

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 21 Number 16

June 11, 2020

Colores de Latinoamérica: Teaching Latin American Art in London (Ontario, Canada)

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Citation: Robin, A. (2020). Colores de Latinoamérica: Teaching Latin American art in London (Ontario, Canada). *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 21(16). Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea21n16>.

Abstract

This article is a reflection as a teaching scholar of Latin American art in London, Ontario, a city, as many others in Canada, where there is no major Latin American collection for students to visit. The experiences narrated are related to a specific course taught in the Fall of 2016 at Western University and to two exhibitions that took place during that time in London, *TransAMERICAS: A Sign, a Situation, a Concept* at Museum London and *Mountains & Rivers Without End* at the Artlab Gallery of the John Labatt Visual Arts Centre at Western University. It is furthermore informed by the experience of teaching Latin American visual culture to non-art history students in Spanish for many years. This essay dialogues with practices of active and experiential learning, specifically for language learners. It offers the voices and insights of the students, detailing how the exhibitions were perceived and experienced by them, through their written essays and in-class discussions.

Introduction: Colores de Latinoamérica¹

This article is a reflection on the teaching experience of Latin American art in London, Ontario, a city, as many others in Canada, where there is no major Latin American collection for students to visit. Trained as an art historian at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), my appointment in a language department in Canada allowed me to approach my field differently, connecting it almost as a daily exercise to second language acquisition and migration issues. The experiences narrated below are related to a specific course taught in the fall 2016 and to two exhibitions that took place during that time in London, *TransAMERICAS: A Sign, a Situation, a Concept* at Museum London and *Mountains & Rivers Without End* at the Artlab Gallery of the John Labatt Visual Arts Centre at Western University. It furthermore takes into account my experience of teaching Latin American visual culture to non-art history students in Spanish since 2009, within a context of content and language-integrated learning experience.

This essay opens a dialogue between scholarship in active and experiential learning specifically for language learners, the visit to the above-mentioned exhibitions with my students, and the Latin American immigration to Canada in different aspects. Some questions guiding my reflection are: How is Latin American art conceived in Canada? How do my students relate to this phenomenon? How do they describe in their own words the artworks of Latin American artists living and working in Canada? I offer their voices and insights to illustrate the way in which the exhibitions were perceived and experienced by my students through in-class discussions and written assignments.²

Active and Experiential Learning

Active and experiential learning are teaching approaches that go beyond the traditional lecture style—where the instructor teaches and students passively receive the information—to engage the students more actively in their own learning process, which promotes a greater student involvement and responsibility (Mello & Less, 2013). It is accepted that active learning

¹ The first part of the title of this article comes from an art exhibition taking place every year since 2006 at the TAP Centre for Creativity in downtown London, and shows artworks of Latin American artists living in Canada, *Colores de Latinoamérica* (Colours of Latin America).

² All the comments from my students come from discussions we had throughout the semester, and assignments covering the different activities of the exhibitions. I refrain from naming them specifically to maintain their confidentiality. I received clearance from the Ethics Board of Western University to include their voices with the study title “Teaching Latin American Art in London, Ontario,” file number 113715. My students helped me forge these reflections, and I am grateful to them for a semester that was especially revealing to me. I am also thankful to Ana González from the Centre for Teaching and Learning at Western University for her guidance in relation to scholarship on active and experiential learning. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

“surpasses traditional lectures for retention of material, motivating students for further study and developing thinking skills” (Prince, 2004, p. 225). There are valid reasons for lecturing, but the best practice currently promoted by specialists is to adapt lectures to incorporate active learning strategies that vary according to the topic of the course and the size of the group.³

Active learning is defined as “anything course-related that all students in a class session are called upon to do other than watching, listening and taking notes” (Felder & Brent, 2009). It has received considerable attention over the past decades, and is often presented or perceived as a radical change from traditional instruction (Prince, 2004). The topic frequently polarizes faculty and is unevenly applied among the disciplines. Most instructors actually use active learning in one form or another, but they do so intuitively. “Active learning requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing” (Prince, 2004, p. 223). Active learning takes place when we ask a question, pose a problem or issue some other type of challenge. It also happens when we tell our students to work individually or in small groups to come up with a response. We can furthermore provide students with some time to work, and call on them to share their responses (Felder & Brent, 2009). Active learning can take the form of a few minutes of relevant activity during a lecture, which may be as short as 30 seconds to 3 minutes (Felder & Brent, 2009), or consist of a longer activity that can take up to 40 minutes (Mello & Less, 2013).

Experiential learning takes active learning one step further by promoting activities outside the classroom. It enhances “students’ critical thinking about content and engagement with the content in order to maximize learning beyond the classroom” (Strong, 2015, pp. 285-286). Different models of experiential learning exist. Pertinent to my course is David Kolb’s 1984 experiential learning model as a multi-step process rather than an outcome: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Strong, 2015).

Much scholarship on experiential learning in the context of language learners has been published related to study abroad programs, other international service learning opportunities, and international internships; however, fewer publications are devoted to experiential learning for second language acquisition in the domestic context (Bloom & Gascoigne, 2017). The length, purpose, and specific activities of each strategy vary, from one-year immersion to a

³ For more information on specific active learning strategies and activities, please consult: <https://teaching.uwo.ca/teaching/learning/active-learning.html#inmyclass>. Also useful is: Peter Frederick, “Active Learning in History Classes,” *Interactive Learning in the Higher Education Classroom. Cooperative, Collaborative, and Active Learning Strategies*, Harvey C. Foyle, ed., Washington, National Education Association of the United State, 1995, pp. 116-138.

short visit of a few hours (Burke, 2017). This essay seeks to contribute to this field of study from the Canadian perspective, through the discussion of specific activities performed in a content course on Latin American art that is specifically directed to undergraduate Spanish language students at Western University.

