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[See table of contents](#)

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“Good Willed Inertia”: Radicalizing the Lazy Academy

Guest-edited by Kristy A. Holmes, Andrea Terry, and Lisa Wood

[W]hile there is a pressing need for arts institutions to engage fully and productively with racialized communities, art and design departments, colleges, and universities, like many postsecondary sites of study, have remained entrenched in a strategy of good-willed inertia when it comes to instrumental change... [We must] reconsider possibilities within our current system, cognizant of intense resistances but also open to the potentials that present themselves to those of us who are looking, not just for a seat at the table, but a way to remake the table and all its settings.¹

—Ashok Mathur

Calls for fundamental change to postsecondary secondary arts institutions in Canada to “address curriculum, the needs of racialized students, and the hiring and retention of racialized faculty and administrators” have been expressed, voiced, articulated, written, and disseminated at conferences and in reports, journal articles, op-ed pieces and, most recently, by Ashok Mathur in his article, “Complicating Non-Indigeneities and Other Considerations around Race in the Art and Design University.”² This special section brings together polemical works that respond to Mathur’s article and offer concrete suggestions for how truly equitable and meaningful employment, research, and artistic opportunities for BIPOC artists and scholars might be realized within academic systems.

The papers that follow were first presented at the 2019 Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) annual conference in Quebec City in the Professional Development session. This session featured short “calls to action” presented by Noor Bhangu (by video), Ayumi Goto, Carmela

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Laganse, Cathy Mattes and Taien Ng-Chan, followed by a long table discussion that actively involved the audience. We, as the session organizers and guest editors here, wanted to respond to Mathur's call because we wanted something beyond simply having the will to dismantle the colonial, patriarchal, and neoliberal practices that structure academia. As members of the UAAC board, we have heard in panels, in Professional Development sessions, and in verbal and written correspondence from UAAC members, that we are part of the problem. The "good willed inertia" that Mathur speaks of is us—there is a lack of doing, of action. As an all-white board comprised primarily of tenured faculty members we occupy positions of extreme privilege and have been called to task in recent years on the lack of board diversity, the absence of sessions devoted to anti-racist pedagogy and to decolonization and reconciliation, as well as other important issues such as childcare support, funding for students and those who are precariously employed, and providing a barrier-free environment for the annual conference. To turn these valued and important criticisms into tangible action, we wanted to provide a platform to actively engage BIPOC artists and scholars through UAAC's 2019 Professional Development session.

To contextualize how we arrived at "'Good Willed Inertia': Radicalizing the Lazy Academy," we want to highlight some of the important discussions, criticisms and tactical actions that have recently taken place at or in response to the UAAC conference. In 2012, Charmaine Nelson wrote an essay for the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences website that outlined her experience at the 2011 UAAC conference in Ottawa.³ Nelson was then and, as far as we know, still is the only black tenured/tenure-stream art historian in Canada. She writes that she "found [her] self startled by the dominant whiteness of the participants" and noted that as she and one other scholar were the only black delegates they "were desperately out-numbered and

woefully underrepresented."⁴ She compared her experience at UAAC to the American counterpart, the College Art Association annual conference, where there were far more black presenters and attendees and where she presented on an all-black panel.⁵ Nelson is careful to mention that while the United States is "no paradise for black art historians or black academics generally," the stark difference in black visibility at the two conferences was deeply concerning. "There is an ongoing invisibility and even erasure of talented black intellectuals, artists, writers and scholars in the Canadian academy," Nelson writes, that must be addressed.⁶ She concludes by offering some solutions: encourage young black students to pursue degrees in art history, visual culture, and media studies; create a more welcoming environment in the academy and scholarly associations; and support and mentor those in the fields of arts, culture, film and media.⁷

