

Practices of Care in Storytelling

Cole Alvis and Yolanda Bonnell

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Article abstract

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Dossier

Practices of Care in Storytelling

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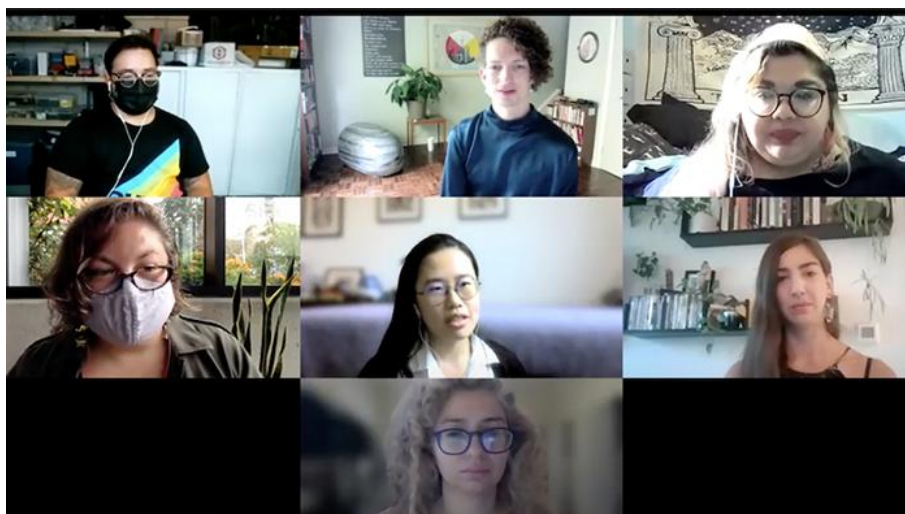
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Abstract

This article features reflections on the recent creation of *White Girls in Moccasins* by Yolanda Bonnell, coproduced by manidoons collective and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in the spring of 2022. In preparation for the coproduction, members of manidoons collective gathered a group of production artists to discuss alternative ways of working within theatre; particularly the often-stressful process of tech week that precedes opening night. Also featured is an original poem called “Pow Wow” by Yolanda Bonnell, woven into proposals for keeping each other safe(r) when working in the performing arts.

Keywords: Indigenous theatre; accessibility; tech week; care



Pictured from left to right, top row: Steph Raposo, Cole Alvis, Yolanda Bonnell; middle row: Rebecca Vandavelde, Deb Lim, Autumn Coppaway; bottom row: Natércia Napoleão. Zoom, 2021.

Photograph by manidoons collective.

Grandfather Sun,

He shines down.

Down on our mountain

On all of us, as we dance

The breeze tickling our braids

Catching our shawls –

the hems of our skirts.

(Excerpt here and throughout the text from “Pow Wow” by Yolanda Bonnell)

As manidoons collective we are a circle of artists that evolve with each project while creating Indigenous performance. The artistic leadership includes Yolanda Bonnell (Ojibwe-South Asian) and Cole Alvis (Turtle Mountain Métis) both based in Tkarón:to. Our first production, *bug*, created and performed by Yolanda Bonnell, was nominated for four Dora Mavor Moore Awards and has toured across Turtle Island; the play is published by Scirocco Drama (2020) and was nominated for a 2020 Governor General’s Literary Award for English-language drama. Our sold-out production of *White Girls in Moccasins* (2022) received rave reviews during our co-production with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre and digital screenings are continuing by request from various communities. manidoons collective recognizes the importance of collaborating with Indigenous community members, specifically Indigenous women, 2-Spirit, trans and non-binary storytellers.

Heartbeat.

So loud.

Echoing across our land –

Over our homes.

Over the birds that fly above our heads.

Our beaded, moccasined feet weaving in and out like grass

The bells of the jingle dress –

Shaking, laughing, dancing with each other.

Sweet mermaid melodies rippling from our bodies

Drenched in the stepping sound of our movement to the –

Since officially organizing in 2016, manidoons has been seeking ways to maintain principles of care in storytelling. This practice means many things. It means a variety of learning curves. It means failing. It means finding what works in rooms and what doesn't. It means working within a value system that prioritizes care over profit in theatre.