Active and experiential learning promote cooperation and collaboration among students, which are two fundamental skills for success in the workforce. In academia, industry, and in government positions, teamwork is seen as an important way to integrate disciplines (Foyle & Shafto, 1995). Furthermore, the teaching methodologies of active and experiential learning promote lifelong learning, empower students to change the world they live in, encourage students to respect themselves and others, and help develop a culture for quality work (Ventimiglia, 1994). These attitudes are not necessarily taught as a primary objective from a content course or directly from a textbook. Yet, they are fundamental in a globalized culture, such as the Canadian context.

My Positionality

Born and raised in the French-speaking province of Québec in Canada, I moved to Mexico City to pursue graduate studies in art history at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). After living in the megalopolis for 9 years, I returned to Canada and shortly afterwards found a position as a visual culture specialist in the Spanish program at the Department of Languages and Cultures at Western University. I found myself in a privileged position: teaching what I love and was trained for in Spanish (a language I control almost as a native speaker) to students learning the language and discovering the culture of the Hispanic world, a process with which I can easily identify.

As a child, I was exposed to immigration from Latin America through my mother's volunteer work in Québec, specifically in the region of Cap-de-la-Madeleine and Trois-Rivières. In the mid 1970s, Latin-American immigrants predominantly from Chile, El Salvador, and Argentina, arrived in Québec. Both of my parents are from the province of Québec and so there is no Hispanic heritage in my family. My mother had some proficiency in Spanish that she had acquired through night classes before she married. Due to her conversational ability in Spanish, my mother was in charge of the families arriving from Latin America. She soon found out that her best allies in greeting the arriving families were her two children, as my brother and I would mingle with the newly arrived children, thus helping to break the ice for the adults involved. I was only 4 or 5 years old at that time, so I have only vague memories of those visits, but I assume this is when I first heard stories of Latin America. Later on, my parents would travel for different reasons to various parts of Latin America, and more stories would populate my imagination. In high school, we had to choose a course option: it was no surprise I chose Spanish over Latin, music, or fine arts. This is how I began my path as a

Hispanophile, not knowing it would become such a central part of my life.

My Students

The undergraduates studying Spanish language and Hispanic culture at the Department of Languages and Cultures at Western University can be divided broadly into two groups. First, the students who are learning the language because they understand that they live in a globalized world and that speaking more than one language opens many doors. Spanish is one of many languages that the department teaches, but it is by far the most popular. Knowing the vocabulary and grammar is, however, not enough: students must learn about the history, culture, and rich traditions of the Spanish-speaking world. The other group of students is composed of children of Latin American families who immigrated to Canada for a wide variety of reasons. Some of them were born in Canada, while others emigrated as young infants or teenagers from Latin America. Their command of Spanish varies widely; some of them are fluent and speak like natives, while others are heritage speakers, which means that they grew up speaking Spanish at home or in their community but do not possess a formal training in the language. Their knowledge of the culture of their country of origin also varies widely. Nonetheless, they share one common aspect: they are all longing to know more about their cultural heritage. Most of them identify as Canadians, but their roots are in Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, etc. One student expressed to me that she took the course because she wanted to learn more about visual culture, with the specific intention of applying the knowledge to her own Hispanic culture.

Many of the students pursue a double major in Spanish and another subject. I do not expect to make art historians out of my students, and actually very few continue on to graduate studies in Hispanic culture at Western University or elsewhere. Nevertheless, by nourishing their curiosity about visual arts in Latin America, they will, hopefully, eventually visit an archeological site, enter a church or a museum, and have the necessary tools to appreciate what they see. From a language acquisition perspective, students acquire new vocabulary in Spanish that is pertinent to describe artworks in different contexts. For these reasons, I take advantage of every opportunity that arises to step out of the classroom and away from the PowerPoint presentation to go and actively see art, hence the interaction in many of my courses with active and experiential learning practices.

My undergraduate course “Hispanic Visual Culture” at Western University is an introduction to visual arts in the Hispanic world, including Spain, Latin America, and the Hispanic art presence in other regions, such as the United States and Canada. One of the course objectives is for students to improve their reading, written, and verbal skills in Spanish. The class is conducted in Spanish and I make a special effort to find accessible readings on visual culture in the language. Their evaluations, in a written or verbal form, must be in the target language

too. Another objective of the course is to acquire an introductory understanding of Hispanic visual culture through different types of texts. Since the Spanish program is housed in the Department of Languages and Cultures, there is an expectation that the content courses are still very much text-driven. Throughout the course, students are exposed to different genres of texts, related to Hispanic visual culture: artists' diaries, interviews, short stories, poetry, chronicles, but also some secondary sources. It is expected that students discover, through the analysis of written material, diverse monuments, works of art, artists, and topics from Spain and Latin America.

The course content is flexible and works through case studies, focusing on examples from pre-Columbian civilizations up through contemporary expressions in the Hispanic world. Specific topics vary from year to year, as I try to adapt the course content to any particular event that takes place outside of the classroom. For example, in 2010 I took into consideration the bicentenary of the independence of different Latin American countries. I also take advantage of different celebrations going on throughout the year, such as the Day of the Dead, or temporary exhibitions, usually taking place in Toronto, which is an important urban center relatively close to London. However, the semester of fall 2016 was special as two different art exhibitions related to Latin America took place in London and I used them as active and experiential learning experiences for my students.

