of the scholar whose work had been removed from the publication, nineteen authors rescinded their permission for the press to publish nine other articles in the issue. *CTR* 199–200 was disassembled and republished without what the editors termed the “omitted” articles in September 2025. The articles were listed at the end of the editorial introduction without comment on the circumstances of their removal.

As you might imagine, this has been a difficult time in our field. Despite this, we are determined to reassemble and disseminate this work. Legal advisors at four universities concluded that the article is protected under the fair comment defence. The editors of *Performance Matters*, Coleman Nye and Lily Mengesha, using Simon Fraser University Library’s Open Journal Systems/Public Knowledge Project, agreed to host the republication of these ten articles as a matter of being open about dissent and freedom of expression. One of the first issues we faced was that *Performance Matters* is a peer-reviewed journal and *CTR* publishes works commissioned by guest editors which then go through an editorial process overseen by the editor-in-chief. We wanted to honour *CTR*’s process and the many hours of

thoughtful labour that the authors and editors went through to get to publication in 2024. Opening them up to the peer review process made no sense; yet we also saw an opportunity to demonstrate the strength and diversity of our field. To this end, we've invited scholars and artists to write short responses to the original articles that are published as companions to each one.

We would be remiss in not addressing the context in which our thinking on this issue of *Performance Matters* developed. Upon first hearing of the situation, Selena's reaction embodied what Sara Ahmed celebrates as the "willful feminist" (xi); she was willing to announce her disagreement and put herself behind it. For Selena, the decision to take action felt obvious—like there was no other option. Ahmed notes, "Willfulness can be a spark. We can be lit up by it" (65). For Melissa, it happened in a snap. Ahmed describes snap as "the moment of not taking it," a moment built on "a longer history of being affected by what you come up against" (189). From her position as a Canadian in the United States, Melissa was watching as women's reproductive rights were rapidly disappearing as were university initiatives and departments dedicated to DEI, gender, sexuality, and race. Melissa experienced snap as a group of women scholars, situated across differences and settler colonial borders, gathered on Zoom to discuss the removal of the article from *CTR*. The silencing of the scholar's voice in the journal's pages was the source of palpable anger and frustration—a hallmark of transformational feminism (Butler 80; Hemmings 157; hooks 63–64). And though snap is a break, it is also a starting point (Ahmed 187).

From this beginning, the work became about assembly and growth. Together, we sought out participants willing to contribute to a publication that, in its existence alone, refused the censorship of the article while also endeavouring to expand the vital work offered by the original editors and authors behind *CTR* 199–200. Like those who rescinded their articles from *CTR*, the new contributors who welcomed the invitation to participate in *Performance Matters* 12.1—Nazli Akhtari, Susan Bennett, Kelsey Blair, Leah Decter, Ric Knowles, Laura Levin, Yvette Nolan, Natalie Rewa, Nikki Shaffeeullah, Jenn Stephenson, Jerry Wasserman, Robert Wallace and Kenneth T. Williams—were bringing themselves to an online assembly that, in a Butlerian sense, calls out injustice and delivers a demand for change (Butler 11). By assembling in the pages of *Performance Matters*, this group has offered an act of affective

solidarity—one that is self-reflexive and undefined by sameness (Hemmings 150). Their solidarity emerges through individual engagements and subsequent action in relation to the author's experience. Moreover, their activation demonstrates that, although continually expanding political and social crises have challenged the ecology of performance scholarship, it remains resilient.

Article respondents accepted the invitation to write 1,000 words (approximately) or develop creative work beyond the language of academic prose with which readers could engage. We asked that they respond to and extend the concepts/ideas discussed in their assigned article and welcomed gestures to further discussions that could build on the original piece and their own work. With this responsive form, we aim to create a space for the best kind of lively and thought-provoking academic engagement.

