

An Appeal to White People: Relearning our Concepts of Good Will, Intention, and Inclusion

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Cities need to be created and designed by people of good will. Exercising good will is hopeful. It expresses deep belief in reciprocation, co-intentionality, and a shared design of our future.

Canada has a 400-year history of assimilation and Indigenous resistance, which began with the legislated removal of the human rights of the Indigenous peoples living here and the claiming of their land by our ancestors: colonial settlers. This was permanent displacement and genocide for the purpose of gaining territory and resources. As Vancouver-based South Asian activist and writer Harsha Walia has expressed, “Canada’s state and corporate wealth is largely based on subsidies gained from the theft of Indigenous lands and resources.”¹ This pattern continues on two levels. First, until treaties are honoured and Indigenous peoples in Canada can self-determine laws, education, community structure, and governance, the conscious and constructed racism that has

subjugated Indigenous peoples will continue as it is written into our country’s bureaucratic policies and corporate agendas. Second, until we as individual members of a colonial culture address our own subconscious suppression of stories and voices through microaggressions that deny, invalidate, alienate, belittle, and dismiss marginalized groups, we remain part of the problem.

Paulette Regan is director of research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Canada and the author of *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*. In her book she asserts that to achieve true reconciliation, we must acknowledge our roles as colonizers who have deployed all the tools that colonizers use to control and assimilate original inhabitants. She points out that as Canadians, our prevalent and continued self-image is as altruistic peacemakers. This is in spite of our involvement in international arms

1. <http://www.coloursofresistance.org/769/moving-beyond-a-politics-of-solidarity-towards-a-practice-of-decolonization/>. Accessed September 29, 2014.

trades and the War in Afghanistan from 2001 to March 2014, which contribute to the ongoing violence of colonization. In order to acknowledge our role in devaluing and destroying Indigenous culture, we must question the validity of this concept and redefine our acts of good will.

Our historical Euro-Christian backgrounds deeply inform our cross-cultural relationships today. Historically this has meant deciding for a certain group what is best for them and then bringing that vision to fruition with force and violence, rather than looking at what we might do together. Let's acknowledge that the road to our contemporary concept of 'hell' is always paved with good intentions. Rather than good intentions, which do more harm than good when established solely by dominant powers, this text is an appeal for good will that's free of expectations and anticipated gain. I write it as a settler and a curator who has learned most about resilience from my engagements with artists and peoples of diverse backgrounds. We can show good will towards groups subjugated by racism, economies, class structures, government policies, and systemic expulsion, but only without assumptions about or preemptive bids for how any reciprocal good will might be expressed. It is also an appeal for conscious, self-reflective co-intentionality. Co-intentionality is the willful exertion of energy in a shared direction, an energy undertaken with the belief that it can result in change and movement. This belief is not metaphysical but a relational contemplation of desired outcomes towards a common manifestation by diverse co-intentional parties.

The self-determination of all people, and its role in placemaking and the formation of new living memory is what is at stake in today's cities. Self-determination is the right to live as one chooses, and to set a course of action. It is also the power of people to determine their own political status, independent from outside interference. This right has been stolen from Indigenous peoples with deeply felt effects on culture, spirituality, language, and governance.

People of Good Will

Heritage Hall, at 83 Essex Street in Guelph, is formerly a British Methodist Episcopal church. This historic site was built in 1880 by abolitionists and former fugitive slaves who arrived in the area via the Underground Railroad. Today the Guelph Black Heritage Society preserves the historical significance of this important building by creating a cultural, historical, and social centre within Guelph and Wellington County. Inspired by the Underground Railroad as a living history, Heritage Hall is a metaphor of cultural self-determination that can be shared with immigrant and culturally diverse peoples living in Guelph.

People of Good Will is the name of a project created in Guelph, Canada, by the Indigenous multimedia art collective Postcommodity from the southwest United States with the support and collaboration of Musagetes.² It provides a new public space in downtown Guelph for culturally diverse peoples to share

2. The *People of Good Will* project description can be accessed at <http://musagetes.ca/news/call-for-your-participation-people-of-good-will-september-2-2014/>. Postcommodity's work can be accessed at www.postcommodity.com. Musagetes' work can be accessed at www.musagetes.ca.

their voices, creative visions, and experiences with the city and the region.

