

# LL's Paddle Down a River: Some Questions to Ask an Indigenous Play

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Numéro 9, printemps 2023

Théâtres et performances des Premiers Peuples : protocoles d'engagement

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112851ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1112851ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Société québécoise d'études théâtrales (SQET)

ISSN

2563-660X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Lachance, L. (2023). LL's Paddle Down a River: Some Questions to Ask an Indigenous Play. *Percées*, (9). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1112851ar>

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## Documents

# LL's Paddle Down a River: Some Questions to Ask an Indigenous Play

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**Keywords:** dramaturgy; land-based theatre; new-play development; artistic process



A close-up of the beadwork on Mairi Brascoupé's work *Akimazinàzowin | An Image of the Land* showing the shape of the Gatineau River. Artist-in-Residence exhibition, Diefenbunker: Canada's Cold War Museum, Ottawa, 2021.

Artwork by Mairi Brascoupé.

In 2007 I was introduced to Elinor Fuchs' "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play" (2004). Her work significantly influenced the way I understand and practise dramaturgy. It's sixteen years later and I am still referencing the essay in my own work and assigning it in my courses. And so, I wanted to honour the impact it has had on me, while also sharing my thoughts on how it could be relevant for studying Indigenous theatre.

Fuchs' essay provides questions about the space, rules, tones, characters, and political order of plays in order to widen our perception and analysis of dramatic worlds. Using a small planet as a metaphor for a play, Fuchs asks readers to investigate worlds through question-based inquiry when developing or reading a play. The emphasis on "world building" in Fuchs' piece is extremely relevant when trying to understand and practise dramaturgy. Thanks to this intentional world building process, play and performance texts can be experienced in a more impactful way by collaborators, readers, and audiences. In my dramaturgical practice, as we set out to world build, I often ask collaborators to identify, abstract, embody, and activate pieces of themselves to insert within the dramaturgical pillars of their process. Often, we end up with fragments of memories, stories, phrases or places as starting points. Mine is always the river.

Since working largely with and for Indigenous theatre artists, I have come to realize that some of these small planets are home to Indigenous stories, characters, and experiences. However, there is a lack of specificity around how to read and understand the cultural offers made in play and performance texts. My intention with this piece is to share some questions I ask during new play development workshops, in classrooms and in rehearsals when reading or creating Indigenous work. With respect to the diverse cultural backgrounds of Indigenous playwrights and creators, I do not expect, nor wish for these questions to serve as a rigid roadmap to analyze any and all Indigenous plays. Instead, I hope it encourages folks to respectfully dive deep into the world of Indigenous plays in ways that best reflect who they are and where they come from.

In homage to my many visits to small planets, let's take a paddle down a river.

## The ecosystems of a river

I live on the Gatineau River and look at this body of water every day. I have realized that rivers are like planets in that they have their own ecosystems, inhabitants, cycles, and rules. Rivers can connect with both land and water, present as calm or dangerous, carry or block a journey, and form other relationships that we may not be able to see at first glance. I have come to see that rivers embody flow, textures, and stories. And because of this connection, I try to see the play as a river – as something always in motion, and with many twists and turns. I ask that you too try and see the play as a river. Is it narrow or wide? Straight or winding? Deep or shallow? Opaque or translucent? To help envision the world of the play, you might want to trace a river from your homelands, imagine one in your head, describe it to someone, or physically stand by the water. Visualizing this river in your mind might help you to picture the spatial realities of this world.



*Gatineau River and Birch Trees. 2020.*

Artwork by Mairi Brascoupé.

## Reflection in the river: recognition

As you approach the play as a river, take the time to look around and become aware of your surroundings. You'll see that there are many ways to approach the water or world of the play. It might be swimming, paddling in a canoe, or cruising the river in a motorboat. We start to recognize the familiar things in the river, and we begin to ask some questions about **space**. What is the environment like in this world? Is it hot? Is it cold? Which season or moon cycle are we in? Is the natural world healthy or unwell? Does the story take place inside or outside? Do we see plants in bloom? Is it bright or dark in this world? Is it vast or is it tight? Is the river flooded? Is this world like your world or unlike yours? Why or why not? Do you see your traditional territory, with

waterways and the sky world, or are we in an urban setting? Are these descriptors used as metaphors to speak indirectly to Indigenous experiences? How do these details impact the form and content of this piece?

