



# TOWARDS BRAIDING

Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti  
with Sharon Stein





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June 2019

ISBN: 978-0-9877238-9-5

Cover: David Garneau, *Not to Confuse Politeness with Agreement*, oil on canvas, 122 x 122 cm, 2013. [Private collection]

Note from the artist: This painting is based on a popular postcard from the 1950s. The photographer is W.J.L. Gibbons of Calgary, and the image features an unknown young Mountie and Ubi-thka Iyodage, also known as Chief Sitting Eagle (1874–1970) and also as John Hunter, who was a prominent leader of the Chiniki band of Stoney Nakoda people of southwestern Alberta. I reversed the image to suggest some irony; I wanted not simply to reproduce the image but re-present it. The image is of an “Indian” and a “representative of the State’s power.” I suppose the intention of the original image was to show the old giving way to the new country, but the young man (who isn’t given a name) is clearly out of his league. I repurposed the image to suggest two very different ways of thinking and seeing the world.

Inside and back cover art: Benicio Pitaguary

Design: Gareth Lind, Lind Design

This booklet was published with support from Musagetes as part of the organization’s commitment towards braiding.

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Overleaf: David Garneau, *Not to Confuse Politeness with Agreement*, oil on canvas, 122 x 122 cm, 2013. [Private collection]





## Preface

Our story starts with things falling apart.

This is a very common story: an organization decides it wants to “Indigenize” and/or “decolonize” and hires an Indigenous person to do this work for them, but usually this position is not one of decision-making authority or autonomy. The Indigenous person accepts the job, hoping that the organization understands Indigeneity and decolonization the same way they do and that they will be able to influence change. However, in time it becomes clear that, apart from this new position, most activities of the organization go unchanged: the mere presence of an Indigenous person is meant to Indigenize and decolonize the public image of the organization. Despite a genuine yearning for deeper connections and relationships, the organization performs a socially sanctioned desire for a specific formula:

- business as usual**
- + non-threatening Indigenous content**
- guilt and risk of bad press**

The Indigenous employee is expected to facilitate convenient Indigenous involvement, to exercise conditional Indigenous leadership, to curate Indigenous content that is palatable to the taste of non-Indigenous consumers, to perform gratitude for “being included,” to embrace the opportunity for reconciliation, to offer redemption to the organization, to appear in equity photos, and to allow the use of their presence as an alibi for the continuity of colonial desires and relations (see “academic Indian job description” poem on page 24). Unrealistic expectations are put on the Indigenous employee to tackle issues in every aspect of the organization, which often amounts to the expectation that one employee will take on multiple full-time jobs.

At some point, the two sides and their differing expectations clash. The Indigenous person feels instrumentalized for an agenda that is still fundamentally colonial in an organization that fails to imagine that other ways of working, collaborating and relating are possible. The Indigenous person calls out this tokenism and the frustration it brings. Next, the Indigenous person who identified the problem starts to be perceived as a problem and as someone who is taking advantage of the organization’s gesture of inclusion. The organization either ignores or denies what was communicated (placing blame on the Indigenous person) or makes superficial changes without realizing the depth and difficulty of the learning that is necessary to interrupt systemic colonial patterns that are perceived as normal, natural and, in many cases, benevolent.

When the Indigenous employee loses faith in the commitments of the organization, they also start to actively or passively resist the organization’s demands. In turn, the organization starts doubting the Indigenous person’s ability to do the job

they were hired to do. The inability to communicate across this divide builds mistrust and anger on both sides. At one point the Indigenous person burns out, threatens to quit, and accuses the organization or individuals in the organization of racism and (neo)colonialism.

The organization then feels justified in their judgment that this Indigenous person is unstable and incompetent. The Indigenous person quits or is fired. The organization hires another Indigenous person, who seems to be more amenable to performing the required set of tasks. In time, the different expectations clash, and the damaging and re-traumatizing cycle unfolds.

This is the general story — an all too common one. However, this text is about an experiment to try and rewrite how a story like this generally ends, in an effort to interrupt the cycle, and to see what else is possible if we approach things differently. At the point of breaking, we decide between two options: to let the story play out as it usually does, or to try and be taught by these repeated mistakes from a place of not knowing what to do. We realize that starting from this place of not-knowing could be a generative place from which to respond to a non-generative situation of mistrust and resentments on both sides. This requires patience, humility, generosity and a decision on both parts to take a risk, knowing that it might not work. In this text, we report on the first year of such an experiment, but it remains ongoing, as does our learning, and it still hasn't (and probably won't ever be) finished.

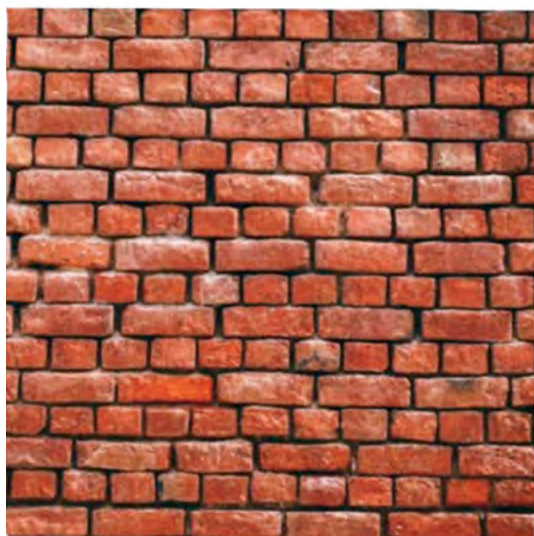
This text is based on conversations that have happened during an ongoing collaborative process between Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti as part of their work with Musagetes, a foundation with a mandate to make the arts more central and

meaningful in peoples' lives, in our communities and societies. This collaboration involved several modes of relational engagement with Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, scholars, and communities, including visits, gatherings and consultations, addressing the following questions:

- What are the conditions that make possible ethical and rigorous engagement across communities in historical dissonance that can help us move together towards improved relationships and yet-unimaginable wiser futures, as we face unprecedented global challenges?
- What are the guidelines and practices for ethical and respectful engagement with Indigenous senses and sensibilities (being, knowing, relationships, trauma, place, space and time) that can help us to work together in holding space for the possibility of “braiding” work?
- How do we learn together to enliven these guidelines with (self-)compassion, generosity, humility, flexibility, depth and rigour, and without turning our back to (or burning out with) the complexities, paradoxes, difficulties and pain of this work?
- What kind of socially engaged and community anchored Indigenous-led arts-based program can support this process in the long term?
- What are the expectations in terms of responsibilities of the organization to the place/land and her traditional ancestral custodians from the perspectives of the local Indigenous communities?

This document reflects our collaborative learning from the first year of this collaboration. We honour all of those who have inspired the insights garnered thus far and thank them again for their time and generosity in sharing their stories and wisdom with us. We would also like to thank everyone at Musagetes for making it possible for this process to happen.

— Elwood and Vanessa





# Bricks and Threads

## Analogies for different sets of ways of knowing/being

In this project we have tested different framings for the distinct sensibilities involved in the highly charged context of settler–Indigenous relations and have found that a distinction between transcendence

and immanence offered a useful tool for analyses of recurrent tensions, as well as possibilities for new forms of engagement. A social cartography using the metaphor of construction bricks (transcendence) and knitting threads (immanence) proved very useful in engaging Indigenous artists in conversations about the tensions of working in non-Indigenous institutions and the essential steps that could enable possibilities for new forms of collaboration. We present the distinction between bricks and threads in this section. Like all metaphors, this one is partial and limited, and thus we also include several caveats.

**Brick sense and sensibilities** stand for a set of ways of being that emphasize individuality, fixed form and linear time;

- where the world is experienced through concepts that describe the form of things and places them systematically in ordered hierarchical structures;

- where the value of something is measured against its capacity, achievement or potentiality to “move things forward”;
- and where self-worth is dependent on external validation.

**Thread sense and sensibilities** stand for a set of ways of being that emphasize inter-wovenness, shape-shifting flexibility and layered time;

- where the world is experienced through sensorial events involving movement, rhythm, sound and metaphor;
- where every “thing” (including humans, non-humans and the land) is a living entity;
- where every entity is valued for its intrinsic (insufficient and indispensable) inherent worth within an integrative and dynamic whole; and
- where their self-worth is grounded on their connection with something beyond the individual self, but also found within it.

## Implications

### Ways of being

**Brick sensibilities** are goal- and progress-oriented. They demand that we share the same convictions about reality in order to engineer proper political, ideological and institutional structures that will in turn engender adequate social relations (i.e., adequate conditions will build adequate institutions that will secure adequate relationships). The focus on engineering reality is knowledge-based, methodological and grounded on consensual decision making. Human purpose can be imagined



as building monuments and walls that will last and leave a traceable legacy that attests to the worth and virtue of the individuals involved in contributing towards the imagined idea of progress.

Conversely, **thread sensibilities** are oriented towards relationality. They require that we sense entanglement in order to weave genuine relationships, which will in turn command responsibility for collective wellbeing as a grounding force for adequate (new) political and institutional systems (i.e. adequate relationships will build adequate capacities to work together that will secure adequate processes). The focus on collective wellbeing invites the surrender of individual entitlements for a greater good and calls for a level of ongoing stretch-discomfort within a container of relational interdependence that is unconditional in its generosity over time, but not open to abuse. Human purpose is associated with respecting the unique medicines that each being carries and integrating these medicines to enable the continuity of life. In contrast with the brick sensibility's preoccupation of leaving a legacy, the thread sensibility focuses on ecological sustainability and aims at having minimal impact on the world (e.g. leaving no footprints).

## Ways of knowing

**Brick sensibilities** take language to be something that describes and indexes the world. Knowledge is something that can be discovered and/or transmitted, and accumulated. This accumulation is documented in writing, therefore knowledge can be mostly found in books and formal institutions. Knowledge is measured according to its capacity for accuracy in describing, predicting or building effectively, and is something people feel entitled to, although they may need to pay for it.

**Thread sensibilities** take language to be both practical and metaphorical. Language can never describe the unknowable wholeness of the world, but it is extremely useful to move things in the world. In this sense, both language and knowledge are “entities” whose impact is evaluated not by their accuracy in describing something, but in their impact in the world (i.e., what they enable and what they foreclose). In this case, knowledge can come from many places (the land, altered states of consciousness, non-humans) and is something that is earned (not an entitlement).

## Communication

**Brick sensibilities** tend to communicate through “thick scripts” of normativity, protagonism (individualistic heroism), reason and virtue that take different forms in different contexts. **Thread sensibilities** tend to communicate through modes of self-effacement, relationship-weaving, intro/inter-spection and metaphor that are “thin-scripted” as they are grounded in the unknown and unknowable.

