

Questioning
Citizenship at the
Venice Biennale:
Responses and
Interventions

with Justin A. Langlois
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Justin A. Langlois

The idea of citizenship, and who gets to grant it, receive it, retain it and who has to give it up, is clearly one of the most pressing issues of our time. While concerns about the status of refugees, migrant labour and notions of citizenship appeared at the 56th Venice Biennale, and the corresponding Creative Time Summit in August, these crises have only become more pressing since then. The Biennale encouraged audiences to play witness to a set of artworks and activism that are mostly hermetically sealed – they represent or depict a problem, perhaps encouraging us to act more or less directly to redress that problem. And yet despite the urgency or the nuance of the ideas presented at the Biennale and the Creative Time Summit, few audience members have the capacity to act in the face of such urgency and crisis.

However, there were works that complicate our imagination of citizenship, offering us less of a directive to action and more of a set of meditations on duration, commitment and labour that could reinvigorate everyday life and political practices, bringing us closer to those other kinds of arrangements of people, and political and social relations. To this end, one might consider works like Taryn Simon's *Paperwork, and the Will of Capital: An Account of Flora as Witness*, which archives hundreds of pressed flora alongside photographs of the same live flora from signings of governmental resolutions, suggesting the need to develop other measures of time and attend to ecological scales of experience; or Adrian Piper's *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3* (2013–15) offering participants the opportunity to contractually commit themselves to one of three declarative statements (“I will always be too expensive to buy / I will always mean what I say / I will always do what I say I am going to do”), binding them to these ideas, and to an assembled collectivity made up of the other participants who have signed on, for the rest of their lives; or Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled 2015 (14086 unfired)* (2015) wherein a sole labourer made bricks stamped with the Mandarin translation of Guy Debord's slogan “Ne Travaillez Jamais” that were available for purchase, with proceeds benefitting ISCOs (Trade Unions Institute for Development Co-operation, an organization supporting international workers' rights). Further, at the Creative Time Summit, we need look no further than presentations by Joshua Wong, the 19-year-old student activist who co-founded Scholarism and sparked the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, to witness the possibility and necessity of provoking our largest civic imagination, or Mina Setra, the Deputy Secretary General of Indonesia's Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago, who framed the need to consider deep indigenous knowledge and knowledge from the territories we occupy as fundamental to social justice movements around the world, or the closing keynote by Antonio Negri, in which he suggested that life in common is life in language, fostering an appeal to continue to produce affective practices together. These projects and presentations offer models for practicing or enacting citizenship that are nuanced, complicated and poetic, providing not just depictions of resistance, but also ways of testing and rehearsing citizenship on a daily basis.

Our citizenship relies on the testing of its very boundaries. And more often, it relies on a series of small and not-so-small gestures that secure or resist it, and that help us to exercise our capacity to measure, record and produce social and civic life together. Art provides an inventory of expanded practices and poetics that might offer us clues on how to do this, but we must work to hone our own actions and activities towards more complicated expressions that can evince our agency in the world. If we await an invitation to perform our citizenship, we will never get around to producing it ourselves.

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Amanda Shore

“We can't trust the flags we fly here,” were Noah Fischer's first words when it was his turn to speak. Sitting on a panel at the world's oldest art biennale, Fischer and four other members of Gulf Labor Artist Coalition were discussing their respective projects, each aiming to bring attention to the exploitation of migrant workers during museum construction in Abu Dhabi.¹

Fischer then elaborated to explain the difficulty associated with territory acknowledgment at la Biennale di Venezia, a place where national pavilions declare temporary cultural sovereignty on individual plots of Venetian land. Despite my numerous visits to the pavilions, I experienced a dull feeling of being lost, which seems appropriate in a place where territorial sovereignty falls away. The pavilions put shallow roots into Italian soil, while outside their walls Italy fortifies its borders against citizens of neighbouring states.

As an increasing number of nations are welcomed to occupy the Biennale, incoming refugees in the surrounding province of Veneto continue to be directly targeted. Violent protests against migrants settled in Treviso have prompted Luca Zaia – President of Veneto and leader of Northern League, the right-wing extremists leading the protests – to declare, “No more refugees will be arriving” in the province.²

This year's main exhibition makes close contact with these issues, operating in the midst of the migrant crisis. Working directly with non-citizens on Italian soil, Canadian artists Adrian Blackwell, Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky sought to combat territorial amnesia at the

Biennale. Their performance *Migrant Choir* brought a chorus of recent migrants to the Ferrara region into the Giardini to sing the national anthems of Italy, France and Great Britain before their respective pavilions.

The majority of migrants seeking refuge globally are fleeing countries once colonized by these three nations, whose bloody anthems call for the fortification of borders and the scattering of enemies. However, choir members Isaac Akhidenor and Stephne Koumtozou insisted that they felt no hostility when singing the anthems' lyrics – only joy at being able to feel that they belong. Crowds gathered on August 13 as their voices moved from the isolated Italian pavilion to the open gardens of the Giardini. Perhaps visitors joined in song out of habit, or as an act of solidarity, or simply out of a common awareness of what it means to belong to a place. Rather than re-inscribing the divisive lines between nations, the anthems, in this context, become affirmative declarations of citizenship for those designated as non-citizens.

