

Radical Decentering

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Carmela Laganse and Taien Ng-Chan (Centre for Margins)

This collaborative introduction frames the contexts of our thinking for both 2018’s “Tactical Actions for the ‘Mainly White Room’” and our presentations below for 2019’s “‘Good Willed Inertia’: Radicalizing the Lazy Academy.” It is difficult to imagine alternatives to the current colonial and capitalist models, systems and ways of being, but we realize more and more the importance of doing so. Instinctively, our inclination is to resist oppression and act for change; however, acting within the current models may only lead to us reinstating our colonial behaviours, since we have been learning and performing them all of our lives.

As artists of colour working full-time within the university system, our locations are both inside and outside of the institution. Our positions of relative privilege on the inside enable us to access resources not readily available to those on the outside, and to redirect and re-use the institution against itself, so to speak. Our own racialized statuses on the inside can also leave us on the outside, but this can enable us to operate from a third space of critique and action: the margins. Together, we wanted to create space where we could investigate alternative structures to help activate change, and so Centre for Margins (c4M) was born. This experimental, performative artist collective operates in response to a number of general observations and experiences within artist-run centres, university art departments, and the Canadian arts community as a whole, particularly with regard to the under-representation and often complete absence of BIPOC folks (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour). We envision c4M as a creative intervention space bridging academia and our own arts practices: exercises in radical table-building.

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We are also friends, and our friendship grounds and supports our work together. Another friend once mentioned that “true collaboration needs to begin with friendship.” This statement has remained with us as a primary consideration while engaged in various projects, activities and interactions. Over the past few years, we have been working with various people and organizations within the community of Hamilton, which is for both of us our adopted city. These interactions were sometimes difficult, but they are ongoing processes from which we continue to learn. We understand that we need to put in the time, to slow down and begin with forming relations in the community. Relationships need time to develop trust, in order to articulate and understand different perspectives and ways of being together, and thus relationship-building (friendship) challenges colonial and capitalist models of engagement. Relationships between communities, institutions, students, educators, etc., as well as with place and all the things that make up place, also require time to become entangled, a necessary process if we are to move forward together.

Inspiration for a deepened sense of entanglement in our relationships comes from Elwood Jimmy as he discusses the idea of “horizontality” in a recent interview:

Like all Western structures, the contemporary art system as we currently know it is calibrated toward a vertical plane. I would humbly offer that this is at odds with an Indigenous sensibility and way of being, which is often horizontal in calibration. In the vertical calibration, a particular kind of mobility and movement is privileged. It is often one of transcendence—of transcending surroundings, of mastering them, of surpassing them, of cultivating separation and separability—whereas an Indigenous sensibility honours and strives to deepen entanglements with each other, with the non-human and with the beyond-human.¹

What kinds of entangled-relationships-as-structures can we imagine for our world? What does a decolonized

system look like? What can we do to promote concrete change? Our goal is to help imagine alternative, horizontal structures through investigating the entanglements of relations and representations, and through research-creation and art. To these ends, we co-organized *The Reception* (<https://thereception.net/>), a multi-partnership project with the NEW Committee,² Centre3, Coalition of Black and Racialized Artists (COBRA) Hamilton, the Socrates Project and many others. This two-day BIPOC-focused symposium (in Hamilton, November 29–30, 2019) intended to provide opportunities for shared learning around active decolonization in the arts. It included workshops on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action, led by David MacDonald, author of *The Sleeping Giant Awakens: Genocide, Indian Residential Schools, and the Challenge of Conciliation*, and on “elements to consider when an organization seeks to engage with Indigenous communities or individuals,” led by Elwood Jimmy, co-author of *Towards Braiding*.³ Questionnaires for each session provided opportunity for knowledge-sharing and networking.

We hope that the relations formed and knowledge gathered from *The Reception* and other activities will help envision future pathways for Centre for Margins as well as for the participants. Some of our plans include artistic interventions and publications informed by the Calls to Action in the TRC report; Transmedia storytelling events, activist media workshops and participatory actions like a Wikipedia edit-a-thon; and creative knowledge dissemination beyond conventional streams to reach marginalized communities. But for the moment, we are taking it very slow. We have learned that we don’t want to be an institution or non-profit organization, with all the problems that those entail. We want to creatively hold space for other possibilities, in ways that value and entangle all our relationships—human, non-human, and beyond-human—in a radical de-centering of knowledge and ways of being.

1. Interview with Elwood Jimmy, <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/rebecca-bellmore-moves-us-closer-to-a-place-where-we-start-to-remember-what-was-once-thought-lost-1.5357108>. Accessed on March 24, 2020.

2. The NEW Committee is a nebulously-structured but active committee within the Hamilton Artists Inc., which emerged to critically interrogate and change the internal Western-centered/colonial structures and function of the artist-run centre. The NEW Committee has been developing relationships with the community in Hamilton to provide programming and facilitate engagement with marginalized members of our community. It has also partnered with Centre3 for Social and Artistic Practice on such programs as *Incoming!* for refugee and immigrant artists.