In modern institutions/relationships, which are ordered by brick sensibilities, thread communication and sensibilities tend to be muted/rendered unintelligible. Therefore, those from the thread space who want to “be heard” in those institutions need to learn to translate their message into the mode of communication that is legible to the dominant brick sensibility. This is not only deeply frustrating, but also often ineffective, pushing the orientation towards a non-generative manifestation. Thread practices are also often selectively adopted/instrumentalized by brick orientations as a means to improve effectiveness, to enact “inclusion” or as a branding “currency” of diversity, decolonization or Indigeneity.

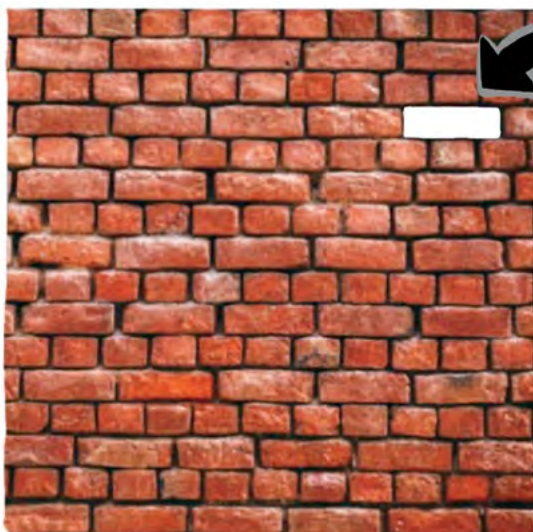
## Important caveats

- There are a variety of brick sensibilities and a variety of thread sensibilities, but it is important to notice that these variations are broadly clustered around different propositions about the nature of knowledge and reality (and the relationship between the two).
- The sensibilities of both bricks and threads can manifest in generative and non-generative ways.
- The universalization of bricks or threads is highly problematic as it makes invisible the limitations of the sensibility that seeks universalization and attempts to delegitimize and/or erase the other sensibility.
- Social groups that depend on a deep relationship with the land as a living entity tend to lean towards the thread sensibility. Social groups that see the land as an object, resource or property lean towards the brick sensibility.
- Indigenous groups are known to work with and through threads, while colonialism is known to violently impose bricks.
- While it is important to highlight that settler–Indigenous relations are grounded on the harm that bricks have inflicted on threads, it is also important to complicate this relationship by acknowledging that many Indigenous groups and individuals have adopted brick-related ways of being and a few settlers have developed senses and sensibilities that enable them “to thread” (and some are penalized for that).
- Despite threads being used in political and academic discourse to characterize the struggle of Indigenous peoples, it is problematic to directly or universally equate Indigeneity

with threads, partly because of historical circumstances that have privileged the power and allure of the bricks.

- For those over-socialized in contexts where the brick sensibility is the universalized norm and perceived to be rational, neutral, universally desirable, and objective, it is very difficult to grasp that other people (coming from a thread sensibility) could feel the world very differently. As a result, within brick spaces threading is perceived as wrong, disingenuous, irrational or impossible.
- The integrity of the thread sensibility is often compromised by the institutional demands and perceived entitlements of the brick sensibility that are normalized and naturalized as “common sense”.
- Brick sensibilities tend to instrumentalize thread methodologies (ways of doing) for their purpose, when convenient, often without the ability to recognize or to honour the ways of knowing and being where these methodologies came from.
- When brick sensibilities engage in processes of inclusion, they generally require threads to be turned into bricks, so that they can become intelligible in the brick wall.
- Acts of transgression that challenge brick normativities are not necessarily a manifestation of the thread sensibilities: bricks often manifest as a competition of different normativities.







## Braiding

**W**e define braiding as a practice yet-to-come located in a space in-between and at the edges of bricks and threads, aiming to calibrate each sensibility towards a generative orienta-

tion and inter-weave their strands to create something new and contextually relevant, while not erasing differences, historical and systemic violences, uncertainty, conflict, paradoxes and contradictions.

Braiding is not a form of synthesis in which two approaches are combined in order to create a new, third possibility to replace them both. Braiding is also not the result of selective, “salad bar”-style engagements with both sides, taking the “best” or most convenient elements of each and combining them; nor is it the result of an antagonism in which one side emerges triumphant over the other. Instead, braiding is premised on respecting the continued internal integrity of both the brick and thread orientations, even as neither side is static or homogenous, and even as both sides might be transformed in the process of braiding. Braiding opens up different possibilities for engage-

ment, without guarantees about what might emerge from those engagements. Braiding is not an endpoint, but rather an ongoing and emergent process. It is not possible to determine what braiding will look like before it occurs. In fact, we propose three “steps towards braiding” that need to happen before any braiding is even possible. They are described in the next section.

## **Before braiding can happen**

Although brick and thread sensibilities appear to be incommensurable, it is at the edge-interface of each of these orientations in their generative manifestation that the potential for new imaginings and adjacent possibilities in braiding emerges. In the collaborative processes with Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants that ground the development of this document, we shared the brick and threads metaphor and asked participants to identify what could support or hinder practices of braiding. These conversations inform the “steps towards braiding” presented below. Before braiding can even start to happen, three long steps are necessary:

1. a deep understanding of historical and systemic harms and their snowball effects needs to become “common sense,” and not something to be avoided, dismissed, or minimized out of a fear of hopelessness, guilt or shame;
2. a language that makes visible the generative and non-generative manifestations of bricks and threads needs to be developed, without becoming rigid, prescriptive or accusatory;



3. a set of principled commitments towards the “long-haul” of this process needs to be in place, including a commitment to continue the work even/especially when things become difficult and uncomfortable.

We offer a cautionary note about a common misreading of these steps, which assumes that achieving these steps equates to actually doing braiding work. In fact, these are only the minimum necessary conditions that must be in place in order for braiding to even become possible; these conditions are not the braiding work itself, and further, these conditions alone will not necessarily lead to braiding. As well, these steps might need to be continuously revisited, as we tend to forget them when things get difficult. We expand on each of the “steps towards braiding” below.

## **Step 1: Facing and digesting the implications of historical and systemic harm**

The political, material, institutional, and cognitive impositions and attempts to universalize the sensibility and weight of bricks, and to eliminate and/or instrumentalize the threads, is ongoing and has lasting effects. Indigenous participants identified that it is extremely common to see liberal organizations creating conditional spaces for Indigenous inclusion that foreground the brick sensibility as a default disposition towards shared futures that is normalized and perceived as natural. In other words, threads are included into the organization on the condition that they contort themselves into the shape of a brick. This includes, for example, organizations expecting: that the inclusion of Indigenous people

will placate criticisms of colonialism; that Indigenous staff/artists will be able to mediate the relationship of the organization with all Indigenous communities; that Indigenous staff/artists and their communities will be willing to “move forward” towards the idealized future anticipated by the organization; that Indigenous staff/artists and communities will be grateful for the opportunity to perform selected, non-threatening aspects of their culture when the organization deems appropriate; that Indigenous staff/artists and communities should have a commitment to harmonious relationships; and that Indigenous staff/artists should perform loyalty to the organization by not challenging the terms of inclusion.

Participants also identified that the current political and intellectual climate makes it possible for criticisms of conditional inclusion to be articulated at this specific historical moment, something that might not have been possible ten years ago. Rather than suggest that these criticisms or the frustrations that are expressed within them are new, we suggest that there has been an increased awareness of conflictual settler–Indigenous relationships in recent years, as the excerpts from the poem, “Academic Indian Job Description: Have to Know” by Cash Ahenakew, illustrates.

### **Academic Indian job description: have to know by Cash Ahenakew**

have to know  
western knowledge and education  
plus the critique of  
western knowledge and education

have to know  
indigenous “culture” and education  
plus the critique and the critique of the critique of  
indigenous “culture” and education

have to know  
how to embody expected authenticity  
and how to embody expected critique  
of expected authenticity

have to know  
when and where to use indigenous literature  
and when and where to use the Western canon  
to build legitimacy and credibility for indigenous thought  
and experience

have to know  
when to vilify, to romanticize, to essentialize  
when to apologize, to complexify, to compromise  
when and who to be accountable to and why

have to know  
when, where and how to perform  
competence, confidence, boldness, heroic rebelliousness  
and humility, compliance and gratitude for the opportunity

have to know

how to be an intellectual, an activist, a therapist, and an  
entrepreneur

how to improve retention, attrition and social mobility  
and how to stop exploitation and ecological disaster

have to know

how to educate “my people,” liberal allies, immigrants, red  
necks, colleagues

how to relate to gang members, business sponsors, elders,  
politicians

how to speak with the crows, the trees, the sea, and the media

have to know

how to solve, how to fix, how to spell and to pronounce  
colonialism, capitalism, racism, slavery, patriarchy  
hetero-normativity, ableism, elitism, and anthropocentrism

have to know

how to Indigenize and decolonize

disciplines, protocols, ethics and methodologies

to make non-indigenous people feel good about their work

have to know

how to live with the guilt of having credentials, a secure job  
and the awareness of compliance with a rigged system  
built on the broken back and wounded soul of your family  
members

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As the poem demonstrates, when “including” other perspectives brick sensibilities rarely question their own presumed universalism. Thus, the act of inclusion in itself becomes a means for the brick sensibility to reclaim universality: whereas it once excluded difference, now it embraces it and thereby becomes all the more totalizing. What remains unquestioned here is not only who decides the terms of inclusion, who benefits, and how, but also the assumption that exclusion from universalism is the primary basis of colonial relationships and, thus, that inclusion into the brick sensibility is the only viable and desirable means of addressing colonial harm. When these assumptions are not questioned, diverse/Indigenous bodies are instrumentalized within a brick framework for the benefit of organizations, and thread visions, futurities, and sensibilities are silenced once again.

Because the brick orientation sets the terms of inclusion and maintains the power to issue (and rescind) the invitation to be included, this approach to change does not disrupt and in fact reinforces colonial desires and entitlements. For instance, the perceived entitlement to authority and leadership is reinforced when those with a brick orientation retain the right to adjudicate who is included (and excluded) and under what conditions they are invited and allowed to stay. The perceived entitlement to simplistic, readily available solutions is reinforced when those with a brick orientation presume that including an Indigenous staff member alone will address centuries of systemic colonial violence and absolve their organization of complicity in it. The perceived entitlement to have one’s benevolence affirmed is reinforced when those with a brick orientation present themselves as generous for including difference, and believe this

entitles them to redemption for colonial violence. Despite or perhaps precisely because of these colonial continuities, “inclusion” is often mobilized as an alibi for innocence, following the idea that including Indigenous people is itself proof of an organization’s commitment to decolonization.

