

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 white wall with a faint, grey handprint. The background is white with several red circles of varying sizes scattered across it.

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

'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:
Seraphina Nicholls

Arts Education in a Postnational State: An Introduction

Madhavi M Peters Esq

BIOGRAPHY

Madhavi M Peters, Esq is a writer, connector, change-maker and lawyer who divides her time between Toronto and Southeast Asia. She is the personification of the global citizen and is fluent in six languages, having grown up on three continents. Naturally, this has made her obsessed with the concept of roots (quite literally), which led her to found The Tropicalist (www.thetropicalist.press), an organization that runs environmental education projects in the Himalayas and in Southeast Asia. She also produces and co-hosts the Reorient! Podcast on current affairs in Asia and has written extensively on Asian culture. She has been a docent at the Aga Khan Museum of Islamic Art in Toronto and the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. She was also twice a speaker at the Gallery Weekend, Kuala Lumpur.

The past year has not been a good one for those of us who still believe in the open societies of the liberal democratic ideal. The frightening speed with which localized viruses such as the SARS-CoV-2 can evolve into global pandemics highlight the considerable challenges of a world with open borders and a highly mobile population.

Add to this other concerns, such as unfettered and secretive global capital flows, a virtual world highly susceptible to attacks from malevolent anonymous actors, a perceived lack of accountability in governance structures, environmental catastrophes with worldwide repercussions, and so on. It's unsurprising that the public at large feels a loss of control and the urge to retreat into the safety of the familiar. After all, according to the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, humans can comfortably maintain stable social relationships with no more than a hundred and fifty people. Yet our world now demands that we extend a sense of empathy to seven billion people.

Globalization's cheerleaders thought that it would bring an end to history and the nation state. How wrong they were!

All is not lost, however.

Like that one small village of indomitable Gauls, there is a frozen corner of the world where the spirit of openness is alive and well: Canada.

Here, in the face of jingoistic nationalism resurgent elsewhere, upon becoming the prime minister in 2015, Justin Trudeau cast Canada as the 'first postnational state', a place where 'there is no core identity, no mainstream' (as quoted in Lawson). Who could forget the image of Trudeau greeting Syrian refugees with open arms at the airport, even as the rest of the world closed its doors? This powerful gesture telegraphed to the world that anyone could be Canadian, should he or she so choose. They did not have to look, speak or worship a certain way.

Still, even postnational states must rely on the traditional machinery of the nation state to be functional, and this requires finding some common ground and purpose with an imagined community (Anderson 1983).

This is where the arts play a crucial role, for what are the arts if not the stories we tell about ourselves? The visual arts, literature, music and architecture, all of them have a role to play in helping diverse and disparate individuals to slowly coalesce into a common 'we'. Our shared appreciation of a great painting, song, book or movie helps us find common ground and imagine each other as members of a community.

Dr Jérôme Pruneau of the Montréal-based organization Diversité Artistique Montréal provides an example of the power that art wields in defining a common identity in his essay 'Artistic and cultural equity in a postnational state: the exception of Québec'. In 1968, the Québécois playwright Michel Tremblay chose to use Joul, the basilectal Québec French associated with the French-speaking working classes in Montréal, rather than standard French, in his play *Les Belles Soeurs*. The choice of Joul validated the notion of Québec as a separate nation within Canada, based on the unique language spoken by the Québécois.

When we talk about the role of the arts in nation building, we must consider both artistic heritage and contemporary art. One feeds into the other, of course, as contemporary art works are more likely to enjoy state patronage when they bolster heritage narratives. This is why it is important to examine which art gets heritage designation, which artists make it into the history books and which art gets to define who we are as a people: none of these decisions are politically neutral.

This is all the more so for a young state like Canada, with an official policy of multiculturalism and where heritage narratives are still fluid. As Soni Dasmohapatra, a grants coordinator at the Edmonton Heritage Council in Alberta, writes in her essay 'Heritage documentation and impacting social change in Alberta', when we examine who gets to write the heritage narratives in Canada, the picture that emerges is a homogenous one, and to that extent, the Canadian heritage narrative finds more resonance with certain groups of stakeholders over others.