The original *CTR* issue was organized in four sections: "Looking Back," "Cross Sections," "Core Samples" and "Futures." This *Performance Matters* issue features articles from each of these sections in the order they were originally published (as detailed below). In our overview of the content of this issue, we have quoted the original editorial descriptions of the articles as listed in the table of contents and the editorial introduction (these words are italicized but not cited because they are no longer publicly available). We also explain the reasoning behind inviting specific people to share their responses. Recognizing the limitations of our perspectives as white settler women scholar co-editors, and as part of our mutual ongoing commitments to continue to expand who is invited to be "in the room," to redress exclusions that limit our field, we made a conscious effort to invite scholars and artists from diverse backgrounds. We understand that at this stage, this is a gesture of "inclusion" that does not in and of itself dismantle the power structures that continue to disproportionately feature white settler perspectives. We also hope that this can be the kind of action that Métis political scientist Adam Gaudry and dis/ability education scholar Danielle Lorenz identify as "inclusions" that can be "vectors to achieve more transformative ends" (221). We hope this collection of authors and respondents can be a step toward the creation of better infrastructures that will serve us all.

Section 1: "Looking Back"

In *"(Un)Making History? Canadian Theatre History and the Canadian Theatre Review," Kailin Wright* provides an overview of the relationship between the development of the journal and of Canadian theatre history and studies as a field. The response to Wright's article is by Selena Couture, titled: "On Unmaking and Making in the Compost Heap of Canadian Theatre History." Like Wright, Couture is a theatre historian; her work questions historiographical methods to expand what we can understand as history while also aiming to deconstruct settler colonial understandings of white possession. In this article, she takes us to the metaphorical compost heap, examining not only how Canadian theatre history is unmade but also the possibilities of what beauty might bloom from its constitutive heap.

Next, **Jessica Riley** takes a deep dive into CTR 1, noting in her article *"Chauvinism and Its Discontents: Canadian Theatre Review 1 Revisited"* how the journal's argument for the importance of Canadian theatre history is situated within largely unexamined frames of whiteness and masculinity.¹ The response to Riley's article, "Feminism and Its Discontents: Reviewing CTR's Inaugural Issues," is by Susan Bennett, a distinguished professor emerita whose field-defining work on Canadian theatre and feminism makes her an ideal respondent to Riley's article. Her article expands on CTR1's limited gender representation and chronicles the dearth of women's voices in the first twelve issues, reminding us of a number of women working in Canadian theatre at the time. These erasures had an impact, arriving at a moment when institutional knowledge formation was coming about.

In the next contribution, [f]ormer CTR editor **Alan Filewod** reflects on his ambivalent relationship to the journal's history in *"The Wrong Side of History, or How We Got It Wrong,"* noting that by remaining locked into nation-building assumptions, the journal edified settler national culture. Jerry Wasserman's response to Filewod, "Maybe We Got Some of It Right: A

¹ Heather Davis-Fisch reflects on the process of editing the issue and Riley's article in particular in the issue's introduction: *I think my favourite moment about putting together the issue was at the CATR conference in 2023. You [Jenn Stephenson] gave Jess Riley a copy of issue 1, and it was Alan Filewod's copy, with his name and marginalia in it, and it was the day Alan was receiving a lifetime award at the conference. It felt like the embodied history of the field, and the relationship between CTR, and this issue, and the evolution of our discipline all intersecting in that moment.*

Response to Alan Filewod,” reflects on his own time as an academic and actor in Canadian theatre, and disputes Filewod’s rhetorical binary of a “right” and “wrong” side. As a contemporary of Filewod, who also worked in theatre and the academy but was never part of the *CTR* editorial team, Wasserman provides a knowledgeable and critically distanced perspective.