The decisions that manidoons makes come from the hearts of the people in the room...

Heartbeat.

Our people.

The feathers, mouths, scents, colours – so bright.

Blinding yellows and reds.

Yellows and reds.

Red.

Like our sun touched skin.

Arms stretched out with shawls

Like wings.

Calling.

Singing.

With fringe on our tips and delicate patterns of earth creatures

And symbols of connection and oneness.

Spinning and spinning, catching the air

Turning in rhythm

This

Is the time to fly.

Heartbeat.

... a shared desire to ensure members of the creative team can ask for what they need to be safe(r) in the space. And constantly questioning how we can learn from mistakes, from each other, and translate that into growth for how the story is being told while supporting the storytellers and audiences.

We stand on the shoulders of Indigenous community members who have cleared the trail. manidoons collective recognizes the tireless work that 2-Spirit, Indigiqueer, trans and non-binary artists continue to do in this field. That so many of us, every time we enter a performance space or agreement, have the responsibility to advocate for ourselves in order to have our sovereignty respected by colonial institutions. And while not everyone is able to do so, that is still OK. The hope is that one day, none of us will have to push back on the structures just to engage in our art. That we will be able to exist with joy and tell stories safely.

Children running.

Squealing.

Hands jam sticky.

Bannock happy mouths.

The sweet, ever-present wind ribbons through as –

Voices

Voices raise high.

Filling the empty spaces,

Parting the clouds,

Penetrating our hearts

Our spirit

To let in our ancestors

To call

To pray

To sing To offer

Eyes closed, mouths wide.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe.

And scream.

The following are a set of practices for manidoons collective. We put this forward for all of our agreements and use it as a tool in our spaces.

Indigenizing practices

1. Workdays are shorter, leaning more towards five hours (or three to four if online).
2. Work weeks are five days a week (instead of six). If possible, there will be no two-show days in the production.
3. Each day in the space begins with a check-in circle, an opportunity for folx to speak about where they are physically, mentally, spiritually, etc. This is so we know how to be in space with each other by respecting boundaries and states of being. This removes the request to “leave baggage at the door” as we choose to adjust the work plan as needed.
4. Transparency in any and all things. No one is on the outside of knowledge. Everyone on the team is welcome to any meeting regarding the production.
5. We work, play, create and exist in space by holding the Seven Anishinaabe Grandmother / Grandfather teachings of Truth, Honesty, Bravery, Courage, Love, Wisdom and Humility. We add Patience to this list as it serves our work.
6. Everyone has autonomy. If a person needs to leave suddenly or needs to take care of themselves and their body, they are given space to do so. It is up to manidoons collective, as the holder of the process, to adjust.
7. We start each project or process with a contemporary feast to begin the journey in a good way. Traditional feasts in various communities have protocols that we will adhere to as long as they align with our 2-Spirit and anti-patriarchal values.
8. We aim to provide sustenance in the room for well-being through a “wellness table,” which may include items for self-soothing, snacks, books, etc.
9. We will listen with open hearts to any grievance or objection that an individual may have with the work or with us, as well as offering an outside option to speak to (a liaison or stage manager or cultural worker) should the need arise.
10. If harm does occur in our space, we will hold a talking circle to name the harm and collectively discuss our next action and accountability.
11. No one will be asked to disclose personal trauma for the sake of the story.
12. If the story triggers trauma for anyone in the room, we will stop to discuss and / or pivot the work plan as needed. Collective care is of utmost importance.
13. Traditional medicine (sage, sweetgrass, cedar, tobacco and potentially others) will be present in the room and made available for anyone to use.

manidoons collective threads care into its work with these practices as foundation. As actionable items, they inform how we gather, rehearse, and present our work. As we continue to Indigenize our creative process, we noted our capacity for care in the rehearsal room became challenging to maintain once we loaded into the theatre. This is when the focus of the team’s work shifts to threading what is being rehearsed with design and other technical elements on the stage. Tech week requires time, patience, and grace from everyone in the room as it is often all hands on deck.

Heartbeat.

Warriors.

Warrior cries.