Consider that 21.9% of the Canadian population is foreign born, 17.7% are second-generation immigrants and 22.3% are visible minorities. Between 2011 and 2016 alone, over one million immigrants arrived in Canada. One would think that in such a multicultural state, it is all the more imperative that the heritage narrative resonates with the majority of stakeholders: for that to happen, however, a concerted and systemic effort must be made to include a diversity of voices upstream.

(For what it's worth, artistic heritage may not be a settled question in the established nation states of Europe either. Witness the controversy that arose when Mary Beard, a classics professor at Cambridge University, confirmed that Roman-era Britain was ethnically diverse. Were this view of Britain's past to gain wider acceptance, it would demand that the guardians of British culture take another look at what gets to be designated as British heritage.)

Dr Attariwala, like several other authors in this issue, also believes that Canada's reckoning with its past injustices towards its Indigenous peoples, via the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, will have positive implications for inclusivity overall.

Crafting a more widely resonant heritage narrative is no easy task, however. In their essay 'The UnSilent Project: holding creative tensions through interdisciplinary arts collaboration', Barbara Smith and Kate Eccles of the National Youth Orchestra of Canada document the process of creating a work of art commemorating Canada's 150th anniversary, no less, that would also acknowledge Canada's pre-colonial Indigenous history. The challenges were numerous. First, none of the musicians in the National Youth Orchestra were Indigenous; second, sponsors included investment companies with interests in oil pipelines and uranium mining companies that were the target of vigorous Indigenous land rights protests; third, for Canada's Indigenous population, the 150th anniversary of the founding of an often hostile Canadian state was no cause for celebration. Nonetheless, by reaching out to and collaborating with Indigenous artistic partners, the final work was — if not entirely uncontroversial — a first and significant step towards a more inclusive narrative.

Simultaneous to the task of acknowledging Canada's Indigenous heritage in official narratives is the task of bringing 'New Canadian' (i.e., more recent immigrants) stakeholders on board with this Indigenization. Elliott Young, the Indigenous Community Engagement Officer at NorQuest College in Edmonton, Alberta, from the Ermineskin Cree Nation explains what this means in practice, in his essay, 'Small steps and the occasional leap in Indigenizing NorQuest College'.

At NorQuest, architecture becomes the artistic medium through which a sense of community can be imagined. A majority of NorQuest's students are recent arrivals to Canada. It is unlikely that these New Canadians are familiar with the complex relationship between the Canadian state and its Indigenous peoples. Within the four walls of the Indigenous Student Centre, a dedicated space for Indigenization that is built in a circle with a seven-point star to reflect Cree sacred teachings, the oldest of Canadians are able to share their arts and culture with the youngest of Canadians. The guiding principle in this activity is *Wahkôhtowin*, a Cree word meaning, 'we are all related'.

Long before the nation state came into existence, Indigenous peoples around the world used art in all its forms—storytelling, drawing, carving, music etc.—to create a sense of stewardship of a place. The Toronto-based P.I.N.E. Project continues this tradition, using music, storytelling and other forms of creative activity to foster a connection to the natural landscape of the Greater Toronto Area.

Hannah Dobrowski, an educator with the P.I.N.E. Project, describes in her essay, 'Being more, needing less: fostering a nature connection through art', how an arts-based nature education transcends national origin, culture and mother tongue, making the reader wonder whether, in the postnational state, this is sort the arts education we should be aiming for in our age.

The challenges inherent in the postnational model become more pronounced when incorporating voices from diasporic or ethnocultural groups with ties to nation states or cultures that the majority perceives as posing a threat to Western hegemony.

The Aga Khan Museum of Islamic Art in Toronto does a brilliant job of finding themes within Islamic culture that coincide with and bolster the liberal values of the West, such that Islamic heritage narratives can be seamlessly integrated within the wider Canadian heritage narrative. In her essay 'Looking back and looking forward: the first education programs at the Aga Khan Museum', Patricia Bentley, the education manager at the Aga Khan Museum of Islamic Art in Toronto at its inception, writes, how the designers of the museum's educational curriculum took their inspiration from the city of Toronto itself, a city of neighbourhoods with a diverse population. They found that it was possible to have a global point of view at the same time as being deeply embedded in local communities.

