

Note from the Editor: The following article was written in honour of Indigenous Disability Awareness Month observed annually in November.

## **Building Solidarity in Celebrating Difference**

*By Mona Stonefish, Carla Rice, Sue Hutton, Evadne Kelly, Seika Boye*

***Into the Light: Eugenics and Education in Southern Ontario*** is a new exhibition that examines institutional histories and ongoing legacies of eugenics, the false idea that it is possible to improve the human race through selective breeding.

Eugenics is often associated with the dehumanizing atrocities of Nazi Germany during the Second World War. But eugenics was also taught and practiced in Southern Ontario in the early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Educational institutions, including Macdonald Institute and the Ontario Agricultural College, two of the three founding colleges that formed the University of Guelph played a key role in the eugenics movement. They, along with other institutions, advanced destructive ideas that targeted, de-humanized, and eliminated Indigenous, Black, and other racialized populations, as well as poor, and disabled peoples through methods of segregation, institutionalization, cultural assimilation, and sterilization that continues today.

This exhibition combines stories with artistic, sensory, and material expressions of memory. The goal is to bring the hidden history of eugenics, and stories of survival, out of the shadows and into the light.

*Into the Light* is co-created by Mona Stonefish, Peter Park, Dolleen Tisawii'ashii Manning, Evadne Kelly, Seika Boye, and Sky Stonefish. Key contributors include Carla Rice and members of the partnership grant *Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life* at Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice, University of Guelph, Dawn Owen at the Guelph Civic Museum, and Sue Hutton at Respecting Rights, a project at ARCH. Together, we have worked for several months to create the accessible, multi-sensory, and multi-media exhibition.

Our process centres storytelling to support a decolonizing process of building solidarity, grounded in difference, between those who are unevenly implicated in and impacted by colonialism and eugenics. On October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019, at 2 PM, the co-creators and key contributors extend this process in a conversation, called "Eugenics Retold," held at the Guelph Civic Museum.

In advance of that event, we offer some reflections on the ways in which human "betterment" is rooted in institutional histories, continues to diminish and disappear those who have already been marginalized by eugenics, and how oppressive ideas and practices continue to bolster one another.

The Canadian government and the Christian church committed heinous crimes against humanity, against First Nations, that have not stopped. While the whole Christian doctrine is not to blame, it was carriers of the doctrine who committed the crimes. But many Canadians are unaware of how these crimes of the past are still with us today. The orange shirts worn on Orange Shirt Day downplay the heinous crimes, which include eugenics. The heinous crimes need to be brought to light.

**- Mona Stonefish**

There are unique struggles, but also parallels –for institutional survivors and residential school survivors. To connect the dots and share stories of resilience, bringing all of that “into the light” has been a long time coming.

But abuses continue to be entrenched in group homes and foster care as well as other types of institutions. For example, Respecting Rights gratefully received funding from the Huronia Regional Centre class action settlement against the province of Ontario to continue its work promoting respect and decision-making rights for people labelled with intellectual disabilities across Ontario.

But the proceedings of this class action law suit, and others like it, are not an easy topic for survivors. This class action experience was not unlike what survivors of the Residential Schools went through with the process of the class action law suit of Residential Schools in Canada that was settled May 10, 2006. Survivors were not provided an opportunity to tell their stories through the process of the class action. Instead, survivors were tasked with filling out forms that felt humiliating, degrading, and caused re-traumatization for many people.

*Into the Light* is the telling of stories. The care, the love, the inclusion that has been put into the co-creation of *Into the Light* will hopefully embrace listeners who come to experience it with warmth – the way survivors want everyone to be treated.

**-Sue Hutton**

The 30 years of eugenics course documents on display in the exhibition reveal how value-laden classifications of mental and physical “fitness” hide the actions of eugenicists in positions of authority, who created the conditions of inequality, poverty, devaluing difference, and dehumanization.

For example, by 1928, eugenics leaders, such as University of Toronto professor Peter Sandiford, classified First Nations Peoples as mentally “unfit” and supported their claims with culturally biased intelligence testing on First Nations children. Such faulty testing produced representations of First Nations as mentally and physically “unfit”, which led to unethical sterilizations and institutionalizations, which continue today.

