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**Us-Them-Us: Artists Interrogate the
Ambivalent Structures of Belonging**

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Us-Them-Us: Artists Interrogate the Ambivalent Structures of Belonging

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Abstract

Us-Them-Us was an exhibition held as part of the pre-conference to the Social Sciences and Humanities Congress 2016 of the Comparative and International Education Society of Canada at the University of Calgary, Alberta. The exhibition included the work of seven artists whose work engage in discourses surrounding identity and belonging. Their works disrupt the normative implicit curriculum of art education with its western, patriarchal bias. They open spaces to explore the intricate choreography that is required to be part of a society. This essay introduces the works in Us-Them-Us that form the visual essays included in this special issue. Each work pulls back the layers of the complex problem. Taken as a whole, they expose the implicit curricula that a society imposes on its members in order that they learn to belong.

Keywords: Implicit Curricula; Art Education; Art as Social Action

Early in 2016, Cecille DePass (Co-Editor of CPI) asked me to put together some artworks to complement the Social Sciences and Humanities Congress pre-conference meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society of Canada, *Another Tea at The Empress: Taking Action! Contesting Colonial Agendas in the Formal/Nonformal Curricula* at the University of Calgary. I knew it was a perfect opportunity to bring together the art work of some my colleagues, our graduate students and alumni in a rich exploration of the meeting's theme. Further, locating the exhibition within the hallways of the Department of Art provided the perfect context for the exhibition: It has been my experience as a post-secondary art instructor that the formal curricular structures and content of university art departments have privileged Western, European definitions of art, favouring so-called Fine Art over supposedly lesser forms of craft. Until only recently, these curricula have been heavily male-centred in content, and have privileged work made by people of European decent. Instructors have also tended to be white men. The instructional spaces in the art departments I have experienced in my 35-year engagement with post-secondary art education tend to be large open rooms wherein students work at easels, tables or drawing donkeys. These spaces make it difficult to teach forms that are not based on European drawing, painting or sculptural modes. In the last 20 years, computer labs have joined the traditional studios within art departments. I suggest their presence reinforces a privileged Western bias. The sheer cost of the hardware and software required to create digital art is beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population who live in poverty. Art, as it has been taught in art departments, is something for those who have, excluding those who have not. It is for Us, not for Them.

Hence, it is often the arts themselves that reproduce the normative images of “us” and the representations of “them” through their formal and informal educational institutions (art schools and museums). The arts can contribute to the continued vitality of colonial structures. However, the arts can also be the lens that exposes the mechanisms of colonization and the structures of its reproduction. Through their research, artists can provide spaces for dialogue and images that move beyond the recursive Us-Them-Us cycle towards a vision of “we.” The exhibition *Us-Them-Us* brought together the work of seven artists from the University of Calgary whose research focuses on the ways that social structures “other” some in order to reproduce the institutions that maintain “our” status quo. They investigate the ambivalence of the us-them relationship, the complex inter-relationships that require separation and an honouring of otherness. Each of the artists approaches the problem from a different perspective, demonstrating the complexity of the phenomenon.

Dick Averns engages in the political landscape of the democratic process in his performance series, *Ambivalence Boulevard*. The recent American election, with its dramatic “primaries” and vicious election campaign caught citizens of the United States in an eddy of nested identifications of us-them dichotomies: Republican-Democrat; Clinton-Sanders; Trump-Cruz; Clinton-Trump; Trump Supporters-Everyone Else. While it is easy for us Canadians to scoff at their shenanigans, is this so very different than the quieter dramas that play themselves out in Canadian politics? Recent carbon tax legislation across the country polarized discussion surrounding climate change and created an entrenched us-them dynamic between environmentalists and the oil and gas sector.

However, in both the American and Canadian contexts, we lose sight of the importance of the ambivalence that is at the heart of the issues. “Ambivalence” means “The state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone.” (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ambivalence>) A democracy, when functioning well encourages mixed feelings and contradictory ideas. It recognizes that the debate these oppositions engender brings growth in a society.

There is no right or wrong direction on a boulevard; it moves necessarily in two directions. While we move along our lane going where we need to go, they move along theirs moving toward their destinations. We respect each other’s presence on the road and work to keep each other safe. The alternative to a boulevard is a one-way street; politically, this is totalitarianism. *Ambivalence Boulevard* provides us with an opportunity to recognize the existence of oppositional positions as a normal and healthy part of the democratic process.