This alibi can be quite effective in forestalling critique or minimizing it when it arises — at least, up to a certain point. This is because brick sensibilities are naturalized as normal and desirable in ways that make their power invisible. Within this logic, if an organization perceives Indigeneity as desirable, it will also define what is desirable about Indigeneity and select Indigenous bodies and dispositions that (it believes) will perform accordingly. This means that aspects, bodies and dispositions perceived as undesirable may not be tolerated. By creating a contained and controlled space for Indigeneity to be expressed, organizations re-assert their territoriality and normativity. Thus, Indigenous peoples are made to feel like they should perform to expectations, avoid conflict, and feel grateful for being allowed to exist in brick spaces. Their success within an organization structured around brick sensibilities depends on whether or not they perform the authorized and expected content of Indigeneity they were brought in to express. They are also expected to make those who have opened and enabled the space for diversity feel good about themselves for having done so.

The conversations that emerged as part of this project indicate that this “brick wall” is a stark reality for Indigenous and racialized artists in Canada. Many feel that efforts to represent Indigenous cultures are often tokenistic as they instrumentalize Indigenous bodies for immediate and selective cultural consumption rather than for the healing and braiding of rela-

tionships or for the needs of Indigenous communities in the long term. Indigenous participants also expressed that they feel that thread sensibilities are largely unintelligible in organizations framed by the universalization of brick sensibilities and that when translating thread sensibilities they feel pressure to focus on what is palatable for consumption and considered “productive” and “valuable” according to an organization’s criteria. In sum, for “brick organizations” it is much easier to engage with an Indigenous person who has been educated into middle-class language, manners, social mobility/consumer aspirations, and aesthetic sensibilities, rather than an Indigenous person immersed in thread practices coming from direct experiences of both collective trauma and resilience, and who dis-identifies with middle-class affluence aspirations and sensibilities.

This invitation for conditional inclusion leads to different kinds of responses. Some Indigenous artists try to meet these conditions for personal income generation, profile building, or just as a matter of survival, while some engage them strategically in order to be able to work in often unfunded or un-fundable parallel projects in their own communities, and some engage to challenge the terms of engagement and to push forward Indigenous agendas of redress, while others refuse to engage. (None of these approaches is mutually exclusive). Participants mentioned that there are also those individuals who capitalize on the current mobilization of Indigeneity as a currency and the demand for Indigenous bodies without investments that are perceived as legitimate by Indigenous communities. Examples of this tendency could include someone of Indigenous heritage who decides to identify as Indigenous only in order to get a job or in other moments when it offers a material benefit; or some-

one who wants to claim Indigenous positionality despite having no community relationships and having only learned Indigenous knowledge from books.

Challenges to the usual terms of inclusion tend to tip the brick orientation towards its non-generative manifestation. When this happens, organizations blame Indigenous collaborators for failures of expected performance and for taking advantage of the efforts of inclusion, often attributing personal (moral or professional) deficit to the person in question and expressing a wish to employ more “competent” staff (who will perform to expectations). On the other hand, the brick non-generative manifestation also tips the thread orientation towards its non-generative side, where un-silencing the pain of colonial violence becomes a priority: for example, when Indigenous people publicly call out neo/colonial organizational practices. When both orientations are caught in a feedback loop of degenerative manifestations, relationships fall apart and people can get seriously hurt in the process. More often than not, Indigenous people leave, organizational structures remain the same and the process starts again with more amenable Indigenous people, who, in time, may also feel frustrated and demeaned by this arrangement. The reputation of the organization within Indigenous and racialized communities committed to the thread sensibility would be adversely affected in this case, but the current economic context is such that there would not be a shortage of differently positioned Indigenous people willing to accept this deal.

Not learning from this repeated pattern of failure has extremely high tangible and intangible costs, including Indigenous people burning out and becoming skeptical of organizational intentions, organizations becoming more resentful and less



risk taking with Indigenous artists and communities, a massive waste of time, energy and resources, and possibilities for healing and braiding becoming unachievable. This text reflects, in part, a simultaneous recognition of the importance of challenging this conditional inclusion *and* of the need to reimagine how we do so in ways that might lead towards more generative possibilities of engagement.

## **Step 2: Recognizing generative and non-generative manifestations of bricks and threads**

A second step towards braiding is the development of a language that makes visible the generative and non-generative manifestations of bricks and threads as well as the tipping points where generative starts to turn into non-generative. The social cartographies on the next page illustrate how bricks and threads relate differently to:

- A) settler–Indigenous relations;
- B) socially engaged art;
- C) philanthropy focussed on social transformation;
- D) organizational decision-making.

The cartographies (in red) also propose the possibilities for braiding that could be opened when brick and threads are brought together in their generative manifestations.

## Settler – Indigenous relations

Brick/Building (Transcendence)		Braiding		Threads/Weaving (Immanence)	
Non-generative	Tipping	Generative	Moving slowly while healing together (different temporality and negotiated idea of forward)	Generative	Tipping
Fragility, denial, manipulation, paternalism, bashing, seeing the person who made the problem visible as the problem (e.g. labeling incompetent, not contributing, needing "help")	Instrumentalization, tokenism, transactional language ("we are not moving forward fast enough towards where I want / have paid for it to be")	Moving forward TOGETHER, without fragilities and projections		Healing together without band-aids (facing hidden violences); regenerating; composting waste	Silence, passive resistance ("we cannot and will not move without stopping the wounding and scarring the wounds")
					Anger, blaming, shaming, calling out, rejecting individuals for repeating historical patterns

**Socially engaged art**

Brick/Building (Transcendence)		Braiding		Threads/Weaving (Immanence)		
Non-generative	Tipping	Generative	Opening up sensibility towards viable possibilities beyond what is imaginable on either side	Generative	Tipping	Non-generative
Elitist, class marker, self-serving, universalizing aesthetic normativity, "(neo)colonial"	Market instrumentalization; narrow sensibility; focus on individual aesthetic genius	Aesthetic experience shifting perception and illuminating new possibilities		Aesthetic experience of regeneration: weaving community, healing wounds, opening space for non-human authority	Exclusively trauma-focussed	Re-traumatizing, self-righteous, internally divisive

**Philanthropy focussed on social transformation**

Brick/Building (Transcendence)		Braiding		Threads/Weaving (Immanence)		
Non-generative	Tipping	Generative	Opening spaces for creative, unconventional, inspirational, thoughtful and socially accountable experimentation	Generative	Tipping	Non-generative
Manipulative; inappropriate; shallow (stories do not match reality); driven by need for validation; trend-dependent commitment; universalizing; exploiting	Lack of focus; rushed; top-down; inappropriate	Social innovation		Social accountability	Entrenchment, uncompromising	Dogmatic; overwhelming and unrealistic demands

## Organizational decision-making

Brick/Building (Transcendence)			Braiding		Threads/Weaving (Immanence)		
Non-generative	Tipping	Generative	Braiding		Generative	Tipping	Non-generative
Means and/or ends imposed with a presumption of desirability, without understanding of different sensibilities, or with tokenistic paternalistic presumption: "we are doing this for you, and therefore you should be grateful"	Tokenistic consultation only with those who already agree (or not to challenge); predefined outcomes; involving the minimum of people impacted; doing it "for show" (no genuine interest)	Ability to engage genuinely with multiple forms of expertise; involves those who are directly affected; self-critical; resilient; patient	Decisions made together in a mutually defined process that centres the people impacted (in terms of decision and power); collective accountability; attention to different sensibilities		Ability to read the context, to translate different needs, to communicate to different capacities of understanding, to navigate complexities, calling in rather than calling out (translations, patience, flexibility)	Being overwhelmed by the level of contextual or imposed demands; passive resistance to (tokenistic) consultation	Refusal to engage, to translate or to negotiate the terms of engagement; idealization of an alternative/single way; calling out; making it personal

### Step 3: Investing in principled action-oriented commitments for the long-haul

The third step towards braiding involves three general principles and related action-oriented commitments that need to become “body memory” (embodied and unconscious) before the very possibility of braiding becomes viable. We note that while the critical historical memory and systemic analyses from step one, and the development of a language for discussing generative and non-generative approaches from step two, are both necessary and largely knowledge-based conditions, the invitation we articulate in this third step is not a “knowing”, “understanding” or “thinking” task, but rather a task of intellectual, embodied and affective engagement.

**Integrity:** Recognizing differences (as the first priority) and potential complementarities (as the second priority) between brick and thread sensibilities including different conceptualizations of self, time, relationships, work ethic, priorities, and responsibilities, and their practical implications. For example, understanding how the practice of being together as bricks and threads requires not only an awareness of the limits of knowledge and knowing as a means of relating, but also different sensibilities towards time, expression, collaboration, productivity, ethics, and aesthetics that cannot always be articulated.

**Action-oriented commitments:** According equivalence to the importance and value of both brick and thread sensibilities through processes of priority setting, funding, and curation; creating spaces for “in-breath” work (deep exploration in each

orientation), as well as “out-breath” work (interfacing engagements), while acknowledging historical imbalances and harm. It is important that the creation of equivalent spaces is not perceived as an act of concession towards threads, but as an act of historical, systemic and existential accountability.

**Harm reduction:** Recognizing *and acting upon* the impact of historical and systemic violence in all forms. Recognizing and acting upon different scales of trauma, of pain, of burden (e.g. of translation, of emotional labour), and of responsibilities to place, to non-human relations (e.g. earth, sky and water), to communities, and to ancestors past and yet to come.

**Action-oriented commitments:** investing time, energy and resources in systemic harm interruption in all activities; developing practices of high sensitivity towards tipping points that can enable the sustainability of generative relations in order to prevent the harm caused by non-generative incidents (e.g. developing a highly sensitive radar for unarticulated dissent, for homogenizations, for deficit theorizations, for labour-invisibilizations and for seemingly benevolent practices that unintentionally replicate oppressive relations).

**Resilience:** developing stamina, flexibility, humility, and capacity to sustain relationships and collaborations through the difficulties, challenges, complexities, and paradoxes of the long haul of working through the legacies of deeply entrenched and endemic historical and systemic harm affecting (unevenly) both sides.

**Action-oriented commitments:** developing practices that can nurture an organizational culture that rewards risk taking and courage to publicly learn from failure; investing both structured and unstructured time in learning and building relationships in spaces of thread practices; taking systemic responsibility for visibilizing violences (especially when those violences implicate the organization); situating claims (de-universalizing statements) and not over-stating achievements; “having each other’s backs” rather than “backing each other up,” that is, supporting one’s right to disagree/dissent, without necessarily agreeing with the content of, or approach to, the disagreement; acknowledging indebtedness to the earth, and the communities upon whose backs modernity was built, as part of a larger effort to create a container that encourages and sustains ongoing humility and generosity.

In the poem “Wanna be an ally?” we tried to outline some of the difficulties and the possibilities of enlivening the principles and commitments described in this section.

