

WHEN WE WALK IN: A REFLECTION

introduction

an invitation in the form of a draft

Mūkonzi wā Mūsyoki

i am here. sitting in a place of reflection. thoughts from the experience and accompanying excogitations yields a number of offerings. everything has manifested the way it has because of the state i've embraced. i had this engagement in the university of alberta in edmonton last month. i had no idea the unveiling would reveal things to this extent. i feel a positive disturbance to not only think but participate more in the fractures that persist here in canada. i am currently in nairobi kenya. i had a serious family emergency that required me to go home immediately. through my journey, i have gained the privilege of being able to step back—further back—and go into the heart of the positive agitations that i carry from the conversations and reflections we shared in the performance installment *learning here* led by Marilyn Arsem.

in the session we think through where we are as individuals, as a society, as part of an institution, and within our (different collective and individual) agency in the broader conversation on decolonization, conciliation, and reparation. we dwell in the raw energy that fuels us to come up with sustainable solutions: solutions can always recur forwards (always in a process of trial under good intentions) because as humans we are messy, flawed, persistent, and endowed with so much passion. at this stage of my doctorate research, i am thinking a lot about autoethnography and relationality. i think of the ways initiatives can commence with that sense of inner equilibrium that serves the grounding function. this sets up a foundation that ensures we move on to the urgent step of striking a balance between the social self and the individual self for the realization of 'healthy' solutions. in other words, this form of 'balance' ensures we are not employing extractive or exploitative models while coming up with solutions or alternatives. there is a genuine 'heart' in looking at solutions as implications and not just 'an issue we need to fix.'

the dedication i am seeing with the youth and other stakeholders here in kenya resisting a system that does not serve them well, echoes a familiar instinct... the situation is messy, i don't approve some approaches but i acknowledge the genuine drive to resist, claim citizenship agency, and to be heard in the realization of the new government's plan. it is impactful to inhabit a space of resistance: to hear the currents of change or necessity blow with vigour and conviction in that voice and drive meant reminds us that something has to happen. at the heart of it all is that human instinct to have a home, to have a harmonious home, harmony in a shared home. if you ask me now, i don't know how to best describe home if i cannot talk about spaces that gain a soul (or deep meaning) and become more than a space. conceptual, physical, and psychological spaces cannot be decoupled from our character attributes and contaminations of who we are: in our ambitions, while alone, joined together, and in our inveterate displacements. dear reader and witness i hope this will offer you insight. it is a thought in process tangled in life, anxiety, hope, fear, guilt, dedication, grief, and other forces that will stay in fluctuation and flow. things that take on a draft form are not necessarily incomplete or unsubstantial... it means for some of us, that is what things need to be.

PART I

Poem: spaces

1
these spaces remain alive
persistent
the energies they carry:
past, present, future,
there's a spirit of a kind—
the kind whose heartbeat over time
dims to a whisper
brushing through rocks
we still hear the beats
but call it 'a lifelike embrace'
like the clasp
of battered concrete hands
can be hospitable, or kind...
maybe they are or try to be

but what does this effort offer
if not a leeway to mute
the lifeline of spaces
so low that care
can only be an imploration
blowing like a wisp of wind
over our conscience

2
the way we induct ourselves into
spaces
the codes we sculpt around the
frames
the small invitations
we squeeze through the seams

welcoming and unwelcoming gestures
what we nail on the face
what we aim for it to say
signs and symbols
the way we read them
or want them read
the way we bring our presence
or presence our set selves
the schemes we put in place
to define what spaces need to be

3

how we carry ourselves
in and out
what we hope to feel, find, forge
the alignments we carve
around blocks of architecture
the fine bits
we merge with the design,
the negotiations
that nurse frictions of translation:
what we want to notice
what we aim
to see, remember, embrace,
what we leave out
how we choose to situate ourselves in
tight spaces of fluctuation
how we associate with
the sense of belonging
being somewhere
in concert with
the seen and the unseen
acts of remembrance, forgetfulness,
dismissal
how we concoct
sense and rationale
the felt, the unfelt
senses with no name