People of Good Will brings to light the historical involvement of Indigenous peoples and others who acted in good will to assist in the emancipation of former American slaves. *People of Good Will* takes its inspiration from this alliance between two groups working together towards a common goal.

The project is a creative container for new kinds of sociality and a site for social expression—made, articulated, and driven by people from culturally diverse communities. The core values and aims are to:

- 1) translate the Underground Railroad into a living history of cultural self-determination;
- 2) examine the contemporary experiences of immigrant, Indigenous, and diverse communities;
- 3) develop ideas about and responses to issues that are critical, timely and relevant for immigrant, Indigenous, and culturally diverse communities;
- 4) examine contemporary contexts of intercultural relationships, power and determinism; and
- 5) mitigate historical and cultural erasure, broaden participation within the Guelph arts ecology

Over the course of one year, a series of collaborative events between local and international artists, arts programmers, community organizations, and the arts collective Postcommodity will be featured at Heritage Hall. This series of visual art, performances, readings, and music will be specially designed and created just for this space. In exploring the Underground Railroad as a living history of cultural self-determination, these events will showcase the experiences and perspectives of diverse local communities. Through this project, Postcommodity seeks to examine contemporary contexts of intercultural relationships, power, and determination.

A Beginning: Sharing a Meal

On September 20th, the project was inaugurated with a Feast on the Street. We were enchanted by Meral Mert, a Turkish singer accompanied by Nawrooz Kufat who played violin and Persian lute and sang.³ Stories of immigration—journeys, arrivals, and beginnings—were told through a series of projected videos by new immigrants called *Digital Storytelling*. We enjoyed Eritrean and Ethiopian food—lentil stew and injera made by Laza Catering—and Caribbean green banana salad and spicy fish balls made by the Grenadine Hospital Equipment Assistance Fund. But most of all we revelled in each other’s company. Three full seatings at a table in the middle of the street set for fifty—plus many folks too rapt in conversation to grab a chair—meant that at least two hundred people gathered on Essex Street that collegial, sunny afternoon.

3. This event was reviewed online at <http://www.guelphmercury.com/news-story/4872919-new-showcase-for-creative-arts/> and <http://www.theontarion.com/2014/09/new-creative-space-launched-by-gbhs-and-musagetes/>

Some skepticism I heard leading up to the inaugural event has surprised me, expressed as a lack of faith in the viability of the project, the clarity of the concept, or the necessity of the gesture behind *People of Good Will*. This is by no means the dominant reaction to the project—which is usually excitement—but it is undeniably there and I have bumped into it in the most surprising places. It has never been expressed as a conscious racism but as a kind of dispiriting denial or invalidation. Within critical race theory this is referred to as microaggression: something said or done, often in an everyday context and without conscious intent or awareness, that alienates or belittles a marginalized group. Microaggressions can be more damaging and difficult to address than overt expressions of bigotry or hate because they are often dismissed by those who commit them as a misunderstanding or something said casually in poor taste. Denial and invalidation—especially accidental—is a subconscious suppression of stories and voices, and it is far more uncomfortable and difficult to confront. And the only way I know how to do so is to speak for myself, not for others.

Speaking as a Settler

I'm a settler; my ancestors—British, Scottish, Polish, and Czechoslovakian—brought their culture to Canada four generations ago to set up residence, to have families, and to establish trades in a place new to them: southern Ontario. Working to confront and learn from the settler colonialism of my

ancestors is a complex act. When I begin to write about settler colonialism, I realize how lodged western identity is within the economic language of exchange that is an entrenched reality of capitalism's rapid development over centuries. The almighty dollar is power.