They would dance and step

Element connected

Ready for battle

Ready for a fight

Ready for –

Unfortunately, the long hours combined with the pressure of a first audience can result in a fraught creative process. The rehearsals leading up to opening night see the creative team putting the finishing touches on their contribution to the storytelling. Since there is much to do and a limited access to the venue, these rehearsals can be scheduled as twelve-hour days, with two one-hour meal breaks, commonly referred to as “10 out of 12’s.” Canadian Actors’ Equity Association allows members to work six-day weeks for eight hours a day and, in the final week, twelve-hour calls are permitted (with adequate breaks) in recognition of the intricacies of crafting live performance. Like many performance practitioners, we find ourselves asking how we can approach this technical process in a way that adds breath and space and care.

manidoons collective and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre partnered on the development and co-production of the world premiere of *White Girls in Moccasins* by Yolanda Bonnell. As part of our collaboration, manidoons offered two roundtables – one, an internal discussion about meaningful relationships with Buddies’ staff, and the other a panel called *Rethinking Tech Week* that is available to watch online (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLdyCt6LKqE>). Technicians, production managers, and designers are among those on the creative team working long hours, which can lead to burnout for everyone. This discussion asked how we can approach tech week to make it more care-focused while still being able to get the work done. Part of our practice is to engage members of our community to dream with us alternative ways of working that are informed by what we have now and what might be possible in the future. We asked Rebecca Vandeveldte to moderate. She is a standing member of Means of Production (<https://www.pmttd.ca/current-standing-members>), which describes itself as “a collective of Production Managers and Technical Directors who have been working together to reexamine the way we build shows” (Means of Production, n.d.). Panellists included Steph Raposo, Rental and Events Manager at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (<https://buddiesinbadtimes.com/>), Autumn Coppaway (Anishinaabe), Technical Director for Vancouver Opera (<https://www.vancouveropera.ca/>), Deb Lim General, Manager of fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre Company (<https://www.fu-gen.org/>), and manidoons (<https://www.manidoons.com/>)’ Associate Producer Natércia Napoleão.

Here are selections from the transcription of the conversation that we held over Zoom on October 6, 2021.

Cole: Meegwetch y’all. Welcome to this event on the interwebs. My name is Cole Alvis, I’m a Michif 2-Spirit artist based here in Tkarón:to where the original caretakers are the Mississauga-Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat. As we are gathering virtually, I wanted to share a land acknowledgement that Jill Carter, an Anishinaabe-kwe academic, has in the signature of her emails. Jill says:

Zoom has erected its headquarters in San Jose California, this is the traditional territory of the Muwekma Ohlone tribal nation. Current members of this nation are direct descendants of the many missionized tribal groups from across the region. We, who are able to connect with each other via Zoom, are deeply indebted to the Muwekma Ohlone people as the lands and the waters they continue to steward now support the people, pipelines, and technologies that carry our breaths, images, and words across vast distances to others.

As we engage in communication such as this, I personally acknowledge the debt that I have incurred and that is amassing each time I open my notebook. We are all indebted to those peoples and communities whose waters and lands have been poisoned as a result of the extraction of metals and rare earth elements required to fabricate the machinery through which we speak, hear, and view each other. We are indebted to those peoples whose working lives, youth, and vitality have been spent in unsafe spaces and intolerable conditions so that so many citizens of the so-called developed world might have easy access to these and related devices. As we encounter each other through our email accounts, our messaging apps, our virtual meeting rooms and chat rooms let us strive to remain mindful of the incalculable debt that we owe.

So gitchi meegwetch to Jill Carter for penning this acknowledgement and the opportunity for us to reflect on our impact while we are inconvenienced by this technology. Over to you, Yolanda.

Yolanda: Meegwetch Cole. Aanii Yolanda nindizhinikaaz. Giizhibaa Ma'iingan nindigo. Makwa nindoodem Fort William First Nation nindoonjibaa. Tkarón:to nindaa. Hello, my name is Yolanda Bonnell, I am Anishinaabe and South Asian from Fort William First Nation in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and I am the other half of the manidoons collective. We are so happy that you could all be here with us today. I'm really excited to have this conversation, to re-imagine what tech week could look like.