Latin American Populations in Canada

According to the US census data from 2010, one in six people in the United States is of Latin American origin, which constitutes the country's "majority minority population" (Aldama and González, 2019, p. ix). Diverse historical conditions have led to various practices and traditions that Latin American populations have brought from their countries of origin. Over the years, these communities have actively and meaningfully transformed the reality of their host country. In the United States, their presence has given rise to different movements, such as Chicano, Nuyoricano, and Latinx, that have consequently affected American culture, history, politics, and language.

When compared to the situation with its southern neighbor, the Latin American population in Canada is far less abundant, more recent, more diversified in terms of origins, and much less affected by aggressive discourse. As Victor Armony acknowledges, scholarship on the Latin American diaspora has a long trajectory in the United States and the Canadian situation has not been fully studied, partly due to the proximity of both countries.⁴ The dynamic in Canada

⁴ For this section, I am much in debt to the texts of Victor Armony, "Introduction: Latin American Diasporas: Common Origins and Different Paths," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 46.3 (2014): 1-6; "Latin American

is not the same as in the U.S. The migrant populations are offered a different social, political, economical and cultural space in which the process of integration is quite different, and must be taken into account when referring to the Latin American population in Canada. Furthermore, the situation in urban centers is different from that of smaller cities, but the Anglophone provinces also tend to present a different reality than the French speaking province of Québec. For example, Québec attracts twice as many Latin American immigrants than the rest of Canada, presumably for reasons of “cultural affinities”, such as the romance language spoken and the importance of the Catholic religion (Armony, 2018).

Latin Americans in Canada have settled over several decades since the late 1950s in distinctive waves, corresponding to different times, reasons, and conditions of migration, that can be divided roughly into two distinct groups. The first important wave was between the 1970s and the 1990s, when most immigrants came to Canada for political reasons (such as military dictatorships and civil wars) from South and Central America. Since the mid-1990s, the Latin American population has been admitted to Canada under the ‘economic category’, that is, on the account of their prospective employability as ‘skilled workers’, a condition evaluated according to their level of education, work experience, and sufficient knowledge of Canadian official languages (Armony, 2014; see also Veronis, 2006). A smaller number have come under the family-reunification and refugee categories.

Although the national contexts are quite different and there are diverse populations on both sides of the border which reveal peculiar approaches and social realities, the diaspora’s construction must be examined from a transnational perspective. Hence, the Latino-Canadian population is not built in an isolated manner; it is fashioned through both its interaction with the Canadian society and as part of a hemispheric situation. While it has also been speculated that the Latino reality in the United States is massively important, Canadian Latinos will eventually gravitate towards the U.S. model of pan-ethnicity, instead of creating a different mode of diasporic identity (Armony, 2014).

Furthermore, the Canadian model of multiculturalism, adopted as a federal policy in 1971, values cultural heritage and offers a welcoming context for identity affirmation. Respect for cultural diversity, equality, and antidiscrimination are core principles of multiculturalism, and

Communities in Canada: Trends in Diversity and Integration,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 46.3 (2014): 7-34; “Les paradoxes d’une affinité culturelle : la construction de la diaspora latino-américaine au Québec,” in *Vues transversales. Panorama de la scène artistique latino-québécoise*, ed. Mariza Gonzalez (Montreal, Éditions CIDIHCA/ LatinArte, 2018): 21-39; specifically on the Toronto Latin American diaspora, see: Luisa Veronis, “Strategic Spatial Essentialism: Latin Americans’ Real and Imagined Geographies of Belonging in Toronto,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 8.3 (2007): 455-473.

were legally consolidated in 1988. Initially, its goal was to ease French-English tensions, hence multiculturalism works within a bilingual framework to recognize both as equal ‘founding nations’, but it rapidly evolved to recognize and commend Canada’s increasingly diverse ethnic groups and their contribution to national development. It eventually led to extensive facilities for the installation and integration of immigrants and resources for the preservation of diverse cultures through festivals and language programs.⁵

London is not foreign to Latin American immigration. Colombian and Mexican communities are so important that the city also goes by two nicknames: *Londombia* (playing with London and Colombia) and *PuebLondon* (offering a combination of “pueblo”, Spanish for village, and London). This paper attempts to link the presence of Latin American immigration in London to two art exhibitions that were held in the city in the fall of 2016 within the context of a specific visual arts course offered at the university, and discusses students’ involvement.

TransAMERICAS: A Sign, a Situation, a Concept

This exhibition, curated by Cassandra Getty and Dianne Pierce at Museum London (Getty & Pearce, 2016)⁶, displays the artwork of Latin American artists living in Canada and the United States, and depicts diverse communities of Latin American heritage. *TransAMERICAS* presented the artwork of Laura Barrón, Dianna Frid, Alexandra Gelis, Pablo Helguera, Manolo Lugo, Juan Ortiz-Apuy, Eugenio Salas, José Seoane, José Luis Torres, and Clarissa Tossin, as well as Nahúm Flores, Erik Jerezano, and Ilyana Martínez, members of the artist collective *Z’otz**, based in Toronto. The artists participating in the exhibition *TransAMERICAS* examined through different artistic techniques the relationships formed between people and places.