As part a regular part my work with Musagetes, I participate regularly in dialogues about how art can reach the general public. There is no such thing as a general public. Rather, there are self-defined communities and multiple publics comprised of hot-blooded, opinionated people with diverging values and goals they rightly hold dear. Sometimes these conversations about art turn to collaboration, and what groups might get out of working with an artist or our organization. Phrases like 'what can the public gain from this art project?' are uttered in community art initiatives with hope, yet structured purely in terms of some kind of currency that needs to be traded. This is a consistent, generalizing question arts organizations in Canada are grappling with. As limiting as it is, what's more alarming is that some of these organizations don't even get to the point of asking this question, naïvely assuming the communities they envision will be interested in an art project without considering why they might be moved to care.

Relating to communities and publics beyond the value of exchange is harder than I thought, I admit. It requires relearning our relationships and thinking in terms of good will, co-intentionality and shared design rather than gain.

Speaking as a Curator

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is a writer and editor of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg ancestry and a member of Alderville First Nation who has written about Nishnaabeg resurgence in her book, *Dancing on our Turtle's Back*. She speaks of her culture:

We need to articulate in a clear manner our visions for the future, for living as *Indigenous Peoples* in contemporary times. To do so, we need to engage in *Indigenous* processes, since according to our traditions, the processes of engagement highly influence the outcome of the engagement itself. We need to do this on our own terms, without the sanction, permission or engagement of the state, western theory or the opinions of Canadians. In essence, we need not just to figure out who we are, we need to re-establish processes by which we live who we are within the current context we find ourselves. We do not need funding to do this. We do not need a friendly political climate to do this. We do not need opportunity to do this. We need our Elders, our languages, and our lands, along with vision, intent, commitment, community, and ultimately, action.⁴

If we were asked by the Nishnaabeg to contribute to their resurgence, what could we do as settlers? We could start by acknowledging our positions.

Like settler colonialism, curatorial practice is entrenched in a history of decision-making and the language of exchange. The word *curator* means ‘to care for,’ and previously this referred to caring for a collection of works by deceased artists. Historically, curators were heritage keepers and some curators still work in this way, but the profession has developed to include many new ways of approaching concepts and creativity. More recently the definition of curatorship has shifted to mean assembling temporary exhibitions (often in the white cube gallery space) around a movement, moment, or theme. The all-encompassing definition of contemporary curators that I prefer is that they create and contribute to public dialogues about ideas and artistic strategies that address the world in all its complexities.⁵

This definition doesn't limit curatorial practice to exhibition making, so it includes curating socially-engaged artistic practice, working with communities through artistic process, and commissioning new work. When curatorial work is socially grounded like this, the role becomes more complex as curators are responsible to the organization they work for, the artist they select, and the community for which the work is destined. How a particular artwork sits within a larger trajectory of organizational vision is considered. As an advocate on the part of the artist, he or she is a go-between, upholding the rights of creative freedom and remunera-

4. Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*, (Winnipeg: Artbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011) 17.

5. Karen Love, *Curatorial Toolkit: A Practical Guide for Curators*, 2010. Accessed online October 24, 2104 at http://mgns.org.au/media/uploads/files/Curatorial_Toolkit.pdf

tion and the values of trust and experimentation. And curators deeply embed an artwork in an existing community, or cultivate a new public around a work through its own sites of reception.

On the one hand, a curator makes choices. He or she must constantly evolve their relationship to the language of representation, considering all angles of how a work of art speaks to larger ideas through its physical, social, and political manifestation. This means refreshing themselves constantly with new information and references from popular culture, history, literature, theory, and underground networks. This is a vocation where shrewd opinions about visual culture and sharp perspectives on the world today are bartered and debated; curators make judgments based on experience and expertise while responding to contemporary life. In the practices of many curators, this is a type of visual, historical, theoretical authority.

On the other hand, a curator needs to be a diplomat. This carries with it an ethos of appreciating and advocating for all parties in the triumvirate of organization, artist, and public (or in the case of socially engaged art, community). He or she makes suggestions, finds space where there seems to be none, cultivates resources, and nourishes the opinions of others. A curator is making informed choices while reflecting upon and mediating between possibilities at the same time.

