GESTURING TOWARD DECOLONIAL FUTURE WITH VANESSA ANDREOTTI

In Conversation with Gabrielle Donnelly

Dr. Vanessa Andreotti is a professor at the University of British Columbia, where she holds a Canada Research Chair in Race, Inequalities, and Social Change. Vanessa is one of the founding members of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) Collective (decolonialfutures.net) and Teia das 5 Curas, an international network of Indigenous communities located mostly in Canada and Latin America. She is the author of Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity’s Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism.

Gabrielle: Welcome Vanessa and thank you for joining me in this conversation about decolonial futures and the work you are committed to with the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective. I’m joining you from Khipuktuk (Halifax) in Mi’kma’ki (Nova Scotia).

Vanessa: Thank you for the invitation. It’s an honor and privilege to be in conversation with you. I am speaking from the territories of the Stó:lō people. I also usually offer a land acknowledgment from the Guaraní people, who are one of the 305 Indigenous groups of Brazil. My mother is Guaraní and my father is of German ancestry. It involves four acknowledgments. The first is acknowledging the land as a living entity not a resource or a property. The land sustains our lives and we are part of it, not the other way around. The second acknowledgment is of our ancestors. Not just those who have come before us but also those who come after us, bringing them into the conversation and having them shape our responsibility. The third acknowledgment is recognizing those who’ve made it possible for us to be here. The Indigenous peoples who care for the land we live on. And thank you for the opportunity for this conversation, Gabrielle. If there was food, we would acknowledge those who’ve prepared it. In this (online) context, we also need to acknowledge the technology that makes this conversation possible and this involves a recognition of the violence on communities that comes with the mining of precious metals that make our computers. Our livelihoods are systemically subsidized by violence and we must acknowledge this too. The last acknowledgment is that we are a larger family of humans and non-humans facing many challenges and difficulties due to irresponsible decisions we humans have been making. This comes with an invitation to recalibrate our collective existence toward decolonial forms of sobriety, maturity, discernment, and accountability.
Gabrielle: From what I understand, the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) collective is a collaboration around pedagogical and artistic inquiries about questions of violence and unsustainability involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous members. What is the collective up to these days?

Vanessa: We are a transdisciplinary collective of researchers, artists, educators, practitioners, students, and Indigenous knowledge keepers trying to create pedagogical and ethical experiments at the interface of two sets of questions: questions related to historical, systemic, and ongoing violence and questions related to the unsustainability of our current habits of being, as well as questions related to social and ecological collapse. For us, this requires bringing together concerns related to racism, colonialism, unsustainability, climate change, biodiversity loss, economic instability, mental health crises, and the intensifications of social and ecological violence. We’ve learned from communities that if the topics are really heavy, we need to have a light container to hold these difficult conversations without relationships falling apart. We use humor in a specific way to get our bodies to be light enough to carry these conversations forward without resulting in accusatory tones of critique that tend to turn trauma and/or virtue into competitive currencies. It’s important to do the work in a space where we can carry it, where we’re not sinking with the weight of it. We base our work on non-western psychoanalytic approaches informed by work with Indigenous people in Latin America and Canada, who are part of the Teia das 5 Curas network. A lot of the practices we are learning about come from experiences, but they are not necessarily coming from direct instruction—they are coming from these communities offering practices for addressing issues that are volatile, uncertain, complex, and very difficult to deal with. We are also trying to document what happens when we attempt to create ethical solidarities across the global North and South, between Indigenous peoples in different locations and between (racialized and white) settlers and Indigenous peoples. Part of the work that we are trying to do is to document experiments that are both useful and helpful but also, most importantly, documenting failures, too, so that we learn from experience rather than from scratch. We call our failures “good data.”

Gabrielle: Where does the work start for the collective and those you engage with?