## **Wanna be an ally?**

don’t do it for charity, for feeling good, for looking good, or for showing others that you are doing good

don’t do it in exchange for redemption from guilt, for increasing your virtue, for appeasing your shame, for a vanity award

don’t put it on your CV, or on facebook, or in your thesis, don’t make it part of your brand, don’t use it for self-promotion

don't do it as an excuse to keep your privileges, to justify your position, to do everything except what would be actually needed to change the terms of our relationship

do it only if you feel that our pasts, presents and futures are intertwined, and our bodies and spirits entangled

do it only if you sense that we are one metabolism that is sick, and what happens to me also happens to you

do it recognizing that you have the luxury of choice to participate or not, to stand or not, to give up your weekend or not, whereas others don't get to decide

don't try to "mould" me, or to "help" me, or to make me say and do what is convenient for you

don't weaponize me ("I couldn't possibly be racist")

don't instrumentalize me ("my marginalized friend says")

don't speak for me ("I know what you really mean")

don't infantilize me ("I am doing this for you")

don't make your actions contingent on me confiding in you, telling you my traumas, recounting my traditions, practicing your idea of "right" politics, or performing the role of a victim to be saved by you or a revolutionary that can save you



and expect it to be, at times, incoherent, messy, uncomfortable,  
difficult, deceptive, paradoxical, repetitive, frustrating,  
incomprehensible, infuriating, boring and painful — and  
prepare for your heart to break and be stretched

do you still want to do it?

then share the burdens placed on my back, the unique  
medicines you bring, and the benefits you have earned from  
this violent and lethal disease

co-create the space where I am able to do the work that only I  
can and need to do for all of us

take a step back from the centre, the frontline from visibility  
relinquish the authority of your interpretations, your choice,  
your entitlements, surrender that which you are most  
praised and rewarded for

don't try to teach, to lead, to organize, to mentor, to control, to  
theorize, or to determine where we should go, how to get  
there and why

offer your energy to peel potatoes, to wash the dishes, to scrub  
the toilets, to drive the truck, to care for the babies, to  
separate the trash, to do the laundry, to feed the elders, to  
clean the mess, to buy the food, to fill the tank, to write the  
grant proposal, to pay the tab and the bail

to do and support things you can't and won't understand,  
and do what is needed, instead of what you want to do,  
without judgment, or sense of martyrdom or expectation for  
gratitude, or for any kind of recognition

then you will be ready to sit with me through the storm with the  
anger, the pain, the frustration, the losses, the fears, and the  
longing for better times with each other

and you will be able to cry with me, to mourn with me, to laugh  
with me, to "heart" with me, as we face our shadows, and  
find other joys, in earthing, breathing, braiding, growing,  
cooking and eating, sharing, healing, and thriving side by  
side

so that we might learn to be ourselves, but also something  
else, something that is also you and me, and you in me,  
and neither you nor me

**[decolonialfutures.net/portfolio/wanna-be-an-ally](https://decolonialfutures.net/portfolio/wanna-be-an-ally)**



## For organizations starting this journey...

If you find yourself in a position to “include” Indigenous peoples and perspectives in your organization, or to begin a process of Indigenization or decolonization, then there are many practical, ethical, and educational dimensions and implications to consider before and while doing so. In particular, it is important to consider how your invitation might end up reproducing harmful patterns of relationship and representation even if your intention is to do just the opposite.

The following questions may help you think through your expectations, your intentions, and the impact of your choices, and to think systemically how these are rooted in a larger social and historical context. We offer both general guiding questions for reflection and discussion, as well as point to some “red flags” that commonly emerge in the context of these engagements and which warrant pause and further consideration before pursuing efforts to include Indigenous peoples and perspectives.



# What do you expect the Indigenous perspective to do for you?

## [integrity]

Think about why you are compelled to seek an Indigenous perspective in the first place, and what assumptions and investments your expectations are rooted in. These expectations will significantly shape what you are able to hear, and not hear, and the sense you make of what you do hear. They might even shape who you invite to present their perspectives and how you create space for their presence.

Do you want to deepen your understanding of colonialism, learn about/from/with other knowledge systems, or acknowledge or right past wrongs? Or perhaps you are motivated by some of the “red flag” reasons for engagement such as:

- making a benevolent gesture seeking redemption, forgiveness, or gratitude from the Indigenous person;
- generating an alibi to draw upon when your organization comes under critique for colonial actions;
- affirming your innocence, virtue, social or material capital, or credibility as a “good ally;”
- enhancing your CV and becoming more employable; securing funding or employment stability.

These reasons for engagement (which are very common) are likely to recreate rather than interrupt colonial patterns of relationship. What you want, hope, and expect from the experience may be imposing projections on the person(s) you chose to

invite, and may also be limiting other, generative possibilities for engagement by keeping you from inviting other perspectives.

Once you have thought about the expectations that are driving and shaping your invitation, then you might consider how you would respond if you were exposed to Indigenous perspectives that do not meet your expectations and projections. Please consider some important questions:

- What is lost in selectively engaging Indigenous perspectives that will not challenge your expectations?
- What might be gained from loosening your expectations and opening up to other possibilities?
- What are the risks to the invited Indigenous people involved in both of these scenarios?
- What strategies do you have for noticing and interrupting your projections when they emerge?
- How can you try to ensure that this strategy does not create additional burdens for Indigenous peoples?

## **What kind of learning are you willing to do? [commitment]**

If engagements with Indigenous peoples are not going to reproduce inherited patterns of relationship or be organized around an instrumentalization of Indigenous perspectives towards your own preconceived ends, then it will require a different approach to learning than many non-Indigenous people are used to engaging. Before you invite anyone to speak, you might there-

fore ask: How much effort are you, and others in your organization, willing to put into your own learning (and unlearning)?

Indigenous communities and peoples are diverse. Institutions usually privilege perspectives that align safely with the objectives of their stakeholders (e.g. Indigenous people/communities invested in social mobility and economic growth rather than those fighting against pipelines). Institutions also tend to hire Indigenous people who embody familiarity in terms of middle-class language, logic, and sensibility and in terms of normative bodies (e.g. white skin, thin, able and heterosexual bodies). Knowing this, you might ask yourself:

- Do you want only an Indigenous perspective that is understandable from your point of view?
- How much will the perspective need to be translated into your sensibility for you to feel satisfied?
- How equipped are you to have difficult conversations without relationships falling apart?
- How do you usually respond to having your assumptions challenged?
- How do you usually respond to being called out on harmful practices that are perceived as normal?
- How will you respond to Indigenous perspectives that may make you feel uncomfortable, guilty, rejected and/or hopeless?
- Are you able to engage with and hold space for multiple, competing, or even contradictory Indigenous perspectives among Indigenous peoples?
- Individual Indigenous people, like all people, are also complex and contradictory. Are you able to engage with and hold

space for the full, complex humanity of the Indigenous individuals you work with?

Depending on your answers to these questions, it may be that your organization has not yet done the internal preparation work and self-study that would be necessary for the Indigenous engagement to be generative and to create new possibilities for relationship rather than reproducing existing patterns of harm. If this is the case, do not be discouraged, but do recognize that there is important work to be done by the organization and its members before initiating engagements with Indigenous people. That said, having “good” answers to these questions does not guarantee that mistakes will not be made and harms will not be reproduced. Thus, continuous opportunities for self-reflexivity and honest feedback from both internal and external parties should be intentionally built into your organizational plan for engagement. We consider both the necessity and the challenges of creating these opportunities in the next section.

## **What are the hidden costs and labour involved in your invitation to engage? [harm reduction]**

Indigenous people who work in institutions often feel pressures to conform to the expectations of those who enabled the “inclusion.” There is generally an implicit expectation that Indigenous people should feel grateful for being granted a space, and thus, they are considered ungrateful if they ask for more space; challenge how the space has been constructed; or say some-



thing that contradicts or challenges those who invited them. Thus, even when a space is nominally open to different perspectives, some Indigenous people might feel compelled to keep their thoughts and concerns to themselves and go along with the dominant organizational logic. Out of respect for the relationship or concern for the backlash, other Indigenous people might say what they think those who invited them want or are readily able to hear. Still others might express their thoughts and concerns in ways that are less direct than is generally expected by non-Indigenous people, and they might therefore be misheard or misunderstood. Finally, some will be more direct about their concerns, and this directness will not always be well received.

In order to reduce systemic harm, please consider the following questions:

- In what ways are you taking these complexities, power relations, and different modes of communication into consideration when you invite an “Indigenous perspective”?
- In what ways might you be “listening” to Indigenous people in selective ways that prevent you from really “hearing” what they are saying?
- What kinds of attachments and assumptions might be blocking you from hearing, how might these be related to/rooted in larger colonial patterns, and what is your plan for addressing these blockages, if any?
- What kinds of mechanisms or processes does your organization have in place for receiving and addressing critical concerns in ways that take them seriously and address them openly?

- Do you recognize that it may be only through long-term engagement and relationship building that difficult and uncomfortable, but meaningful and important conversations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people might become possible?
- Do you intend to develop such a long-term engagement, or are you more interested in a one-off transactional relationship?
- Is your intended form of engagement clear for all parties involved?
- To what extent are you instrumentalizing and/or appropriating Indigeneity for your own gain?
- To what extent could your gesture of inclusion be considered tokenistic?

While Indigenous peoples are often saddled with the expectations presumed to come along with “being included,” they also have a lot of demand from their own communities. So, ask yourself:

- Why should Indigenous peoples prioritize your learning needs?
- How much would you pay for the time of an expert in your professional area, and are you paying the same for Indigenous expertise?
- What do you intend to do with the Indigenous knowledge you engaged with?
- How can you engage ethically with this learning rather than treating it as an object of consumption?

If you think about the Western education system and its knowledge hierarchies, it takes at least 22 years of formal education for someone to complete a PhD and be considered an expert in a subject area. In Indigenous communities, it also takes several decades for someone to master skills and no one is ever an “expert” as everyone is continually learning until they die. It is problematic for non-Indigenous people to take courses or to spend time in Indigenous communities and to present themselves as “experts” in the communities they gained this (little) knowledge from. In the same way, for Indigenous people who claim their Indigenous identity later in life, or who can and choose to pass as non-Indigenous, it is also complicated to claim Indigenous spaces without having the experience of struggle, pain and resilience that disenfranchised Indigenous people embody.