But how does the work of a curator change when working with artists and communities who value

self-determination above all else? To act as a chooser in this case can over-determine potential outcomes, but more seriously, it can verge on the assimilative. The balance of choosing and mediating must swing to the side of mediation in this case, realized as a new kind of working relationship. This is a critical moment of learning for a curator because it requires different skills: negotiation, relationship-building, embodiment, and presence. In cases like this, working co-intentionally can transform the individuals involved and the commissioning organization. This is an effect *in addition to* the social engagement that is hoped for by all parties, and it occurs when people work together on a common problem. This is individual and organizational change through working together. The art historical authority and the process of decision-making based on research typically associated with curatorial practice takes a backseat to the kinds of co-intentional approaches required of working with artists and communities who value and practice self-determination. The work in this case requires a different kind of care, and that means—in contrast to historical and even many contemporary approaches—that artistic intent supercedes curatorial intent. This co-intentional approach trusts that the intentions of both will be satisfied if the intentions of the artist are satisfied. Or to put it another way, as the curator and artist work together, the curator trusts the artist to make decisions that meet everyone's needs (the organization, the artist him or herself, and the community). Contemplation and work is shared with great fluidity and faith in emergence, usually in conversation.

Inclusion (Co-Intended Not Curated)

Earlier in September I participated in a meeting in Guelph about *Cities for People*, an experimental initiative for resilient cities, which included *Cities for People's* four Curators—Art and Society (which is led by Musagetes), New Economies, Citizen Spaces, and Cityscapes. We met in Guelph along with the national curatorial node to report on recent project developments, brainstorm challenges, and identify opportunities together.

Social inclusion was an important topic at the centre of our conversations during these meetings in Guelph. What motivates people to get involved in their cities? How do we co-define resilience with all voices? How can we, as a group of collaborating organizations, not only include people and welcome them in, but co-create our intentions together?

Social inclusion is the realization of full and equal participation of all people in economic, educational, social, cultural, and political spheres. And who determines the categories of diversity and comprises the right mix—not limited to Anglophones, Francophones, Indigenous peoples, culturally diverse peoples, immigrants, queer voices, and disabled individuals—has long been determined by whites. The first step in cultivating social inclusion is recognizing the importance of diversity beyond economic gain. For those in positions of power, like white people, we need to acknowledge our own privilege, and more seriously, our complicity.

Race is a Concept, Not a Fact

Although race is a concept, racial labels creep in to shape our understandings of ourselves and of communities. Racism has been constructed by dominant peoples in spite of the fact that evolutionary biologists now reckon that the six to seven billion people on the earth today share the same small number of ancestors living two or three thousand years ago.⁶ If we flesh this out, labels—especially those like Indigenous, Francophone, immigrant, and culturally diverse—can be limiting. These labels often become stand-ins for individuals and individuals become stand-ins for labels. Labels are imposed as a form of power and control defined from the outside. They erase individuality and restrict how people can each function in relation to others. We need to keep this in mind when using labels. On the other hand, labels—when self-defined and taken up by people themselves—can also be useful and powerful, for Indigenous sovereignty for example. Nishnaabeg is translated as “the people” and refers to Ojibwe, Odawa (Ottawa), Potawatomi, Michi Saagig (Mississauga), Saulteaux, Chippewa, and Omámiwinini (Algonquin) people.⁷ We can look at labeling as an act of power—which can be one of suppression or resurgence.

In 2011, Guelph was documented as nearly 85% Caucasian. It is too simple to see this as a reason for or against having cultural programming dedicated to self-expressions of people who are not white. Will trumps statistics. Guelph is a place where we

6. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People*, (W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 2010) 2.

7. Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*, (Winnipeg: Artbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011) 25.

can cross-culturally design new societies co-intentionally, in which including and listening to all voices is a primary value. Our responsibility is to radically restructure our colonial relationships to immigrants, and to Indigenous and culturally diverse people. Our role is not to speak for others but to speak for ourselves as we work to confront entrenched settler colonialism. That can be our contribution to changing the system.

