

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

rcééa

BOOK REVIEW: *UNSETTLING SPIRIT:
A JOURNEY INTO DECOLONIZATION*

Shauna Butterwick

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editors-in-Chief: J. Adam Perry and Robin Neustaeter
French Language Editor: Jean-Pierre Mercier
Special Edition Editors: Jennifer Sumner and Emily Dobrich
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

38,1 June/juin 2026, 101–103
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

BOOK REVIEW: *UNSETTLING SPIRIT: A JOURNEY INTO DECOLONIZATION*

Denise Nadeau, McGill Queens University Press, 342 pages.

In this autobiographical narrative, Denise Nadeau¹ explores her ongoing process of decolonization, particularly of the spirit². Denise is an adult and popular educator who has developed and delivered hundreds of workshops, many in partnership with Indigenous leaders³. For Denise, reconciliation is about decolonization, the development and sustaining of mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples which requires unlearning dominant settler worldviews and values that prohibit meaningful and respectful relations. This is the heart of Denise's journey where she asks: "what does it mean to be a settler on stolen lands" and "how do we rescue theology from the cowboys and disentangle Christianity from whiteness?" (p. 5).

Through 18 chapters divided into 5 sections, and endnotes with references to hundreds of Indigenous leaders and authors, this text provides a comprehensive account of one settler's decolonization. Denise shares with deep humility how she has learned through being in relation and listening with the heart. Denise's journey is a process of reconciling Christianity's complicity in the colonization of Indigenous peoples with her Christian faith and commitment to working respectfully with Indigenous communities. For many years Denise worked with Catholic missions and Jesuit organizations (Chapters 1 to 3) and her growing unease with what were mostly one way exchanges with little input from Indigenous communities and no exploration of church and settlers' complicity in colonization. She notes the radical difference between Indigenous and Western systems of knowledge and notions of spirituality. In Chapter 4, Denise learns about land claim processes where Indigenous peoples had to *apply* for rights to land which was *already* theirs. In Chapter 5, Denise explores how, within Indigenous health frameworks, health problems are not symptoms, rather they are survival skills. Indigenous peoples experience

-
- 1 Denise is an Affiliate Assistant Professor in the Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University and was Director of the Interfaith Institute for Justice, Peace and Social Movements at Simon Fraser University from 2007 to 2012.
 - 2 <https://denisenadeau.org/>. Denise wrote the popular education handbook *Counting Our Victories: Popular Education and Organizing* (1996) and *Sharing Breath: Embodied Learning and Decolonization* (University of Athabasca Press).
 - 3 Denise has frequently partnered with Alannah Young, an Anishinaabe Cree educator, currently a PhD Senior Research Associate, Indigenous Community Research Partnerships, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, University of British Columbia.

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
38,1 June/juin 2026, 101–103
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

© Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

colonization as an apocalypse; Indigenous health is engaged in post-apocalyptic healing processes. Trauma is also examined and Denise notes the growing understanding of how trauma impacts health and how it is part of Indigenous approaches, however, it has also become a problematic concept as it is used to erase context and pathologize Indigenous peoples and other survivors of trauma. Chapter 6 explores the deeply problematic idea of the Great White Helper and how “whiteness constructs a false self by defining what self is in comparison to others” (p. 61).

In Chapter 7, Denise returns to her birthplace of Port Daniel in Quebec, the land of M'igmaq peoples, exploring her heritage and her own white settler innocence. The concept of blood quantum has been how the Indian Act determined Indigenous status; she notes “it’s my relationships that define me, not my blood” (p. 119). Denise finds maps (Chapter 8) of settler occupation of her birthplace; which erased M'igmaq peoples and their precise laws and travels, problematically labelled as ‘nomadic’. The significance of rivers (Chapters 9) for Indigenous peoples is examined including how the privatization of rivers and related laws have prevented Indigenous peoples from fishing and sustaining their communities. We learn how Indigenous activists are now reclaiming rivers and creating curriculum based on the medicine of salmon, a natural bounty provided by the Creator for well being without harming the environment.

In Chapter 10, Denise describes her discomfort with buying a pair of beautifully crafted and beaded Indigenous moccasins and learning that selling Indigenous crafts and art was the only way for Indigenous communities to survive. Denise recounts her growing personal relationships to Indigenous women, and how their important roles, through the Indian Act, were strategically undermined. In Chapter 11, Denise speaks of Walking with Our Sisters (WWOS), a campaign where 1800 individual vamps, the beautifully beaded tops of Moccasins, were created to honour and remember Indigenous Missing and Murdered Women (MMW). Chapter 12 tells the story of Denise’s learning about Indigenous water laws based on the interconnection and interdependency between water and the human plus more than human world.

Ceremony is the focus of Chapter 13 where Denise learns how many ceremonies are not described or shared beyond Indigenous communities. Ceremony, Denise recounts, is about practicing spiritual self-determination, it is a process that heals the break between self and the world. In Chapter 14 the meaning of reciprocity is considered as Denise recounts her encounter with the Mohawk Thanksgiving Address, learning how its purpose is to teach and remind listeners of the interconnected world and their responsibilities to it. Gift giving, something with which Denise has struggled, she now understands as maintaining relationships with others and the nonhuman world, a way of living out obligations to all relations.

The creation of treaties is the focus of Chapter 15. Here Denise shares her initial assumption that all treaties were corrupt and how she now understands that treaty-making was an Indigenous practice occurring long before European contact, the purpose of which was to extend relations with allies, a radically different orientation compared with European/Western views of treaties as contracts.

In the last section of the book, Denise shares stories of the Lejac Residential School (Chapter 16) and her encounters with Indigenous Christianity (chapter 17) including a story of transformation as she participated in a drumming ceremony. “I felt connected to the collective pain of the women in the circle and to the larger community of pain”

(p. 245). In her final Chapter (18), Denise tells a story of co-facilitating a discussion with mostly settler participants which began with a film about the MMW. Denise invited participants to bear witness, to listen and feel, and not move into problem solving, a common colonial and settler response which bypasses opportunities to be in relation. Denise describes her growing understanding of how body sovereignty and land sovereignty go together. She recounts her humble journey to understanding there are no English words that can do justice to the complexity of Indigenous concepts⁴. Denise also notes how the dualisms of right and wrong, so central to her Catholic upbringing and other Christian religions, are contrary to Indigenous spirituality oriented to living a life of balance.

Denise concludes her amazing journey by noting how “the process [of decolonization] differs for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples” (p. 263); it involves returning land to Indigenous peoples. It is also not about settlers adopting Indigenous frameworks, rather, settlers must learn to “see, hear, and welcome other ways of being in the world and let go of the expectation of certainty and security” (p. 234). For Denise “body, spirit, mind and emotions, [are all] necessary to engage in any process of decolonization” (p. 264).

This book is a deeply engaging, humble, and heartfelt personal account of one settler’s truth and reconciliation journey, a journey which continues. It is recommended reading for activists and scholars in many fields including adult education and religious/spiritual explorations who are committed to supporting indigenous peoples’ movements for justice. It also stands as an excellent example of an autobiographical/autoethnographic study, one which is richly accompanied by multiple references to the responsibility of the Canadian state and its institutions in the brutal colonization of Indigenous peoples. It is a challenging text, one that may engage the reader to reflect on their own complicity in institutions and policies that continue to maintain colonial worldviews.

Shauna Butterwick, Professor Emeritus
University of British Columbia

4 Through talking with Larry Grant, Elder of the UBC First Nations House of Learning.