Autumn: I think it's really important to make a reference as to what production actually does. So production is actually working three weeks to seven months to a year in advance for any type of production. You don't realize it, but people like me, people like Deb, we're working on things [for] next year and our plans are actually moving right now. So, production is actually working behind the scenes at all times and so, when you look at "oh well we're trying to do these things to help that," you also have to remember that all that back scene and back work actually has to be done prior to any artist stepping foot in a space. And so all of that work – the problem with all of that work – is that it's oftentimes forgot[ten]. It's not something that you can tangibly see or tangibly, hum, quantitate and if the performance, if the art, is not at a state that it is ready for production to actually take on, it actually increases [our workload by] a massive amount. So when you're doing a piece, exploring is really important, but the description of that exploration, the communication with those production people way in advance, will help those hours and will help your artistic practice because you can actually have that support.

I preface that because when we're saying "10 out of 12's," it is [for] a performer. I'm a technical director. I work at large-scale venues, including Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts and the Queen Elizabeth Theatre. Those are 16 or 18-hour days for me. That doesn't include notes at the end of the night when I have to type them all up. That doesn't include the text messages that I have to figure out before I have to come back in at 7 a.m. So those situations are really what we're looking at and I think a lot of people don't realize that production is working all of those extra hours. We are behind the scenes. There are hundreds of us that are running around making those things happen.

Rebecca: We're kidding ourselves if we think that on "10 out of 12's" it means you don't have to respond to someone else's print deadline for the next show. As a freelancer, you're balancing multiple gigs... and this is the same conversation that we were having about some crew needing the overtime. Life is expensive, rent goes up, and we all have a lot to cope with. So I guess the question shouldn't be, do we need a "10 out of 12's," but can we afford a "10 out of 12's," knowing that's a euphemism for a lifestyle where we put everything on hold to deal with today's problem, and everything past today is a problem for then. So, I guess I should reframe that question as "can

we afford to continue working this way and if not what are the alternatives?” And we’ve talked about more time, but I’d love to also talk about, in addition to the [extra] time (assuming we require that), what are the things within that time that we can do to let ourselves be whole people, manage our next show, and still create beautifully together in the ways that we need to create?

Deb: I think that just like that flexibility, that acknowledgement of where people are, so that we can actually use time productively and meaningfully, is a consideration that should go into tech week in advance, like Autumn mentioned, but also to have those check-ins during tech week as well.

Yolanda: Autumn, something you brought up a little bit ago... I think that artists, writers, directors, even performers, I think we all have to be less precious about the work so that this idea of “the show must go on...” So, like, if something happens and we have to cancel a show, or if we have to cancel a day of rehearsal, that is okay. We have to be okay with that. We have to give space for this because we’ve too long lived in this space of theatre where we have to continue with the show because of money, or because of an artist, or because of whatever, and if we’re putting profit as the first thing, we’re already setting ourselves up to cause harm. Right? So, like, I think that as a call-out to artists as well, to think about being less precious about our work so that if we have to say no to some things, elements in the show, or if we have to say no to having to extend something, or if you have to cancel a show for the sake of somebody on the team, for the sake of somebody’s health, like that, that is okay. We have to be able to be okay with that. At the end of the day we’re, again, we’re just like, we’re humans. You’re human, you know?

Rebecca: It sounds like we’re all kind of describing the same shift in making the person making the show, and their needs, the priority over what we need to do to get to a complete state, to get to a state of whatever we’ve decided is satisfaction, artistic excellence, opening night, whatever that is. And we’re also talking about a shift in communication, like, this flexibility is about shifting our communication method to be about what do you need to do your best work and not what can you do with what I can give you? I’d love to kind of hone in on what are the tools that we need for that best communication, for that shift in prioritizing the person making the work, and I’m gonna casually use the word “artist,” but I want that to include everyone collaborating, and not adhere to this artificial divide between creative and non-creative. I feel like that’s a dichotomy that we’ve made to decide whose needs in the room matter, but I’d love to talk about what everyone on a team, all artists, need to do their best work, and how to incorporate that into your communication.