Here, mention must be made that the *TransAMERICAS: A Sign, a Situation, a Concept* exhibition and my students’ comments came shortly before Donald Trump won the American election in the late fall of 2016. This political situation and the discourse held by the current American president regarding immigration and borders might raise new insights into the works exhibited in Museum London.

⁵ For an overview of the history of Canadian multiculturalism, *cfr. Multiculturalism and the Canadian constitution*, ed. Stephen Tierney (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007). For an analysis of Canadian multiculturalism in relation to the Latin American community in Toronto, *cfr. Veronis, “The Canadian Hispanic Day Parade,”* 1653-1671.

⁶ For more information on the museum, please consult: <http://museumlondon.ca> *TransAMERICAS* was counted as having an attendance of 29,385 people. I thank Cassandra Getty from Museum London for this information. Specifically on the exhibition, see also: <http://museumlondon.ca/exhibitions/transamericas>.

To start the semester, the class participated in the online photo exhibition *Click! Panoramic Americas*, an interactive project coordinated by filmmaker Juan Andrés Bello, who is originally from Venezuela and now residing in London. It aimed to expand the dialogue between artists and the public by assembling photographs, both online and in the museum, that were submitted throughout the run of the exhibition. No matter what their country of residence or origin was, people were invited to send Museum London a photograph to share the richness of Latin American culture, illustrating what one wanted others to know about Latin America. The invitation directed contributors to consider the following themes: people, places, practices, knowledge, conflict, and diversity.

The first weeks of the semester were dedicated to getting the students acquainted with basic notions of art and visual culture from the Hispanic world. Students were divided into small groups, which paired students who had never travelled to Latin America with others who had had photographic material to share due to a prior visit in the area. Literature on active learning refers to this kind of activity as “Think-Pair-Share” approach. Collaborative learning is an instructional method where the emphasis is put on students’ interactions with their peers rather than on learning as a solitary activity. Also as part of active learning, collaborative learning refers to an activity in which students work together in small groups toward a common goal (Prince, 2004). Think-Pair-Share activities help students learn about one another and enhance the building of a community of students in the classroom; they also enhance interest and enthusiasm in the course content since all students participated and contributed to the topic (Larson, 1995). Each group had to choose two of their own photographs of Latin America to submit to the online exhibition. They had to explain to the rest of the class in Spanish why they chose those pictures, what their criteria for selection had been, and why these photographs were meaningful to them. The expectation was that these photographs would eventually be printed and exhibited in Museum London, along with the submissions of other people (Figure 1). *Click!* received 378 submitted images. The most represented countries were Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela (each with 40 submissions), Cuba (31), Ecuador and Brazil (17 each), Nicaragua (13), and Guatemala (12).

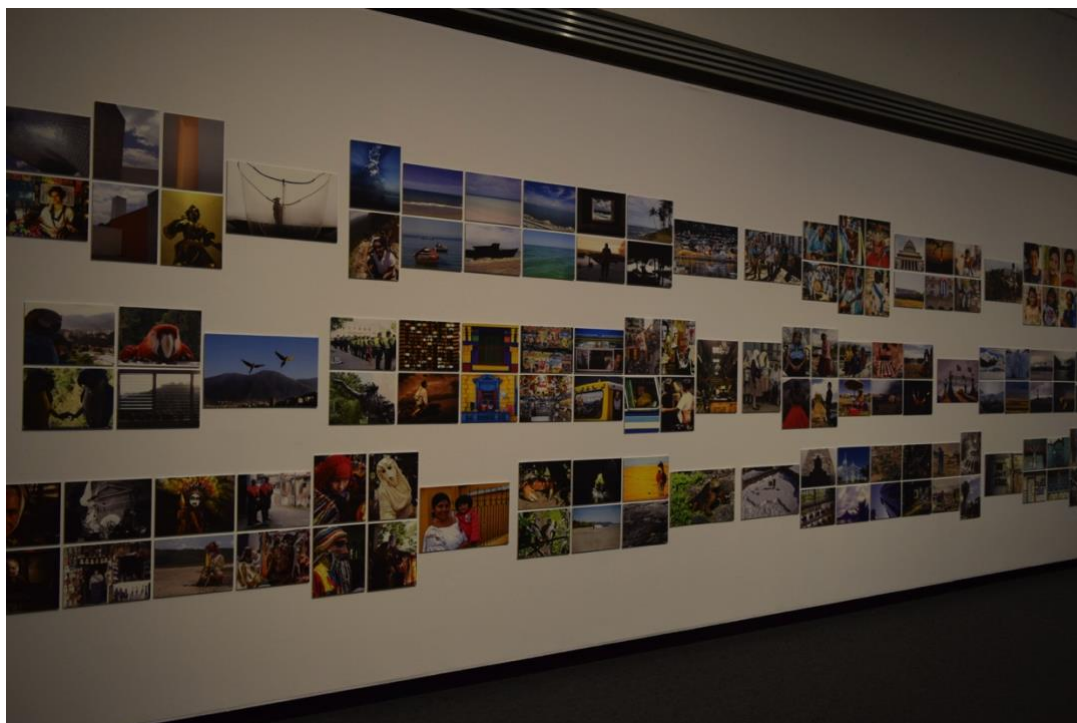


Figure 1. *Click!* as exhibited in Museum London, Ontario, Fall 2016. Photograph: © Alena Robin.