**Are you committed to addressing the individual and group conflicts and anxieties that will probably arise?  
[resilience]**

If you are really committed to undertaking the difficult work of remaking and reimagining relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, then it is important to realize that this is not something that can happen overnight, but rather something which requires sustained effort and critical generosity towards oneself and others. If you decide that this is a priority for your organization, then consider the following questions:

- What practices of engagement might enable relationships to be maintained even in moments of conflict?
- What strengths are present — or still need to be cultivated — in the organization that can enable difficult, relational work to happen and be shared across multiple people?
- If you hear something that triggers you or makes you upset, what strategies and group dynamics might help ground you so that you can return to a more generative space, and how can you ensure these strategies don't rely on Indigenous peoples' emotional labour?
- What kinds of human and financial resources is your organization willing and able to devote to this work?
- Are you expecting immediate, clear results, and if so, what are the potential pitfalls of this expectation, and how might you frame this engagement differently?
- How can you prepare yourself and your organization for the frustrations, anxieties, and mistakes that will inevitably arise in the process of strengthening non-Indigenous and Indigenous engagements?

## **Are you organizing the logistical dimensions of your Indigenous engagements with consideration of different sensibilities?** **[ethical hosting]**

Organizations seeking to enact more ethical engagements with Indigenous people also need to take account of very practical considerations in ways that anticipate the needs and sensibilities of Indigenous speakers and participants. In non-Indigenous

organizations, the logistical dimensions of inviting speakers or participants tend to be implicitly oriented around the norms and expectations of white, middle-class people. For instance, there is an assumption that people will have (easy access to) a bank account, that they have regular access to the internet, that they have reliable transportation (e.g. to get to an airport), and that they have the financial reserves to pay for their travel in advance and then be reimbursed. Particularly when working with Indigenous Elders and/or with Indigenous people who are living in more rural/reserve areas, these things should not be assumed. Thus, when working with Indigenous people, organizations should rethink these assumptions and act accordingly— for instance by offering to pay honoraria or food stipends in cash (rather than by cheque), offering to arrange someone’s door-to-door transportation in advance and on their behalf, ensuring that those who are traveling locally but from a considerable distance are offered overnight accommodation, and not delaying paying fees and reimbursements as this can severely affect the communities involved and affect trust and willingness for further engagements. Or, offer to hold meetings in the relevant communities.

Further, organizations should not wait until Indigenous speakers or participants request these things, but rather anticipate and offer them, as those operating from a thread sensibility may be less likely to voice their needs. In addition, especially when working with Indigenous Elders, institutions should task an employee or volunteer to take responsibility for making sure that each elder is escorted to and from different locations, and that their needs are being anticipated and met by someone who is patient and comfortable with the thread sensibility. Most organizations will develop agendas for meetings with tight

timelines and constrain any involvement by Indigenous Elders to “openings” or “land acknowledgements”. While this may seem respectful, it is also considered tokenistic and inappropriate by many Indigenous peoples. Thus, aside from offering to hold meetings in relevant communities, organizations might consider collaboratively developing plans for meetings that include flexibility and adaptability to ensure respectful inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge Holders and a different view on the concepts of time and productivity.

**Is your organization cognisant of the heterogeneity within Indigenous communities, and capable of engaging divergent perspectives? [complexities]**

Indigenous communities have always been heterogeneous. But beyond this internal complexity, colonial apparatuses have also operated in ways to further divide and separate community members. For instance, Indigenous people who live(d) on reserve have different experiences than those who live off; Indigenous peoples who are white-passing have different experiences than those who are read as visibly racialized; Indigenous peoples who come from middle-class families have different experiences than those who come from low-income families; Indigenous peoples who grew up speaking their language and/or having access to their ceremonies have different experiences than those who did not; and Indigenous peoples who grew up with their Indigenous family members have different experiences than those who grew up in non-Indigenous adoptive families, or in families where

Indigenous heritage was minimized or hidden or only “discovered” or revealed later in the person’s life.

None of these individuals is more or less Indigenous than the others, but at the same time, their experiences of Indigeneity cannot be conflated. Yet, in many cases non-Indigenous organizations fail to recognize this complexity, or feel unequipped to engage with it, and thus they instead invite and expect a single Indigenous person to speak not only for their entire band, tribe, or nation, but also for the entirety of Indigenous peoples. This approach not only flattens the diversity and complexity of all Indigenous people, it also tends to reproduce selective, instrumentalized engagements with Indigenous perspectives. In particular, organizations might tend to either engage primarily:

- 1) Indigenous people whose appearance and/or sensibility align more closely with white, middle-class norms; or, conversely,
- 2) Indigenous people whose appearance and/or sensibility align more closely with the stereotypical image of an Indigenous person.

In the first set of engagements, there may be an expectation (that is not always met) that these individuals will be less likely to challenge the organization and disrupt its business as usual. In other words, organizations may be more comfortable engaging Indigenous people who they perceive to be similar to themselves. In the second set of engagements, there may be a fetishization of the individual and a projection of expectations that they will be spiritual, wise, and ecologically conscious in ways that align with Western environmentalism and the Hollywood image of Indigeneity. If Indigenous people do not meet

these expectations, then this might be met with disappointment and even suspicion about their “authenticity.”

There is no prescriptive solution or checklist for how to consider the heterogeneity of Indigenous peoples, and in some cases relevant differences might relate to internal conflicts that communities would prefer to keep internal. At the same time, organizations have a responsibility to develop more sensitivity to these differences, and to think through their implications as much as possible when arranging Indigenous engagements. For instance, who decides who will be invited, and why? Why do certain people tend to get invited and not others? Which Indigenous perspectives are present, and which are absent? This also points to the importance of developing long-term engagements and relationships with Indigenous peoples, so that these nuances can be considered and unraveled over time as trust is built, as well as the importance of having Indigenous people on staff who are already more sensitive to these nuances — and who are encouraged rather than punished for bringing them to the attention of non-Indigenous colleagues. Not taking these considerations into account can lead to very difficult situations, as described in the next section.





## When things fall apart

When both sides find themselves in a non-generative position such as in the story described at the beginning of this book, there are some steps that can support non-Indigenous organizations and Indigenous people to stay in the process and learn through and with it.

1. The first step is to acknowledge that the cycle of relationship fractures is a pattern that is **systemic** in nature. This means that the problem is **not an individualized problem**, but rather is rooted in **historical and colonial structural patterns that are normalized** (perceived to be natural) and rewarded in society. At this point, it is useful to remember that we are working against a scenario of 500 years of colonialism and fractured relationships and that finding our way to more generative relations with Indigenous peoples and communities does not happen overnight. Therefore articulating the problems as systemic problems helps people **de-personalize** the issues and understand how **harmful and**



**frustrating** it can be for Indigenous people to go through the cycle described in the beginning of this book over and over again — often without being able to articulate to organizations what is wrong. However, emphasizing the systemic nature of the problem should not be used as a means to deny one's individual part in reproducing harm.

2. The second step is a recognition that the process of interrupting this cycle and learning to engage ethically with Indigenous peoples and communities will be **challenging and long**, and it will require **stamina, humility and resilience** on the part of the people of the organization and **patience, humility and generosity** on the part of Indigenous people. Mistakes will be made and sometimes repeated — this is not just about changing how we know, it is about changing how we hope, how we feel, how we form relations — this process takes time and is not linear (it is often “one step forward, two steps back”). Therefore, a **commitment to the “long-haul”** of this journey on both sides is necessary.
3. The third step is to acknowledge that there is **no formula** for how to move forward together: we don't know how to walk and breathe together yet and we cannot expect to have a clear idea of the journey or the outcome from the outset: it is like learning to walk and breathe in a foggy road together. This means that people cannot commit to this process in exchange for a secure outcome. The quality of the process and the outcomes will depend on the quality of the weaving of relationships and this weaving depends on people

engaging in **good faith**, being **open to the unexpected**, and **allowing themselves to be transformed**. Therefore, it is important not to suffocate the process with expectations and projections. It is also important to be careful not to allow specific past traumatic experiences to overdetermine the process.

4. The fourth step is for the organization to step back and hold space for Indigenous people to exercise their **sovereignty and autonomy** in a way that is properly compensated. This involves recognizing that it is usually Indigenous people who have to do the emotional labour involved in teaching a different way to people who are often resistant to being taught something new. This translation job is quite demanding, tiring and often frustrating. Therefore, non-Indigenous people need to take responsibility for their own learning (not expect Indigenous people to prioritize their needs) and “get out of the way” to let Indigenous people do the work they need to do, even if non-Indigenous people do not fully “get it”. In this sense, it is important for everyone to be willing to trust the process and to weave relationships that will enable everyone to sit together later to talk about successes and to learn from failures — without accusations or the need to “prove” one’s worth.
5. The fifth step is to recognize that **both sides likely have a part in arriving at a non-generative space**, and thus both should consider what that part is — while recognizing that it can be difficult to see our own actions clearly, especially in moments of conflict. Each side must be open

to being held accountable by the other, and furthermore, should proactively hold themselves accountable as well. This includes trying to see oneself from outside perspectives (knowing that these efforts will likely be imperfect and contain some of one's own projections—see #7 below). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that those on both the thread and the brick sides have accountabilities beyond those at the interface, within their own communities. Both sides are also accountable to something beyond *all* communities. These multiple layers of engagement, meaning, and responsibilities should be taken into account as part of the overall process of accountability. Finally, accountability is central to being in good relation, and in order for it to operate in a generative way, it should not be articulated through personal accusations but generous, empathetic critique (or radical tenderness) that affirms unconditional regard for the *being* (i.e. existence) of all those involved, even if/when one is raising concerns about their *doing* (i.e. actions).

6. The sixth step is to recognize that sometimes those with a brick orientation take seriously critiques of colonialism, and even say the “right things” (e.g. about being committed to reconciliation). However, **having a stated intellectual critique or moral commitment to decolonization/Indigenization does not always equate to a shift in one's affective investments in colonial desires and perceived entitlements.** In other words, *saying we are doing something* is not the same as actually doing it; and generally, it is a lot easier to say we are committed to change than to actually change. Sometimes, desires and entitlements are only made

evident when those who hold them start to feel that those entitlements are under threat—for instance, once the terms of conditional inclusion are challenged. In these moments of interruption, when fragilities tend to be triggered, we can see where in the process people actually are. In this sense, the moments of crisis when things appear to be falling apart can actually serve as important opportunities for different possibilities to emerge. However, in order for generative responses to crisis to be possible, we will need to have a self-implicating systemic analysis, a recognition that we are not always transparent to ourselves about where our own investments lie, and a commitment to work towards something different without guarantees.

7. The seventh step is to recognize that we are unreliable narrators—that is, we are not always transparent to ourselves about our own investments and desires. **It is often easier to view others' actions with suspicion than to do the same for ourselves;** however, this kind of self-reflexive work is crucial for enabling a shift away from a non-generative space. One way of practicing a (healthy) skepticism about our own desires, intentions, and impacts is to try and view ourselves through the eyes of the other parties involved. This is important for both sides but particularly so for those coming from a brick orientation, who are more used to thinking of their perspective as universal, objective, and benevolent, and who tend to resist or become defensive when those assumptions are questioned. The imperative is not to permanently adopt the perspective of another, but to practice engaging that perspective with humility (and realism about our limited

ability to understand it). It is important to try and do this work in good faith—even when others do not do the same for us (and perhaps to ask why this might be the case).







