

Mon histoire, ton histoire: Entangling Research, Pedagogy and Theatre

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Abstract

In this article I explore ways Research-based Theatre (RbT) entangles pedagogy, scholarship, and art-making through embodied, relational inquiry. Drawing on the evolving autoethnographic play *Mon histoire, ton histoire*, I reflect on a theatre-based workshop in which participants co-created personal and ancestral stories through movement, monologue, gesture, and dialogue. Centering the monologue “Baggage Carousel,” I share how theatrical practices invite rhizomatic forms of knowing that blur boundaries between performer and audience, research and teaching, individual and collective memory. The workshop illustrates how arts-based inquiry can foster relational meaning-making, cultural reflection, and collaborative storying within educational spaces across diverse learning communities globally.

Mon histoire, ton histoire

Forty years ago I was in first year of a BA in Acting at Dalhousie University, expanding my creative self. I had no idea how that theatre training would play itself out or, as my parents were no doubt thinking, how this degree would get me a job! Over the years I have had opportunities to apply my training in traditional theatre, though for the most part I have woven this artform within pedagogical and research spaces. At a time when teaching, learning, and research are primarily experienced through screens and sitting at desks, dialogue around ways to consider embodied theatre-based approaches for pedagogy and scholarship seems critical.

Theatre, like other disciplines, has an array of theories and practices, though at its core it invites stories to be heard, seen, and felt through aesthetic approaches. Research-based Theatre (RbT) as a form of arts-based inquiry “shows” what was (and continues to be) discovered within research endeavors using theatre (Shigematsu et al., 2022; Belliveau & Lea, 2016). To illustrate ways that theatre enables rhizomatic forms of inquiry, I describe a moment within a workshop that featured monologues from the emerging RbT play *Mon histoire, ton histoire* (Shigematsu et al., 2025).

Mon histoire, ton histoire loosely traces my ancestral narrative as a French Acadian. The autoethnographic play shifts from past to present, weaving stories that span over four centuries of Acadian identity, culture, and language. It draws on historical documentation about the Acadians,¹ including scholarly articles and books, archival material, and expert interviews. Additionally, the play incorporates relational perspectives through ongoing conversations with relatives, personal journals, and engagement with contemporary Acadian culture (Belliveau, 2024). For the past three years, I have been sharing monologues from the evolving script as part of university classes and workshops (masterclasses) locally

and globally to explore creative pedagogical and research approaches. Each offering has provided rich opportunities to discover further meanings within the monologues and, just as importantly, to inspire co-creation with participants to tease out the *ton histoire* (your story) element. The particular moment I share in this article took place during a multi-day workshop in 2025,² where I facilitated a series of four 3-hour sessions (12 hours total) over the course of a week that inquired into the possibilities of theatre as a form of pedagogy and research.

The participants knew the sessions would be interactive and that they would be invited to share small performative moments in groups. Woven within the facilitation and as part of the scaffolding, I offered “performed” examples to show this embodied methodology in action. I selected three monologues from *Mon histoire, ton histoire*, including “Baggage Carousel” shared below. By now, excerpts of the Acadian play have been performed over 20 times in different configurations in various teaching contexts in both English and French. Nonetheless, I am still exploring how to make this piece about cultural identity relevant and meaningful to the diverse audiences and participants I encounter.³ Also, one of my goals is to keep seeking ways to seamlessly weave aesthetic examples of theatre into workshops without it turning into a performance that completely separates performer(s) and audience. Ideally, the monologues bridge and forge connections for participants, evoking an entanglement of pedagogy, research, and art-making.

The moment I elaborate upon took place during the first 3-hour session of the four-part sequence. Describing this moment, or most creative, embodied experiences for that matter, is like trying to catch the wind with your hands. You can feel, sense, and hear it, though it’s often intangible and ephemeral. As such, the descriptive retelling only conveys glimpses of the experience. With formal research about the experience coming from participants, we would no doubt gain deeper insights around how the co-creation fostered unique ways of knowing and doing. Alas, the description comes solely from one lens—my observation!

Context

The workshop, facilitated in English, is set within a typical classroom, yet as we push the tables and chairs aside it creates an empty playing space for creative invitations. The group of 18 participants includes K–12 and tertiary educators, community artists, and graduate students, coming from various cultural and linguistic contexts. The participants willingly engage in a variety of initiating activities that are scaffolded, which leads them to eventually engage with a personal ancestral story through theatre-based inquiry. An hour into the workshop, they are asked to select a *positive moment* they recall about an ancestor, friend, or acquaintance, preferably someone at least a generation older than them.⁴ I provide an example of a memory of my grandpa showing me *la source* (water spring) on the family farm property when I was 10 years old. They are asked to look through an imaginary window to recall this (positive) moment from the past. Then, they free-write about this moment in their learning journals (which I ask them to bring for the workshop), engage in tableaux, and carry out a variety of embodied activities to tease out the memory. The engagement is done individually and in small groups as they begin to inquire and remember that moment. Through the process they hear snippets of each other’s stories as the

activities allow for intersecting and exchanging of memories. Listening to small moments of one another's stories and engaging in collective physical activities enables participants to situate and re-imagine their own memory, knowing that memories can shift with time and that their story is part of a larger story.