A student from my class commented that he really enjoyed the *Click!* project as it allowed everyone to have a say on what Latin American culture means to them, and to reflect on the experience and impact that Latin America had on their lives, regardless of their country of origin. Another student reflected on the way the photographs submitted to *Click!* were exhibited in Museum London all together with little space between each image (Figure 1). To her, this expressed the richness and differences of Latin American culture, and that it is somehow all connected. The juxtaposition of the photographs also symbolized the proximity of each of the countries as if the borders did not exist between them, and that we/they were all connected at some level. Also, a student commented that the project coordinator Juan Bello and the community involved with this initiative were planting the seeds of inspiration for viewers who want to explore the diversity that Latin America offers.

A second step taken by the class was to complete a guided tour in English of the exhibit *TransAMERICAS*. Volunteers from the museum provided the students with basic ideas of the exhibition and the artwork shown. According to David Kolb's model of experiential learning, the visit to the museum was the concrete experience (Strong, 2015). The students then had to write a report in Spanish about the exhibition by taking into consideration specific aspects. Reflective observation is the second step of Kolb's model. The comments that follow come from the students' written assignments and in-class discussions.

For some of the students, it was their first experience visiting an art exhibition. It was a unique opportunity for them to see the impact that different social and economic circumstances has on Latin American artists and to witness the union of cultures through art at a local artistic venue. The concept of the exhibition was appealing to students. By addressing globalization through visual culture, students were encouraged to reflect on how a person can express their identity while in a new place—something some students could relate to, having arrived in Canada from different countries of Latin America with their family. Different works from the exhibition illustrated the movement of people from their place of origin to a new home. This is an idea exemplified through the exhibition upon which different students reflected: one's own culture and roots will always accompany you no matter where you go. Migrating from Latin America to Canada, a country with different customs and languages, these were the barriers that some of the students had to transcend in their new country.

Students also had to comment on specific works of art by explaining both how they relate to them and why they appeal to them. When the tour guide invited us to observe José Seoane's creation, *Lingua Franca* (Figure 2), most of us were speechless and did not know how to address the artwork. Seoane is a Cuban artist who resides in Windsor.⁷ A student commented that his work reminded her of her grandmother since she would cook beef tongue, which was exactly what the artist used as a material. The student was amazed at how creative the artist was for using beef tongues to address the issues of language barriers and the richness of speaking different languages. The students' favorite tongue was the one sliced in two, as for them it represented bilingualism, which was something they were striving to achieve. The divided tongue also was perceived as an illustration of the idea of immigrants maintaining their native tongue while also adopting a new one.

Referring to the same artwork, another student alluded to its title, *Lingua Franca*, translated as "common language." To her, this was a metaphor that tongues/languages signify that all humans are the same and their differences are superficial. Languages build communities; it is a way to unify people. Ironically, although all the tongues originated from the same type of animal, a cow, they were all covered with different ornaments. Hence she questioned the title of the work and wondered if Seoane is longing for unity among people, given that our differences are so superficial.

⁷ For more information on the artist: <http://seoanestudio.com>



Figure 2. José Seoane, *Lingua Franca*, mixed technique, 2016. Photograph: © Alena Robin.

Another student alluded to the artwork as a metaphor of colloquial phrases both in Spanish (“la lengua de oro,” the golden language) and in English (“silver-tongued”). Having learnt English as a second language, the student identified with the artwork. Upon first seeing the tongues, he felt repulsed, which was a feeling he had when first living in English. Then, he was personally intrigued while observing the creativity and uniqueness of each tongue. This was an impression he sensed when hearing different accents spoken in Spanish depending on the country of origin. For him, the piece served to explore frontiers as a visual tool to understand the concept of continuous perspective, implying that travels mould and affect our personal perspectives. This was not the only artwork in *TransAMERICAS* that addressed the language issue, but it was the one most commented on by students.

The topic of frontier was also a recurrent theme of the exhibition. Many artists of *TransAMERICAS* used the theme of border as a symbol to represent the freedom of movement through the world that we usually take for granted. Many pieces question this assumption. *The Ultimate Map* by José Luis Torres (Figure 3) was also a favorite of the students. It combined everyday implements, nails, and measuring tapes, with the process of population movement and globalization in our society. Torres was born in Argentina and has resided in Québec

since 2003.⁸ In this map, the artist left the borders open. To a student, this meant that the entire world could be *TransAMERICAS*, where culture travels with people outside their country of origin. For this student, the measuring tapes represented unity. For another student, the opened borders were an unsealed invitation to discover the world, with no limits to travel and many paths to discover. Here, a student applied the idea of metaphoric bridges to analyze José Luis Torres's creation. She saw stability in the use of the same material to create the map throughout. She assumed this also signaled that people populating these lands are made from the same substance, and that borders are fictitious constructions imposed by us. She believed that Torres was trying to demonstrate that borders segregate countries and people, yet borders are also insubstantial and not so rigid. She was fond of the idea of contemplating the world as one, not segregated nor independent. Borders are not permanent, nor should they stop us; they are porous. The work of José Luis Torres also addresses the issue of equality since his representation of the entire map is done with only two materials. These political issues were quite current topics in the fall of 2016, as they alluded to the question of refugees that had been making daily news for a while already.