*In “Imprint: Reflections on Canadian Theatre Review Play Publication,” Rebecca Burton and Annie Gibson bring together playwrights, publishers, and academics to discuss the relationship between the journal and the play publication landscape in Canada.² Cree playwright Kenneth T. Williams’s response “It’s Not You, but It’s Not Me Either,” responds by sharing some stories of his experiences as a playwright and theatre maker from Saskatchewan to illustrate what he terms his “complicated relationship status” with *CTR*. As a creative writer, Williams took up our invitation to write beyond the language of academic prose and deployed his considerable skill as both a humorist and a political commentator (most often displayed these days on the podcast *Media Indigena*) in his piece.*

Section 2: Cross Sections

*Taking up the issue’s theme of core samples and cross sections, Katrina Dunn explores how space and site emerge across the fifty years of the journal in “Unruly Sites, Bewildering Buildings, Angry Cities: A Wayward Walk.” Nazli Akhtari’s response, “Despite Landscape,” extends Dunn’s attention to debates about space published in *CTR* to consider what it means to think about landscape when it is mediated through “white possession,” pulling examples from student encampments protesting Palestinian genocide and the complex entanglements of landscape painting and theatre in Canadian history. She concludes by noting the multiplicity of creative practices that*

² The editors also discussed this article further in their introduction: Heather Davis-Fisch: In “Imprint: Reflections on *CTR* Play Publication,” Jill Carter describes really beautifully how when she was a young actor, she’d buy *CTR* to read the scripts and what artists said about their work. She describes *CTR*’s coverage of Indigenous theatre, and the 1991 issue edited by Monique Mojica. I do think that *CTR* is one of the only places where we consistently see artists in conversation and writing about and explicating their work. . . . The other thing that was interesting to hear about in this issue was the curatorial process and the role of the script. Alan [Filewod] [in Rebecca Burton and Annie Gibson’s curated panel] talks about how seeing a play and wanting to publish the script often drove the issue theme. It was not “choose the theme and then find a play that fits.” He talks about it with Newhouse, the Richard Rose Necessary Angel piece. One of the things that emerged is how early *CTRs* were in large part about publishing scripts, and that lasted for quite a long time.

endure despite this. We invited Akhtari to respond to Dunn's work because of her perspectives on critical historiography and the global Iranian diaspora, which query both the "politics of departure" and the "ethics of arrival" on Indigenous territories. Akhtari's work was recently featured in this journal with her article "Diaspora Walks: Small Lessons in Unlearning," which was part of the 2021 special issue "Performing (in) Place: Moving on/with the Land," co-edited by Jenn Cole and Melissa Poll.

Section 3: Core Samples

In "There is no such thing as a gay play': Canadian Theatre Review and Gay Politics in the 1970s" J. Paul Halferty analyzes CTR 12, positioning the issue as marking the first time the journal engaged with identity politics outside of the nation and as capturing a moment when understandings of queer performance were undergoing significant change.³ In her response to Halferty, Nikki Shaffeeullah's "Affinity or Extraction? The Institutionalization of Queer Arts Spaces" nods to the progress in diversity and inclusion Canadian theatre has made since the 1970s but amplifies the changes that remain stubbornly hard-won. Shaffeeullah identifies how Canadian theatre may be invested in an optics of diversity and ally-ship but our arts institutions continue to balk at the prospect of work invested in making lasting social change. We wanted to celebrate Paul's article with a response from Shaffeeullah, given her perspective as a queer Indo-Caribbean artist and advocate and her commitment to equity-driven, community-engaged work. She has also been an important contributor to *CTR*; her piece "Safety and Justice in Our Artistic Spaces" asks vital questions about how people and arts organizations can position themselves to minimize harm and hold themselves accountable when harm is done, focusing on transformative justice and new frameworks for praxis.

In her article, **Kim Solga** reads all of 1988's issues, asking how the preoccupations of 1988 resemble those of today and finding that the questions explored and the contradictions they trouble lay crucial

³ In the introduction, Heather Davis-Fisch comments further on Halferty's article: *When people are critical, I think it is still with that spirit that they are also historically contextualizing those writing or editorial choices. We see this in Paul [Halferty]'s article, when he argues that despite the problematic aspects of the Homosexuality and the Theatre issue [CTR 12], it also emerged at a moment when the culture was shifting around understandings of what gay culture in Canada was. I think there's a generosity in the critique.*

groundwork for today, in "A Year in the Life: Canadian Theatre Review, 1988." Kelsey Blair's response, "A Year in the Life: Publishing *is* and *as* Recording," takes inspiration from Solga's method of weaving performance, publishing and the personal to examine the ambient atmosphere surrounding the publication of the 1988 issues. Blair's piece includes recollections she solicited from the editors of the 1988 *CTR* issues, which she uses to return lost personal textures to the publications. We invited Blair to respond to Solga's work because of her multifaceted profile as a scholar of communication, musical theatre, sport, and performance studies, as well as her previous collaboration with Solga on her blog *The Activist Classroom*.