Vanessa: We anchor our work in what we call the four denials. The first is the denial of systemic violence and complicity in harm; the fact that our comforts, securities, and enjoyments are subsidized by expropriation and exploitation somewhere. The second denial is of the limits of the planet; the fact that the planet cannot sustain exponential growth and over-consumption. The third denial is of entanglement; the insistence we have in seeing ourselves as separate from each other and the land rather than entangled within a living, wider metabolism that is bio-intelligent (i.e., the planet). The fourth denial is of the magnitude and complexity of the problems and difficulties we will need to face together, and the tendency to look for simplistic solutions that make us feel and look good and that may address symptoms but not the root causes of our collective, complex predicament. And we’re doing all this in a social educational learning context, where there is a cacophony of perspectives. We are going into a supermarket of viewpoints where there is (mis)information overload and the impossibility of stable authorities, and where there is also an oversaturation of unprocessed emotions and a lack of resilience and collective capacity to “hold it together.” Informed by Indigenous analyses of this problem, we see this as a failure of western culture to produce grown-ups. And this is all happening in VUCA times, which stands for increased volatility, uncertainty, social complexity, and ambiguity, so there is a lot of social fragmentation, polarization, and dissenting perspectives...
on “the common good.” There are also lots of incentives for hedonistic, narcissistic, and hyper-individualistic behaviors, where consumption is a mode of relating to the world. And not just consumption of stuff, but also consumption of knowledge, consumption of relationships, consumption of experiences, consumption of critique and of reconciliation. In this problematic context, the focus is on feeling and looking good and seeing hope as a projection of continuity that helps us escape the “shit,” which are the different layers of unprocessed difficult stuff in the present hanging over our heads. So, educationally, there is a demand for coddling and rescuing rather than—what we would call in the collective—“composting shit”—both collective and individual shit. We use a lot of provocative and shocking metaphors to bring us back to this visceral thing of not deflecting from what we need to deal with or what we don’t know how to deal with, so we can learn to do it together.

We also work with an analysis of wicked global challenges, which are different from regular challenges because they are hyper-complex, multi-layered, interlocked, they involve many unknowns and have longer and uncertain timescales. Formal education does not prepare us well to address wicked challenges and the complexities, uncertainties, ambiguities, pluralities, paradoxes, unequal power relations, and conflicts that are inherent in them. So, if we address wicked global challenges as regular problems, our interventions will tend to reproduce three harmful patterns, which are related to (1) simplistic “feel good” solutions that only address symptoms; (2) paternalistic engagements with marginalized communities; and (3) ethnocentric ideals of justice, sustainability, and change.

Gabrielle: My understanding and experience of the work of the GTDF collective is that this kind of depth of analysis is combined with practices and capacity-building?

Vanessa: Yes, we try to create experiments and practices for building capacity to face storms together and we have been focusing on two key capabilities. One is negative capability which we understand as the capacity or disposition to engage with difficult issues and be present for uncomfortable conversations without feeling overwhelmed, immobilized, or demanding to be rescued from discomfort. The other is generative capability, which is the capacity or disposition to navigate volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, and to negotiate different sensibilities in the context of historical and systemic dissonance, with integrity, in generative ways. So, we’ve been trying to map in the literature from different disciplines what this would mean, and we’ve found a few terms that have been helpful in delineating what it would take for people to hold cognitive, affective, and relational complexity. For example, the term polysemic awareness refers to the recognition that words have different layers of meaning, which will be interpreted differently in different contexts. Heteroglossic recognition or dexterity indicates that when we say something, what will say will be interpreted through different filters, even in the same context. Diachronic reasoning is the ability to “read” ascribed meanings in a temporal way, tracking where assemblages are coming from, where they are going, and how culturally embedded they are. Another one is onto-sympathetic resonance, which is the ability to feel the pain of others and the land. We are also trying to map the neurobiological state regulation, meta-skills, and affective and relational (muscle) conditioning that are required to develop the stamina and endurance for the marathon of facing multiple and more difficult issues together.

Gabrielle: What are some of the experiments and methodologies you are using to build these capacities?