In *Greekopolis*, **Jean René Leblanc** explores the global capitalist economic structures that have come to be seen as “normal.” The Greek word “metropolis” means “mother state”. Greece gave birth to the fundamental values that underpin western culture. However, today Greece is in ruins, literally. The ancient sites that bear witness to one of the greatest empires of the world are not the only ruins one finds in Greece. In *Greekopolis*, Leblanc juxtaposes the contemporary “ruins” of unfinished, abandoned construction with the remains of this formerly powerful empire. Perhaps the ideals and values upon which Western society is founded are in an equal state of destruction? In the last five years we have seen the stresses of global capitalism leading to fissures in the fabric of western nations. We have witnessed terrorist attacks in France,

Belgium, Britain, the United States and Canada targeting fundamental western institutions, including the press, government, and religious communities. We have seen a withdrawal from ideals of cooperation, from a sense of “we”, in the British decision to leave the European Union, in the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the rise in the populist, nationalist parties in France and Germany. There is a re-entrenchment of the us-them protectionist dynamics that many seem to believe will return their nations to a nostalgic glory they associate with their past. In the ruins pictured in *Greekopolis* we are confronted with the destructive consequences of our global capitalist system, the damage being done to the very values that gave it birth.

Bringing the issues of cultural hegemony home to our own country, **Kevin Mellis’** *Portraits Not Yet Taken* offer haunting images of our First Nations Peoples caught up in a past created by the settler cultures that colonized them. The Canadian government moved to ensure the phenomenon through the Indian Act. The purpose of the original Act of 1876, and its various incarnations even until today, has been to assimilate First Nations peoples into mainstream Canadian society (<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca>). Each new revision to the act has left the core goal of the original intact. Canada cannot seem to let go of the need for all those who live on this land to be like us.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, part of this process was the documenting of the “dying” peoples who first inhabited this place we call Canada. The idea of the imminent end of aboriginal cultures was an important element of the settler narrative of Canadian history. Paul Kane was one of the first artists to record the culture of the First Nations people in romanticized images painted in the mid-19th century. Later, in the early twentieth century the images of Edward Curtis accurately documented the peoples through photography and film in order to record their disappearing cultures. Trapped in oil paint, on glass plates and celluloid, exhibited in museums, and studied by anthropologists, these images were created by settlers, for settlers. They were to be studied to better understand the evolution of human civilization from its more primitive forms, represented by these peoples, to its evolved state within western culture.

Today, some First Nations peoples are using these same images to reconstruct all but forgotten histories to reclaim and rebuild their identities (Touchie, 2010). Aboriginal communities are piecing together their histories in order to build a strong image of who they are today, and who they will be tomorrow. Kevin Mellis’s images, created in collaboration with his sitters, are poignant statements that claim distinct, authentic First Nations identities that are clearly present and vital in the 21st century. They are images that assert that they can and will embrace their own “us”.

Kim Huynh’s work, *If I Had a Hammer*, presents the dilemmas faced by a nation that is built on immigration. Who is defined as “us” and who defined as “them” is a consequence of when one’s people came to this land. How one’s people become “us”, fully Canadian, is a contentious process in which the dominant Anglo-Franco institutions slowly allow others to move closer to inclusion – closer but not quite. As documented by Saloojee (2004), the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 carefully protects the original settlers’ cultural norms and values by containing those of subsequent settlers within well defined ethnic ghettos. The 1971 Canadian Multiculturalism Policy “... affirmed the value and dignity of all Canadian citizens regardless of their racial or ethnic origins, their language, or their religious affiliation”

(<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/multiculturalism>). It, and the subsequent act of 1988, recognized and affirmed these differences as long as the basic social institutions of the Anglo-Franco settlers remain unchallenged. Thus, we allow Them to retain some of their cultural norms and values, as long as they do not require us to revise the status quo. Our systems of government, justice, and education are essentially the same as they have been since before Confederation. We do not amend these for Them.

Huynh's work demonstrates what happens when the values of newer Canadians clash with those of an institution like the Canada Council for the Arts. What is Canadian art? What is considered contemporary practice? Whose narratives are represented through the funded work? Whose are excluded? Who are those on the juries that make these decisions? In providing funding for some, and not for others, one of Canada's most important cultural institutions controls the creation of images of who we are, to ourselves and the world beyond. Does this We represent all of us?

