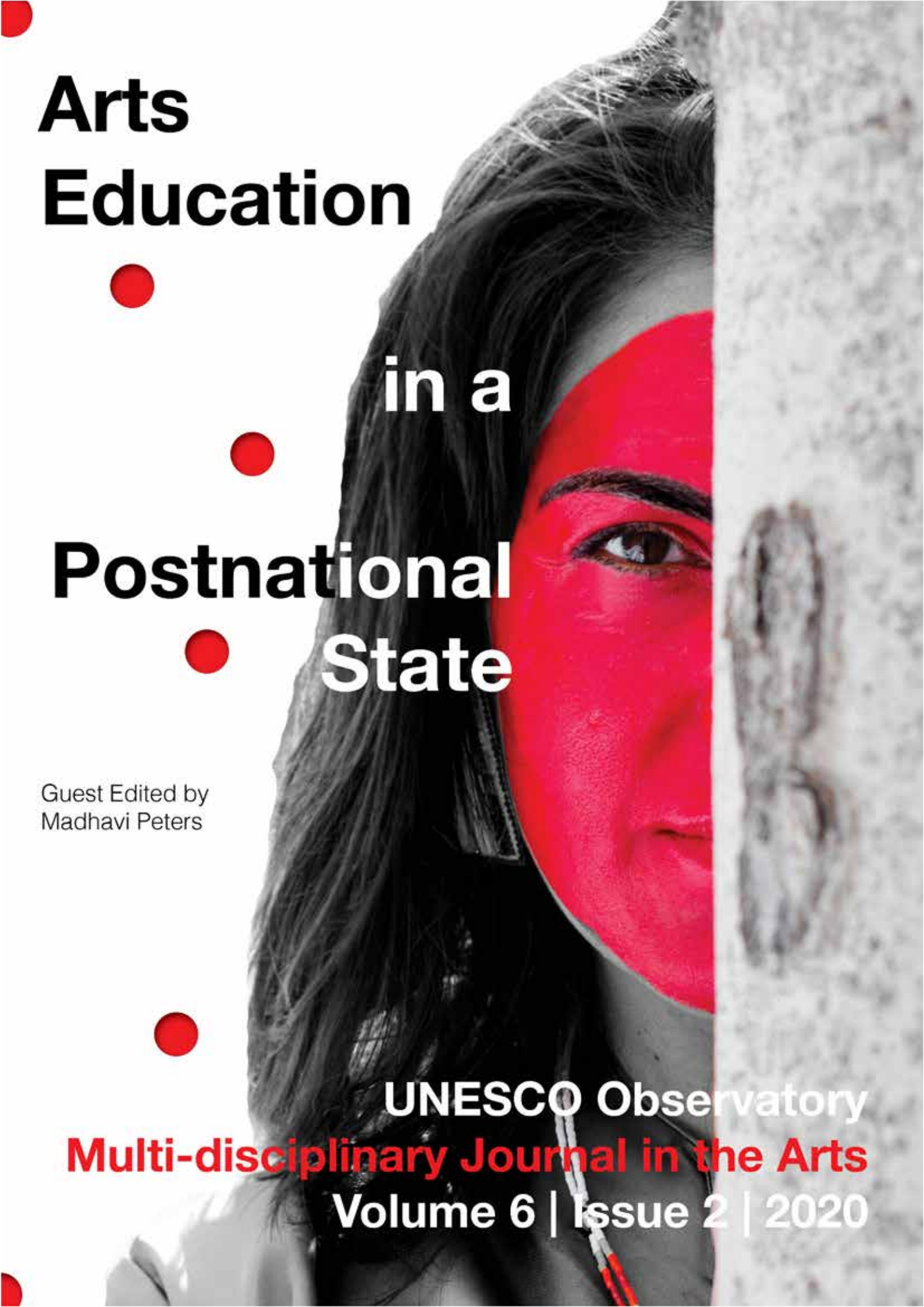
Arts Education in a Postnational State



Guest Edited by
Madhavi Peters

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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
'Apîtaw-Picîkwas' (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, 'Picîkwas'.

Cover page design:
Seraphina Nicholls

Heritage Documentation and Impacting Social Change in Alberta

Soni Dasmohapatra

BIOGRAPHY

Soni Dasmohapatra was born and raised in southside Edmonton. After completing her Bachelor of Arts at the University of Alberta, she moved to Toronto. Soni was involved in supporting social innovation and philanthropy work at the community level, with organisations such as the City of Toronto, United Way Toronto, Laidlaw and Maytree Foundations. Soni also worked as a senior project manager with the Government of Ontario and as a consultant with the United Nations. Since returning to Edmonton, she has worked with the Governmnet of Alberta and is a core team member at the Edmonton ShiftLab 1.0. As a recent master's in public administration graduate, Soni is keen to map Alberta's ecosystems to find, contribute and create spaces of social innovation.