Intertwining memories with one another allows for unexpected discoveries, gentle imprints, and new insights to emerge. Amidst the collective group "doing" activities, I strategically weave in two monologues from *Mon histoire, ton histoire* to provide examples of bringing memories to life through text and embodiment. One of the monologues, "Empty Rocking Chair," offers memories of my grandparents as I return to visit the family farmhouse as a young adult; the second, "Theatre School," explores language identity and how I desperately wanted to learn and perfect English (and lose my French accent) during my acting degree. These five-minute monologues resonate with Mailliet's (1971) Acadian storytelling approach as glimpses of character, place, language, and culture surface and intermingle. The short poetic monologues make use of simple though precise gestures and sparse set pieces (e.g., a journal, two chairs). They invite participants into a blurring of a theatre/pedagogical space, as the workshop momentarily shifts from their co-devising inquiry to witnessing a storytelling theatre piece that uses similar objects and devices utilized within their own exploration. For instance, the "Empty Rocking Chair" has my grandma looking through an imaginary window, and my personal journal is set on one of the chairs.

Moment

Nearing the end of this first workshop, I share the monologue "Baggage Carousel" as a way to begin braiding our stories and stimulating a collective narrative. However, just before sharing it we engage in a short activity called *stepping in, announcing*. I propose an environment: the airport. I model stepping in and announcing: "I am the ticket counter" as I lean forward and stretch out my arms, representing a counter while staying frozen in place. Participants are asked to one by one enter the space and announce what they are within that environment and freeze into a gesture. I encourage them to consider the micro and macro, objects, non-objects, more-than-human. So, in this airport environment, participants came in as "a lost passenger, a passport, an announcement, a recycling bin, a canceled flight sign," and so on. It concludes once everyone who wishes to step in has done so, creating a dynamic imagined airport space. With most groups, like this one, everyone jumps in, and the activity lasts just over two minutes. Keeping with the airport environment we move on to something slightly more specific—a baggage carousel—using the same prompts of stepping in and announcing: "I am the rotating belt, noise of the suitcase hitting the floor, flashing red light, impatient traveler." The third and final one is even more specific—the suitcase—using the same protocol: "I am the broken wheel, zipper, name on the tag, pajamas inside the suitcase, a vibrating air tag." Their collective, creative doing breathes life into the space, helping set up the monologue at the airport.

Baggage Carousel

It's 2022

My new favorite author is Acadian writer France Daigle

Queen Elizabeth II dies at the age of 96

COVID-19 starts to ease in most countries in the second half of 2022

Which allows me to begin researching my Acadian play and travel to France

I'm in the Toulouse airport walking towards the baggage carousel

In conversation with le gars qui étudie l'aviation

He shares his insights about the next generation of aircrafts

And how studying hummingbirds have shifted his way of thinking about flight

On parle en français, so he asks about my French background

'J'chu Canadien'

'Ah, du Québec!'

'Non, j'chu Acadiens'

'Acadiens, bon! Moi, je suis Occitan!'

He goes on to share the history of Occitan language and culture in the South of France

'Ma grand-mère, elle me parle tout le temps en Occitan.

I understand her, 'dough can't speak it'

The suitcases begin to make their way on the carousel

Across from me on the other side

I notice the woman from Pondicherry, India

She sat beside me on the flight

Her first time on French soil, though she's spoken the language since birth

She is coming to Toulouse to visit her grandson who works in aviation

Does everyone in Toulouse work in aviation?

The young couple who sat a row ahead of me

And were on their phones for the entire flight

... are still on their phones

Suitcases are bumping up against one another on the carousel

Different shapes, sizes, colors

Some have stickers, tags, taped corners

Oh, the woman from Pondicherry has picked up hers

A large one, with a multicolor ribbon on the handle

'Bringing lots of gifts and spices, don't tell anyone'

I tell le gars qui étudie l'aviation

'I plan de faire du vélo along le Canal du Midi'

'Mes ancêtres, it's dem dat dug de Canal, you know,

Peut-être your ancestors too?'