We see this theme re-iterated in **Steven Nunoda's** work. Nunoda explores the travesty of the Japanese Canadian internment during World War II. From 1941, following the bombing of Pearl Harbour, until 1949 (four years after WWII ended) the Canadian government protected our interests from Them, Canadian citizens who happened to be of Japanese descent. They were interned because the nation of their ancestors declared war on our allies. We felt the internment protected us from those who might be a danger to us, to our Canadian home.

Nunoda's work, a single shack from the Rosebery camp in the Slocan Valley of British Columbia, interrogates the notion of home. A home is a place of shelter, of refuge and safety. This plain, rudimentary structure, like the hundreds of others that housed Canadians during the Second World War, provided shelter for Nunoda's mother's family. The sound of washing rice that emanates from the little house is ordinary to those of Japanese descent. It is a daily ritual that would be reassuring to those who grew up with it, a source of comfort. For those who did not, this soft sound might be meaningless. It is a strange and foreign sound, another signifier that they do not belong. *Rosebery Single* is a reminder to us that our Canadian home may not be a place of shelter, a refuge or safe for all our citizens.

The ambivalence of Us-Them is not only experienced in the Political or political realms. We can experience this dualism personally, within our own identities. **Marzieh Mosavarzadeh** seeks to express the experience of living simultaneously between and within two very different cultures; living as Us and as Them at the same time in both Canada and Iran. The phenomenon of globalization creates a sense that we can move seamlessly from place to place anywhere in the world and that we will belong with ease. Globalization creates a myth of a united Us that surrounds the planet. Mosavarzadeh reveals in *Herselves* that this belonging is a practice. To belong to Us we learn the codes, adopt the customs, and don the costume of a culture. As Bourdieu (1990) taught us, we inhabit a culture. *Herselves* demonstrates that our identities become veils that we shift as necessary to reveal those qualities needed to belong, while at the same time concealing others that would set us apart. We shift the veil in order to remain included. No longer are we simply a single self. Instead, we practice many selves in order to participate in the Us.

Rachel Thomas's series of works, *A Well-Protected Social Participant I, II and III* reveal that a veil is not necessarily sufficient to negotiate the complexities of living one's gendered life. Thomas's works explore how a woman's identity is comprised of layers of conflicting strategies for negotiating this divide between who I am and who They need me to be. Beneath the soft, feminine costume that signals her compliance with the habits of "woman" of the pictured figure, an impenetrable armour encases the soft yielding flesh providing protection, and keeping the body safe – almost. In *A Well-Protected Social Participant I* the armour doesn't quite cover the scar left on the thigh, evidence of a wound received before the woman learned to protect herself. Without the armour, the body is vulnerable. We learn to shield ourselves from others, while at the same time performing the gendered lives required of us. We learn to deploy strategies that will allow us to participate in society, while defending the self within.

Three poems by **Tania Guerrero** have been placed at intervals in this issue. Guerrero and her mother were refugees to Ecuador from Chile during the horrors of the Pinochet dictatorship. Guerrero's father was detained and tortured. Later she and her mother immigrated to Canada, which became a place of safety for Guerrero as a young girl. However, she often felt that she lived outside the world of her classmates and neighbors. Her life experience and theirs seemed so different. The poems included here, *Invisible*, *The Boarding House*, and *Confessions of a Bad Dog* document this experience of growing up and living as Other both in Canada and Chile. With wit and courageous honesty, Guerrero's work gives voice to the pain and frustration of those who strive to become Us, but never quite feel included.

Art can provide an informal curriculum that reinforces the status quo, reproducing the dominant norms and values of a society. Much of the history of western art has been a story of art's complicity with hegemonic structures. However, the arts can be a form of critical pedagogy through which these hegemonic structures are exposed and debated. *Us-Them-Us: Artists and Social Action* was an exhibition that interrogated the role of art and art education in reproducing oppressive social structures. *Us-Them-Us* engaged in a critical pedagogy by inserting works that critique the dominant cultural structures into the hallways of an institution that often reproduces these. It opened a space for debate and dialogue about who we are as a society, who we include in the discourse, who we exclude, when and why. The works of art included in this special issue of *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry* will provide readers with opportunities to examine their own pedagogical practices. What are the overt and hidden curricula with which they engage learners? Who is included? Who is excluded? Why?

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