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On Mobilizing Institutional Good Will: A Response to Ashok Mathur's Essay

Ayumi Goto

Speaking from a Space of Critical Intimacies

Ashok Mathur is my… how do you say? Heart-mate, current life partner, significant other, live-in lover? We have been together for around 13 years. Prior to that, we were mildly acquainted in excess of fifteen years through my sister, Hiromi, his close friend and frequent collaborator. While I was otherwise preoccupied in my work life, over the years I would listen from the periphery about their artistic activism: Minquon Panchayat (*It's a Cultural Thing!*), *Writing Thru Race*, and IntraNation, among many, many others. When Kristy Holmes, Andrea Terry, and Lisa Wood kindly e-invited me last year to participate on a panel in response to Ashok's essay "Complicating Non-Indigeneities and Other Considerations Around Race in the Art and Design University" at the UAAC conference in Quebec City in 2019, I gleefully laughed out loud. Rather than painstakingly and disingenuously provide a critically distanced missive on Ashok's offerings on radically shifting race relations in art and other post-secondary institutions, I thought that perhaps I could provide some thoughts from a space of critical intimacies and proximity.

Many of the ideas presented in Ashok's essay have been passionately debated, existing perennially in our household, a space currently shared between my partner, Ashok, my bestest friend, Peter Morin, Cat, and myself.[1] Although beyond the front door, Ashok and I are ostensibly Asian, visible minority and/or racialized, and Peter is often identified as some unnamable other, there is much that separates all of our experiences as non-white.

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Whereas Ashok's parents, Parshottam and Perin Mathur, arrived in Canada as part of a professionalized healthcare class and fluent in the English language, my parents, Tiger and Kyoko Goto, arrived as working-class farmers, documented as illiterate and unable to speak either of the official languages of their adoptive nation-state. Most of Peter's relations on his mother, Janell Morin's (née Creyke), side have lived for thousands of years along the meeting of the Tahltan and Stikine rivers in what is currently known as northern British Columbia. Peter's French-Canadian father, Pierre Morin, moved across the country in his early twenties from a mining community in Central Québec where his family had lived for several generations to arrive in Tahltan territory. While we are all the youngest in our families, Ashok is the only son, Peter has both sisters and a brother, and I am the last of four daughters. Both Peter and Ashok grew up in larger towns and cities and I lived in rural settings in British Columbia and southern Alberta. Cat came to live with us after being moved from city to city, house to house, and having abided by his first human caregiver's side up to his death, an older, terminally ill gentleman who had rescued Cat from the SPCA for want of companionship. Needless to say, ideas regarding race relations and power differentials have been discussed among us with animation, passion, boisterous laughter, and at times, outright antagonism. Of the four, I am the most tempestuous, so there have been more than a few occasions of reaching a state of rational exasperation to yell, "Oh yeah, Ashok?!? Well, you're just wrong, wrong, wrong!" and literally stomping away into another room, often with Peter or Cat doing their best to intervene as peacemakers. In sheepish retrospect, it is clear that in those temper-flaring moments, I had clearly lost the plot, argument, what-have-you. I might have been overly tired or hungry. Yet we continue to cohabitate lovingly with respect to profound disagreements, misalignments, and widely variable life experiences. Dear reader, if you could, please keep in mind that the lives we share are much more beautifully complicated than what words can say here.

Grounding for the Metaphysics of Good-Willed Inertia[2]

The messy, lively four-ness in our household exists in stark contrast to the clean-cut binaristic categorical divisions between Indigenous and settler, an analysis of which has been offered in Ashok's essay. I am in much agreement with his assessment that the Indigenous-settler dyad prioritizes and recentralizes whiteness whilst performing good-willed institutional inclusion. In the nation-level discourses of reconciliation, the white-Indigenous binary was readily apparent at Truth and Reconciliation gatherings in Canada. In attending the national gatherings in Winnipeg, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Montreal, I witnessed the presence of very few "people of colour" or racialized audience members. Of those present, they would have had to have a fluent understanding of either one of Canada's official languages or the Indigenous languages of the particular territory. Furthermore, if a gathering did not take place in their vicinity, they would have needed the income and time to travel in order to participate. Finally, they would have had to come from a state of mind, political and/or cultural space to absorb the public display of multiple trauma narratives. For those carrying their own histories of genocide, forced migrations, as well as cultural protocols to not mandate the disclosure of traumas in front of multitudinous others, the most respectful act for oneself and others may have been to look away. The unspoken demands to conform physically, linguistically, culturally, and socio-economically in exchange for a sense of national inclusion were deeply felt in these gatherings.