For many, the flags on display at the Biennale represent unattainable rights and freedoms. Blackwell, Flanders and Sawatzky, who partnered with co-operatives and organizations in Ferrara to realize their project, participate in what artist Mariam Ghani calls “loaning their own leverage” by acting in solidarity with migrant workers. Sitting alongside Noah Fischer at the Gulf Labour panel, Ghani described this method for redistributing agency: a way of building alliances across borders, and promoting transnational sharing of knowledge and power.

In a culturally saturated city, where many self-declared “watershed” exhibitions are quickly forgotten, it is challenging for an artist to make a lasting and visible impact on civic life. However, pavilions that highlight a number of artists across many nationalities build solidarity across physical borders, and rupture cultural borders. Each day the need for more porous borders becomes more urgent, and with 1.4 million refugees expected to arrive in Europe before the next Biennale, national pavilions may be called to loan their leverage.³

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Endnotes

1 Gulf Labor Coalition, “A New Wave of Arts Activism?” Panel discussion, Biennale di Venezia, August 5, 2015.

2 See “Clashes, arrests as neofascists, locals protest new migrant center near Rome,” *ADN Kronos* (Rome), July 17, 2015, and Stephanie Kirchgaessner, “Clear out African Migrants, Lega Nord governor orders in stand-off with Rome,” *The Guardian*, June 13, 2015.

3 See, “UN Agency expects 1.4mn migrants over next two years,” *France 24*, October 1, 2015.

Rinaldo Walcott

At the end of April, I passed through the Munich airport while returning home from Athens. At the passport control, an official asked me, “Where is Bridgetown?” referring to the city in Barbados where I was born. Once again, the gate attendant asked me, “Where is Bridgetown?” And in a final and new twist, just before I went down the ramp to board my plane to Toronto, German police took a look at my passport and asked me, “Where is Bridgetown?” As you might imagine, I was quite annoyed by the repeated questioning, and it was only later, during the current Canadian federal election, that I found out that the Harper government had instituted new controls overseas to prevent persons who might enter Canada and claim refugee status from doing so. One of the most significant things about Canadian passports is that they include one’s place of birth, forever making clear to all its carriers who are not born in Canada that their citizenship is conditional or at least not fully “native” Canadian.

After reflecting on my Munich experience, I suddenly felt a certain kind of anxiety about returning to Europe for the opening of the Venice Biennale in early May. I fully expected to be questioned at the passport control, given that it had been a mere five days since the Athens trip. However, this time I wasn’t subject to the repeated questioning I’d received the week before, and my passage through Munich was pleasantly uneventful. I recall this story of moving across borders because I think it is germane to the kind of intervention that Okwui Enwezor attempted to make with his curation of the 56th Venice Biennale. Titled “All the World’s Futures,” one cannot help but think about crossing borders. Why does the notion of “all the world’s futures” produce a moment for me to think about borders? The backdrop of Enwezor’s intervention has to be read in relation to the mass migration of Africans across the Mediterranean and from South America and the Caribbean to North America.

When Enwezor’s curatorial practice is read alongside the waves of migration that are positioned to potentially transform Europe – and unlike during previous periods of colonialism, this transformation is not entirely within Europe’s control – we begin to see some flaws in his vision. Enwezor’s intervention might be read as diasporic, and therefore beyond nation, but it still does not leave nation-states behind, because diaspora peoples always find themselves in a nation-space somehow which is always its central problematic. The migrants making their way across Europe, especially African migrants, exist in a state of post-citizenship. By this, I mean that even though they may have come from nation-spaces, they are forced to reject those spaces and to inhabit new spaces where they are much more concerned with achieving a life than their relationship to any kind of patrimony. Indeed, their movement confounds what citizenship is and illuminates the exclusionary work of citizenship. More importantly, their movement reveals the ways in which citizenship is a disciplinary apparatus.

So here is my critique of Enwezor’s curatorial vision for the Biennale: it works with liberalism’s notion that we all have a place and therefore are citizens somewhere. However, this assumption is confounded by the recent waves of African migrants as they occupy and begin to



Public Studio (Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky) and Adrian Blackwell, *Migrant Choir* rehearsal in the Arsenal, Venice Biennale, 2015
 PHOTO: PUBLIC STUDIO; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE BLACKWOOD GALLERY

transform Europe in a rude kind of way – and in reality, enact “the world’s future.” What I am getting at here is the way Enwezor’s curatorial intervention brings a record number of African/ Black artists to the Biennale, but in doing so, unwittingly undoes citizenship as container for any possible freedom.

My return to Europe and the trepidation I felt as the plane landed confirmed for me the problem of Enwezor’s project. Asked where I was headed with my Canadian passport, and saying with confidence, “the Venice Biennale,” I entered Italy with ease. As I crossed the border, I looked back to notice all the Africans behind me, with the multiple documents they needed for their own crossing, and for whom possessing a passport is simply not enough. Like all these passports, Enwezor’s intervention simply is not enough. From my point of view, the Zimbabwe pavilion is one of the most exciting shows taking up Enwezor’s theme. But it is also an offsite pavilion, neither in the Giardini nor in the Arsenale. Indeed its offsite position is an unwitting critique of Enwezor’s theme as it simultaneously tells us where we might look to glimpse all the world’s futures.