The final "Core Samples" article, "*Hourglasses and Hammers: A Reflection on Forty Years of Interculturalism in Canadian Theatre Review*," is **Barry Freeman's** critical analysis and personal reflection on how the theme and practice of interculturalism, and particularly its ethical engagements, have shifted during the life of the journal. Theatre artist and academic Yvette Nolan's response, "Here We Are, In the Middle," appreciates Freeman's reflection on his growth in understanding of intercultural theatre over the years. She builds on this further by discussing her experience as the artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, creating theatrical adaptations, and the continuous learning that comes from a commitment to tussling with differences that divide us. Our invitation to Nolan was inspired by our deep appreciation of her generous artistic leadership, scholarly and theatrical writings, as well as her articulation of the concept of "Eighth Fire productions" in *Medicine Shows* as a "time for Indigenous people and settler communities to work together to achieve justice, to live together in a good way" (117).

Section 4: *Futures*

This final section features two articles. *The prompt of sharing her office with nearly 200 issues of CTR inspired Selena Couture's "An Account of Durational and Distributed Encounters with Corpus CTR," which posits CTR as a living archive of theatre and performance practice in Canada.* Jewish Canadian white settler scholar and inter-media/performance artist Leah Decter's response to Couture, "Matters of the Everyday In-Between: Making the Relationality Ac/count," is a "visit" with the idea of the "care-full encounter" described in Couture's description of co-habiting. Decter links this to the unhurried, reciprocal artistic collaborations she has undertaken

that honour the everyday spaces of the in-between. We invited Decter to respond to Couture's article because of her multiple installation and performance projects that creatively respond to and deconstruct settler colonial archives, one of which, *becoming/un/becoming*, she installed at the Ottawa Art Gallery while writing this article.

The second article in the Futures section, "CTR Editors in Conversation," might seem to be a strange fit with the topic as it is a roundtable convened in March 2026 with former CTR editors Robert Wallace, Natalie Rewa, Ric Knowles, Laura Levin, and Jenn Stephenson. While the editors do discuss their experiences from over forty years of publishing the journal, their conversation also reveals a throughline of mentorship, collaboration, and invitation that sustained the journal over many years and points toward the practices that can help us all navigate the crises we face in our field today.

Concluding Thoughts

One thing I've learned through the back-and-forths over the years is that you can take rights away, but you can't so easily take ideas away, including people's belief in their own rights and the rights of people they care about. You can cut down the flowers, but you can't stop the spring. There is no going back, though how we go forward is the work—or conflict—at hand.

—Rebecca Solnit, *The Beginning Comes After the End*

While this issue springs from the effort to reflect on and celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Canadian Theatre Review*, it also reveals the fragmentary nature of commemoration and historicizing. The year 2024 was indeed the fiftieth year since CTR1 had been published—that is one way of counting time. But what if the history started with the publication of the *York Theatre Journal* in 1971? Or with Robert Wallace's assumption of the editorial role in 1982 when, as is revealed in the CTR Editors Roundtable in this issue, his ethic of invitation and gathering changed the trajectory of the journal significantly? This turn then allowed the journal to develop into what so many of the authors included in this issue appreciate—a gathering place for artists, scholars, and activists to share and reflect on their own and each other's work, at times a place of invitation. A place that serves to imperfectly document and reflect on performative practices in these lands. Or should we

mark another beginning of *CTR* in 2025, when a number of theatre scholars came to a clearer understanding of what the journal has been, what the current conditions of its publication actually are, and how we are faced with decisions about what academic publishing in our field will be from now on?

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