In analyzing national truth and/or reconciliation initiatives that have taken place in other parts of the globe, a pattern seems to have emerged to serve as a cautionary note in anticipation of the social relations that might arise in Canada henceforth. As Ashok has pointed out, the term "rec-

1. I wish to thank Ashok Mathur and Peter Morin for their critical feedback on earlier drafts of this essay, and for granting permission to write about their families.

2. In this subtitle, I am referring to Immanuel Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. When I studied microbiology and philosophy for my bachelor's and master's degrees, respectively, I became particularly attuned to the ways in which value systems, namely European philosophies, were integral and foundational in the study of the physical sciences and humanities. The play on the title here could best be considered a decolonizing critique of Kant's celebrated monograph and that which has unfolded from the centralization of certain knowledges over others.

onciliation" has fallen out of favour in South Africa, having as its "theoretical successor" problems of xenophobia.[3] I wish to suggest further that South Africa's truth and reconciliation processes should be factored into understanding ongoing xenophobia primarily against southern Africans. As with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SATRC) was contained within a national framework. Those who were unimagined, that is, those not considered citizens were left out of the social and political imaginary of the newly forming "rainbow state." Over time, xenophobic attacks against legal and illegal immigrants and migrants have proliferated.[4] Ashok and I happened to be in Cape Town in 2008 for a research visit, the year that sixty-two people were killed and thousands disenfranchised to "refugee" status across South Africa. We met with several artists from Zimbabwe and Zambia who expressed their mortal fears of being identified as non-South African. In *From Foreign Nationals to Native Foreigners: Explaining Xenophobia in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Michael Neocosmos argues that xenophobia is premised upon the political and legal reconfiguration of citizenship in the transition from an apartheid to post-apartheid state. Following from the South African TRC, citizenship was reserved only for those who could prove a familial connection with colonial and apartheid formation in the newly liberated state.[5]

Similarly, the years following from the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement have shown both a dramatic drop in sectarian violence between Unionists and Nationalists and significant increases in racial violence towards new migrants in Northern Ireland. In their essay, "From Good Friday to Good Relations: Sectarianism, Racism, and the Northern Irish State," Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rolston present a compelling argument that sectarianism is a specific form of racism propagated through the British imperialistic imperative to colonize Indigenous Irish.[6] According to McVeigh and Rolston, religion is a major signifier of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, creating a division between native Irish Catholics and colonizing British Protestants, consequently religion is intimately entwined with the process of this racial bifurcation.[7] They go on to argue that the rise of new racisms in Northern Ireland is thoroughly interconnected to sectarianism both before and after the Good Friday Agreement, and that the inability to recognize the ways in which sectarianism structures all aspects of civil society will ensure the continuation of racial discrimination of new arrivals to the republic.[8] In other words, state formation built upon the binaries between self and other, Republican versus Unionist, Catholic and Protestant, and subsequent reconciliatory efforts will generate further racism. This antagonistic binary is reiterated in Duncan Morrow's analysis that reconciliation directives integral to the Good Friday Agreement have shown to be inoperable, and have been replaced with prosaic commitments to contain violence and tolerate the adversarial other.[9] He argues that identity formation within antagonistic relations creates a conflation of "anti-them" and "pro-us." Identity formation based upon this rigid binary offers little if any space for imagining unexpected others, who fall outside of the rubric of belonging to one side or other.

Ashok's argument that identity formation premised upon fixed binary opposition between Indigenous and white in the Canadian context speaks to the concerns I wish to raise regarding other national reconciliation initiatives. Dear reader, the social and political situations in South Africa and Northern Ireland are far more intricate than can be represented here. As an outsider witness, passing through these countries, I can only suggest that the cultural and political consolidations of the self in opposition to a specific and fixed other can become an all-encompassing nation-building enterprise. I fear that those deemed superfluous to binaristically constructed identity formation will be considered consequentially. Just as Ashok has pointed out in his analysis of the settler-Indigenous binary

3. Ashok Mathur, "Complicating Non-Indigeneities and Other Considerations Around Race in the Art and Design University," *RACAR* 44, no. 1 (2019): 60.