## Missteps on the path to braiding

**Opening conversations about inappropriate and appropriative engagements**

One of the potential risks involved in working towards braiding is that brick efforts to interface with thread sensibilities can reproduce harmful patterns of colonial engagement, particularly when they treat Indigeneity as a currency and are premised on presumed entitlements and consumptive tendencies. There is a fine line between engagements that can deepen appreciation for/across both sides, in particular recognition of their contextual gifts *and* limitations, and engagements that reproduce uneven power relations and further feed the conflict between the orientations. Further, engagements don't just happen in one layer: they happen across multiple layers (e.g. political, existential, historical, economic, affective, cognitive, relational), are shaped by multiple contexts, and can be perceived differently depending on who is involved and what layer(s) they emphasize.

The following section is an invitation to deepen one's sense of the different layers involved and develop greater sensitivity towards the issues related to possible inappropriate and/or appropriative engagements.

Whether or not actions by a non-Indigenous person in relation to Indigenous peoples' stories, material culture, spirituality, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives are interpreted as inappropriate varies according to many factors, including: the local/national political temperature of events and debates about appropriation; the quality of relationship the person has with Indigenous communities and struggles; the context in, and purpose for which, these actions are mobilized; and the individual and collective perspectives and experiences of those who are encountering those actions. While this discussion is intended to foster greater sensitivity for awareness of the potential impact or reception of particular actions, given the range of contributing factors, it is not always possible to predict or manage how one's actions will be perceived. In other words, this is not only about discerning the impact of one's actions in advance, but also about cultivating a sense of openness to critique and self-reflexivity so that if issues do arise, it might be possible to respond in generative, non-defensive ways that lead to deeper learning about enacting ethical engagements. The idea is not to foresee all possible responses, but rather **to develop an orientation to engagement that is premised on the importance of humility, continued learning, and centring relationships.**

There is also a need to remain aware of the risk that people will take up these critiques, and even transform the languages they use, without actually transforming, or intending to transform, their disposition or sensibilities. This is "slogанизation with-

out transformation”: seeking to transcend complicity and avoid critique, without giving anything up (or being accountable).

Appropriation is associated with a reproduction of colonial habits of being and it is often rationalized using explanations rooted in those habits, including:

- Entitlement to access: e.g. “If Indigenous people can use Western knowledge, then why can’t I use Indigenous knowledge?”
- Exploitative capital accumulation: e.g. “This will help sell...” “Indigenous people should be grateful that I am disseminating their work...”
- Move to innocence: e.g. “I am a good person because: I am inclusive of Indigenous cultures and ideas/I have a critique of colonialism/I want to dismantle colonialism”
- Dehistoricization: e.g. “The past is behind us and resentment for the past will get us nowhere, why can’t Indigenous people move on?”
- Universalization: e.g. “Indigenous knowledge is an important part of our collective human knowledge, and thus it should be made equally available to all of humanity”
- Weaponization of Indigenous critique: e.g. “To be able to appropriate something suggests property is being stolen, but the idea of property itself is a colonial concept”
- Self-transparency: e.g. “I have the best intentions, so I couldn’t possibly be harmful”
- Selective engagements and decontextualization: e.g. “I find this Indigenous idea or story useful for my purposes, so it doesn’t matter if this differs from its original meaning and context of use”

- Individualized sanctioning: e.g. “My Indigenous friend/colleague/partner said it was ok”
- Aggressively seeking permission: e.g. “I’m sure I can convince someone to approve of my actions if they would only give me the chance to explain”
- Generalization: e.g. “I have experienced living three months with an Indigenous community in Nepal, so I understand Indigenous struggle.”
- Self-Indigenization: e.g. “We are all Indigenous to somewhere” *or* “We have been here long enough that we have become Indigenous to this place”

The following actions are known to be problematic in spaces, where the “temperature” of discussions about the relationships between bricks and threads is high. In what circumstances could the cases below be read as: 1) Potentially inappropriate; 2) An example of appropriation?

- A non-Indigenous author creating fictional stories about Indigenous experiences and selling the books as authentic portraits.
- A non-Indigenous director hiring non-Indigenous actors to perform Indigenous characters in a theater play, movie, or TV show.
- A non-Indigenous craftsperson making and selling art that looks like Indigenous peoples’ art.
- A non-Indigenous person using stories and knowledge of Indigenous peoples that have been published/are accessible to the general public.
- A non-Indigenous person dressing like Indigenous peoples,

wearing Indigenous jewellery, or decorating their house with Indigenous objects.

- A non-Indigenous person performing Indigenous ceremonies and selling Indigenous medicines.
- A non-Indigenous person taking part in Indigenous ceremonies and using Indigenous medicines.
- A person discovering and claiming Indigenous ancestry and then applying for Indigenous scholarships/jobs while having no substantive connection to/recognition from an Indigenous community.
- A non-Indigenous person studying Indigenous cultures and knowledges in order to become an “expert.”
- A non-Indigenous person applying for/accepting a job that claims to centre Indigenous peoples and knowledges.
- A non-Indigenous person asking Elders to open and close events.
- A non-Indigenous person learning an Indigenous language, craft or dance.

We invite you to reflect on the rationale for your responses by considering the following “layers” (note: not all questions will be relevant for all actions): Does it matter... Who and why you are supporting? How resources are distributed? How things (including material objects, medicines, knowledges, stories) are sourced? Who benefits from the event or action (in terms of social and material capital)? Who is (potentially) negatively impacted by the event or action? What the quality, duration and history of the relationship (if any) between the non-Indigenous person and the relevant Indigenous communities is? What the motivations of the non-Indigenous person are?





## Towards generative braiding manifestations

What would be necessary to bring and sustain bricks and threads into a generative mode of engagement that would make braiding viable and desirable? We sat with this question for some time and developed

a set of recommendations that speak to the fact that working towards braiding is about working towards the possibility of a very different way of being together that requires the interruption of the dominant colonial habits of being. This interruption is not an “informational” problem, but an affective, relational, and neurobiological one that demands “neurogenesis”. We would like to explore the neurobiological dimension of this work further, in subsequent collaborations. For now, the following recommendations may gesture towards both the joys and the difficulties of a braiding commitment.

*The statements in red represent what people operating from generative thread orientations, generally coming from historically marginalized communities (and used to being silenced) would say about the space and people involved.*

*The statements in blue represent what people operating from generative brick orientations, generally coming from historically privileged communities (and used to being heard) would say about the space and people involved.*

## Recommendations for both brick and thread sensibilities

- **Acknowledgement that, due to historical and systemic circumstances, we begin the journey in the negative, “before zero” (that is, before the starting point where braiding becomes possible)**  
“I feel that, in this space, there is a recognition that what is considered “normal” for the majority is built on historical violence and reproduces ongoing harm.”  
“Many of the things I consider to be normal and desirable are only accessible to me because of harm done to other communities. I am committed to interrupting that harm, but saying that I am committed does not equate to actually doing the work; and, doing the work does not absolve me of my ongoing complicity.”
- **A deep recognition of each orientation's limitations and destructive potential (towards the other, the self, life, the future).**  
“I feel that there is no arrogance in this space, that I can be vulnerable, and that difficult, deep, honest and potentially painful conversations about the complexities and limitations of different ways of knowing and being can happen without relationships falling apart.”  
“Working towards different kinds of relationships will



require humility, surrender of control, and an intention to stay with and learn from the difficult moments. Because of this, I need to come to this work with a sense of the intrinsic worth of those on all sides of this conversation, a recognition of the gifts of the generative dimensions of both orientations, and a sensitivity towards non-generative tipping points in myself and in others (on both sides)."

- **Recognition of historical and systemic often invisibilized patterns of harm/violence and its intergenerational/snowball effects**

"I feel I don't need to constantly explain the effects of colonization/ racism/ and other forms of oppression because people have done their homework."

"I try to remain attentive to how colonialism and racism are ever-present, and conscious of how my own actions and responses are a part of that. I do not expect marginalized populations to teach me about how my community has marginalized them. Despite my efforts to learn about these histories, I do not assume to know everything about it or how it is experienced by others, or that knowing these patterns means that I have transcended them — and I do my best not to tip into a non-generative space when people point this out."

- **De-universalization, de-romanticization, de-idealization**  
"I feel like the tendency for the brick side to universalize its senses and sensibilities has been interrupted, and there is more room for genuine engagement across our differences without projection, idealization, or appropriation of

thread senses and sensibilities. The thread side emphasizes reclaiming and revitalizing our knowledges, recognizing that they are as indispensable as theirs, and like theirs, our knowledges are also insufficient.”

“I recognize and try to disrupt learned assumptions about the universality of my own ideas, assumptions, and desires. However, this does not lead me to try and include marginalized knowledges in selective ways, or to romanticize those knowledges (which is merely reversing the position of universality). I recognize that marginalized knowledges have internal value and integrity and while there is much I could learn from engaging them, I do not feel entitled to access or ‘possess’ them, nor do I assume that those knowledges can or should solve the problems that my own knowledge system has created.”

- **Comfort with uncertainty and not-knowing**

“I feel we have moved beyond the desire for naive hope in simplistic solutions, for essentialist representations, or the security of ‘knowing’ towards the ability to work with paradoxes, complexities and uncertainties.”

“I understand the harm that has come not only from intentional violence but also often from well-intended but superficial efforts to address that violence without getting to the root causes. I am conscious of, and try to minimize, my learned tendencies to seek quick solutions, and try to develop comfort with the discomfort of not ‘knowing.’”

- **Sense of insufficiency, indispensability, inseparability**

“I feel that my body, my ideas, my community are not disposable here, even when we do not conform to expect-

ations. I am grateful for the opportunity to work in this context.”

“I recognize that my learned sense of superiority, demand for autonomy and entitlement to authority are part of the problem, and that what is needed from me is not always what I want to do.”

- **Openness, generosity, compassion before will (not as intellectual choices)**

“Here people do not talk about openness, generosity, compassion, it is simply the way they operate and they never boast about it.”

“I know I will not become more open, generous, or compassionate just by saying that I am, but I am still learning what this means and I don’t assume that I am already doing it.”

- **De-immunization towards collective and individual pain**

“People definitely can sit with individual/collective pain without shutting it down, wanting quick fixes, or instrumentalizing it towards their agendas.”