Rinaldo Walcott is the Director of the Women and Gender Studies Institute, University of Toronto. He attended the Venice Biennale as part of the project, “Expanded Context: Black Canadian Curators at the 56th Venice Biennale,” funded by The Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

Leah Snyder

This past August, during a steamy morning in Venice, I listened to visual historian, artist and curator Jolene Rickard address an international crowd of cultural provocateurs on the concept of wampum. Rickard is of the Tuscarora Nation and on that particular day she was speaking as part of the Creative Time Summit “Geography of Learning” session. For an audience seeking transformative knowledge, she affirmed “Indigenous cultures are art and today we use art as our wampum belt for change.”

Many speak on the deep knowledge that is embedded in wampums like the Kaswhenta (Two Row Wampum).¹ I have listened to knowledge keepers “read” the belts on land that is traditionally Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe. It is poignant to hear the wampums explained in areas historically implicated in breaking the agreements they represent. The words are moving because they offer pathways forward to right relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, many who have arrived as newcomers in search of freedom. This time the words hung suspended in ambiguity. Venice is at a great distance from the lands the wampums represent. On the grounds of the Biennale, with its bordered spaces promoting patriotism and its flag-waving, the concepts of wampum were difficult to link to the critique of nation states’ relations with immigrants, migrants and refugees – the theme of both the Summit and the Biennale. Rickard was tasked with inserting Indigenous concepts and symbology into a location dominated by signifiers

Endotes

¹ The Kaswhenta, or Two Row Wampum is one of the oldest recorded wampum agreements between Indigenous people and Europeans, negotiated in 1613 (in this case, the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch). The Two Row Wampum depicts lines of white and purple shell beads. Two purple rows signify a canoe and a ship traveling side by side in the river of life. It represents agreements based on the ideas of mutual respect and noninterference.

of colonization and to a crowd largely unaware of the deep history wampums represent. She also only had 10 short minutes to do this. Without the reinforcement of other Indigenous perspectives challenging representations of belonging, her task was not easy. Separated from the insight provided when located on the land the wampum is referencing, it became apparent how symbols, like flags, inundate our understanding (or misunderstanding) of peoples' connection to place.

A wampum can mark trade agreements or alliances made during times of war. One of the other functions of wampum is to represent relationship-building between people who share space in a particular territory. When a wampum is "read" its function is to recall the relationships formed as a result of that agreement. Wampum is a mnemonic device or visual marker that cues the memory of those people present as to the specifics of the agreement it represents. The parties involved can stand in front of each other and reconnect by sharing the original story that birthed that particular wampum. Action is inherent in the concept of wampum as relationships are ever-evolving and transforming.

Flags, on the other hand, are historically connected to colonialism, representing a static hierarchy of top-down power within even the most "progressive" of nation states. For those fleeing their homeland, flags become double-edged swords offering a visual symbol of freedom that can also be linked to poverty and other forms of oppression upon entering the new territory. For all the artistic critique of flags (Pedro Lasch's *How to Know: The Protocols and Pedagogy of National Abstraction*), nationalism (Indian Raqs Media Collective's *Coronation Park*) and the exploitation of migrants (the interventions by Gulf Labor Artist Coalition) at both the Biennale and the Summit, alternatives that countered the visual iconography of colonialism were in short supply.

In those 10 short minutes, though, Rickard shared how Indigenous artists like Alan Michelson, Marie Watt, and Denise Deadman use the representation of wampum as an artistic intervention into colonized spaces. "As artists," Rickard stated, "we transform the Kaswhenta into a living symbol." As the stifling heat baked the earth outside where we gathered in the Arsenale, Rickard reminded the us that, "in the moment of war and ecological collapse, the Haudenosaunee are enacting the principle of the Two Row to call for peace and equity."

We have arrived at an intimate global moment. Populations displaced by war and resource extraction and Indigenous peoples are linked together in a complex embrace. Indigenous peoples have always been impacted by migration and as a result have devised and utilized political and social mechanisms, like wampum, to peacefully integrate newcomers into their communities. For Rickard the "Kaswhenta is a path from violence to peace" – a way out from under the oppression of nation states as well as a prototype for moving forward with equitable relations. Foregrounding the interventions of Indigenous artists within the landscape of the Biennale would have offered reinforcement to Okwui Enwezor's curatorial proposition that art has the capacity to provide the world with both an exit as well as a future.

Leah Snyder is the Editor of *Mixed Bag Mag*, an online magazine that includes both Indigenous and immigrant perspectives on contemporary culture in Canada. This past August, along with a delegation of artists and curators, Leah attended the Creative Time Summit held at the Venice Biennale.



Public Studio (Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky) and Adrian Blackwell, *Migrant Choir*, 2015, performance, French Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2015. PHOTO: ADRIAN BLACKWELL; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE BLACKWOOD GALLERY