4. For more information on xenophobia in South Africa see Oluwaseun Tella, "Understanding Xenophobia in South Africa: The Individual, the State, and the International System," *Insights on Africa* 8, no. 2 (2016): 142–58.

5. Michael Neocosmos, *From Foreign Nationals to Native Foreigners: Explaining Xenophobia in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2010).

6. Robbie McVeigh & Bill Rolston, "From Good Friday to Good Relations: Sectarianism, Racism, and the Northern Irish State," *Race and Class* 48, no. 4 (2007): 1–23.

7. Ibid., 3.

8. Ibid., 21.

9. Duncan Morrow, "The Rise (and Fall) of Reconciliation in Northern Ireland," *Peace Research: The Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies* 44, no. 1 (2012): 5–36.

in the structuration of political belonging in Canada, unexpected others may be under-imagined regarding their own life trajectories while being over-imagined and presumed to fit into one of these pre-established sides.

The term "settler" presupposes a unidirectionality of migrational flow and a tacit demand for permanence of placement. By under-imagining the multidirectionality of human movement, both internally and internationally, it becomes challenging to appreciate the presence of those who may not have chosen to be in Canada but landed unexpectedly after having fled their own lands due to environmental, political, and/or economic emergencies. It cannot be assumed that, of those who have arrived, all will (wish to) remain. And conversely, it cannot be assumed that those born in Canada expect a permanence of settlement. Some, indeed many, are passing through.

Subsequent to the presupposition of unidirectional migration, the settler-Indigenous binary also centralizes a singular understanding of colonization, that is, British and French colonization of Indigenous people in the birth and continuation of the Canadian nation state, which inhibits the contemplation of colonialisms that have taken place in other parts of the world. Deeper consideration of the historical and cultural contexts of other colonialisms might elucidate the processes through which colonialism persists in Canada today. In our household, different colonial histories reside side by side. On his mother, Janell Morin's side, Peter's family has been profoundly affected by residential schools, past potlatch and ceremonial bans, and systemic discrimination against Tahltan people. Meanwhile, Ashok's paternal grandfather, Ranglal Mathur, was an award-winning census-taker in the time of the British Raj, in stark contrast to Ashok's mother, a Parsi woman who refused to stand up in court in salute of a photo of King George in India, which was just on the verge of independence. My maternal grandparents were directly involved in the Japanese imperialistic colonization of China. Because of the brutality of Japanese colonization in Asia, I carry a deep personal responsibility to never settle permanently in any place. It is hoped that I can develop a skill set that will enable me to leave Canada to be of inconspicuous usefulness in other lands for some time. How do states of unsettlement and impermanence contribute to and/or disrupt the persistence of British and French colonial structurations of present-day Canada? This question can be addressed only if one were to cease assuming that all non-Indigenous people are permanent settlers.

Next, I wish to explore further the point at which Ashok turns away from addressing the "gargantuan task of [institutional] reinvention," because there seem to be uncanny resonances between nation-state and educational institutional expansion due to British and French colonization.[10] The language of inclusion and accommodation speak to an additive rather than a radically transformative approach in peopling the institution with non-white representation. In the rush to perform equity of bodily presence, crucial questions regarding the intellectual and structural foundations and processes of (economic) viability at art and other post-secondary institutions are not raised for richer critical analysis. Perhaps one of the first comprehensive articulations of Canadian universities was presented in the 1896 publication, "The Universities of Canada: Their History and Organization," by George W. Ross, who would go on to become the 5th premier of Ontario.[11] In this monograph, Ross writes:

> Owing to our colonial relationship, it will be observed, particularly in reading the history of the University of Toronto, that an effort was made to transplant from the Mother Country a university organization adapted to conditions of society which did not prevail in this country…By the Act of 1853 it was intended that the University of Toronto should be a transcript of the University of London (England)….The ties which politically bind the various Provinces of the Confederation and the most distant colonies of the Empire together are thus duplicated educationally and so far with the most satisfactory results.[12]

10. Mathur, "Complicating Non-Indigeneities," 55.

11. George W. Ross, *The Universities of Canada: Their History and Organization* (Toronto: Warwick Bros. and Rutter, 1896).