In 2019, the Senate of Canada released a report, Cultural diplomacy at the front stage of Canada's foreign policy. The report's main conclusion was that cultural diplomacy should be a pillar of Canada's foreign policy, as the arts and culture are foreign policy assets. However, the Canadian government's interest in cultural diplomacy has been inconsistent over the years: initiatives have been undertaken, to only then be phased out. Nonetheless, Canadian artists, writers and cultural organizations have themselves never stopped projecting the country's culture and arts internationally.

A key recommendation of this report was the development of Canada's brand, but what exactly is that brand? While it may appear that who and what is a Canadian is straightforward, the reality reveals itself to be more complex when we examine who is sharing Canadian heritage narratives locally, nationally and internationally.

Canadian Heritage can be identified as human heritage, built heritage and geographic heritage. Heritage designation is assigned by the federal Gatineau-based Department of Canadian Heritage. Obviously, there is a subjective component to the process of determining what has cultural significance to a multicultural nation, as it begs the question, culturally significant to whom?

For example, the process of identification of sites of geographic heritage could include criteria beyond those based on aesthetic or scientific value, to include considerations of Indigenous peoples' histories, or exceptional vulnerability due to climate change and other social and economic impacts.

This paper exhorts heritage practitioners to critically examine power structures in order to name unconscious or conscious biases in their historiography. The goal in creating disruption is to expose and deconstruct the processes that continue to exclude different segments of Canadian society.

Many Canadians are familiar with neither the history of how Canada became a nation nor the exclusionary laws that led to the contemporary Canadian polity. It is important to share this history so that Canada can improve its cultural diplomacy locally, nationally and internationally.

The Case of Alberta

The geographical focus of the current investigation will be the western Canadian province of Alberta, where the author practices. It is important to understand the history of this province as part of a narrative that feeds into the national identity.

What is the dominant narrative around Alberta that generations of heritage practitioners will document for the general public to know and learn? To readers unfamiliar with Canada, Alberta, with its oil and natural gas industries, rugged landscape, agricultural based economy, cattle ranchers and rodeos, is often perceived as the Canadian 'Wild West'.

But who has written this historical narrative, and who will write the contemporary Alberta heritage narratives?

Are there checks and balances in place to ensure that this narrative is inclusive, or is there a danger of an exclusionary narrative being written that will leave people behind?

When writing the histories that inform the present and future connections and identities of communities, there must be a recognition of who holds the power to decide which truth and story to tell. Critical thinking has to be implemented to identify whether this power has been shared to include those voices not typically included or considered.

Heritage practitioners should ask if explicit efforts have been made to identify good practices and to plan archiving and documentation strategies that critically identify the unconscious biases that could occur in the process of capturing the heritage narrative. It is the ethical duty of heritage practitioners to examine these biases and be reflective of the chronicles of Indigenous peoples and the non-European settler diasporas who have played an equally significant role in shaping the Canadian polity.

The critical task in equitably designed heritage documentation is to constantly identify who holds power and privilege in the process. In order to understand where the starting point is for creating social innovation projects that lead to social change, it is important to understand Alberta's history and the impact of colonization in Alberta.

Albertans who are invested in creating inclusive spaces for understanding the current state of heritage studies must examine their commitment to unpacking historical narratives that have shaped Alberta's current social, political, legal, cultural and economic realities.

Discussion

As a heritage practitioner, most of my work is behind the scenes, and I don't often get the chance to directly engage with the public. That changed when I recently had the opportunity to work with my nine-year old son's class to create an alternative history lesson for the Alberta unit in their social studies curriculum.

Following my research for this exercise, I came to the conclusion that the historical narratives of exclusion in Canada's and Alberta's history are not common knowledge.

The research findings also corroborated my own experiences as a woman of colour born and raised in Alberta. I have come to realize that the lack of understanding of Canada's historical origins continues to create systemic and structural barriers that prevent the realization of equity, diversity, accessibility and inclusion in the Alberta heritage sector today.

I am not an Indigenous person nor an Indigenous scholar; however, as a person who was born and raised in Canada it is important for me to understand the true history of this land. The history of 'Turtle Island', as the Indigenous communities refer to Canada, is rich and deep, in existence long before the 'New World' was discovered by European colonizers. Turtle Island has been built by and is home to thriving Indigenous communities who have sophisticated systems of social, cultural, legal and economic ways of being. This narrative is often missing from Canadian history books, especially those used in the school system, and from our contemporary understanding of Alberta.

Instead, the historical narrative school children are most familiar with is that of the political entity that emerged from colonial conquest and that was divided between the European nations of France and Britain. In 1867, Canada's first prime minister, Scotsman Sir John A. Macdonald declared the Canadian confederation. This event becomes the memory that supersedes all political, economic, social and cultural systems before this time.