The next step in social inclusion is increasing social equality and recognizing the agency of diverse and subjugated populations, a complex challenge that has to consider power dynamics, both historical and current.

The Teachings of Mugwort

Mugwort is a common identification for aromatic plants in the genus *Artemisia*, named after the ancient Greek deity Artemis who was a hunter and goddess of everything wild. This bitter herb has a long history of use in herbal medicine especially in matters connected to the digestive system, female reproductive health, and the treatment of parasitic worms.⁸ A breadth of cultures—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Anglo-Saxon, Central American, South American, and Mexican—have used mugwort throughout history as medicines and natural pesticides.

This plant is the metaphor at the centre of a project that took place in September at the Musuem of

Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto by the STAG Library (Aja Rose Bond and Gabriel Solomon), Gina Badger, and Eric Emery. It was called *Brew Pub #3*, an issue of a journal in the form of a beer brewed with mugwort:

Through the development of a beer using wild-crafted mugwort from the city of Toronto—land with which the Huron, Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people have a long, historic and profound relationship—we have been considering what and how mugwort can teach us about exploring the conflictual complexity of settlement. Here, publication is liquid, consumable. Here, authority is plant.⁹

Mugwort is non-native to North America and is an invasive species in Canada. These plants are a kind of settler here. They love nitrogenous soils, and have a deep rhizomatic root structure that allows them to escape complete control. Boasting yellow blooms from early summer to early fall, the flowers are hermaphrodites, meaning they have both male and female organs and are pollinated by the wind. This plant can grow in nearly any conditions in North America: from acid soil to very alkaline soil, from sand to clay, in shade, full sun or drought. Mugwort aggressively inhibits the growth of nearby plants by means of its root secretions. Since the early 1990s, it has graduated from a marginally troublesome species to a major weed that is rapidly expanding and colonizing any available natural areas.¹⁰

8. <http://www.pfaf.org/user/Plant.aspx?LatinName=Artemisia+vulgaris>. Accessed October 20, 2014.

9. *BrewPub#3* Broadsheet, published summer 2014, The STAG library, Gina Badger, and cheyanne turions

10. <http://www.nysipm.cornell.edu/grantspgm/projects/proj12/orn/senesac.pdf>. Accessed October 20, 2014.

Biologists tracking the ecology of mugwort in New York State have found that after mugwort colonization, species diversity of native flora in many habitats greatly declines. Like any colonizer, mugwort actively displaces other plants. Habitats that generally support diverse stands of stress-tolerant native plants are displaced by monospecific stands of the weed. This displacement is most prominent along heavily traveled urban corridors, especially in cities.

What can we as settlers learn from this plant—a friend of butterflies, a medicine of our ancestors, and an enemy to other plant life?¹¹ The creators of the *Brew Pub #3* invited people to taste the beer in deep contemplation of settler colonialism. They asked that those who partook in the brew considered what healing our ancestors called for in order to live in this place well. The group drank in the weed and as such, drank in its stories of migration and teachings:

We propose a certain nimbleness with respect to scale, invoking the microcosm so that we may approach the macrocosm. To see a weed between the cracks of civilization's decaying architecture, and recognize it as the long-neglected medicine of our ancestors, is to envision the possibility of relanding. We wish to end the cycle of colonial dispossession by remembering our own wholeness. To embody this medicine is to reclaim our own ancestors, our own history, our own

spirituality, that we do not further rob the lifeblood of this land and its people. May this medicine help us practice hospitality, humility, and intimacy alongside past and future ancestors of this land.¹²

The third aspect of social inclusion is working co-intentionally with communities, be they communities of plant or people. What is at stake if we fail to operate within a diversity of perspectives? As the planet's population soars, our resources are dwindling. The next era of humanity will be grappling deeply with climate change. And no one will figure this out on our behalf—it will be a collective effort. The ultimate resilience of humanity is an urgent question. But the value of co-intentional work will have effects at the level of local community. The strength of co-intentionality is that it's scaleable.

