

A Cosmopolitan Imagination: Reimagining National Identity through Art

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Biography

Rita L. Irwin is an artist, researcher, and teacher deeply committed to the arts and education. She is Professor of Art Education in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada and has been an educational leader for a number of provincial, national, and international organizations. While Rita's research interests include arts teacher education, artist-in-residence programs, and sociocultural issues, she is best known for her work in expanding how we might imagine and conduct arts practice-based research methodologies through collaborative and community-based collectives.

Natalie LeBlanc is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of British Columbia, where she recently completed her PhD in Curriculum Studies, specializing in Art Education. Natalie has taught a wide range of art and media in a variety of cultural and educational settings in addition to teaching generalist and visual art specialist educators in UBC's post-baccalaureate program. Her research is led by her artistic practice and her work is concerned with examining the pedagogical potential of contemporary art and the intersections between art-making, research, philosophy, and teaching.

Abstract

In this visual essay, we explore the potentiality of the arts for reflecting upon and provoking complex understandings of contemporary national identity and

we explore a set of cosmopolitan practices and positions that enhance the quality of teaching and learning in various educational settings. As part of a three-year study entitled, *O Canada! Reimagining Canadian Identity: A Cosmopolitan Approach to Teaching and Learning*, we draw from arts-based engagements in an artist-in-residence program, investigating how art can create a space for exploring and strengthening identification with place.

Keywords

Arts-Based Research; National Identity; Cosmopolitanism

In this visual essay, we examine the potentiality of the arts for reflecting upon and provoking complex understandings of contemporary national identity and we explore a set of cosmopolitan practices and positions that enhance the quality of teaching and learning in educational settings. As part of a three-year study entitled, *O Canada! Reimagining Canadian Identity: A Cosmopolitan Approach to Teaching and Learning*, we draw from two arts-based engagements that occurred in an experimental artist-in-residence project in which we are investigating how art can create a space for exploring and strengthening identification with place. This is particularly potent given that 2017 was Canada's 150th anniversary as a country. Artist-residencies provided a uniquely evocative artistic-intellectual platform to reflect upon individual and collective identities through artistic collaborations.

Situating the Inquiry

In 2017, artists were invited into classrooms at the University of British Columbia to engage teacher candidates in a series of artistic and educational experiences that encouraged them to think about what it means to be Canadian during such an important time in history. These events

occurred in educational courses spanning the visual arts, language arts, music and drama. As a research-creation project, the residencies created opportunities for teacher candidates, artists, instructors, and researchers involved in the project, to think, rethink, and to think again.

The images presented here depict two different artist-in-residence experiences. One is with our teacher candidates when a drama/theatre artist worked with a group of secondary teacher candidates as they performed various processes that assisted them in investigating their ideas on Canadian identity. The other depicts an experience in which the research team, comprised of the both of us, joined by Drs. Peter Gouzouasis, George Belliveau, Carl Leggo, Ching-Chiu Lin, and visiting scholars Michael Anderson from the University of Australia and Peter O'Connor from the University of Auckland. In this situation, we came together to think about the artist-in-residences that took place at our university over the past year and we thought creatively about cosmopolitanism, the arts and education as we lingered around the notion of what it means to be Canadian, from local and global perspectives.

Cosmopolitanism, or cosmopolitan studies (Pinar, 2009), in the context of curriculum theory, is at the forefront of our artistic research project. Cosmopolitan studies have become a growing research area concerned with ways of imagining a world that emphasizes inclusivity (Delanty, 2012). Cosmopolitanism involves being open to new people, ideas, values, and practices in an educational space that cannot predict or prescribe how the encounter will affect or transform us or others in the process (Hansen, 2014). In this sense, being cosmopolitan requires individuals embrace hybridity, appreciate diversity, and engage with otherness. Approaching cosmopolitanism in light of a larger framework of analysis, we consider artist-in-residences as sites where artists, students, teachers, and researchers may experience “moments of openness” (Delanty, 2009, p. 53), enacting cultural and/or social transformation.