Considering eugenics was taught for over three decades to generations of teachers in domestic science as well as health and social welfare professionals, there is much for all of us to learn about how these ideas and methods have become installed.

**-Evadne Kelly**

I am deeply invested in the archive and how it reflects systemic oppression, exclusion, and disappearance. In our process, we centred stories and utilized the archive to display *how* the horrific violence of eugenicists happened through slow, persistent, and intentional propaganda that reflected the deeply held beliefs of those with power. The depth of sharing and scope of difficulty of the resulting exhibition, I believe was possible because each of us was invited into the project with the condition of being able to step back, leave, take a moment, correct, resist in ways that accounted for our humanity.

So often projects that involve telling the story of trauma (consciously or unconsciously) rely upon unsupported processes of divulging information in a way that benefits the project but not the individual - and often times individuals become extensions of the archive instead of the other way around. The power of this is that those who experience *Into the Light*, will hopefully understand that stories of surviving eugenics, alongside the archival ephemera, are extensions of all of us, this is a history that we share and a legacy that we continue to be ensnared by.

**-Seika Boye**

In 2011, when I first arrived at the University of Guelph and found myself in the Macdonald Institute, I knew that I had a responsibility to investigate its history. As a feminist and disability studies professor, I had a general awareness of Adelaide Hoodless, a well-known early Canadian social reformer who played a critical role in founding the Macdonald Institute in 1903. Hoodless devoted herself to the betterment of education for women and became a fierce advocate of the then emerging discipline of domestic science (the study of cooking, sewing, childcare, and housework). While Hoodless advocated the education of women, she also opposed women getting the vote and fought for the education mainly of privileged women: white and non-disabled daughters of men with property. After her death, the organizations and colleges she founded built on her beliefs, attracting privileged young women who became champions of eugenics ideas and betterment thinking as a way of enhancing their place in society. This was at the expense of Indigenous, disabled, non-white and immigrant girls and women, who became targets of eugenics thinking and practices.

For me, bringing this institutional history “into the light” has been critical to living my feminist values. I knew that I had a responsibility to unearth this history as a way of beginning to become accountable for my institution’s history, its involvement in spreading colonial, racist, ableist, and other violent ideas and practices. Even more than this, my commitment to the *Into the Light* exhibition is grounded in my belief that

when we unearth hidden stories of the past, we call into question our ways of doing things in the present, which opens up new and more just possibilities in the future.

**-Carla Rice**

Canada's histories of colonialism and eugenics have entrenched a divisiveness that continues to create heightened inequities for Indigenous, Black, and other racialized populations, as well as poor, and disabled peoples. Through a process of close listening that celebrates difference, we can begin to understand how oppressive and dehumanizing attitudes and beliefs continue to be firmly established, even after the Residential Schools and institutions have closed. On October 26<sup>th</sup>, we invite people to join us in collectively working to advance social justice.

For more information about the exhibit, go to <https://guelphmuseums.ca/event/into-the-light-eugenics-and-education-in-southern-ontario/>

### **Bios**

Elder Mona Stonefish is an Anishinaabe artist, Traditional Knowledge Keeper, Windsor Art Gallery board member, disability activist, and recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee award.

Peter Park is co-founder of Respecting Rights, founder of People First, and recipient of the June Callwood Award.

Dolleen Tisawii'ashii Manning is an Anishinaabe contemporary artist and Assistant Professor in Indigenous Education & Pedagogy, York University (start date 2020).

Evadne Kelly is a dancer and Postdoctoral Artist-Researcher at Re•Vision Centre for Art and Social Justice, University of Guelph.

Seika Boye is a scholar, writer, educator, and consultant whose practices revolve around dance and movement. She is a lecturer at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Toronto.

Sky Stonefish is an Anishinaabe jingle dress dancer, photographer, and activist.

Sue Hutton is a social worker with focus on anti-oppression and accessible mindfulness. Sue is Co-ordinator of Respecting Rights.

Carla Rice is Canada Research Chair and Founding Director of Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph.

The exhibition is co-presented by *Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life* at Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice, University of Guelph, and the Guelph Civic Museum, and is in partnership with Respecting Rights, a project at ARCH.