12. Ibid., vi-vii.

In this introduction, Ross proposes critically reflecting upon the history of universities across Canada, "more advanced universities" in the United States, Scottish universities, and Oxford in order to come up with strategies for a "radical change" for addressing the intellectual needs of the provinces.[13] Notably, this monograph is contemporaneous with the legislation and installation of the (Indian) residential school system in Canada. According to John S. Milloy, author of *A National Crime*, the "enfranchisement" of Indigenous children into the Canadian nation-state was orchestrated through an educational curriculum that "carried the seeds of European civilization," such as Western philosophical grounds for ethical conduct, patriotism, and "scientific methodology of the European world."[14]

I wish to point out that the socio-political and ethical values that buttress past and current university education in Canada correspond with those which undergird Indian residential schools. Although Ross was attempting to build a case for radical changes, certain pillars of what constitute the basic grounds for knowledge production remain steadfastly in place. Latin words continue to be used to organize the categorization and investigation of living and non-living beings in the physical sciences, humanities, and even on one's degree certificate. Many classrooms continue to consist of chairs and tables or desks oriented toward the designated head of the room from where the professor imparts knowledge. And, if I may be so bold, I would like to suggest that those of you currently employed in university upper administration read carefully through Ross' historical analysis of universities. Perhaps some structural and epistemic insights can be gleaned in terms of how present organizational principles of higher learning have remained unchanged through various iterations of pedagogical and research reform.

In thinking through the additive nature of accommodating shifts in educational and research content, I cannot help but speculate that, over the generations of student bodies moving through post-secondary institutions, some bodies intuitively know how to walk, speak, and articulate ideas better than others. That is, the architecture and administration of knowledge-making rewards those who are intergenerationally conversant and/or aligned with the cultural value systems that serve as the foundations of those institutions. At the same time, students coming from dissimilar and often unimagined cosmologies are penalized until they learn to move to the educational rhythms established by the institution. The expectations that vast and variegated knowledges conform to the habituated workings of the university seem to be at cross-purposes with appreciating that the diversity of the processes, ontologies, and histories is necessary for addressing a world in a state of great upheaval and movement. When working on my doctorate, I was keenly aware that I was earning the highest degree in a system of learning that is currently outdated. As younger universities such as the Ontario College of Art and Design University are at pains to demonstrate that they are capable of securing research funds from private and governmental sources to conduct research exemplary of longstanding institutions, good-willed inertia sets in rapidly. In this regard, Ashok is more optimistic than I in terms of the changes that can take place from within. It is reassuring to witness Ashok working to prioritize the building of good relations in the face of competing research interests and offering kindness in moments of conflict at OCADU. It is my hope that, in the future, nationally-inscribed universities could be presented as the radical option, much like train travel or brown paper shopping bags. But for now, there exists a plethora of models of knowledge formation that will aid in identifying the intellectual, economic, and existential limits of university-based learning. Moreover, they provide alternate and decisively kinetic possibilities for mobilizing

13. Ibid., vii.

14. John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999), 35–37.

good will so that humanity can address pressing concerns about land-human relations, human interrelations, and the fostering of spirit in a respectful manner.

Moving Towards Radical Transformations

Critical creative transformations of knowledge already exist. They offer continuous propositions for learning, thinking, acting, moving, engaging. Careful commitments. Friendships. The beautiful foment of ideas within new and kaleidoscopic collectives. The splendours of: Minquon Panchayat, *o'kinādās*, bush gallery, primary colours/couleurs primaires. And the legacies of Parshottam and Perin Mathur, Andrea Fatona, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Louise Profeit-LeBlanc, the Okot p'Biteks, Cecily Nicholson, Jessie Kleeman, Arahmaiani Feisal, Tiger and Kyoko Goto, the Creyke family, Janell and Pierre Morin, Roy Miki, and Shirley Bear.
And uncountable nonhuman realms of learning...
the multi-cosmological lives of salmon
the 5000km migrations of monarch butterflies
the metamorphoses of fungal growths in the humid crevasses of forests
cycles into cycles that become at once familiar and unfamiliar to selves and others
certainly, infinite possibilities. ¶