

The cover features a woman with long dark hair and red face paint on her right side, looking towards the camera. To her right is a vertical strip of a stone relief sculpture. The background is white with several red dots scattered across it.

Arts Education

in a

Postnational State

Guest Edited by
Madhavi Peters

UNESCO Observatory
Multi-disciplinary Journal in the Arts
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Multi-Disciplinary eJournal in the Arts

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ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal that promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence. Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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COVER IMAGE

'Apitaw-Picikwas' (half apple).

Artist / model:

Lana Whiskeyjack,

Photo:

Rebecca Lippiatt
2014

This was a collaboration between
Edmonton-based photographer
Rebecca Lippiatt and
art actionist / educator
Lana Whiskeyjack's alter-ego,
'Apple', in Cree, 'Picikwas'.

Cover page design:
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The Unsilent Project: Holding Creative tensions through Interdisciplinary Arts Collaboration

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BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Smith is CEO and Artistic Director of the National Youth Orchestra of Canada (NYO). Over the past 15 years, she has succeeded in transforming NYO into one of the world's top orchestral training institutes. Today, more than 40 per cent of musicians playing in professional orchestras in Canada are NYO alumni. Barbara continues to be a vocal advocate for arts education in Canada and spends much of her time traveling throughout North America and abroad speaking on this issue to governments and industry associations. She is founder and co-chair of the International Federation of National Youth orchestras and has served on several government and industry advisory boards. She was chair of Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office and vice-chair of the Ontario parents Council. Barbara has a Bachelor of Music Performance from Western University

Kate Eccles, Advancement Consultant, NYO Canada, combines careers in institutional advancement with work as an educational consultant. For the past 3 years, she has worked with NYO on fundraising and strategic planning projects, as well as the development of a mental health program for gifted musicians. She has worked with many top Canadian colleges, universities, private schools, hospitals and arts organisations, as well as serving as Vice President, Development, for large scale capital campaign at Canada's Royal Conservatory of Music. While at the Conservatory, she held a parallel role as Chief Creative Director of the Learning Through the Arts program, as the time the largest public scale intervention in the world touching 400 schools in 12 countries. She holds a master's degree in Education from University of Toronto, which was followed by postgraduate advanced studies at Zurich's International School for Analytical Psychology.

How can an arts leader celebrate the nation state while acknowledging the morally ambiguous origins of that state? What is the line between giving voice and appropriating voice in a government-funded project featuring Indigenous arts? Is it possible for Canadians to celebrate global diversity while failing to acknowledge persistent injustice toward Indigenous peoples?

While it was exciting to receive funding to collaborate with partners, explore new themes and visit places beyond our usual budget, the government's four celebration themes of 'diversity and inclusion', 'engaging and inspiring youth', 'Indigenous reconciliation' and 'the environment' raised complex questions from the outset.

Though the orchestral metaphor was an inspirational platform to bring in our two project partners —The National Youth Choir and Signal Theatre (a celebrated interdisciplinary group of Indigenous artists founded by Michael Greyeyes, whose work spans music, theatre, spoken word, drumming and dance), there was obvious bias in the invitation to offer 'hope, healing, and inspiration'. The fact that the orchestra had no Indigenous players among its ranks was just the beginning. Add to that, our sponsors included investment companies with interests in oil pipelines and uranium mining companies that were the target of vigorous Indigenous land rights protests was just the beginning. Finally, for a lot of Indigenous groups, Canada 150 itself was no cause for celebration.

What did the blending of the Indigenous arts through The Unsilent Project mean in the context of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's assertion that '[t]here is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada' (as quoted in Lawson 2105)? We argue that the project is a good example of the postnational state in action: frequently messy and contentious, with a great deal of listening involved.

It was our desire from the outset not to 're-appropriate' the marginalized, but to be authentically inclusive, collaborative, and collegial. We saw an opportunity to face these tensions by blending art forms, possibly taking the audience by surprise by confronting the juxtaposition at the heart of Canada's espoused and enacted values.

Still, we worried that the Indigenous component might come across as contrived or only giving lip-service to truth and reconciliation. The suggestion from our Indigenous partners to frame the project around the works of Zaccheus Jackson, a well-known spoken word artist who had passed away under tragic circumstances, and to involve his family in its creation, provided a fulcrum around which the project could develop collaboratively, but always with our Indigenous artists leading the artistic vision.

The project ended in an unprecedented spoken-word-based symphonic work. Co-directors Michael Greyeyes and Gregory Oh led emerging Indigenous artists from across Canada, including Métis composer Ian Cusson, a stage director, three spoken word artists and a costume designer in a bold, trans-disciplinary exploration, *The Unsilent Project*.

An experimental, youth-led response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (to facilitate reconciliation among former students of residential schools, their families, their communities and all Canadians), it combined spoken word, theatre and music. In addition to artistic exploration, this partnership also involved a trip to a former residential school and educational workshops about Indigenous ways of knowing. Every orchestra member worked on preparing a land acknowledgement for one of the concerts. These were well-received, especially in Whitehorse, where it was met with roaring applause.

The process began with a tentative series of discussions that ensued without any one partner leading the charge. The first set of challenges included our own ignorance about Indigenous issues and Indigenous culture as a whole. Questions arose in initial meetings as basic as: 'What do we call you? Are you First Nations, Aboriginal or something else?' We needed help to understand the significance of terminology, land acknowledgement, beginning a meeting or session with a smudging, the concept of appropriating voice and how our partners felt building a 'celebration' on the shoulders of 150 years of cultural genocide. The Indigenous artists were incredibly generous, but did not hold back their scepticism and stepped confidently into their role as educators.

Challenges for our Indigenous artists included a lack of knowledge about the structure of a symphony orchestra. For example, they were surprised that conductor Jonathan Darlington, who had not been in the workshops, could step in to direct the performance. As spoken word artists, they were very much in charge of their own performances and were not accustomed to taking direction. For Darlington as a white British man, he knew that his words 'represented the colonizers', but he had a specific customary role to lead the performance in the tradition of a symphony orchestra.

The project sparked debate amongst orchestra members. Several musicians embraced the project, while others questioned the merits. Audience reaction was mixed as well. A few resisted the political statement we were making, feeling 'this was not what they signed on for'. But our view remains that music is political and has historically been a vehicle for expressing political views. As Canada's national training orchestra, we should not shy away from exploring difficult material.

Were we successful? Perhaps, inasmuch as we gave artistic freedom to our Indigenous partners to give voice to their feelings and emotions around celebrating Canada 150. We showcased the 'other side' of Canada 150, commissioned new works that will be available to other orchestras, and contributed to the education of our musicians and our audiences around the issues facing Canada's Indigenous communities, Indigenous creation methods, and ways of knowing. We still use the land acknowledgements created by the 2017 orchestra, and we are more cognizant of Indigenous culture than we were before.

We think we demonstrated our sincere desire to embrace truth and reconciliation to the Indigenous community, and that, in one small way, we provided a platform for the issues surrounding the Indigenous community in Canada to build a better understanding between us. We have a lot of work to do, but this was a start.

References

Lawson, G 2015, 'Trudeau's Canada again', New York Times Magazine, 13 December, viewed 10 January 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/magazine/trudeaus-canada-again.html>>