Several years later at the 2016 UAAC conference in Montreal, Susan Cahill, Kristy Holmes and Erin Morton organized the Professional Development panel, "Killjoys, Academic Citizenship, and the Politics of Getting Along," which "critically investigate[d] the politics of normalizing civility and the culture of collegiality that often polices and silences dissent in academic environments."⁸ The invited panelists included Heather Igloliorte, Alice Ming Wai Jim, Charmaine Nelson, Cheli Nighthtraveller, AJ Ripley, Carla Taunton, and Tamara Vukov, who addressed the difficult and affective labour involved in "being nice" and how it unequally affects women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ people, and people with disabilities. The panelists' reflections from that session were then turned into a multi-authored article published in the 2017 issue of *TOPIA*.⁹ At the 2018 UAAC conference in Waterloo, Noor Bhangu, Soheila K. Esfahani, and Yam Lim chaired the panel "Enemy at the Gates: Decolonizing and Inscribing Culturally Diverse Communities' Perspectives in 'Mainstream' Artistic Discourses," with papers presented by Hassaan Ashraf, Andrew Gayed,

1. Ashok Mathur, "Complicating Non-Indigenities and Other Considerations around Race in the Art and Design University," *RACAR* 44, no. 1 (2019), 54–55.

2. *Ibid.*, 54.

3. Charmaine Nelson, "Resisting Invisibility: Black Faculty in Art and Art History in Canada," Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, March 2, 2012. <https://www.ideas-idees.ca/blog/resisting-invisibility-black-faculty-art-and-art-history-canada>. Accessed January 15, 2020.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Heather Igloliorte, Alice Ming Wai Jim, Erin Morton, Charmaine A. Nelson, Cheli Nighthtraveller, AJ Ripley, Carla Taunton, Tamara Vukov, with Susan Cahill and Kristy A. Holmes, "Killjoys, Academic Citizenship and the Politics of Getting Along," *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 38 (Fall 2017): 187.

9. *Ibid.*, 187–208.

Henry Heng Lu, Ashok Mathur, and Victoria Nolte. Also at the 2018 conference, Laganse and Ng-Chan organized the ВІРОС Caucus session, “Tactical Actions for the ‘Mainly White Room’: A Long Table Discussion and Caucus-Building Exercise.” Laganse and Ng-Chan began the session by introducing panelists Lori Blondeau, Marissa Largo, and Ashok Mathur, and then proceeded to describe the long table discussion format to follow the presentations. In his 2019 article, Mathur begins his discussion by highlighting the importance of these two panels, noting that they were both “dedicated to contributions around race and under-representation, and both of them were intended to disrupt normative patterns of arts education in the post-secondary scene across the Canadian spectrum.”¹⁰

While scholars and artists have raised concerns over the last several years, Mathur deplored that change was happening far too slowly and not at a systemic level. As we thought about what we could do at the 2019 conference to carry on and foreground these discussions, we asked Mathur if he would consider consulting with us on a session that might offer some concrete solutions to the “good-willed inertia” currently plaguing academia. He agreed and offered the idea of having panelists contribute a manifesto-type paper that would outline steps that could be taken by faculty, students, administrators, artists, and those involved in the field of arts to implement change and support ВІРОС colleagues and students. Seeing the success in the longtable discussions that were held in 2018, we thought a longtable discussion could follow the manifestos. After contacting our potential panelists, some expressed concern that the term “manifesto” has gendered and racial overtones and that such documents have historically been associated with masculinist, heteronormative, white, and often violent connotations. The panelists agreed that perhaps a better term would be a “call to action,” borrowing language from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.¹¹

The “calls to action” were presented in a formal conference set-up with panelists seated at a table at the front of the room and the audience in chairs. For the discussion, we asked anyone with a question or comment to come and sit closer to or at the table. A number of the panelists, harkening back to Mathur’s article, spoke at length about the symbolism of the table itself—who gets a seat, who does not, how tables structure learning, relationships, knowledge, power, and bodies. The table has been a powerful symbol in art and critical and cultural theory. In her 2006 article (and subsequent book), “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” for example, Sara Ahmed uses the table to discuss how bodies orient themselves in the world in relation to objects and what happens when that body is one that exists outside of normative behaviours or structures such as heterosexuality.¹² For Ahmed, the table is important as both a real object and a metaphor for how bodies are activated in space and time through thinking, writing, gathering, eating, and sharing.¹³