While the Aga Khan Museum focuses on art history to challenge stereotypes, Dr Henry Heng Lu, the curator of Centre A, an Asian Canadian art gallery in Vancouver, does the same via contemporary art. The lack of acknowledgement of Canadians of Chinese descent, who have immigrated to Canada in several waves, the earliest dating back to before the declaration of the Canadian Confederation, in the historical narrative is a persistent blind spot for the colonial settler states of North America.

In his essay 'Chinese diaspora in Canada: Chinese Canadian art as an apparatus of revisiting history', Dr Lu explores the Canadian majority's perceptions of Chinese-ness. Are Canadians of Chinese descent forever condemned to be either the model minority 'other' or a threat to national security? By foregrounding the work of contemporary Chinese Canadian artists grappling with questions of identity via non-traditional artistic media, Dr Lu hopes to educate the art-going public about the nuances of Chinese-ness.

Bringing artists to schools can be a great way to explore what it means to be Canadian via contemporary art. Julieanne Sloman and Monika Wenzel-Curtis, classroom teachers in an arts-based public school in Calgary write about their experiments with this model in their essay 'Speaking up, speaking out'.

The model requires that class teachers lay the groundwork with their students beforehand, following which, the artist will make a series of visits to the classroom where he/ she will collaborate directly with the students to produce a work of art. Needless to say, the model works best when the teacher and artist have developed a working relationship over time. One of their most recent artistic collaborations ended with a spoken word performance in which students expressed their idea of Canada as a space where everyone should have an equal opportunity to find and use their voice.

Another theme that runs through this issue is the beleaguered status of arts education within the public school system, given our current obsession with STEM subjects. Curiously, the decline of support for the arts within the public education system seems to correspond with an increase in the diversity of the general population. As they are absent from decision-making positions within the public education system, perhaps parents from non-Anglophone/Francophone ethnocultural groups prefer to educate their children in their respective cultural heritages via their own ethnocultural organizations, many of which are eligible for public funding.

Dr Gillian Kydd would argue otherwise, that the arts do have an important role to play in the public education system. In her essay 'What do you notice: taking schools to art', Dr Kydd, who is a science educator by training, describes an innovative program that she pioneered, which allows schools to use art galleries as classrooms for up to a week at a time. The skills of observation, visualization and description that the students learn while sketching a work of art in a gallery, for example, are applicable across disciplines and are equally invaluable in the sciences.

While the question of its own arts curriculum remains unsettled, the postnational state can provide a neutral space to heal the wounds of nation states. In her essay 'I want to tell you a story: reflecting on the practice of teaching the Sri Lankan genocide in Toronto', the Sinhalese Canadian poet Dr Aparna Halpé reflects on her experience of teaching literature to a classroom of Tamil Canadians. Here, arts education in the postnational state becomes a means of brokering an understanding between warring diasporic communities that is not otherwise available to them in their nation of origin.

The issue ends with an essay by Jan Wong, a well-known journalist and professor of journalism. Ms. Wong is a true citizen of the world, having reported from China and the United States, in addition to Canada. But don't dismiss her as a 'citizen of nowhere', as former British Prime Minister Theresa May might. In her essay 'Post national is not post truth: authenticity and storytelling in a postnational state', Wong drives home the important role that the denizens of a postnational world have to play in telling the stories of the nation.

It is true that the postnationalist worldview is shaped by experiences in multiple nation states; yet, rather than resulting in a selfish nihilism, this very postnationalism throws into relief the contours of a healthy nationalism. As Wong writes, the postnationalist knows that in a well-functioning nation state, art must serve a parrhesiastic function.

While many of the experiences detailed in this issue date from a pre-COVID world, we hope that their spirit, if not their form, will be a source of inspiration not only to arts practitioners and policymakers within Canada, but also to those in other polities, as they attempt to balance the demands of national (or postnational) identity with the cultural needs of a diverse citizenry.

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