4

spaces that make us feel safe
the ones we sanctify
spaces of art-making, ritual, reflection
where we dispense
boundless amnesty
deflect from the sight of ruin
how we enfold it all

under the polished sheen:
amnesia, the noble shimmer
emits a blinding finish, enough
to misnomer destruction as glory

5

but
those of us who come here
come not just to witness
but uphold the mythologies
of glory and genius
sidestepping silent hurt
or the hurt we deem silent

6

hurt haunts the soul
that enlivens this place
but
we've clothed this hurt
in kind, mindful, and polite words
that cushion our conscience, like
a tenuous tent shielding us
from hot torrents of guilt
bone-chilling winds of condemnation
a foil from the outward world
we want to stay inside
because the outside
might remind us
things that have been done here
and continue to this day
in the name of advancement

7

what makes spaces what they are?
you ask
the hurt of others
the demeaning of names
the diminishing of the human
violence
the one thing that
procures reputation and pride
what we call a prominent name,
names
terms that teach us to look aside
to put glory in place of pain

8

oh!
there's a tree outside the window!
the tree outside the window
the tree
our host
still waving in the wind
welcoming us, spreading joy
a reminder of
compressed compassion—forceful
neighbourliness...
some of her roots had to die
for the magnificent structure
we now relish

to stand firm
in the beams of steel
piercing the earth
with unwarranted authority
forcing our host
to grow around, outward, away—
'necessary displacement'
does that make you think?
despite all the things done here
past and present
we still want to be here
this way...

PART II

Aesthetics and transformation

When I walk in, there is something open, porous, and heavy in the space.

The space is not air-tight.

It feels accessible.

It is welcoming.

It is quite interesting how we curate and encode spaces for the purpose of sculpting a certain experience. Or shaping what participants can go through—what they can become. Offering in spaces that hold heavy reflections are not just invitations; they require a prolonged sense of investment to sustain and enrich us as intended. Marilyn Arsem makes the space feel open yet conscious of the weight within it. Part of it comes out of character: who Marilyn is from the care and dedication to the work. But the more you take part, the more you realize the other bit; the attempt to embrace everyone for who they are without reducing the first-hand contact to the heritage and burden each of us carry—I ponder this affect from the idea of commencing the gathering and collective reflection with a big question. When we walk in, our feet echo through the rooms, the very act of entering the space is a question: why are we here? Moreso in a space that feels balanced in a state of deliberate vacancy that may not need to fully be occupied. The big room with five participants creates enough confidence to engage in banter while we take in the arrangement, energy,

and display. As we come to the realization of sharing this experience, there is an 'itchy' sensation: the sparseness within makes it so automatic to lean in, to connect to add more substance... At this moment, I think about the notion of aesthetics as the basis of understanding artistic space and engagement. bell hooks maintains that an aesthetic approach "is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming" (66). hooks' assertion identifies the affective forces generated in the questions of aesthetic impact on the psyche, positionality, belonging, and becoming. Aesthetic practices validate, explore, and valorize ontologies. Mainly as the flesh that determines how we effectuate the feeling of completeness, how we establish the way(s) spaces hold us, how we will embrace them, and how we become part of the experience. The experience one goes through has so much to do with the configuration or the hint of how the outlay will influence, guide, and augment you. When we walk into a place of art-based experience, we expect a route or exert an unravelling of one. We need something that will influence our focus on certain activities, fixate on certain images, enclothe ourselves as participations in certain ways, and find areas of settlement once we subscribe to the flow. Configurations change and charge inclinations in intentional spaces. The magnetism in this place materializes first as a search of a kind. The spatial outlay and material elements give it a certain resonance which poses questions of how different personalities will meld with it and each other. It is clear, the experience cannot be comprehensive if we fail to embrace how we bring ourselves here. We all need to accept there is a form of discomfort that validates the feeling of vacancy that will attain the fullness from participants' invested involvement.