Vanessa: One of the methodologies is called The Bus Within Us and it’s just an invitation to look at ourselves as a bus full of people and a driver. The bus has different decks with
more layers and creatures in it, but the basic deck represents only your own life experience. There might be passengers at the front of the bus who are vocal, passengers in the middle who only speak in certain circumstances, and passengers at the back who are trying to hide and sometimes trying to sabotage everything, and sometimes they even take the wheel and run over other people. The whole idea of the bus is that if you are not able to sit with your own complexity, chances are you are not going to be able to sit with the complexity around you. And in this case, everything we try to repress in ourselves becomes a projection onto other people or onto the reality that we may or may not be aware of. So, the more we can establish a psychoanalytic distance, where we can see and sit with the passengers within us, looking at our shadows and desires (both harmful and generative), our yearnings, but also our traumas, both personal and collective, and learning to process this (through narrative or not), the more chances we have to face together multiple wicked challenges in a generative way. If you don’t do this kind of work, you will become work for other people. For example, many people go into communities to do “good work” without the discipline of checking their bus and they project on these communities their desires and perceived entitlements (usually for self-validation) and, although other people may play along, genuine connections cannot be established. It’s very difficult to break this pattern once you start out this way.

Gabrielle: The work of the collective makes a clear link between decolonization and the larger context of modernity. Can you share with us more about that?

Vanessa: This link is more visible in the analytical tool that we’ve created as an anchor called *The House Modernity Built*. It is a social cartography—a visual way to engage with something more complex—that we’ve workshopped with groups and communities. It is something we can put on the table to start difficult conversations. It is about how the current system, our “house” that gives us comforts and securities, is based on a foundation of separability, has walls of universal reason and the nation-state with a roof of global capital. This is a house built on a planet where it is exceeding the limits of the planet. There are hidden costs of the house stemming from unsustainable growth and overconsumption, piping into the house is expropriating resources and pipes out are dumping waste. The house is subsidized and maintained by destitution, disposition, and genocide. And there are floors in the house where we play with the terms global north and the global south.

In the penthouse, we have the “north of the north,” and we have the “south of the south” receiving the sewage outside of the house. We have the “south of the north” in the basement of the house, people who want the securities of the house and who are not interested in social mobility, and then you have the “north of the south,” where the majority of people are interested in the stairs of social mobility and climbing those stairs, which are becoming narrower and narrower. And here we talk about a false promise of a universal middle class for all because expanding the house comes at the expense of other people and of the planet.

We understand the struggle of people in the “south of the south” as high intensity as opposed to those, for instance, who are trying to climb the stairs of social mobility but can’t. This is a struggle of low intensity in comparison to those engaged in high intensity struggles, such as Indigenous people in the Amazon who are putting their lives on the line to protect the forest against logging and mining and, as a result, are being assassinated or those fleeing war. The distinction between these two struggles is very important. This is all within the context of climate change, economic instability, cancellation of rights, populism, precarity, increased military violence, and structural damage to the house (because the whole house was poorly designed to begin with), all leading
Gesturing toward decolonial future with Vanessa Andreotti

to social, economic, political, mental health and ecological crises, which in turn results in increased violent conflict and mass/forced migration. Then the question we have to sit with together is what are we to do with the house? Do we fix it? Expand it? Build another? Live without? Find other planets? And how prepared are we to actually sit with these questions because we’ve lived in this house for so long—it conditions the ways we think, imagine, relate, feel, hope, and desire. For those of us really attached to this house, what will this assemblage of crises mean?

Gabrielle: How does this compelling critical analysis and exploration of modernity open ways forward?

Vanessa: It helps us to set up the conversations about the kinds of reforms or de-commisionings we can engage in, and we’ve named three—soft reform, radical reform, and beyond reform. In soft reform, we think about better data, better policies, and better leadership. Soft reform is about the same questions, moving forward in the same direction, and expanding the house. In radical reform, different perspectives, bodies, and leadership are valued—the questions are different but moving forward is the same forward—the idea is still to expand the house, just with different leadership. Then there is the beyond reform space, where there are three options. The first option is replacement, where we have radical alternatives that promise “guarantees” such as abolitionism or permaculture. The second option is hacking, where we use the materials of the house to support those trying (and mostly learning from failure) to initiate genuine change or fighting for something different, like the Indigenous people of the Amazon. The third option is hospicing, which is an assisted death of modernity that happens as we also support the prenatal care of something else—something else that we don’t know yet. It’s still in embryonic stage and can’t survive outside of the womb, we don’t know what it will become or whether it will be viable, it is undefined and precarious. It might be wiser but not necessarily and we risk suffocating it with the heavy pressure of hopes and projections. We have to keep asking deeper questions so that we don’t romanticize or idealize alternatives. In beyond reform, there are different questions, and a different understanding of the way(s) forward and finding another kind of shelter other than the house of modernity. So, when we talk about community engagement we are going to be in spaces that include all these different clusters of responses in the same room. Even with the Indigenous people we work with in Brazil who are at the forefront of the struggles, we go to the communities and the perspectives of soft, radical, and beyond reform are all there. The desires for different things permeate all communities and unless we can find ways to navigate this complexity, we tend to walk around in circles.