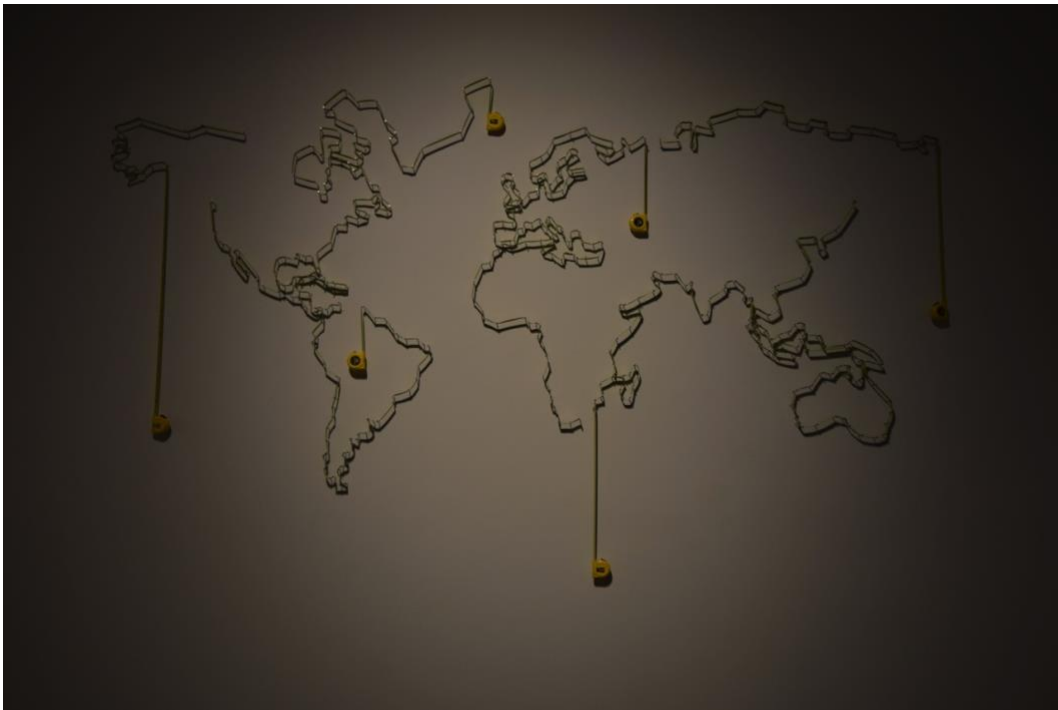


Figure 3. José Luis Torres, *The Ultimate Map*, site-specific mural installation, measuring tapes and nails, 2016. Photograph: © Alena Robin.

⁸ For more information on the artist: <http://www.joseluiistorres.ca/en/index.php>

Many artists incorporated political aspects into their artwork. Manolo Lugo, a Mexican-born artist now residing in Toronto, also addressed the issue of frontiers in *Border Towns* (Figure 4).⁹ Here, the maps of border cities between Mexico and the United States are printed, colourless, nameless, and without visible borders. I was intrigued to see that quite a few students mentioned this piece as their favourite. One commented on this installation as a representation of equality that demonstrates that frontiers are artificial and that they should by no means stop us, just as in José Luis Torres' *Ultimate Map* (Figure 3). Another student appreciated the use of digital tools, such as Google Earth and Photoshop, to show both sides of the frontier while erasing the differences and the name, making it impossible to identify which side of the border the viewer is seeing. The student thought the artist wanted to obscure the geopolitical differences of the two neighbouring countries to indicate that the differences are, in reality, social constructions. Another student also reflected on the space that Lugo's creation occupied within Museum London, in a corner, somehow visibly removed from the rest. This is what caught her attention and encouraged her to approach the work. But to adequately contemplate the maps, she had to move closer and closer to them. This experience made her appreciate that frontiers are artificial. Borders are created for political reasons, and sometimes because of war. Lugo's creations echoed other works of art in the exhibition.



Figure 4. Manolo Lugo, *Borders Towns*. Photograph: © Alena Robin.

⁹ For more information on the artist: <http://manololugo.blogspot.mx>

One student stated that he was not familiar with contemporary art prior to viewing this exhibition, yet he appreciated it as it opened new perspectives to him. Through *Click!* and the creation of *Z'otz** (Figure 5) he learned that art could have a social purpose, that a team could collaborate and create something beautiful. However, as a native from a country in South America, he felt somehow excluded from the exhibition. If the purpose of the exhibition was to educate a general Canadian audience about issues raised by Latin American immigrants, then he felt the mission was well accomplished. However, he felt like a stranger in front of the concept of bridges and expressed that some typical elements of Latin America were somehow lost in the exhibition, while trying to appeal so much to an Anglo-Saxon public.



Figure 5. Z'otz* Collective, *Mural Painting*. Photograph: © Alena Robin.

Another student found it interesting that so many artworks coincided to express a similar message of language, community, transformation, travel, and real and metaphoric bridges. To her, this represented that the world has changed but that there is not a rigid separation between people and their countries, since the world is slowly becoming one. Another student concluded that, through art, the Americas that are currently so divided might unify in a consensus. A student congratulated the curators of the exhibition for offering the opportunity to view artistic creations through the topics of continuous perspectives, communities, and collaboration, hence addressing a global citizenry that is not restricted to one single nation but perceives the world as one international, consolidated community.