However, the vacancy acquires a filling feel...

This comes out of the affective act of entering while invested in the possibilities.

Wanting to actualize the transformative potential within by being aware, intentional, and present. The space makes you feel like you are going to take up a big role. As an attendant, I feel less passive just by the mere act of being here, noticing the prompts, and attempting to conjure, imagine, and align with the possibilities. The participants begin with the curation of the space of participation/conversation. We

arrange our seats and establish how we will occupy the space in relation to each other. The most anchoring element in the room is the table situated at the far right wall. On top of the table is a set of books that offer a glimpse into the crucial conversations about Indigenous people in Turtle Island (mostly Canada). The titles (such as 'Calls to Action' and 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission') in the stack sit heavily in the room: the topics induce a form of melancholy and mindful presence.

Shame

Discomfort from shame.

As we settle, I feel shame. Shame as a Black person sheltered by a colonial institution. It is unsettling... The unsettling feeling holds the space into a hush that spurs a deep reflection pondering where this is meant to go. Being Black and African, shame is something I associate with the way one is seen as the other; outside the aesthetic conventions; the attempt to fit in; the feeling of being on the outside even when you are on the inside; not being enough; or imposter syndrome. In this place, there is a visceral acknowledgement of the important conversation that echoes in the room long before it begins. This is also the moment I realize **the space is naked**: exposed to the outside. The porosity of the space makes one ponder the attributes that render curated spaces free, open, and accessible. We can see people walk across. A few notice our gathering, stop and throw a curious glance. Parts of our discussions and reflections compel us to notice the outside as a key determiner of our involvement and (dis)location. The giant windows make **the inside and outside** flow into each other in a rhythm that normalizes the exposure of institutional sites. I think of notions of formality and professional experience because this feels semi-institutional. This spatial experimentation provokes the consideration of the things that get walled off to create a welcoming gesture for those who find their way in. It means that this space is not shielded, isolated, or hidden. We can openly talk about a conversation that remains deferred by the bold boundary between **the inside and the outside aspects of the institutional establishment**. The tautness I feel within means I will not go into this with lightness or disregard or the instinct to leave the discussion there as soon as it is done. The open acknowledgement that we are all

sheltered by a colonial institution becomes our point of departure. This means we were going to situate ourselves embracing discomfort that will evolve into admission that everyone in their capacity has a part to play.

The first part of our discussion comprises accounts of how each one of us continues to find our way/home here (Edmonton): it is always an ongoing process and should not be about arriving. Marilyn creates an open invitation where we speak to the experiences and conversations that continue to inform our negotiated connection to this land and its history. Whether by ancestral linkage or personal journeys, we all have a substantial chunk to unpack. We share this deliberation even in the aftermath... This reflection is not meant to name what the stories and negotiations are for the participants but rather the impact of the exercise and the consequent realizations. For instance, the attendants born here and those born elsewhere speak to the experience of Canadian identity and belonging: land, colonialism, Indigeneity, race, nationalism, generational trauma, and unspoken/muted issues that are part and parcel of fractures that characterize Canadian relationalities.

A few steps from the studio is the **LRT (Light Rail Transit) University station**. The houseless population frequents this place. Most of us circumnavigate whenever we stumble upon **them** on our way to work. We discuss the idea of finding our way to the studio and other destinations. The habits we sustain concerning our attempts to find our way in the world. We ponder what we saw on our way here. The active choices we make in relation to the disenfranchisement of Indigenous people. It is the first time I've echoed these thoughts and sentiments in a physical room with **bodies that seem absorbent...** What we do and how we continue to situate ourselves in these places. At the back of my head is the phenomenon of conjuring a pathway in the accumulation of choices and efforts. We contemplate pathways... the ones that lead us to our preferred locations; to feelings of safety; to places of shared experiences; to chosen relations; to comfort; and to destinations with less intimidating unknowns. Somewhere in the midst of all the swirling energies, questions, and settling discomfort is the curiosity to know Marilyn's ethnic background but I don't ask... I don't want to ask. There is something trustful in the

way she reaches out and injects the courage to reflect together. She holds the conversation, the room, and the possibilities with a reflective openness that is dense and deep.