The Artistic Interventions

What does it mean to be Canadian today? Beck (2002) discusses a *cosmopolitan imagination* as “an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities” (p. 18). This has been a useful concept for thinking about Canadian identity during our artistic residencies. Canada is a country that has been proud of its multicultural policies. However, multiculturalism reinforces boundaries and the preservation of inherent differences based on cultural heritages while cosmopolitanism seeks to bridge borders and boundaries. In many ways, cosmopolitanism proposes a new humanism by fostering “complex understandings of equal moral standings and of civic and political commitments to all humans of the world” (Hebert, 2013, p. 15). Thus, being an immigrant nation in a world of constant change, Canada is in a critical era that demands a new discourse on Canadian identity in which we are encouraged to envision the world through sensitivity to the interrelationships among cultures.

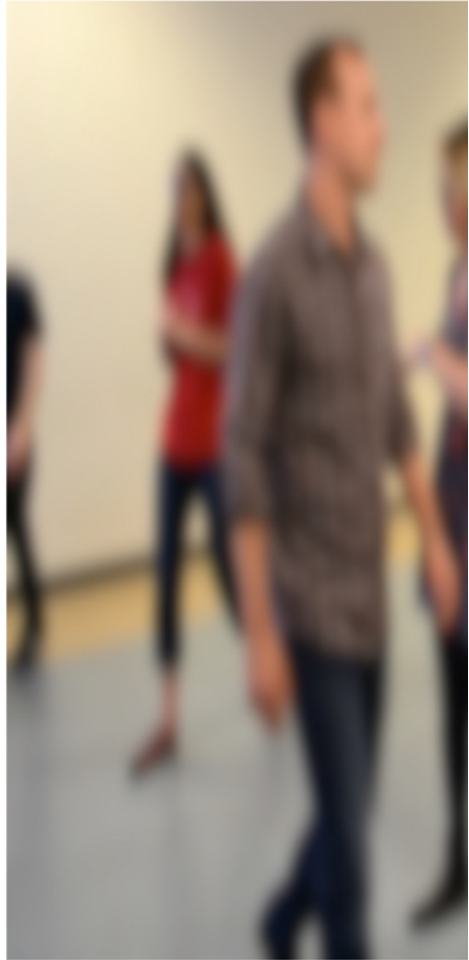
The arts have long been at the nexus of nation building in Canada, with artists actively engaging in creating visions of democracy as they seek to challenge the taken-for-granted conventions, beliefs and values that govern the society. For example, the Group of Seven, Canada’s most recognized artists, inspired many Canadians to experience the inextricable relations between the Canadian landscape and nation building through their engagement with the arts. While the connection between landscape and nationalism remains a critical and complicated subject tackled by many contemporary Canadian artists, the arts are often overlooked as potential sources of transformation related to Canadian identity in educational settings.

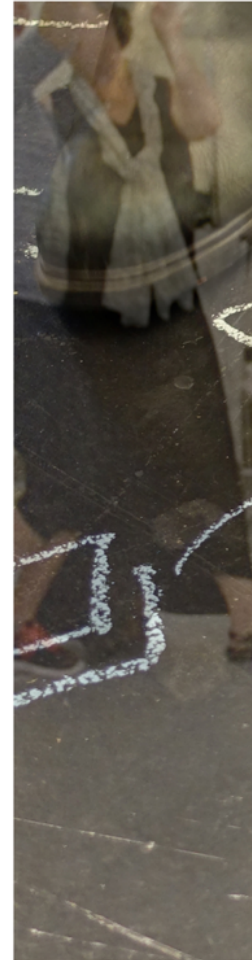
In a drama workshop, teacher candidates with little to no prior experience in theatre, were introduced to the concept of ‘viewpoint,’ emphasizing the idea that in drama education, especially for K-Grade 7, the most important thing to remind students is *not* to act, but rather, to play a character who speaks *from* a specific viewpoint. Teacher candidates shared individual

viewpoints of the Canadian identity – such as being ethical, polite, bland, accepting, apologetic and frustrated. They shared how their viewpoints were framed from their own lived experiences as Canadian residents from different provinces, cities, and towns as well as being Indigenous or non-Indigenous, and visitors, temporarily studying in Canada from other countries. The dialogue that unfolded allowed each person to speak from a viewpoint and to recognize how everyone in the class had a viewpoint that was different from their own.