An alternate history of Alberta, one written with the above-identified critical perspectives, might run as follows:

> *In 1876, the Indian Act was implemented. This act prohibited Indigenous peoples from living on their land, implementing their legal systems, practicing their cultural and spiritual traditions, and speaking and nurturing the many Indigenous languages that originated on Turtle Island. The Indian Act has impacted all Canadians and Indigenous peoples in the past and present, and will continue to do so into the future.*

At the time of the Indian Act, Canada was committed to a vision of 'White Canada Forever'. This is documented in the archival footage shared in Ali Kazimi's 2004 film Continuous Journey. While Canada's founding fathers were on a mission to build the country by bringing in immigrants, they sought only white British immigrants, in service of their vision. There were explicit federal immigration laws put in place to prevent immigration and settlement in Canadian cities and provinces like Edmonton and Alberta for various communities of colour. Laws such as the Chinese Head Tax, Continuous Journey Regulation and Order in Council '1911-1324', which gave the power for Canadian Immigration agents to build a concerted campaign to block black settlement in Canada, are examples of how Canada's nation-building excluded many communities of colour.[1]

It is instructive how few Albertans are aware of the following historical facts that challenge the exclusionary narrative of a white Alberta settled by peoples of European descent from 1867 onwards:

- Amber Valley was a community of peoples of African descent that settled just outside of Edmonton in the early 1900s;
- The first person from the Indian subcontinent settled in Edmonton circa 1907;
- Chinatowns were established in Alberta in the late 1800s; and
- The first mosque built in Canada was built in Alberta in the 1930s.

Figure 1
Between 1900-1911, about 1500 Black Americans came to the Canadian prairies from the United States. Many of them settled in Amber Valley, Alberta.
Source: Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21.

Figure 2
Harnam Hari Singh, a farmer of Indian heritage who arrived in Alberta circa 1907.
Source: Asian Heritage Calgary

Challenges in Disrupting Heritage Documentation

Through my role as a core lab team member of the Edmonton Shift Lab 1.0, I have had the opportunity to be part of a social innovation lab (supported by the Edmonton Community Foundation) that convenes diverse social justice-oriented entrepreneurs to originate prototypes that can address the complex issues that arise from systemic exclusion via equity-based solutions.

Being a disruptor is dangerous. The tension that arises from identifying inequity is emotionally and spiritually taxing for those comfortable with the status quo.

In heritage documentation processes, sometimes this tension is received well, and commitments are made to move through this challenge and emerge with unexpected outcomes. Other times, the dialogue is shut down due to discomfort.

Canadian social norms value politeness and political correctness, and the collective psyche is typically offended when Canadians are called out for being racist or homophobic, or for having legislation and policies that create structural barriers that promote inequity. As a result, the disruptor, rather than the system, is often labelled as the problem. Therefore, a person who challenges groupthink is likely to be censured. This creates considerable disincentive for the identification of points of entry to name structural barriers.

There are instances when group mistrust prevails, and the process does not move forward but ends. Sometimes there is more power residing with one type of group, who takes over as they are seen as ‘experts’ in the field of heritage studies. The latter perpetuates experiences of exclusion and does little to promote the actualization of diversity, inclusion, equity and accessibility.

Canadian heritage institutions have the right intentions to address gaps in equity and inclusion; however, the current systems are often rigid and not malleable to incorporate meaningful systemic change to address inequity. The organization as a whole needs to be invested in implementing change models that are not tokenistic solutions. Resources and long term planning are required to fully implement a meaningful organizational change strategy that can expose the gaps in order to provide solutions. The commitment to make this happen has to be organization-wide and cannot be limited to hiring a diversity officer or the human resources department. This concept is very new, and heritage organizations need to take time to explore what is realistic and what is a waste of resources in the realization of equity.

Suggested Best Practices in Heritage Documentation

In conclusion, I offer a series of questions that heritage practitioners can ask themselves in order to identify whether the heritage archiving or documentation process they are creating are truly ensuring that inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility are being realized:

- Who is being included or excluded to develop the narratives that capture your region's heritage story?
- How does this influence who is part of organizational decision making, documentation and knowledge transfer?
- How does your heritage sector define community voice?
- Which community voices are validated, respected and documented, and which ones are not heard? Why?

It is an onerous process, but it is only by repeatedly asking these questions and checking for inclusivity at every step of the process that we can develop a heritage narrative that is significant to *all* members of a community.

Notes

1. For more on diverse heritage narratives and immigration stories, please refer to the website of the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21: www.pier21.ca

References

Senate of Canada Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade 2019, Cultural diplomacy at the front stage of Canada's foreign policy, Senate of Canada, Ottawa, viewed. 8 Feb. 2020 <https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/421/AEFA/Reports/Report_CulturalDiplomacy_e.pdf>