Deb: Yeah, absolutely, I love that question! I think something that we’ve already brought up quite a bit is just this need for communication, but how does that communication actually happen? Like to be able to communicate, someone needs to be safe, feel safe, and have that space and that platform to be able to communicate their needs. And I think that [is] especially [the case] for emerging – I’ll use the [terms “emerging artists”] – or even people who feel marginalized, or who, for whatever reason, don’t always feel like they have the platform to voice their needs. And so, building those mechanisms in [is important], of whether you have someone for conflict resolution that you go to. Those people are identified, like someone who is an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion representative (for example). Just having those mechanisms built in from the get-go, and knowing who those people are so you’re able to have that communication is, I think, necessary.

Autumn: I think a lot of it is also, again in this pre-production world, communicating and being a part of the initial conversation when you budget something. Please let us know [in advance]. We’ll help you along the way. We’ll help flag those moments that you probably should account for. Cole, I know you were a part of this, but at the Canadian Opera Company it was a bit of a struggle to get smudging on stage [for the opera *Louis Riel*]... There was not a willingness to sacrifice any artistic time, but in addition to that, we could not be on stage without a crew member and that, of course, that impacts the budget by increasing crew hours... Ultimately, the company did go ahead, and we did figure out a way. However, it was on a voluntary basis and so it wasn’t, I don’t feel that it was particularly planned out. It wasn’t understanding that that time actually needed to be taken.

Deb: I was a freelance production manager before I stepped in at fu-GEN, and that was really an eye-opening experience for me because I got to look at the full budgets and see how companies actually budget things. And [this led to] realizing that a lot of production budgets were just based on past production budgets, that there was no consultation process, there was no acknowledgement of how prices fluctuate and what specific productions actually need. So, I think this consultation process, this early communication, like even way back when you're applying for your grants, when you're planning a season, that's when production people should be brought into the conversation.

Autumn: Just as a note everyone knows COLA is a Cost of Living Adjustment. If you did a show ten years ago, the increase [in costs today] is thirty percent.

Steph: Yeah, the production budget includes labour costs and those need to reflect the cost of living, and that is specific to where you live. No one ever thinks about that. There's no blanket cost of living adjustment.

Rebecca: I think what we're all articulating is that there's no trick or shortcut to building a relationship of trust and safety. It takes a lot of work and a lot of time, and the only sure way to start that is to start from a place of open communication, flexibility, and to give people more time and more money to do their jobs. It's easier to make space for a project when you're being paid to make space for a project. That's certainly on the list.

Autumn: I think this is a really good conversation to begin. As we spoke at the beginning, prior to recording, a lot of what we're after right now is truth and reconciliation, and the understanding that part of this is the truth that we're not doing it the best. So this conversation really helps [identify that]. I think that this kind of open dialogue about what can be done and not necessarily what you have to do, but aspects that you could look at, new approaches in which you, at every level of a theatre creation, can really help influence and assist in making those spaces more safe, more equitable, more inclusive. So, Miigwetch.

Cole: Big meegwetch for being here, all of you Deb Lim, Autumn Coppaway, and Rebecca Vandeveld, sharing your knowledge to support Steph Raposo and Natércia Napoleão and Yolanda Bonnell and I as we move forward with *White Girls in Moccasins* coming at you in the spring of 2022. Live theatre returns!

Yolanda: Miigwetch everyone, for being here, and for everyone sharing their knowledge and this fruitful conversation! It was really lovely to be in virtual space with you all and to chat about something that's so important. So, miigwetch. Baamaapii.

Cole: Baamaapii y'all. Take care everybody!

Deb: Thank you!

Post-production reflections from manidoons collective

One of the approaches we took to the world premiere of *White Girls in Moccasins* was to make every performance accessible. This meant keeping a low light on above the audience during the performance, Buddies had a "chill out space" for anyone who needed a break during the show, in the opening speeches we encouraged audiences to come and go as needed, to keep their phones on if necessary such as in the case of caregivers and others potentially needing to be called away during the show, and offering captions for Deaf and hard of hearing audiences to attend any night of the run (rather than only getting to choose between the few performances that are ASL

interpreted). We recorded a performance with a live audience so that anyone who was not yet ready to return to live theatre (or could not get a ticket to our sold-out run) would be able to watch from the comfort of their own space. Deaf interpreters Amy Ireland (Oneida) and Courage Bacchus recorded themselves interpreting the show from home and their interpretation was included in the digital version.