This famous Canal connects the Mediterranean and Atlantic Ocean near Bordeaux

The young boy who sat behind me

Constantly kicking the back of my seat

Picks up his small Batman suitcase

Immediately opens it up

And pulls out what looks like a transformer batmobile

There's my suitcase
It's stuck underneath another one
'There we go
A few more knicks
Wheels are still intact
All good'

I make my way towards the exit
With several other passengers pulling or pushing their suitcases
I pause to look back towards the carousel
Still churning out suitcases as people eagerly await them

All these suitcases shared space
Hugged one another in the cargo hold
Jostled in harmony with the movements of the plane

Parting now, going their separate ways
Each containing stories, glimpses, snippets
Of the passengers

My suitcase holds my well-traveled folding bike
Snuggled by clothes and necessities
Ready to encounter new stories

'Ah ben, c'est vraiment nice ça'
Le gars qui étudie l'aviation offers me a drive to my hotel
Our suitcases reconnect for a little longer
'Ma mère vient me chercher.
Elle aime bien les Canadiens du Québec!'
'Ben, how about les Acadiens!?'

As the monologue concludes, I invite the participants to think of a word, phrase, image, or gesture they recall from the monologue, or what it made them think about—a memory from their lives, perhaps. Then, I ask them to step forward and place themselves (without speaking) inside the baggage carousel “theatrical” space where they imagine that word, phrase, image, or memory might sit. Once everyone has stepped inside our fictional airport space, I ask them to turn to nearby participants, and in groups of three they talk about the image, phrase, or memory. What resonates from the monologue, what connections did they make? Then, I ask them to recall the moment they have been developing around an ancestor or friend. Using the metaphor of the suitcase, baggage carousel, or the environment of this place of arrival/departures, they are asked to generate a sentence or so (short text) and a physical gesture about their emerging monologue/story. I give an example from the monologue I just shared: *My suitcase holds my well-traveled folding bike, snuggled by clothes and necessities ready to encounter new stories* while looking intently at the contents of what my suitcase might hold, then gradually look up towards new adventures. I ask them to devise and explore their short text and gesture(s) with (or without) their partners for a few minutes. I share how this inquiry is in-process, and not fixed, encouraging that ideas, their text might be discovered through physical gestures and movement within our creative space.

When ready, we decide an order for (voluntarily) sharing these short snippets of their moment. Once a sequence is established, one by one they offer their short text and gesture(s) of an emerging story with the group. All is executed slowly and with a sense of discovery and curiosity. Some speak in first person, others narrate their event, though all are invested in their moments. Stories of individuals included: opening the suitcase to take out a special gift handed down—binoculars; taking a tea set out of the suitcase then sitting having tea with their grandmother; being at a distance from the suitcase then gradually coming closer to hug the suitcase/aunt. As they share their moments, I step out of the playing area, creating space for their stories (*ton histoire*) to emerge. From the witnessing space, I can feel the burgeoning possibilities, stories waiting to be explored in a collaborative, co-creating space.

Once everyone has shared their moments, I ask them to slowly, silently walk in the space to recall various moments they just witnessed, and acknowledge (without speaking) one another. As they gently walk, I repeat the following passage from the monologue:

All these suitcases shared space
Hugged one another in the cargo hold
Jostled in harmony with the movements of the plane

I then ask them to quietly form a large circle (the way we began the workshop) to prepare debriefing today's unfolding. While they are moving to create a large circle, I continue:

Parting now, going their separate ways
Each containing stories, glimpses, snippets

We debrief the session, then discuss next steps for our upcoming days.

In the final workshop of this series, these budding one-line and one-gesture stories were transformed into their own short monologues. The scripts the participants developed continued to be relational, as they were generated in constant group discussions, *performing* what arts-based educational practices like research-based theatre invite, to “set in-motion” (Irwin, 2013, p. 211).

The development and sharing of their 18 stories now live within the next iteration(s) of “Baggage Carousel.” Their gestures, journeys, and discoveries through text and movement have offered further layers, imprints, and insights for my monologue. The initial story depicted within the “Baggage Carousel” monologue becomes diffracted into multiple stories, and disrupts a set narrative as new stories are invited to be shared. Because of these deliberate creative interactions with others, the diasporic Acadian story continues to grow amidst and in relation to other stories/memories about identities, cultures in flux, in states of becoming. Through this arts-based pedagogical inquiry, we (re)discover stories that were buried, yet to be told, and in the relational co-creating space we find ways to invigorate our collective humanity.

Notes

1. French Acadians (as they eventually became called) are a group of people who came from various parts of France to present-day Canada in the early 17th century. Today, they are largely based in the Eastern Canadian provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island—though the diaspora of Acadians reaches across the continent, with many residing in Louisiana.
2. In consultation with the individuals who invited me, I will keep the location anonymous, though participants did give their consent for me to write about the unfolding.
3. To date the monologues have been performed several times in Vancouver, Hong Kong, Norway, Sweden, France, Switzerland, and the United States to undergraduate and graduate students, faculty members, artists, and community members.
4. I emphasize selecting a story that is not activating for participants. The invitation is also open for a moment that *might* have happened, as for some a semi-fictional realm is best. Some of the scaffolding activities invite a space between fiction and so-called fact.

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