All of us have experienced a form of a **journey** (internal, external, psychological, physiological, political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual... etc.). This is a journey. Some of us here are going through geopolitical (dis)location. Others are negotiating sociocultural (re)rooting. Belonging and having an identity is not just about coming from elsewhere. There is more. This form of thinking urges us to establish a connection with other factors that inform the continuous process of finding one's place. For instance, our permeability and inclination to realities and truths that have come to light; challenges that persist despite attempts to mute them; or excavating hidden/underwritten histories deliberately tucked far from reach. Our political, economic, and social structures have **legacies in the shape of icebergs**. And in most instances, to accept the full picture, one has to fluctuate: deciding when to look through a microscope, bare eyes, and a telescope—you need this perceptual combination. The highlight of the collective reflection on how we continue to re/locate ourselves is the idea of proximity/interest to the experience of land, settler colonialism, and Indigenous sovereignty all wrapped up in conciliation. The areas of validation and career/cultural practice set us against the much-needed unity to realize the decolonization process for what it needs to be.

The question '**what are you doing?**' and '**how are you locating yourself in the realization of necessary efforts?**' echoes and dilates the discomfort into a remembrance that guilt is not productive, but it does (re)surface. To embrace guilt is not a sign of stagnation although it induces an adjustment. It is rather a tonal and rhythmic shift. The idea of inheriting habits, reputations, or perceptions... We sustain these inheritances sub/consciously. We talk about two trajectories. First, the idea of a nation. We talk about nations and boundaries at a time of high global mobility. The idea of difference and intermingling as destabilizing and enriching forces. Secondly, we ruminate about the dissonance arising from the disconnect between the nation and Indigenous sovereignty. Has the national ideal ever exhibited solubility towards Indigenous sovereignty (since it is the entity always creating/enforcing a container)?

The idea of the nation's infancy and infringement upon Indigeneity. "Are Indigenous subjects national subjects?" Some of us are Indigenous in relation to where we grew up.

PART III

Shoals and (re)conciliations

When the collective reflection began, I considered David Garneau's offering of "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality." In "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation," Garneau defines this as:

gatherings, ceremony, Cree-only discussions, kitchen-table conversations, email exchanges, etc. in which Blackfootness, Métisness, Indianness, Aboriginality, and/or Indigeneity is performed apart from a Settler audience. It is not a show for others but a site of being where people simply are, where they express and celebrate their continuity and figure themselves to, for, and with each other in a complex exchange without the sense of feeling they are witnessed by people who are not equal performers. (33)

The idea of occupying a space where all participants 'just are' is very vital. Particularly, gatherings that tackle conversations of this nature. Garneau's offering speaks to gathering of First Nations people which I do not discount but borrow from. The consensus and chemistry forged among participants who meet each other on equal ground allows the openness of the space and process of reflection. His proposal highlights sites that strengthen the heartbeat of resistance, growth, and transformation.

In this room, we just are.

The flow is not strenuous. It is neither easy.

It is heavy.

I feel discomfort, but it is not a barrier. It is a catalyst.

Most of us are not Indigenous to Turtle Island. Still, we speak to our cultural backgrounds as considerations that further our intentions: how we continue to locate ourselves here through time and space. This deliberation leads us to attract the thought and care that can make a gathering like this matter. Marilyn's prompts to unpack our backgrounds, preoccupations, and journeys/relationships with Edmonton (based on our comfort levels) create the bond and thoughtfulness needed for the conversation to go where it needs to. I feel as if we are a unit. We work towards equality in our openness to continuous reflections. We ponder the unraveling of intersections and inclinations that give shape to care and intention. Such a space serves as a springboard in ascertaining and establishing ways we can actualize our capacities in changing the world we live in.