Gabrielle: One of the significant impacts of the collective so far has been the uptake of Towards Braiding, can you please share with us some of the background and significance of this work?

Vanessa: In 2019, Elwood Jimmy, Sharon Stein, and I published Towards Braiding, which is the result of an experiment. I was working with an organization, and I learned that they had contracted an Indigenous person to Indigenize and decolonize their organization, but very much based on the soft reform approach. The person who they had hired was very much in the beyond reform space. And, of course, the expectations were very different for what this person needed to do in this organization. I saw the unfolding of this as a witness up to the point where relationships really fell apart in a painful way. And I had seen this dynamic before in my university and in other organizations, so, as a witness, I was in a position to draw the attention of the organization to the fact that this was a systemic complex problem that required us to “stay with it” rather than resort
to business-as-usual responses (e.g., replacing the Indigenous person with an Indigenous person who would be more compliant). To the organization’s credit, they said, “Okay. Yes. Let’s do this, but we don’t know what to do.” I responded, “not knowing what to do is the best place to start. What we need to do next is give the Indigenous person the space to do what they need to do rather than project onto the Indigenous person what you want them to do.”

This resulted in a project where we mapped the barriers to Indigenous peoples’ work in the arts with other Indigenous artists and allies who were recognized by the communities. We sat with a lot of artists, and we collected the metaphors they shared in these conversations and tried to see which metaphors resonated with other Indigenous peoples.

Gabrielle: As I understand, one of the metaphors that came out of this work with a lot of resonance is the distinction between brick sensibility and thread sensibility. Can you share more about this metaphor with us?

Vanessa: Yes, one of the metaphors that stood out strongly through consultations was this distinction between brick sensibilities and thread sensibilities. This is a metaphor, and like all metaphors there are limitations in how it can be used, but it has become very useful to talk about spaces, like universities, for example, as brick institutions. Threads have a very different texture and are weaving all the time, whereas bricks are layered with cement, and they intend to create a monument or a building that will be left as a legacy. So these different sensibilities have very different intentional patterns and very different practices of conviviality. One of the things that became clear is that when a university or another organization or institution seeks to “include” the thread sensibility, it often means turning that thread sensibility into a brick and building it into the existing wall. This was a significant and generative topic of conversation in these consultation processes, supporting people to articulate figuratively what they were facing in terms of institutional barriers. We talked about how bricks and threads have their own integrity and how their relationship carries the weight of historical, systemic, and ongoing harm. The idea of “braiding” bricks and threads sensibilities evokes the impossibility of doing so—in the book, we emphasize that, for braiding to become possible, we need to “get to zero,” which means that we need to account for the harmful dynamics that tend to happen in the will to “include” Indigenous peoples and knowledges in non-Indigenous spaces (e.g., paternalism, tokenism, extraction, appropriation, selective consumption, etc.).

When the book was published in 2019, many organizations began to use it because it gave them a vocabulary to understand these dynamics in their own contexts. But we also saw lots of organizations jumping very quickly to checklists, claiming that they were already there, at the place of zero, and we were super suspicious because this is work that takes decades and will have to be done for generations to come. The practice in itself requires a sensibility that is not self-congratulatory, virtue-signaling, or validation-seeking, therefore, saying that “you’re already doing it” is a sign that there is a problem. If you’re saying that you’re doing it, it means that either you don’t understand the difficulty, depth, and scale of the challenge or that you’re doing it for other reasons that benefit you. This work requires healthy skepticism toward ourselves and our organizations—and truckloads of humility.