The fourth, and most important step in social inclusion is self-determination. Indigenous self-determination is community action driven to respond to community needs and desires.¹³ It is not given, artificially assigned, or even offered. Coming from a background in artistic production, cultural mediation, and community building, I'm most hopeful these days when we talk about who the *Cities for People* initiative is for, and how we engage communities. This is when things become urgent. Who is at the table making choices about ideas, concepts, processes? To work co-intentionally with a group is not the same power dynamic as to propose solutions to, to consult with, to advise, or

11. <https://weedecology.css.cornell.edu/pubs/Published%202005%20PS%20277%281-2%29%2053-69.pdf>. Accessed October 21, 2014.

12. *BrewPub#3* Broadsheet, published summer 2014, The STAG library, Gina Badger, and cheyanne turions

13. My understanding of this concept is informed by dialogue with artist Cristóbal Martínez.

to mentor them. It requires for all parties to define what is needed for their communities. A community must have the capacity within which to act of their own accord, even to refuse the hand offered.

Co-creation, at its best, is destabilizing, especially to dominant parties. It's not easily packaged with established processes like proposal-making, consultation, advising, and mentoring, which is typically how inequitable social hierarchies are structured. In our work in strengthening communities, cities, and people, we have to apply care and intention to avoid replicating old ways of working. The destabilization and invention of new kinds of relational encounter is where real learning—and relearning—occurs. Both as an organization and as individual members of that organization, Musagetes is relearning our responsibility as a cultural broker in Guelph and as a producer of socially engaged artistic projects internationally from Postcommodity and the Guelph Black Heritage Society.

People of Good Will is an examination of contemporary contexts of intercultural relationships, power, and determination that takes the form of a socially engaged artistic project. Socially engaged artistic practice strikes at the heart of power dynamics because it involves questions about process, money, people, space, and resources—questions that are often embedded within the practice itself, its artistic expression, and its effects in the community. Everyone who is interested can contribute to making it happen. In fact, the project will fail if it doesn't engage both the larger art ecology and the

local communities of Indigenous, immigrant, and culturally diverse peoples. We're counting on building relationships in the larger cultural ecology that will propel this project forward. We are going where the energy is. The results of our relationships with Postcommodity and the Guelph Black Heritage Society have been surprising, inspiring, and deeply impactful in our work, and we're ready to see where it takes us.

Because power structures of colonialism reproduce themselves still, our cities are in a state of deep disrepair, socially, economically, politically, and physically. Our responsibility is to be receptive to the spirit of humanity. Our cross-cultural relationships need new patterns and new types of exchange based on co-intentionality, uncoupled from the need for economic gain. We need to relearn where we've come from and where we are going. Relearning can start by expressing good will towards groups subjugated by racism, economies, class structures, government policies, and systemic expulsion through critical self-reflection and acknowledgment of our roles as settlers. Because racism has been written into the social fabric of Canada, this must be done with eyes wide open, humility, and a conscious search for shared intent. We must take responsibility for ourselves or we risk invalidating and excluding Indigenous peoples further.

We need to prove that we can be trusted again before any true collaboration is possible. We must forgo our imperial measurements of success, our obsession with economic gain, our grips on the concept

of ownership, and our simultaneous devastation and romanticization of the land. We must actively seek to build trust through generous acts without expectation of return on investment. We must apologize for the wrongs our ancestors have committed and for the violence of subconscious suppression that continues. We must open our hearts and minds to difficult conversation and we must be ready to change. After all of this, we might be ready to receive an invitation from Indigenous peoples to work co-intentionally towards a mutual objective, such as a more just, healthy, and resilient world.

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There are lots of resources out there for people who want to go deeper into understanding our position as settlers and what we can do to act in solidarity with groups subjugated by racism, economics, class structures, government policies, and systemic expulsion. The linked articles and books referred to here are a good start, as is “Decolonization is not a Metaphor”¹⁴ by Tuck and Yang and articles by Damien Lee.¹⁵ Thanks to cheyanne turions and Danica Evinger for suggesting some of the referenced texts.

14. decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/download/18630/15554

15. <http://zoongde.wordpress.com/2014/06/23/tbay-settlers-in-solidarity-p1/>