

The cover art features a close-up of a woman's face. The right side of her face is covered in bright red face paint, while the left side is in grayscale. Her dark hair is visible on the left. The background is a white, textured surface, possibly a wall or a piece of fabric, with some faint, dark markings. Several red circles of varying sizes are scattered on the white background.

Arts Education

in a

Postnational State

Guest Edited by
Madhavi Peters

UNESCO Observatory
Multi-disciplinary Journal in the Arts
Volume 6 | Issue 2 | 2020

UNESCO Observatory

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.

ISSN 1835 - 2776

UNESCO E-Journal:
an Openly Published Journal affiliated
with The UNESCO Observatory at
The University of Melbourne.

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UNESCO Observatory.

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Endorsed by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education

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

Postnational is not Post Truth: Authenticity and Storytelling in the Postnational State

Jan Wong

BIOGRAPHY

Jan Wong became the first Canadian to study in China during the Cultural Revolution in 1972. In 1989, as Beijing bureau chief for the Toronto Globe and Mail, she covered the uprising at Tiananmen Square. Her first book, *Red China Blues: My Long March from Mao to Now*, was named one of *Time* magazine's top ten books of 1996 and remains banned in China. She is currently a professor of journalism in New Brunswick, in Atlantic Canada.

Critics of postnationalism grumble that it goes hand in hand with moral and cultural relativism, a belief that what one perceives to be true depends on one's culture. By contrast, journalism, the art of observing and capturing authentic human experience via compelling storytelling, rests on the idea that there is an absolute truth out there, waiting for an intrepid reporter to uncover it.

But, in an era when everyone has his or her "own" truth, the concept of a national nightly news broadcast or a national newspaper of record, where the truth is handed down from on high to a passive public seems increasingly quaint. It may not be mere coincidence that there is a proliferation of journalistic platforms at the same time as there is a proliferation of truths.

Innumerable think pieces have already opined on the death spiral of journalism. And it's true that newspapers are closing at an unprecedented rate. Nowadays, news junkies, even a professor of journalism like myself, rely on Twitter for breaking news. But it's important not to confuse the practice of journalism with the business of journalism.

After all, the fourth estate is democracy's lifeblood. As a third-generation Chinese Canadian who grew up in Montréal learning French, not Chinese, as my second language, I never really imbibed this lesson until I became the first Canadian to study in China during Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution. This lesson was further reinforced when I became the first news assistant in the New York Times's Beijing bureau, and later, as a foreign correspondent in China for the Toronto Globe and Mail.

I wasn't just concerned with such freedoms in other countries, however; what I witnessed overseas made this Canadian unusually passionate about quality journalism back home. In newsrooms from Boston to New York to Toronto, I was surrounded by colleagues who had never lived abroad, and whose worldviews were shaped solely by American and Canadian culture. For those who live in a democracy, a free and fair press is like oxygen: you don't notice its absence until you're gasping for air.

And so, even if these are the last days of journalism as my generation knew it, I now teach newsgathering, scepticism and fairness. I teach how to verify facts, unpack complex issues, interview, investigate and speak truth to power. I teach courage, curiosity and caring enough to listen. Above all, I teach my students to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

I teach at a tiny liberal arts university in a small city in Canada's poorest province, where the literacy rate is 50 percent. This lovely community has one movie theatre, one escalator, no Sunday bus service and 58,000 people. Here, people are genuinely friendly, trees outnumber humans, oh, 10,000 to one, the air is crystalline clean and rush hour is a few rush minutes. My students are the sons and daughters of fishermen, sawmill workers and soldiers. They are often the first in their families to attend university. It's refreshing when these students hold open doors for me, disheartening when they equate asking questions with being rude.

In my classroom, I create breaking-news simulations, working with a drama professor whose students perform improv while mine report and write. Scenarios include lay-offs at the power utility, a shooting outside a pub, an apartment building on fire and city hall staffers accusing a deputy mayor of workplace harassment. During the 45-minute simulations, the other professor and I eavesdrop, observe and evaluate. Afterwards, the drama students debrief, and the journalism students have one hour to file their stories, giving them a taste of real-life deadlines. Any misspelled proper nouns result in an automatic zero.

One of scariest assignments I've dreamed up is obituary writing. Journalists mostly dislike them, so as newbies in the newsroom, I know the assignment will land on my students. Obituaries are also a perfect pedagogical exercise. Profiling someone who won't (well, can't) talk forces you to hunt down other sources. Approaching friends or family of the freshly dead requires bravery, sensitivity and resourcefulness. I make my students report the story until they discern a narrative thread. I teach them to scour funeral home websites. I urge them to don a suit or a dress and drop by funeral homes to find cooperative relatives and acquaintances. The lesson is: even under the toughest circumstances, there is always someone willing to talk.

Still, in a small town, gripping story ideas don't present themselves easily. After a few years, I'd grown weary of the story ideas my students put forth, such as the hardship of finding a parking space on campus or the fun of a summer job at Disney World. One day I thought: what if my fourth-year seniors investigated campus sexual assault? It was two years before the #MeToo movement went viral. That day, when I broached the topic in class and asked for volunteers, a dozen hands shot up, comprising half the class, equal numbers of young men and women.

I said we would investigate not just our own university, but an adjacent college and the other university with whom we shared a campus. I warned the investigative team that we faced a credibility problem if we depended too heavily on anonymity. We needed first-person accounts, photographs, video and real names. I explained we had to be empathetic, but also sceptical. We had to corroborate claims. A single mistake would discredit the entire series. I also said this would be a difficult project. Anyone could drop out at any time, without penalty, and resume writing ordinary features like the rest of the class.

