

Despite of Landscape

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In “Unruly Sites, Bewildering Buildings, Angry Cities: A Wayward Walk” (this issue), Katrina Dunn takes her readers on a stroll through five decades of spatial thinking in *Canadian Theatre Review*, a journal established in 1974, just seven years after Canada removed racial barriers to immigration in 1967 to maintain its population and labour force (Li, sec. 3). Along the way, Dunn offers a densely signposted narrative about past debates on space pulled together from this archive of Canadian theatre.

The bibliographical labour performed by Dunn in limning a narrative of space-thinking in the issues of *CTR* results in a list of more than forty contributors who reflected on debates about space, site, and place in the journal’s pages. Excepting the very few contributors writing about placemaking and Indigenous land-based practices, the voices represented are of white scholars and artists. Just as with any archive, past issues of *CTR* could only provide an incomplete record of these decades. Yet Dunn’s walk offers an empirical glimpse into a certain attachment to space and theatrical landscape.

In engaging with the space of theatre and performance, I seek to actively account for what the representation of space *does*. Thinking about space within such romantic fictions as “Canada” always already risks occluding racialized codes in a “recursive” production of space and the legalization of theft as property (Nichols 9). The differentiated terrains of struggle for/against space/landscape are realized in the extended materiality of this recursivity, and its “juridical forms” (Bhandar 12) in property. So, appreciative of this invitation to read, learn from, and think with Dunn’s essay, I have had to ask myself what it means to think about space, especially for those of us whose relationships to this space/landscape are mediated through “white possession” (Moreton-Robinson xiii). The past few years have made irrefutable the historical disposability of racialized bodies and labour,

especially given the international, violent clampdown on assembly and speech (things of performance and performativity) and the pervasive indifference to, and indeed the permissibility of, a genocide in full view of the world. That genocide resurfacing in a colonial frontier elsewhere, in Palestine, is at once a reminder of its *hereness*.

How do we engage in and teach the vital art of assembly at the time of its criminalization?



Figure 1: Gaza House: the Liberated Zone, June 2024, located on Haldimand Tract and on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples, situated on land colonially claimed by the University of Waterloo. On 25 October 1784, this land, which includes 10 kilometres on each side of the Grand River, was promised to the Six Nations.

As Dunn's journey through the journal's past illuminates, the first decade of engagements with space in *CTR* reflected concerns with the construction boom of theatre venues as incongruous with the nation's young practitioners'

artistic needs. These issues are imbricated with related questions about ownership and access. In relation to this “forceful arrival of architecture,” Dunn observes a “suspicion and disappointment” among theatre practitioners (91). This suspicion extends to the establishment of such conglomerate art spaces as the National Art Centre and the elitism that model spearheads.

Consequently, the 1980s invoked a momentum for site-specific performance, as artists moved away from purpose-built venues. In *CTR* issues of subsequent decades, authors engaged with the appropriation of such spaces as warehouses, churches, and fire halls and their transformation into performance venues for alternative theatre groups. Stumbling at the year 1989, with concerns over housing costs in the 2010s and 2020s echoing similar worries from the 1990s, Dunn confides a temporal disorientation (93). The conceptual norms established in *CTR* about site-specific and immersive work continue into the new millennium.

The walk then nears more recent decades, when concerns over gentrification and redevelopment have found purchase in contemporary debates about artist-run and non-profit art and cultural institutions and the neoliberal financialization of ownership, debt, and access to space. Dunn’s pause at the year 1989 in fact invokes how theatre’s boundedness to space means that the medium inevitably must grapple with broader conditions related to the financialization of corporate and residential real estate in a settler colonial economy predicated on land theft and resource extraction.

More recent issues of *CTR* begin to aptly turn their attention to housing injustice, the spatial choreographies of assembly, and the politics of mass gathering. As part of a larger conversation in Canadian scholarship on space and theatre, Dunn stresses that “[m]ost of us settler scholars have lots of work to do in this direction, but Indigenous artists and scholars have a long history of land-based practices that have been deeply articulated in *CTR* through many voices and issues” (95). In its final fold, the essay pointedly asks, “In a medium that requires spatial presence, how can we pay the brutally prohibitive cost of remaining?” (97).