This event as well as others were later discussed with the research team who drew out major themes, ideas, and concepts from the artistic residencies in chalk on a large floor of a theatre studio located on campus. During this exercise, the researchers began intervening with these words and with each other by erasing, blending, and in some cases, adding letters and creating new words or concepts for us to consider. By performing this act together, on UBC campus – on the unceded and traditional territories of the x^wməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations – this experience reinforced our connections to Canada and it situated our viewpoints in place, but also to this very particular place with a deep and tumultuous history. Seeing and listening to what each of us were saying and doing, and to the juxtapositions in-between, allowed us to recognize, to question and to consider how identities are shaped, played out, mapped out, blurred, erased, and performed in place and also in time, and how art can become a pivotal platform for exchange and connection.



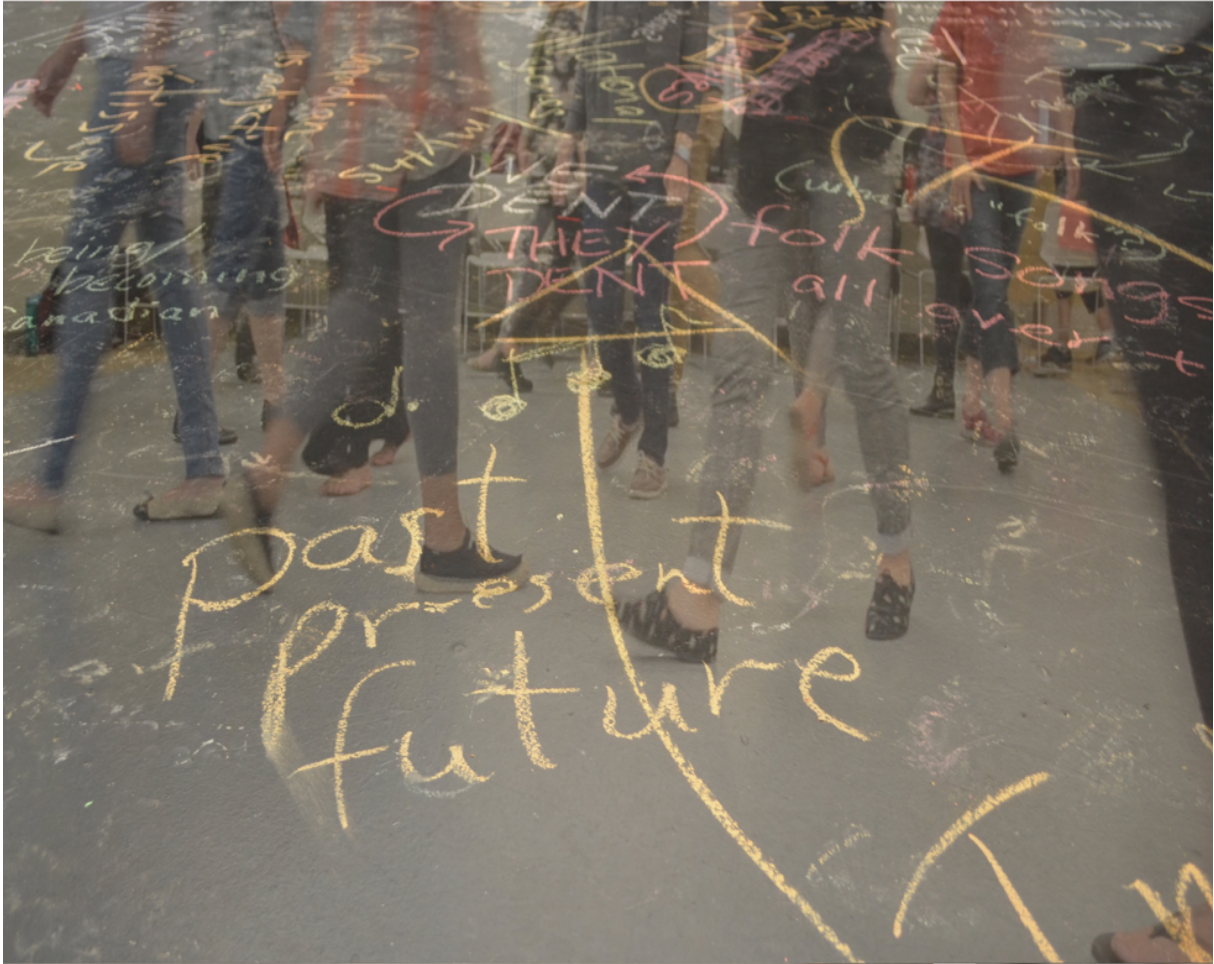


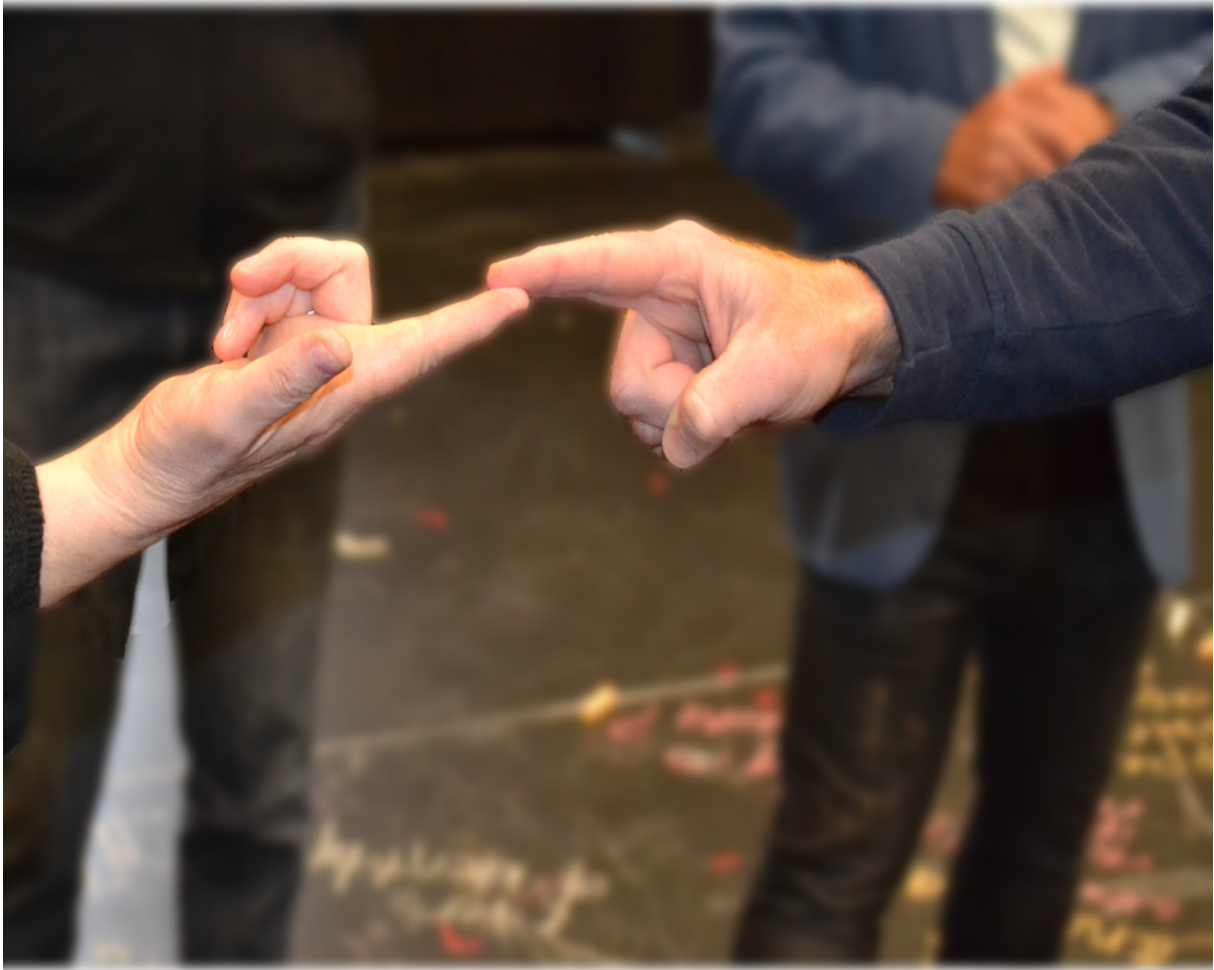












Towards a Cosmopolitan Imagination

Our events brought forth an understanding of how teaching and learning can be harnessed by the imagination in pursuit of a cosmopolitan teacher education. Addressing a cosmopolitan imagination is critical not only because imagination is “the key component of the global order” (p. 33), but also because “imagination is today a staging ground for action” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 7) that allows educators to cultivate students’ moral sensitivity, dialogical capacity and active citizenship. By working with artists, we created artistic