Delving into statistics, we discovered that one in three women experience sexual violence; only 5% of sexual assaults are reported to police; and more than half of the victims in Canada were, like my students, under 25. We perused the university's policy on sexual assault. We studied the legal definition of consent.

I saw one young woman whisper something to a classmate. Then she raised her hand. 'I was raped', she said. Four years earlier at an orientation-week event in her residence, she drank too much and stumbled into a stairwell. An upper-year student, paid to supervise the event, steered her to her dorm room as she passed out. She awoke the next morning to find him getting dressed in her room. In shock, she asked what had happened. They'd had sex, he said, and warned if she told anyone, he would tell everyone she was a slut. She kept her mouth shut, eventually confiding only in her boyfriend, who cried, blamed her — "How could you do this to me?" — and broke up with her.

Until this moment, my student had never understood consent. Now she was willing to tell her story using her real name and even make a video. Her courage electrified our class of aspiring investigative reporters, who wondered how to find other victims. 'For the next 48-hours', I said, 'ask everyone you bump into: "Have you or anyone you know been sexually assaulted?"' By the next class, they had found five more. Only two requested anonymity.

When they learned that we would be publishing the story on the journalism department's website, the university raised a series of objections. Perhaps they feared bad publicity. Perhaps it worried nervous parents would send their daughters elsewhere. But wasn't a cover-up worse? By reporting on the problem, we could warn students of the risks. We could save some of them from getting raped. Perhaps we could even spark change.

"The university is going to come down hard on you," warned an older professor in the sociology department, whom I had approached for advice. "You should ask your colleagues for their support." There were only two other tenured professors in journalism. Neither had lived or worked outside the Maritimes. One professor predicted it would end badly. He said our students weren't mature enough to handle the subject matter. The other, on sabbatical, labelled the project unethical. He sent scolding emails saying it would tarnish the journalism department's reputation. He threatened to resign.

At first, I was baffled. Only now, in hindsight, I realize that contrary to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's assertions about postnationalism in Canada, parochialism is still alive and well here. "You think we're bumpkins", one of the men once accused me. At the time I demurred, stunned. I had moved here without preconceived notions. I had made good friends, including a circle of local women who invited me into their Tuesday evening group. 'Sewing', as we called it, had been meeting for forty years.

Here I was, a brash outsider, a cosmopolitan mishmash of cultural influences, advocating for unearthing the truth in my little city. Meanwhile, to my two colleagues, esteemed members of the in-group, my truth-seeking grated against their cultural norms.

Nevertheless I persisted. For ten weeks, my students reported and wrote a thirteen-part series on campus sexual assault. They even interviewed one of the alleged rapists, a varsity athlete, who casually opined that the sex had been consensual and was a he-said, she-said situation. The athlete's parents then complained to the university. Their lawyer sent a threatening letter. I needed a lawyer too, at least to conduct a libel read, the standard step before publication. I had no budget, and hunted for someone pro bono, in vain. The university offered its outside counsel, which was good and bad. At least I had some legal help. But the lawyer, who dealt mainly with corporate work, was unfamiliar with libel reads, thus creating a protracted review (and a hefty bill). Also, the university - and potentially censor - could now monitor every word of our story before publication.

The journalist in me was fascinated by the university's reluctance to run the story. I was summoned by the administration for multiple tense one-on-one chats. I was ordered to submit the project to the university's ethics review board, required of the social sciences—sociology, psychology, anthropology, criminology and the like—for any research involving human subjects.

But journalism is not a social science. Moreover, you'd never make a deadline if you had to go through a review board to report a story. Still, I dutifully inquired of the policy at four respected journalism schools: Ottawa's Carleton University, Halifax's University of King's College, Toronto's Ryerson University and my alma mater, Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. All four replied that journalism is not, and has never been, under the purview of the ethics review board. And my own university's ethics review board quickly agreed.

All this delay put the investigative team in an impossible position. We kept reassuring our stressed-out, panicky victims that their stories would be told—without knowing whether we would ever be allowed to publish. One young woman couldn't stand the wait; she withdrew her permission to let us use her real name (although she said we could still publish her story).

After weeks went by without a response from the university, a senior member of the administration finally came to our class to speak with the team of student reporters directly. He addressed the students in a sincere and serious tone. The university is there for victims, he said. If only the students had come to him first, he could have told them how to talk to victims. Someone asked how many victims had come to his office? None, he admitted.

The students impressed upon him their desire to run the story. Ultimately, he capitulated, and the story was finally published on our website on the last day of classes, the Thursday before Good Friday. That Easter long weekend, the student reporters stayed in close touch with the victims. We monitored online responses for hate mail, but to our relief there were only congratulatory messages from professional journalists across Canada. No corrections or clarifications were required. The victims all expressed relief at getting their stories out. I should have thanked the university for a real-life education in what can happen when journalists attempt to shine a light into dark corners.

The article (no longer on the university website, but readers can access it at <https://fogofrape.wordpress.com/>) was nominated for two national awards, by the Canadian Association of Journalists and Emerge Media. We won first prize in the latter.

The word “postnational”, like “postmodern”, often gets bandied about like a bad word, a sign of the essential nihilism of our age. But the very basis of postnationalism is values — universal ones to which we can all subscribe, regardless of our heritage, in accordance with Prime Minister Trudeau’s vision. I may have been the rootless outsider at my little community; yet, my experiences in cultures half a world away taught me that truth is a transcendental value. And this is what I try to pass on to my students.

Last summer the university offered me a suspiciously generous retirement deal. I was turning 68. After nine years of teaching, I’m leaving without regrets. My top graduates are working in the field. I’m also tired of explaining the art of writing an obituary. As I said at the beginning, our society, our democracy, our way of life, require a vibrant journalism industry. I’ve done what I can. The rest is up to consumers of our craft. In other words, you the reader.