Writing on the “neoliberalization of institutionality,” Jodi Melamed invites a (re)consideration of “financialization and debt today as always already

configured and disposed by racial capitalism and imperial conquest.” She proposes, for instance, that “rather than seeing the brutality of today’s financialized modes of accumulation by dispossession as novel, we might ask, what are the key differences between indigenous lands seized yesterday by way of tax debt and sold to white settlers, and lands seized today by indebted governments and sold to foreign investors?” Through a feminist-queer-of-color critical lens, this proposition is an invitation. Rather than presuming a settler collectivity to probe the costly price of working as a theatre artist in the present (post)pandemic moment when “austerity” is increasingly used as “a revamped civilizing discourse” (Melamed) that among other things exasperates housing injustice and the shrinking of cultural spaces while radically changing the public’s social habits, I want to ask what similar patterns of prohibition have *historically* determined who affords to do and to audience theatre in this country.

In researching Carroll Aikins’s 1922 red face play *The God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, Deanna Bowen considers the anti-Black migration petitions signed by the members of the Group of Seven along with the legacies of the Group’s unpeopled landscapes and the *longue durée* of white ethnonationalism of the Massey Commission (Bowen). Her work invites an inquiry into an entangled history of early painting and theatre in Canada. Similarly, considering how early twentieth-century artists “anchored white settler identity in the landscape,” Iyko Day shows how “Asian labor personifies the abstract circuits of capitalism,” while “settler colonial constructions of landscape express the opposite” (76). Day observes that, for instance, in the works of the Group, the “romantic anticapitalism flourished during the height of anti-Asian immigration restriction to project a settler identification with a personified, Indigenous landscape” (77).

Artists presently working across institutions of contemporary art in their hyperfinancialized and racialized settler forms may not commune across disciplines in the ways they had at the outset of the twentieth century. Yet given these early entanglements, what happens if we consider historical conceptual norms of understanding space in Canadian theatre along with early landscape, especially given that “national identity in Canada and the United States has often been defined as a product of the landscape” (Day 78)? For instance, one may expect a performance history that, building on Bowen’s research on the links between landscape and the invented Indian

in Aikins's play, would consider the personification of "Indigenous identity theft" (most often by white women) (Simpson, "Indigenous Identity Theft") as a contemporary expression of "autochthonophilia" or the "intense desire to 'go native'" (Day 79), as exemplified by Emily Carr, the infamous honorary member of the Group. How does the art-historical recognition of landscape "as a medium rather than strictly a genre of art" (Day 75), as a settler colonial fetish, or even "a biopolitical expression of white supremacy and a personification of white male dominion," (Day 79) change the perception of this attachment to space historically expressed through the medium of theatre? What may considerations of histories of space in theatre along with landscape as similarly coded manifestations (of the enactment of settler imperial conquest through regimes of elimination and exclusion) convey about material histories of race?

The question I stay with about the established norms of theatrical space is not only about exclusions or absences of Indigenous and racialized voices in *CTR* as an archive. While salient, my concerns are less about the inclusion of place-based practices, historical barriers to access or to maintaining space or funding, or even counter-modes of creative expression by Black, Asian, and racialized theatre practitioners. Instead, learning from Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson's essay "On Ethnographic Refusal" as well as Indigenous modalities that Dene scholar Glen Coulthard calls "grounded normativity" (13) demands that I first and foremost take seriously deracination and extractivism as logics of the reconciliatory national frame of reference in "Canadian" theatre and performance as well as projects of its documentation. Racialized communities have their own methods of recording and memory keeping that may cast doubt on academic publishing. Despite ongoing exclusions in theatre's institutionalized archives, multiplicities of creative practice continue to endure the landscape across this country. More so, I want to encourage us to persist with transdisciplinary methods of inquiry into the ways in which race *historically* has and continues to remain encoded within the existing norms established through Canadian theatrical practices and in the writings that engage Canadian theatre's habits of space.

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credit to the student encampment at the University of Waterloo whose artwork is enclosed. Their continuous rehearsal for a kind of urgent and artful living and deep study has shaped this response yet prove it futile. The ongoing repressive violence that calls their relational worldmaking, conviviality, and deep study “property damage” instructs me regarding space and assembly in Canada more than anything I could read or write. The policing and securitization as they assembled in support of sanctity of life with their vibrantly blue tents to do the life-affirming work of conjuring a world of material abundance, their methods of provisioning incommensurate with the lethal terms of institutionality that continue governing their lives, liquidating them callously as “enrollment,” bears a historical weight that ethically and collectively remains to be reckoned with.

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