and pedagogical interventions that contribute to “a critical dialogue between ethical responsibility, locational identity and cosmopolitan imagination” (Meskimmon, 2011, p. 5). We consider *cosmopolitan imagination* as “an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of the other” (Beck, 2002, p. 18), thus providing an analytical framework for envisioning and conceptualizing Canadian identity from the perspective of *the other*.

These images help us think creatively about cosmopolitanism. As we celebrate Canada 150, we ask: how might we recognize and celebrate our differences as we focus on fostering an understanding of the other, thus rethinking what it means to be Canadian in a globalizing world? We believe the artist-in-residence experiences encouraged students, teachers and artists alike, to embrace knowing as a way to appreciate a cosmopolitan understanding of difference. While the experience may not have been long enough to inspire social action, drawing attention to the diversity of experiences helps everyone begin to embrace a cosmopolitan imagination.

Additionally, the research team, who also experienced the artists-in-residence, had multiple opportunities to think about what it means to be Canadian through meaningful art experiences, opening up spaces for further artistic experimentations. While teacher candidates experienced an openness to otherness, so too did the researchers. We experienced the flexibility of the arts to perceive and conceive in different ways. We too, are coming to a place of openness to

cosmopolitanism.

In closing, we suggest that artists-in-residence programs offer opportunities to provoke conversations between artists, students, teacher candidates, instructors, and researchers as we embrace a cosmopolitan imagination and create engaging, challenging and meaningful art while reflecting upon representations of individual and collective identities through artistic collaborations. The images that we share here act along the lines of contemporary art in which art forms are less about products created in studios and shared with the world, and rather, the artistic practices in which social interaction “proclaims itself as art” (Helguera, 2011, p. 1). While cosmopolitan ideals such as ethics and equality are commonly embraced in Canadian artists’ inquiries into national identity as a subject matter, our work employs artistic practices with pedagogical considerations that ultimately inform our sense of citizenship. While we do not have answers, we have enhanced insights. Our images show our collaborative explorations of a cosmopolitanism imagination.

The overlapping images portray our intentions to search for the complexity in what it means to be Canadian without defining it in any one way – after all – cosmopolitanism celebrates diversity, alterity, hybridity and the blurring of boundaries. Our nation may have celebrated a landmark anniversary, yet we have much work to do as citizens to ensure we work toward even greater understanding of one another and as we attend to the truth and reconciliation efforts underway with our indigenous peoples. Our research will continue and yet at this juncture point, we recognize that it is through a cosmopolitan imagination, enacted through artistic and creative processes that we can apprehend the magnitude of how far we have come and the potential of even more appreciation for diversity to come. Together we can continue to reimagine Canadian identity throughout our lives.

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