

## Question

(response to Access to Print: Kass Banning, Will Straw, Rinaldo Walcott)

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**Response to a conversation that took place as a live broadcast online video event on 30 April 2021 as part of the speaker series *Desire Lines: Mapping the Metadata of Toronto Arts Publishing*, hosted by the AGYU in coordination with Artexxe and the SpokenWeb.**

## Question

I think about futility and momentum—against, inside, simultaneously, within existing houses of nationhood, discourse, funding structures, harm. It feels important, but elusive to me, to hit that razor point of the right question. How do you even ask the question? How do you find the unfilled space, as-yet-thought-of by dominant systems?

Access to print in one pressing way means access to money to sustain itself and any kind of alternative or nuanced critical publishing about arts and culture in this so-called country. Tracing money sources are often opaque in the public realm (to readers, writers, audiences), whether it's private philanthropy with its wormhole of associations that influence content to various degrees, or public grants and sponsorships with their own limitations depending on the government system of the day and mainstream (acceptable) rhetoric about inequity. Ioan Davies referred to government funding as the “officially sponsored alternative culture” (“Samizdat,” *Border/Lines* issue 5, 1986). In the mid-1990s when federal and provincial arts grants were tightening their eligibilities to the negative impact of independent publishers, *Border/Lines* had to look elsewhere to survive—issue 36 (1995) cleverly used funds<sup>1</sup> from a special grant from Canadian Heritage multiculturalism programs to intervene on “multiculti,” that very myth of happy multiculturalism. As Rinaldo Walcott says, the grants began to circumscribe the nature of what could be published, a product of neoliberalism shaping the public culture that we live with now.<sup>2</sup>

That reminds me of joking with an artist friend about putting our traumas forward for grant applications, like “diasporic” this, “neurodivergent” that. Identity-based funds make possible incredible work from underrepresented makers, who disrupt the stories capitalist-colonial-racist society dictates. At the same time, it's about naming and selling discrete yet compounded marginalizations to others holding the purse strings of power. It feels better when you think of it as all strategy, really, slinking through the grass with all the other snakes, who will not stop. Like how *Border/Lines* repurposed multiculturalism funds or, on

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<sup>1</sup> Kass Banning, part of the editorial collective, wrote this grant, amidst the magazine's other hustles to keep going.

<sup>2</sup> See 46:31 in the video.

quotidian yet incessant scales, how marginalized peoples use code-switching to their advantage in the art world, it's about "finding the cracks" and forcing the structure to the ends of its limits (Rinaldo Walcott). But what are we gaining access to, who gets to say anything at all, and what's the weight of our words as they're received? Access to print must also encompass access to thought, language, fair compensation, childcare, mentorship, editors, support, time, self-belief, physical safety, mental health tools, peace of mind amidst intergenerational traumas, and all other material factors that make doing critical and cultural work possible.

*Border/Lines*' last issue was in 1997. *Fuse* folded in 2014 (having had their Canadian Heritage funding cut 100% in 2010<sup>3</sup>). Along with other publications no longer here, they never die, only live on in other forms, conversations, and connective tissues. That necessary malleability is what's left of meaning. Not to mention the proliferation of accessible DIY media in the past decade, like online and print zines, that expand social nodes and ways of being critical. The structural peril and downfall of *Canadian Art*, where I was part-time (2019) then full-time assistant editor since July 2020, has been angering on many levels. Speaking only for myself, what I witnessed and experienced made very clear the disconnection inside a structure that allowed a board of directors in control of financial decisions, even with changing personnel and potential allies, to fundamentally misunderstand and consistently undervalue the labour of staff. This is not to mention the specialized trust work Black, Indigenous, and racialized editors and staff have done in recent years to change the face of the magazine and wider cultural conversations, which should not be lost now.

From the outside, my view of the magazine as an emerging and unsure writer and arts worker changed around 2017, with the launch of the *Kinship* issue guest-edited by Jas M. Morgan and with the work of editors like Yaniya Lee and Merray Gerges. The value in visibility is a complicated conversation, but from my perspective now, it's doubly silly (aggravating) when an organization doesn't even recognize the reputational value its own tokenizing processes have brought. The labour and visibility of these editors created trustworthiness in the organization for me, before knowing internal movings. As editors, a lot of our work is based on trust and relationships, too, with writers, our communities, our bonds—that determine who is comfortable participating in particular platforms.

It's also important to note *Canadian Art* was never alternative in the same way as *Fuse* and smaller publications. A search of publicly available financial statements shows the publication drew \$2.5 million in revenue for 2019 from government grants, sponsorships, ad sales, and private donations (though exceeded by expenses), compared to other art publications like *C Magazine* or *Esse* at just under \$500k in revenue. Most staff, including all of editorial, were unceremoniously laid off from *Canadian Art* with less than a day's notice. I still had drafts-in-progress on my desk from external contributors. The "sacrifice" of those most vulnerable for the magazine's financial sustainability neglected that the value of a cultural organization is based on the communities that they are responsible to—without that, with value and trust broken, there is nothing to fund.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://web.archive.org/web/20160423011719/http://fusemagazine.org/2010/11/support-fuse>

There's so much I don't have the knowledge to analyze, but what I do believe is that while the imagination and willpower was there on a staff level to rethink *Canadian Art's* relevance, it was subsumed by deep legacies of harm because governance decisions refused transparency at every step—from how layoffs were delivered, to not internally acknowledging until pressed the very public letters from former staff in the past year. I think if there's one way white institutions replicate themselves, it's through the infernal, internal deference of responsibility, and operating out of a fear and scarcity mentality, including through the machine of HR and NDAs. Maybe that structure reaches the end of its limit. How do we actually escape this net of oppressive gravity into new structural laws that form vital grounds out of fault lines? What is to be folded and unfurled again?

### **speculation**

does gravity crack? the ground was laid millennia before. a rock-bent space; the gravity bound the wind. earth moved according to problems long unrecorded and nations were a word with another name. other pressures oozed out: bodies crushed into ships, the indent of skin on skin, blood on the battleground, water sweeping across land, a finger pushing flesh downward. a nation gives a weapon to another nation and death becomes curiosity; everything gains its price. a heavy ball on a mattress caving with the curve of its influence. then, the pressure to riot, to keep saying and saying, with the other sayers, until the gossamer warped, hit by heat and punches and voice. threadbare, spun again by unseen mass that curdles like moth wings on a screen, flutter, filling holes between fixability and malleability the pressure of trust in bonds that map [the metadata], the ghosts of a new lace to home us.

[Joy Xiang](#) is a writer, arts worker, and perpetual late bloomer born in Shanghai and based in Tkaronto/Toronto. Her work engages desire, migration, material flows, and media nostalgia and futurity. She prioritizes collaborative processes, and learning ways of being together in complication and intimacy. Her first chapbook, *cold blood*, uses cold-blooded creatures as a metaphor for creative and survival-focused adaptation strategies. She has edited for *Milkweed* and *re:asian*; written for Mercer Union, Ada X, and Hamilton Artists Inc.; and held positions at Vtape and Blackwood Gallery. She was assistant editor at *Canadian Art* and is a member of the feminist working group EMILIA-AMALIA.