Does the river act as a mirror, reflecting something back to you? Is this world multidimensional? Have you seen this world in stories or in a dream before? Are there specific knowledge systems in place that impact how space is used? Is the animal realm activated? Is the spiritual realm activated? How does this space make you feel? How do you negotiate the transitions between human and elemental characters? Is this space built to support people like you? Is this a space where you can bring your full self, or are you landing with caution?

## A river's current: time

The world of a play might take place in co-existing or multidimensional spaces, so how does this impact the river's current or the notion of **time**? How does time flow in this world? Do we see a mix of "real time" and "spirit world time"? Is it cyclical time or linear time? Do we journey through a "day in the life" or through an entire lifetime? Is it inter-generational? Is the duration of some moments slowed down or sped up? Are we in the past, present or future? A mix of all three? Is this connection to time rooted in Nation-specific cosmologies and worldviews? Is time used to honour the cultural specificity of the playwright? How so? Is the use of time drawing you in or distancing you from the story? Why? How is time working in relation to other aspects of this world?

## Deep diving: tones and sounds

Now that you know how space and time flow in this world, let's look for aesthetic and stylistic details. Does this story include Indigenous material cultures, sacred geometries or languages? Does this world offer Indigenous place names, clan systems or creation stories? How do you respectfully receive and care for these parts of the world? Is there dancing, feasting, celebrating, ceremony? Does the land have a voice? Can you hear the birch trees or the pavement? How does the land's voice (or lack thereof) speak to issues of settler colonialism? Is there a political undertone in the aesthetic of this world?

Is the **mood** of this world happy, serious, or sad? Are the river banks tall and full? Is the river full of life, or stagnant? Do you hear music? Is it traditional, contemporary, or both? Does the choice of pop-cultural references have an intertextual meaning that you recognize? Did you research these references if not? Does the mood of this world impact you in a physical way? Does it encourage you to take action? Do you feel overcome with emotion? Questioning the tone helps to understand how characters live in this world.

## River dwellers: characters and values

The **characters** are those who live in this world. Are they like or unlike you? How so? Tell us about the people / animals / ancestors present in this world. What kinds of choices do they make? Individual or familial? How do these choices impact the other characters in the play? What do they want to achieve? Why are they on this journey? How do the characters dress? How do they interact with each other? What language(s) do they speak? Do these characters have similar or dissimilar values to you? How do they embody these values? Is the world of this play accepting of those

values? Do the characters make choices that help or harm others? Are Elders and children supported and cared for?

Do you see yourself in these characters? Why or why not? What are the characters trying to tell you? Can they activate change within this world? Are all of these characters human? Are there other than human characters? When do they appear? Why then? Are these characters from the spiritual realm or the dream world? What are they coming to say? Can they make change in the “real world” of the play? Do they make you want to make changes in your “real world”? What is your connection to the spiritual or animal characters in this play – are you comfortable seeing them in this world? Why or why not?

## The river's eddy: what changes?

Lastly, think about **what changes** in this world. Have we gone from dark to light? From happy to sad? Are the characters transformed? How has the community been impacted? How were they cared for? Did you feel cared for? Is the artistic ceremony over, or is it just the beginning? Has someone or something gone in the wrong direction? Was there a resolution? If the resolution was not clear to you, how can you seek a deeper understanding?

Rivers can freeze and can be dammed up, what if resolution wasn't an option in this world? What embodied memories did the river reveal? Was healing possible? For whom or for what? After hearing the story, do you feel accountable to the work or motivated to learn more? Have you spotted beaver dams along the way that have now become hydroelectric dams? What has changed inside you? Have you changed from visiting this world? How can you bring information shared from this play back to your family or community?

## There will always be more to see

As Fuchs states, “There will still be more to see” (2004: 9). And indeed, this work isn't just about asking questions to Indigenous plays, but also about asking questions to ourselves. What more is there to see and experience in our world? Trust your instincts to lead you down the river bends, and jump in with openness to see as much of the world as possible. Apply close reading and respectful deep listening skills as the river guides you through the stories. Don't lose yourself. Although these are plays, there may be connections to the real world, where you can provide tangible action and enact change.

Are you ready to dive in?

## Biographic Note

Lindsay Lachance (Algonquin Anishinaabe) has worked as a dramaturge for over a decade and has a PhD in Theatre Studies. Lindsay's dramaturgical practice is influenced by her relationship with birch bark biting and the Gatineau River. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Theatre Studies and Dramaturgy in the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of British Columbia.

## Reference

FUCHS, Elinor (2004), “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play”, *Theater*, vol. 34, n° 2, p. 4-9.