3. David MacDonald, *The Sleeping Giant Awakens: Genocide, Indian Residential Schools, and the Challenge of Conciliation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019) and Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti with Sharon Stein, *Toward Braiding*, 2019. Open Access book available at https://decolonialfuturesnet.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/braiding_reader.pdf

Towards a Radical Re-Thinking of Tables

Taijen Ng-Chan

The time has come when we must examine the table. Not only who is seated at the table and who is not, but the very table itself. The table was not built for those of us on the margins. People at the table may make way for us, but if that is where it ends, it ends in token hires and checked boxes, it ends in endless “mainly white rooms.” The table was not built for us.

What can we do about the table? How about, screw it, we build our own tables?! And we do. Or we try. We end up building small tables that may only be for ourselves (though let’s not overlook the importance of a table for one’s self), or we end up building what get called “minor” tables, “marginal” tables. Tables that may be poorly built, because we have not yet learned how to build tables. We don’t always know how; we don’t always have wood. Do tables even need to be made out of wood?! Does it still need four legs, a flat top? What we need is to learn to build differently, yet purposefully. Let us see if we can break the big table down, all those of us who have a seat. Let us see if we can re-purpose and re-use and re-configure what we can. Let us see if we can re-design our minor and marginal tables to intersect, to give support and weight and counterbalance, to grow according to need. What will this look like? We don’t yet know.

What we do know is that good tables are good for working and eating on. Let us call our tables places of friendship, where we can develop relationships, networks, spaces for ourselves. Let us teach each other and learn from each other’s mistakes in table-building.

Let’s switch metaphors now: many other things can be tables; many other things can model how to be. Look at the rhizome, the underground network of rootstalks that now and then blossom above ground, and mold that can bring down concrete. Look at the bees, whose threat of extinction may lead to the collapse of our agricultural

systems. Let us think about what supports us, what really feeds us, the depth and structure of these needs (all the more clearly exposed in the current pandemic times); the minor and marginal will be key!

Entangled Materiality Through a POC Lens

Carmela Laganse

A step towards radicalizing the academy is to decentre the Western canon, to recognize, critically decipher, and embody various forms of knowledge and ways of being. Through an ongoing process in collectively creating a new art program at McMaster University with colleagues and community, I have learned that it is difficult to challenge and change our approaches to learning and knowledge. Although intentions are to mindfully collaborate and consult, we recognize deficits and barriers in our institutional systems in which we are embedded. However, we move forward, collectively developing guiding principles with an understanding that we must reiterate, re-envision, adapt, and recognize our implication through this process of learning.

We are working to place issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion at the program’s core. The curriculum is committed to decentering the Western canon, both in the material that it selects for study and in the ways that it approaches research and facilitates learning. Some of our guiding principles include recognizing and respecting various forms of intersecting knowledges and lived experiences, emphasizing equity, diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility in education and collaboration, and engaging in non-linear, flexible, and adaptive approaches to learning, research, and creation. How can these principles impact all facets of our educational institutions—from syllabi and space to language and content? How can these principles help us recognize Indigenous knowledge and hold us accountable for current and historic oppressions? All knowledge is part of an ecological and social entangle-

ment that includes relationships to other people, materials, and environment.

Current forms of learning and demonstrated knowledge within academia such as research, dissemination, and lecturing are reflective of colonial mechanisms within the contemporary academy that favour the Euro-Western dominant culture, its history and, consequently, our understanding of knowledge and how we learn and unlearn.

How do anti-racist pedagogy, decolonial practice, and reconciliation emerge? How do we collectively construct a working model that reflects diverse knowledges and ways of being? We have to work to identify and name our colonial and capitalist-centred structures, which have historically instrumentalized and oppressed marginalized groups for power and resources. We have to work to critically reflect and articulate how these systems have impacted our behaviors. At what and whose expense has research in anthropology, languages, and materials, as well as medical and technological innovations, emerged? We need to critically consider our current pedagogical formats and approaches. Do our current systems and institutions consider and emphasize our social and environmental ecology and well-being? Do our current systems sincerely teach us how to be accountable and work towards reconciliation?

The culture of how we understand space within our institutions needs to be challenged and re-considered. What reinforces colonial ideology is embedded in the materiality and space with which we engage and are entangled. Many institutions' organization of space is informed by corporate models and metrics that influence how space is allocated, who has privilege to use certain spaces, facilities, etc. Can we consider ideas of space that foreground a

different set of principles? Inclusive, fluid, modular spaces need to be co-produced/designed, co-identified with various people (Indigenous, POCs, people living with disabilities, people identifying outside gender binaries and the various intersections of identity, class, etc.) who engage accessible meeting, learning, collaboration and exchange.

It is critical to identify and situate our material contexts such as textbooks, tables, portraits of past Deans and Administrators, digital interfaces, doors, etc. These things reflect a context and politics in which we interact daily. Who has created these things? Who is being reflected in these objects? How do these objects and architectures challenge or support Western-centred culture? How do we co-create places that support and respect our environment, various and diverse forms of knowledge, people and ways of being?

Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systemic politicized practices of teaching and learning. Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claim to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined pedagogically, as questions of strategy and practice as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational institutions radically.⁴

These words were written by Chandra Mohanty in 1994 and her ideas continue to be relevant today as we struggle to deal with the same status quo structures that direct the oppressive behaviours of our institutions. As artist-researchers, we need to maintain the critical and creative resistance that guides us in building inclusive spaces. ¶

4. Chandra Mohanty, "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberation Education in the 1990s," in bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 33.