One of the panelists, Cathy Mattes, has critically discussed the table from her perspective as Métis. She notes that,

historically in Métis households the kitchen table was the center of the home—it is where loved ones were fed, clothing mended, beadwork and embroidery completed, and where political and cultural scheming occurred. It was and still remains, an electric and activated space, for dialogue, relations-building, and artistic activities.¹⁴

In response, Mattes has developed “Métis kitchen table talks” as a methodology to share and gather research for what she has termed “Indigenous littoral curation,” a curatorial model that “value(s) collaboration, the dialogical nature of art engagement, and acknowledge(s) curation as creative continuance.”¹⁵ Embodying the Métis kitchen table’s role in providing space in the home for discussion, art making, and nutrition, Mattes invites conversation with participants around the table while sorting beads. While

10. Mathur, “Complicating Non-Indigenities,” 54.

11. “Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action,” http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf. Accessed January 18, 2020.

12. Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 549. See also Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

13. *Ibid.*, 558-60.

14. Cathy Mattes, “Indigenous Littoral Curation—A Michif Jig in 3 Parts,” PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 2020 (in progress).

15. Cathy Mattes, “Sparking Miyeau pimatisiwin: Métis Kitchen Table Talk and Beading as Methodologies for Indigenous Littoral Curation and Critical Discourse,” *SoA Today: University of Manitoba—Beading Workshop with Professor Cathy Mattes*, January 30, 2019. <https://umschoolofart.wordpress.com/2019/01/30/beading-workshop-with-professor-cathy-mattes/>. Accessed March 24, 2020.

Mattes is setting her table as a Métis space for inclusion, discussion and debate, Ahmed, Mathur and panelists such as Ng-Chan and Bhangu used the idea of the table as an object and symbol where intellectual ideas are created and disseminated but where certain bodies—in this case, racialized bodies—are not oriented or welcomed.

One strategy for re-making the table and re-orienting the body is the long table discussion. Devised in 2003 by artist, activist, and academic Lois Weaver, the long table is an experimental public form, a performative roundtable-dinner-party-installation that encourages a democratic raising of voices, offsetting hierarchical perceptions of “expertise.”¹⁶ For their 2018 session, “Tactical Actions for the ‘Mainly White Room,’” Laganse and Ng-Chan began their long table discussion with people coming to sit at the table—there was no moderator and instead Laganse and Ng-Chan acted as hosts assisting the conversational flow. Guest performers participated by speaking or writing on the paper covering the table provided by the hosts. Only those guests sitting at the table could speak and they could leave or return to the table at any

time. The long table format not only subverted the conventional post-conference question and answer period, it urged difficult issues to be identified, acknowledged, and mulled over by all in attendance. Concerns were raised, such as how BIPOC students, artists, and scholars are often the ones “doing the work” and are frequently asked, even expected, to carry additional roles and responsibilities that can cause extreme mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. Inspired by this previous long table conversation, we wanted to employ this strategy for our 2019 panel. We reached out to those we witnessed doing valuable and exhausting work advocating for radical pedagogies and wanted to provide a platform and hold space where their energies would be acknowledged, celebrated, promoted and propelled further into concrete actions.

In this Polemics section, these crucial discussions have moved from the table to the printed form. Please read and share these crucial voices, views, proposals, and experiences that merit sustained reflection, words and writings, and which motivated us to use the table for more radical, demanding, strenuous, and rewarding conversations. ¶

16. For further discussion see, “Long Table—SPLIT BRITCHES,” <http://www.split-britches.com/long-table>. Accessed December 31, 2019.