A third step taken with the students was to participate in a workshop at the museum organized in conjunction with the exhibition *TransAMERICAS*. The students worked with a group of artists based in Toronto's Z'otz* Collective, Nahúm Flores, Erik Jerezano, and Ilyana Martínez.¹⁰ One of their creations was part of the exhibition *TransAMERICAS* (Figure 5). When we first toured the exhibition, the meaning of the mural was not clear to my students and it was something many commented upon, that it was difficult to make sense of the different elements fashioning the mural painting. However, after the workshop, the meaning of the artwork became clearer. As a student mentioned, the mural seemed like an unfinished work of art because of the empty forms and blank space. However, it is up to us, through our imagination, to fill up the space and the narrative. A student commented that their work in Museum London left her speechless: each element narrated a different story and reminded her of topics related to immigration, with a touch of humour and vivid colours. It prompted her to reflect on her own life and the life of her family as immigrants in Canada. Another student addressed how space and light in Museum London affected the mural. She questioned how that specific space was selected for the mural painting and how the architectural elements affected the composition. She wondered if the structural element in the middle of the composition referred to the topic of division in *TransAMERICAS*, that is, the division expressed through borders, languages, and nations.

As their name reveals, a fundamental idea to the group of artists is that of collaboration. The three artists of *Z'otz* Collective* have worked together for 12 years. Their work is both individual and communal in the sense that their individual work shares a common physical space, such as a wall, while the joint idea transcends the individual composition. Through different elements, they express central topics of immigration and the different implications of settlement. Each member brings their own experiences, ideas, materials, and techniques, and in so doing, they learn from one another.

The workshop at the museum is when abstract conceptualization and active experimentation of Kolb's model on experiential learning came into play (Strong, 2015). We did not really know what to expect from the workshop, as the museum provided me with very little information when I contacted them to share my desire to attend the activity with my student group. We sat at a long table in the centre of which were white sheets of paper and different coloured pencils and crayons. We had to use them to draw in a collaborative way, drawing on one another's paper, just like the group of artists Z'otz* do in their creations. The instructions

¹⁰ Z'otz means 'bat' in Mayan and refers to their Bat God, Camazotz. Based in Toronto and working together since 2004, the group meets weekly to collaborate on multi-media works which include drawing, painting, collage, sculpture, and site-specific drawing installations. Their images explore ideas of transition, displacement, containment, and evolution. For more information on the artist: <http://zotzcollective.blogspot.mx>

were quite flexible: we all started with a blank sheet of paper and needed to draw something. Some models of pre-Columbian motifs were provided to us, but many students used their own imagination. The idea was that after a while our drawing needed to be passed along to our neighbour who would continue our creation, and so on, for about two hours (Figure 6). At the end, we grouped our drawings together on the floor and tried to come up with a story. A student underlined this as her favourite part of the workshop activity, as it allowed her to see how far our design had come, along with the details that were added throughout the collaborative process. This creative activity in Museum London with Z'otz* Collective was much appreciated by the students, as it differed from the academic lectures and evaluations they are used to. It also allowed them to bond and learn from each other in a relaxed environment, each with their own abilities.



Figure 6. Group workshop in Museum London, October 1, 2016. Photograph: © Alena Robin.

Most of the time, students respected the creation that arrived in their hands from their peer. One student drew flowers for her grandmother, who appreciates them. She was pleased to see at the end that no one drew on top of them, but rather just coloured them. Another student's original drawing was mainly black and white, and this aspect was respected throughout the

collaborative process. As time passed by in the creative activity, other designs were intervened in a more drastic fashion, although ideas and artistic concepts grew in an organic manner. Some students used scissors to modify the original composition, hence half a turtle, the favourite animal of a student, ended up as a collage. In another example, sections were glued to the drawing to add a third dimension to an otherwise bi-dimensional creation. The infinite possibility of elaboration was well understood and taken advantage of by the students. Some conversations arose from the creative and collaborative process. That day at Museum London, students from a wide variety of countries of origin and academic paths gathered together to reflect on social, cultural, and economic complexity through artistic creation, having the collaborative process as a common objective.

A student commented as well on the setting of the workshop at the Museum, which was in a room with a gigantic window looking toward the Thames River, with natural light coming in and a fall view over the river. As the student mentioned, from there one could see the baseball field (baseball being the national sport in Venezuela, his country of origin) in Labatt Park with the orange leaves on the trees all around (a typical Canadian postcard). This setting reminded him of the extraordinary shared experiences of migrants. Likewise, Erik Jerezano, a member of Z'otz* Collective, explained that the group of artists was well aware of preconceived notions on immigration, and that they tried to address and question them through their work.

Mining in Ecuador, Art in London

Mountains & Rivers Without End was inaugurated in mid-November 2016 at the Artlab Gallery of the John Labatt Visual Arts Centre at Western University.¹¹ It is the result of an interdisciplinary group project involving artists and scholars from Canada and Ecuador. The collaborative project was meant to reflect upon diverse outcomes of the mining industry in the areas of Portovelo and Zaruma. This area is known as “la provincia de El Oro” (the province of The Gold) (Carrión, 2015). Although the extraction of gold has been known in this area of Southern Ecuador since pre-Columbian times, what the artistic exhibition addresses are contemporary issues, related to the abandonment of the region by American companies. The South American Development Company (SADCO), an American firm that operated in Ecuador between 1896 and 1950, developed an urban settlement with capitalist intentions: one section was the industrial complex, the other was the residential area. Gold mines in the area reached their apogee during the Second World War. There are still some mining activities

¹¹ The exhibition and its accompanying conference were co-organized by Ulises Unda, Andrés Villar, and Patrick Mahon, then respectively PhD candidate and faculty members at Western University. For more information on the project and the artists involved: <https://mrwe.org>. For more on the activities of the Artlab Gallery: <http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/artlab/index.html>

going on today, but on a much smaller scale. The exhibition addresses global issues of the mining industry, such as questions of water and the environment, but in a local context and from an artistic perspective. The town is still alive, so the artworks also take into account day-to-day life. The negotiation with the more recent history of colonialism in the area is an underlying theme. As in *TransAMERICAS*, contemporary art is establishing a link between Canada and Latin America, which addresses social issues and spatial concepts in different ways, such as mobility through travel and displacement.