“Colonialism has caused pain for everyone, including me, but this pain is unevenly distributed. My inability to face pain is part of the problem (a non-generative brick tendency), and so I am learning to sit with it and sense the responsibility that comes from being a part of the collective pain (without assuming that I can ever know the pain of others, or that taking responsibility means that I have transcended my complicity in harm).”

- **5Rs: Respect, Relevance, Responsibility, Reciprocity, Relationality**

“I feel my time is never wasted here.”

“I recognize that the emphasis on these concepts is rooted in the thread sensibility and that they mean different things to different orientations. I do not assume that my interpretation of these is universal, and I recognize that I have much to learn from engaging with their other meanings. For instance: ‘concept’ is probably an inadequate term to use here — these are not ‘concepts,’ but lived practices!”

## **Recommendations specifically for those who have been over-socialized in the brick sensibility**

- **“Responsibility towards” replacing “responsibility for” (beyond paternalistic language of inclusion, concessions and compromise)**

“Here is one of the few spaces where I don’t feel patronized, tokenized or undervalued. I feel people here moved beyond paternalistic forms of engagement towards a commitment to equanimity and historical accountability.”

“Developing new forms of relationality and decentring oneself is uncomfortable, but I undertake this work for current and future generations of all communities. This work is not a concession done out of guilt or benevolence, or a desire for redemption, but rather out of a deep sense of historical, systemic and existential accountability.”

- Recognition of the gift of holism as a first step**

“People here understand the limits of rationality and want to activate other senses to engage with the world, which is great. They might not understand what ‘we’ mean by holism, but they sense that there is something beyond knowledge that is very important and that needs space, care and attention.”

“Part of me still wants to find the answer to our problems in book or theory, but I know this can only get us so far. Other ways of knowing, being, feeling, and relating offer other ways forward — for instance, holism. I might not yet (and may never) really know what these things are, but I trust that they offer something important and I am open to engaging and experiencing them, even as I recognize that is not my entitlement to access or master them.”
- Developing an “allergy” and radar towards self-aggrandizing/self-promoting tendencies**

“Here I am not asked to be in the ‘equity’ photo for the organization or for someone’s Facebook. People are humble and genuinely interested in doing the difficult work without taking credit for it. It is not about what they can tell their friends, their ‘legacy,’ their CVs, their ‘capital,’ or their credibility in their networks.”

“I do not do this work for the ‘rewards’ it potentially brings (whether cultural, material, or affective), but rather for its potential to nourish the collective wellbeing of a wider metabolism. Rather than recentre and celebrate individuals, we should focus on doing our small part of the

collective work that needs to be done and the important teachings that come from our failures.”

- **Moving beyond the dichotomy of virtue/vice**

“People here do not need to feel above or below anybody— there is no need to ‘look good, feel good and be seen to do good.’ They understand we are all human— limited, contradictory and potentially harmful, and that we are doing the best we can from where we are at in our journeys, living through good and bad days. They have a good sense of humour and can laugh at themselves when they get the message that they are being ridiculous.”

“The point of doing this work is not to make myself into one of the ‘good’ bricks, but to recognize that the attempted universalization of ‘brick-ness’ is the problem— as is the desire to transcend one’s own brick-ness! I am both part of the problem and potentially part of the solution. We are all complicated, contradictory, and capable of both wonderful and horrible things. I can listen without getting defensive when people tell me I have done something hurtful, and laugh at (and take responsibility) when I act out things I know are part of the problem and that I easily identify and critique in others.”

- **Moving beyond fragility/naïve hope/depoliticization, and the need for validation demanded from othered bodies**

“People here have developed emotional maturity. I don’t feel I am asked to please people, to elevate them or to centre their needs and experiences because they cannot handle their unprocessed feelings of guilt, shame, inferior-

ity or worthlessness. I feel I can be in my body without being worried about how other people feel about it and that this body is not instrumentalized to meet other people's needs for validation."

"I can listen to critiques of myself, the things I am invested in, or institutions I am a part of, without getting defensive or feeling wounded. I have strategies to de-escalate problematic/fragile responses in myself and others. If I still need to express these responses or feelings, then I carefully consider when/where I do so, and who I am asking to do the affective work of listening, especially so that I do not ask marginalized people to help me process my guilt or shame. I have people in my life that I trust to tell me when I am being ridiculous, and I am grateful when they do so. I try to do the same for others, especially those in similar subject positions (i.e. other bricks)."

- **Humility, generosity, compassion**

"People here have let go of arrogance. This is something that is deeply felt without any need to talk about it. Relationships are genuine and can handle the good, the bad and the ugly without losing grace, humor and love."

"I am going to make mistakes, although I try my best not to harm others in the process, and to take responsibility when I do (including both making amends to those harmed, and learning from the mistakes). Similarly, I know that others will make mistakes, and I need to be patient with them, while ensuring that I or someone else helps them address those mistakes so that we can continue in this process. However, I know that there is much that I still don't know,

things that I may never know, and even things that are unknowable.”

- **Commitment to protecting the integrity of difference and dissent (rather than seeking comfort in consensus)**  
“People here have a radar for unarticulated dissent and will stop or slow down so that differences can be present in the space (even in inarticulable forms) and honoured (even when they make things more difficult). We don’t have to be on the same page, but we are committed to staying in the same wavelength, working together.”  
“Mainstream ideas of free debate or open dialogue embody white middle-class norms about expression and conversation. Recognizing this, I am developing my sensitivity to ‘tipping points’, particularly when they are made evident in modes of communication I am unfamiliar with, and to knowing when/where/how to intervene in generative ways. I am more concerned to ensure the integrity of good relationships than being heard or being right.”
- **Surrendering what has been most pleasurable and rewarding within modern-colonial structures that have been designed “for you” at others’ expense (e.g. sense of authority, deservedness, superiority, prestige, merit, entitlements, right to arbitrate justice)**  
“We can genuinely sit together, feel the collective pain, mourn what we have already lost, and also dance, cook, clean up, make jokes and laugh together as we start to heal.”  
“I don’t know exactly how to disinvest from harmful



desires, but I am immersed in the process of learning how — which means both surrendering control and taking responsibility for my role(s) in the collective work that is needed in order to get us out of harmful feedback loops.”

## Recommendations specifically for those who have been socialized in the thread sensibility

- **Healthy scepticism, replacing mistrust**

“There is a long history of suffering in my community and I know that engaging in this process will be seen by many people in my community as betrayal. At the same time, the foundation of mistrust is only producing more suffering. Something has to change and we don’t know how, so we need to experiment in good faith without having our hopes up.”

“I understand why marginalized communities might feel mistrust towards me and my communities, and I am not defensive about this. I am not entitled to their trust, and I recognize that earning their trust is a (non-linear) process that cannot be done on my terms or timeline.”
- **Developing an allergy towards essentializations/idealizations/nostalgic romanticizations**

“Representing our communities strategically for others or the state has been necessary for our survival in light of what has been done to us, at the same time, these idealized representations have not been able to reflect the complexities or overcome the difficulties we face. These

representations have also been instrumentalized in getting us to compete with each other for resources and space. We need different ways to engage with each other and more honest and nuanced conversations about this within and between our communities.”

“Much of what we have been taught about marginalized communities are essentialized ideas that fail to address the heterogeneity of these communities, and the individuals in them, and are dehumanizing. These ideas are often negative, but even ‘positive’, romanticized representations are harmful because they flatten cultural and human complexity and project unfair/unrealistic expectations.”

- **Moving beyond reversing hierarchical binaries**

“The “us–good” versus “them–bad” can be a useful dichotomy in a few circumstances (when everything else fails), but, ultimately, it is ineffective in addressing the complexities and magnitude of the problems we face, trapping us in circular critiques that prevent us from moving somewhere else. Recognizing the spectrum of possibilities for generative and damaging acts in all of us is a starting point for something different.”

“Brick individuals/communities should not fall into a trap of suggesting that ‘everything is complicated and everyone is complicit’ as a means to avoid taking responsibility or move to innocence. However, that does not mean we should romanticize marginalized individuals/communities and assume they have all the answers, nor does it mean that we have nothing offer.”

- **Beyond instrumentalizing suffering**

“Contemporary modern narratives of social justice create an economy of victimization that rewards the instrumentalization of individual and collective pain as a means of redistribution or individual capital accumulation. Although this may bring some temporary gains (or celebrity status), this is unsustainable and traps our communities in continuous wounding: we become dependent on the pain for our ‘gain’ within the system. Eventually, we start to attack people within our own communities as well. Wounds need to scab, scar and ultimately heal and we need to find a way for that to happen.”

“We often demand that marginalized peoples recount or perform their pain for us in order for us to believe them or see our role in causing it. An empathy premised on our ability to relate to or ‘feel’ other people’s pain is not only conditional, but it also both exploits their pain, and is not a generative space from which to make change and build relationships. We should stop reducing people to their pain, address our own simultaneous discomfort with pain and our fetishization of it in others, and recognize the full spectrum of humanity in all of us, pain being just one dimension. However, we should hold space for individual/collective pain when it emerges.”

- **Beyond self-righteousness/moral high ground as pain-relief**

“In a context where being historically and systemically silenced causes chronic pain, it is understandable that ‘being heard’ works like pain-relief. However, this kind

of pain management is also unhealthy and unsustainable in the long term as it traps the user in a feedback loop where the search for the 'high' of each intervention (dependent on other people's validation) replaces the process of healing, like an addiction, and divides our communities."

"I can only imagine how frustrating it can be for people to have their pain, their labour and the violences towards their communities made invisible in our society. It is understandable that sometimes this frustration will turn into anger and self-righteousness, and that I may be a target of that. This is the point where my commitments to the generative space and process are challenged and I need to make myself useful in holding space for difficulty and discomfort without relationships falling apart."

- **Patience, compassion, generosity**

"For communities that are constantly subject to violences and violations and called upon to make space for and serve dominant communities, asking for patience sounds like a tall and unfair order. At the same time, without patience, compassion and generosity we tend to mirror the violences we are subject to and socialize our unprocessed traumas within our families and communities. We need to find another way."

"I am grateful when people from a marginalized community hold a space for us to try and work together, but I do not feel entitled to it. I recognize that even when they do this, and even when I try my best, my learning and unlearning processes might cause further harm, and I am grateful for being held accountable when this happens. I try to offer

critiques of others and myself with a sense of patience and generosity; I try to forgive myself and others, but do not expect others to do the same for me.”

- **Commitment to protecting the integrity of metabolic movement (rather than seeking value/validation/security in dissent/stalling)**

“When we are often forced into consensus in order to legitimize and offer hope and comfort to dominant groups/ organizations/institutions, stalling processes through dissent can be a powerful strategy of interruption.

However, when our sense of self-worth becomes attached to dissent, genuine collaborative movement becomes impossible. The wider metabolism we are part of depends on movement for its survival.”