The support for this play was immense. manidoons collective was successful in receiving funding from all three levels of government, our co-producer Buddies in Bad Times Theatre brought monetary and in-kind resources to the collaboration, including facilitating an alternative production schedule that saw us working for five weeks instead of three. Our commitment to shorter rehearsal days meant we had the same number of hours to prepare, spread out over more time, to reduce the likelihood of burnout for our creative team. Theatre is expensive and, with the revenue we were able to source, this experiment was largely a success. In the final week before our first audience, we extended our workday on two of the days during our tech. This saw the performers called for eight hours instead of six and, in order to cap the day at eight hours or less for all involved, technicians tagged in and out, splitting the ten-hour day in half for the crew. The support of the production management at Buddies made it possible to adhere to our values while being responsive to the emergent needs of the show in its final moments before opening for an audience. We made this decision collectively and during the daily check-ins, we engaged with the cast, designers and technicians to ensure there was consent in the room for changes to the original schedule. A crucial teaching we are taking from this experience is to be prepared for delays, particularly if a pandemic rages on. Given the seven weeks we were all working together (including the two-week run), it was vital to do everything we could to keep each other as safe as possible. This meant weekly pandemic check-ins to discuss what we could expect the following week as more people joined us in the room each week. We limited the number from the start: the first week and a half of rehearsals saw only the performers and stage manager in the rehearsal hall with the co-directors and designers participating online. The hospitalization numbers were receding as we began, but only a few weeks prior a performer from another production rehearsing in the same place we were had tested positive for COVID-19. We began rehearsing just prior to the government making rapid tests available and were supported by community members donating their kits so that we could offer tests to anyone in the same room as the unmasked performers every two days for the duration of the engagement. While no one on our team tested positive while on contract with us, we did have collaborators isolating due to travel and / or a possible exposure, and they would join online where possible. While these routine precautions kept us safe, it meant that our carefully crafted production schedule needed to shift. The combination of the pandemic and a new way of working created moments of stress during the process, as is to be expected when doing things differently. Ultimately, it is a common experience to get to opening night and wish for one more week of rehearsal. And since we crafted the process around our values, pushed back on colonial ways of thinking and scheduling to make the show happen on our terms with less harm for all involved, it feels like a success.

Too long have we been called savage

Savage

Unclean

Needing a good holy water wash

Too long have we been ripped apart

Like tearing bark off of a birch tree

Feet bound

Voices strained
Arms weak
Hair cut
But when I sit in quiet, I can still hear the –
Come back
Come back
Remember
Remember where the circle began
Remember our Grandfather Sun
Come back
And sing and dance again
Come back
So we can once more
Let in
The heartbeat
Of the earth

Biographic Notes

Cole Alvis (she / her) is a Turtle Mountain Michif (Métis) artist based in Tkarón:to with Chippewa, Irish and English ancestors. She is one of the leaders of lemonTree creations (<http://www.lemontreecreations.ca>), manidoons collective (<http://www.manidoons.com>), and AD HOC Assembly (<https://www.adhocassembly.ca/>), and is on the board of the Dancers of Damelahamid (<https://damelahamid.ca/>). Cole has performed, directed and toured queer and Indigenous performances across Turtle Island.

Yolanda Bonnell (she / they) is a Bi / Queer 2-Spirit Anishinaabe-Ojibwe, South Asian mixed storyteller from Fort William First Nation. Her play *bug* (2020) was nominated for four Dora Mavor Moore Awards, while the published version was shortlisted for a Governor General's Literary Award. Yolanda won a Tom Hendry Drama Award (Playwrights Guild of Canada) for her play *My Sister's Rage* (2022), and proudly bases her practice in land-based creation, drawing on energy and inspiration from the earth and her ancestors.

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MEANS OF PRODUCTION (n.d.), "About Us", www.pmttd.ca/about-us (<http://www.pmttd.ca/about-us>)