I speak to my ethnic background (Kikamba) and a diasporic Blackness that (in)form inner and outer frictions in light of the phenomenon of inhabiting an in-between space. However, I see so much potential for alliances that exist inside and outside whiteness. My mind goes to the work of Tiffany Lethabo King who offers the premise of "The Black Shoals" within the frame of enabling and recognizing possibilities for alliance, decolonization, resistance, and accompanying social, cultural, and political efforts. She describes the shoal as:

an analytical and a methodological location, [which] constitutes a moment of convergence, gathering, reassembling, and coming together (or apart). The shoal, like Black thought, is a place where momentum and velocity as normal vectors are impeded. It is the place where an adjustment needs to be made. As an in-between, ecotonal, unexpected, and shifting space, the shoal requires new footing, different chords of embodied rhythms, and new conceptual tools to navigate its terrain. (4)

The in-betweenness and mercurial nature of the shoal (as a junction and constantly shifting sphere made up of both land and sea) provides a compelling premise. It becomes the ground to contemplate and actualize alternative spaces, relations, and discourses. King insists that the shoal functions "as a space of liminality, indeterminacy, and location of suture [incorporating] frames that have conventionally

been understood as sealed off from each other” (4). Being in the studio there is a form of intimacy. Our alchemy is surprising and inconclusive. It is as if what we have made the space become renders it disconnected from the bigger container that hosts it. Of course, when we leave, it may revert to what it has always been. But the shoal is not stagnant, the effect of the gathering conjures a transferable imprint. The way each one of us opens up converts our occupancy of the space into a moving circle. We echo our conundrums, passivity, and initiatives in the ongoing project of decolonization and conciliation. Sharing our stances in collaboration with Marilyn makes the space and discussion reverberate with a tone that is our own. For instance, the instinct to package my voice in a certain tone erodes as we keep sharing in support of each other. King’s argument echoes the discoveries I experience here. For example, making a difference or doing something meaningful does not require validation from another person not even the person you are reaching out to.

The gap between grand and individualized interventions poses a question. Does every effort really count? There is a bridge needed here. One that can make every kind of action and intention mean something. But it is missing. How do we build, and sustain it? This bridge, whichever incentivization it takes, how do we invite others to see, understand, and use it? How do we normalize it? It is the key to overcoming feelings of powerlessness; discouragement from the big unethical corporations; and reluctance that isolated individuals harbor feelings that their effort does not make a dent. These ruminations remind us of the attributes that make interventions really matter. Such intentions are not about competition. We discuss land, colonialism, relational potentials, and futurity. As a Black African in the diaspora, I experience and embrace the **shoaling effect** from the composition and intention injected into the space. From my perspective, the shoaling force necessitates the imagination and intimation of relationality between Indigeneity and other BIPOC backgrounds beyond colonial disenfranchisement. King maintains, that the “shoal creates a rupture and at the same time opens up analytical possibilities for thinking about Blackness as exceeding the metaphors and analytics of water and for thinking of Indigeneity as exceeding the symbol and analytic of land” (4). I see

the sea and land metaphorically and physically as the grand forces. These forces inform the strain we go through to create an alternative space. King asserts that the shoaling effect creates the possibility to transgress and transcend since “unexpected openings emerge [when] different voices are brought into relationship” (30). As a methodology and a stance “the shoal functions as a process and space where boundaries and binaries constructed between sea and land, Black and Native, aesthetics and theory, and human and nonhuman are blurred” (30). My interpretation/application of a shoal in Marilyn’s invitation, hosting, and facilitation makes me dwell on the idea of propagating a shoaling effect: how we shift through the shoal, realize potential, and build relations that are not restrained by outward forces. This experience encourages one to embrace the idea of organically melding relations based on the personalities you have in a circulating circle. An alloy that is only possible once those present embrace the possibility of sharing a space in the way they bring themselves. It is not a stagnant circle, it moves, morphs, and absorbs. It fluctuates and what it becomes is up to us.

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