Gabrielle: How does what the collective is learning reframe or inform the broader conversations around equity, diversity, and inclusion?

Vanessa: This is an interesting question and the conversation you are pointing toward is a difficult one to have because it can be easily weaponized. In one of our intergenerational pedagogical experiments, we saw a lot of conflict around approaches to inclusion across
generations. Younger people want inclusion to be one thing and older generations understand it quite differently. In the mix between generation W (1945–1964) and generation X (1965–1984), we encountered an understanding of inclusion as assimilation—a demand for deference and gratitude for those who are included. This is a classic dynamic that we can see in boardrooms everywhere. For the mix between generation X and generation Y (1985–2004), there is an understanding of inclusion as representation, recognition, and redistribution. But the problem here is that it is linked to a demand for performance and validation. There is a lot of consumption of difference and of trauma. For instance, you would be interested in having an equity photo where everybody is represented. For generations Y and Z (2005–2024), there are calls for a major systemic overhaul, a complete renegotiation of the terms of engagement. We hear this in the Black Lives Matter movement, in Indigenous movements, in movements that are bringing down monuments everywhere. This is creating a huge issue because for older generations, in response to generation Z, it looks like what is being asked for is completely outside of the horizon, that is understandable. There is a chasm—while generations are often considered to be around 20 years in length, with technology, we’re seeing this stretched—with the oldest and youngest generations more at odds than ever. It will be the generations in the middle—X and Y—that must do the work of bridging and translation, another pedagogical learning that we all will have to engage with, and within the collective, we have started working on it.

Gabrielle: For the readers of this volume, is there anything more you would like to share about your work and the work GTDF collective that can provide generation orientations toward the future?

Vanessa: I think that one thing that has become more and more evident in this work is that the enormous challenge in front of us that calls for a different form of coexistence requires healing in many layers, including cognitive, affective, relational, economic, ecological, and political layers. It requires us to wake up, to step up, to smarten up, to grow up (or rather “grow down”), and to show up differently to each other and to the planet. This, in turn, will require a shift in the ways we relate to knowledge, to language, to pain, to politics, to our own bodies, to our unconscious, to the metabolism of the land, and to life and death—learning how to live, to age and to die well. Cash Ahenakew articulates this as an invitation for “eldering,” for becoming good Elders and ancestors for all relations. He defines eldering as the process of “deepening and expansion of holistic capacities while one’s physical capacities decline and the time to exit the physical body draws nearer.” He identifies four of these capacities, which are:

1. the capacity to be present to the complex reality of things—the beautiful, the ugly, the good, the bad, the broken, and the messed up within and around us (as opposed to escaping what is difficult, painful, or disgusting; and/or being attached to idealized more comfortable versions of reality and of ourselves);
2. the capacity to enact visceral responsibility: to face responsibilities without excuse, which means doing what is needed at the time even if it goes against one’s self-interest (as opposed to responsibility being an intellectual choice or a matter of convenience);
3. the capacity to put oneself in service while divesting from the desire to be remembered for that service (as opposed to transactional altruism, which is often based on the desire to leave a legacy that monumentalizes one’s life or one’s name);
4. the capacity to offer a compass that can help people navigate toward collective/metabolic health and wellbeing without imprinting one’s own projections onto
someone else’s path (respecting the principle of non-interference while honoring the responsibility to guide people away from mistakes already made and ditches already known).

In the same text, that was written as a response to the question from a student about what could people look forward to after 40, Cash offers 35 things that could be better as we age if we choose eldering instead of attempting to hold on to permanent youth, which is what modernity-coloniality is constantly enticing us to do. This desire is often expressed as an entitlement to epistemic and moral authority, unrestricted and unaccountable autonomy, and the universal arbitration of common sense. I believe that the invitation for eldering that Cash has put forward is part of a compass that can guide us toward (co)existence otherwise, with honesty, humility, humor, and hyper-self-reflexivity as we learn to activate decolonial forms of sobriety, maturity, discernment, and accountability.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

For more information about the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, along with the cartographies and texts mentioned here, visit: decolonialfutures.net