“I am learning how we can move forward together without agreeing on everything. Compelling consensus has often been driven by a desire for control and order, which has led to the silencing of dissenting voices, particularly the most marginalized. We need to continue moving without assuming we will all be on the same path, or that the paths are linear.”

- **Surrendering what has been most effective in “pushing back” within modern-colonial structures and that has offered a band-aid to the colonial wounds (including the desire for retribution)**

“Both our great-grand-children and their great-grand-children deserve better. What really matters is what matters when we are no longer here in the bodies we inhabit today.”





## Reflecting forward

As we conclude our reflections on this first year of learning, we emphasize once again that this is only the beginning of what will be ongoing, multi-layered, and context-sensitive conversations about braiding work. Recognizing that this work cannot be tackled all at once, we have identified three priority areas that we will prioritize in the next stage of our collaboration:

- 1) navigating relationships at the interfaces of Indigenous and racialized communities;
- 2) engaging with the internal complexities of Indigenous communities; and
- 3) articulating the relationship between braiding work and decolonization with the pressing challenges of climate change and possibilities for continued life on the planet.

## 1) Relationships between Indigenous and racialized communities

Braiding work cannot be reduced to a two-sided engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, given that the category of “non-Indigenous” collapses many meaningful differences. For example, because of the history and ongoing legacies of forced migration through slavery in Canada and throughout the Americas, the position of Black Canadians is distinct from that of European settlers. Another example is those who migrated to Canada fleeing unlivable conditions caused by the activities of the Canadian state or corporations abroad. At the same time, some who historically arrived in Canada under compromised circumstances later sought to secure access to colonial entitlements. Given these complexities, navigating relationships between Indigenous and racialized communities is no simple task. First, it requires that we neither collapse these communities based on their shared experiences of white domination, nor that we engage in the traps of simply comparing our experiences of oppression, or worse yet, competing for a position of innocence or righteousness. Instead, we will need to address not only the potential solidarities, but also the tensions, complicities, complexities, contradictions, and incommensurabilities that have and will arise. For instance, the same individual may be positioned as vulnerable to subjugation and as a beneficiary of someone else’s subjugation; and, the same individual might be a part of multiple communities, including communities in conflict. Thus, while decolonization is a project for everyone, what this means in practice for relationships between Indigenous and racialized communities remains an open question that we will emphasize in the next phase of our work.



## 2) Internal complexities of Indigenous communities

Many important differences are collapsed within the overarching category of “Indigenous peoples,” including not only individual differences or differences across Indigenous nations, but also differences based on class, geography (e.g. urban or rural; living on or off reserve), sensibility, and relationships to one’s language and home community. Some of these differences are products of colonial policies that have sought to segregate and separate Indigenous peoples from their lands and communities, the effects of which Indigenous people continue to grapple with.

Beyond simply acknowledging the heterogeneity of Indigenous communities, in the next phase of our work we will engage with these differences with greater nuance and consideration of how they affect braiding work. For instance, some non-Indigenous people collapse these differences and reproduce homogenous images of Indigeneity, and then become frustrated when Indigenous peoples do not adhere to their expectations — or, selectively engage only with Indigenous peoples who meet their expectations and stereotypes. Others try to exploit these differences, in particular conflicts or disagreements within communities, to their own benefit. Thus, we ask how and under what conditions Indigenous peoples can meaningfully address these differences in their full complexity, given that these engagements are often of great interest to the non-Indigenous gaze. Further, we ask how we can adjust braiding work to be more cognizant of and sensitive to these differences and their implications for building relationships.

### 3) Bridging braiding work with climate change

In the next phase of our work, we seek to make more visible the deep connections between colonialism and climate change, and thus, to ask how bridging work might prepare us to address pressing environmental challenges in a different, decolonial way. According to Indigenous people, colonialism has been deeply harmful not only to their human communities, but also to their other-than-human kin. It was precisely by first removing Indigenous peoples from their territories — and thus, from their embedded relationships to place and the other living beings of that place — that colonial powers could then commodify land as property, and frame living beings as “natural resources” to be exploited. In this way, Indigenous peoples have already lived through the kind of radical environmental challenges that many others are only just now beginning to face.

When a critique of colonialism is absent from engagements with climate change, this can lead people to advocate for “saving” the earth while continuing to erase Indigenous relationships to place and failing to address the underlying harmful and unsustainable systems that have led us to a point of climate crisis. When colonialism is understood as the underlying cause of climate change, this can open up difficult but important conversations about how we arrived at the point of climate crisis, and how we might address this crisis in ways that would interrupt (and potentially even mitigate) colonial violences. We therefore seek to understand how braiding work might enable engagements around climate change that recognize (without romanticizing) that many Indigenous communities still hold knowledges about how to relate to the earth and other living

beings very differently (some might say “more sustainably”), but that don’t treat these knowledges as common property to be extracted and exploited. We also ask how braiding work might prepare us to address the collective problem of climate change while acknowledging our unevenly shared responsibility for creating it.





# Afterword

**By Shawn Van Sluys**  
**Executive Director, Musagetes**

This booklet, *Towards Braiding*, and the accompanying program of artist residencies, gatherings, workshops, and other forms of engagement are part of a learning journey that we at Musagetes have embarked on to transform ourselves, our organization, and, hopefully, the wider communities of which we are part. As we have learned over the past four years of expressing a desire to work with Indigenous people, people of colour, and their many communities, our best intentions are not always aligned with our actions, and our most carefully designed plans are not always matched up with our aspirations. Often, we don't even recognize that the frameworks we use — comprised of desires, intentions, plans, and actions — are the wrong starting points altogether.

As mentioned already in the beginning of this text, our journey started with relationships falling apart. At that point, the easiest choice for the organization was to bail out of the conflict and start again without being able to learn the wider lessons that the falling apart was teaching. But a different invitation was put on the table: to stay with the trouble, to learn from the failures, to work through

the different dimensions of the problem apart and together, to do it for the benefit not only of ourselves, but also for other groups and organizations. We decided to accept this challenge and the risks involved. In the beginning we were concerned this would be about blame, shame and guilt. It took us a while to understand that there was another form of relation, which was unthinkable for us from the outset, that was being offered as a way forward.

This form of relationship required us to let go of certain attachments and to face certain insecurities in order to make room for a more generative space to emerge, where humility and truth and attention and resonance could create the conditions for deep listening and respect.

Musagetes was established with a mandate to make the arts more central and meaningful in peoples' lives, in our communities and societies. Our programs, partnerships, and collaborations are meant to experiment with the many ways this mandate can be enacted. In 2014, we published a document that summarized the latest conversations we were having about the organization's trajectory, assessing where we wanted to focus our programs. We wrote that art does more than offer a sense of belonging—it also draws attention to incoherences and injustices. We recognized that the first principle of Musagetes' founding declaration is the necessity to confront the fault lines of modernity and to challenge the primacy of rational thinking that underwrites contemporary Western culture—often to the detriment of the imagination, relationality, and the planet.

Those reflections mark the moment when Musagetes committed to a path of inquiry and learning that has great significance for how we are entering the journey towards braiding today:

“Past centuries have shown us the limitations of using language to connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, but the arts offer new ways to explore this imaginatively through a shared human spirit rather than through reductive rationalistic thinking....Let’s walk together in the woods. Let’s find a common place for healing and reconciliation to begin. And then let’s invite others to that place.”

Beautiful words — but as we came to learn over the past two years, enacting this requires us to embody the “not-knowing”, to suspend our dependence on what we think we already know, and to bring forward that which was previously pushed to the background. *Intellectually* we may have the desire to braid, but *affectively* we are still invested in one form of knowledge and way of being that gives us security and pleasure often sourced in highly problematic ways. Loosening these ties is a process of unlearning, of letting go, and of trusting what takes its place.

Developing the sensibilities — the radar—for making necessary personal and organizational changes is a precondition for braiding; we can’t just declare ourselves to be braiding ways of being without embracing what Vanessa and Elwood describe in this booklet as exiled capacities. We are each wounded by the fault lines of modernity, but the wounds differ in their nature, their existential threat, and their required medicines. Each of us at Musagetes is committed to tending to the wounds of each other, of our communities, of other creatures, and of the planet. But we’re just now learning what it means to do this tending and we know we need to learn from inevitable failures and mistakes in this process.

Everything we learn or unlearn is one small part of a large metabolism that both nurtures us and unburdens us. Moving

towards braiding is hard work, shaped through collective authorship—including this booklet and these closing words. But the deepest gratitude for leading the initiative towards braiding we offer to Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti. Together they have given so much to Musagetes as an organization and to each of us as individuals.

We continue on an uncertain journey. Dear Reader, we invite you to come with us, not knowing where it will lead or if and how we will arrive. The path itself, not the destination, is what will change us—and this is the gift of this journey.





## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Musagetes' staff and board, and the many people who have directly contributed to this project, including:

Albi Nelson, Alessandra Pomarico, Alissa Firth-Eagland, Alvin Nelson, Andrea Lyall, Andrew Judge, Anne Riley, Benicio Pitaguary, Bruno Andreotti, Carl Mika, Camila Cardoso, Cash Ahenakew, Cease Wyss, Chris Creighton-Kelly, Crystal Smith, Dallas Hunt, Dan McCarthy, Dana Claxton, Dani d'Emilia, David Ng, Dawn Morrison, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Dan Longboat, Dino Siwek, Dorothy Christian, Erin Woods, Fay Nelson, France Trépanier, Garrick Cooper, Georgina Nelson, Harikoa Brons-daughter-George, Haruko Okano, Jake Moore, Leslie McCue, Lisa Hirmer, Lois Thomas, Mackenzie Lesperance, Margo Kane, Marnie Badham, Melanie Goodchild, Nancy Rowe, Peter Schuler, Rene Susa, Robin Brass, Sadie Jimmy, Sandra Semchuk, Sara Roque, Shelley Niro, Sherry Farrell-Racette, Stephanie Sobek-Swant, Tereza Cajkova, Valerie Sing Turner, Victor Sauca, Zab Maboungou, Zool Suleman  
...and many others who have offered invaluable feedback to draft/earlier versions of this work.





## Recommended reading list

This reading list is a good starting point for organizations wishing to start the journey towards braiding. However, it is important to remember that changing thinking alone is insufficient to move us closer to zero. Indigenous communities will value more your capacity to relate even if you don't understand the context, than what you think you know about their cultural reality, aspirations, struggle or trauma. Similarly, they will value much more your ability to respond with humility and generosity when you are challenged and/or asked not to occupy so much space, than the ideas you have about how open you are (your self-image). Therefore, the intellectual knowledge you may acquire through these readings cannot replace a long-term/life-long training in relational ways of being.

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