The project of *Mountains & Rivers Without End* initiated with a residency of artists and researchers in the mining area of Portovelo and Zaruma in the summer of 2015, accompanied by local scholars and cultural promoters, to visit and discuss problems related to the extraction practices, and to share ideas in their areas of expertise. The outcome of this reflection was a series of artworks and texts that were exhibited in the Museo Municipal de Arte Moderno in Cuenca, Ecuador, in January and February of 2016, and brought together once again for this exhibition at Western University in November and December, 2016. The artists responsible for the creations of the exhibit do not share a common origin. Some are from Ecuador (Esteban Ayala, Jenny Jaramillo, Ulises Unda), others are Canadian (Patrick Mahon), and interestingly, some of the artists involved are originally from India (Gautam Garoo) or China (Gu Xiong), but were residing in Canada.

The resulting exhibition was composed of works of those six artists working in different media, from sonic segments, interactive videos, and video performances, to photographs, collages, and different installations. It was another experiential learning activity that was included in the course. It was not hard to feel attracted to the exhibition, as it was highly participative, sometimes ludic. For example, starting in the entry to the gallery, sound and video artist Ulises Unda invited viewers to use a metal detector that amplifies the sound of searching for precious metal but also the sounds of the city. *Sounds of SADCO's Industrial Ruins* was a sonic installation problematizing the experience of sound in relation to the mining industry. *Portovelo Topography* was an interactive video also by Ulises Unda using Google Maps technology and a 3D model of the zone, enhancing different fragments of the mining area, which responded to the movements of the spectator detected by a vigilance camera.

Without a doubt, the artwork that most caught the attention of viewers was the creation of Esteban Ayala, *Prospecting* (Figure 7).¹² Of large dimensions, the work addresses issues of manual labour, water, and pollution in the mining industry.

¹² For more images on this piece: <https://www.estebanayala.com/montantildeas-y-rios-sin-fin.html>



Figure 7. Esteban Ayala, *Prospecting*, wood, plastic, metal, water, water pump, sand, stones and elements from Portovelo's Yellow River, 400 x 64 x 200 cm, 2016. Photograph: © Alena Robin.

On the wall next to his installation was a digital photograph illustrating an almost idyllic countryside of the mountains surrounding Portovelo, taken from the neighboring Zaruma. Yet the following inscription completes the message and brings the viewer to a harsh reality: “El oro en realidad no lo ha visto jamás ninguno” (Gold indeed has never been seen by anyone) (Figure 8). The installation was notable as it appealed to many senses: sounds, smells, and objects that tempted the viewer to actually touch them. The viewer's presence completed the work as a movement detector activated water that ran through the metallic structure. Sand, stones, bones, pieces of ceramic and metal, and other garage-like artifacts were standing there to make a statement on the history of Portovelo and to raise socio-ecological issues at the same time.



Figure 8. Esteban Ayala, *Gold indeed has never been seen by anyone*, Digital photo, 20.32 x 25.4 cm, 2015. Photograph: © Alena Robin.

Patrick Mahon addressed issues of colonialism and local community in his installations, *Ascending and Descending: Water Works/ Mountains* (Figure 9).¹³ As they toured the community during the artist's residency in the summer of 2015, they witnessed remnants of the American presence separated from the local community residential area, structures, and buildings that changed functions through time and others that remained silenced, such as a cemetery and a swimming pool. While related to a not-too-distant past, they appeared out of context and invited another way of alluding to mining. The swimming pool was photographed and printed on Tyvek paper accompanied by plastic mesh. The visual effect produced by the light reflecting on the mesh creates an optical illusion that resembles the effect of the sun on water, and also changes according to the movement of the viewer. The PVC pipes arranged on the floor form a structure that alludes to the mountainous topography surrounding Portovelo, but also echoes the metallic structures of the swimming pool in the photographs.

¹³ For more artworks of Patrick Mahon: <http://www.patrickmahon.ca>



Figure 9. Patrick Mahon, *Ascending and Descending: Water Works/ Mountains (American Compound)*, tiles pyramid, photograph on tyvek, plastic mesh, 190x 270 cm, mountain water pipes, structure made of PVC pipes, variable sizes, 2015. Photograph: © Alena Robin.

Guatam Garoo, a native of Kashmir, India, took the mining issues to an even more globalized level related to environmental concerns. Garoo received his Master's of Fine Arts degree from Western University and currently resides in Canada. In his work entitled *3°42'48.5"S 79°36'48.8"W*, he addresses different acts and rituals related to gold mining, not only in Ecuador, where he obtained the yellow pigment used in his creation, but also in India (Figure 10). The title reproduces the geographical coordinates of Portovelo. The sand that is found in Portovelo in the river appropriately called "Río Amarillo" (Yellow River) is of this color, but the pigment also suggests the colour of contaminated water through the process of extracting gold. The fine lines of the drawing allude to sacred mandalas but are distributed on the paper to emulate the tunnels in gold mines. It also refers to circuit boards in electronic components and to the recycling of precious metals, which is a highly hazardous yet non-regulated labour in India. In this work, arranged on the floor as a sacred offering, the artist meant for viewers to reflect on different sociocultural aspects of mining activity, not only in Ecuador but also in India, his country of origin.

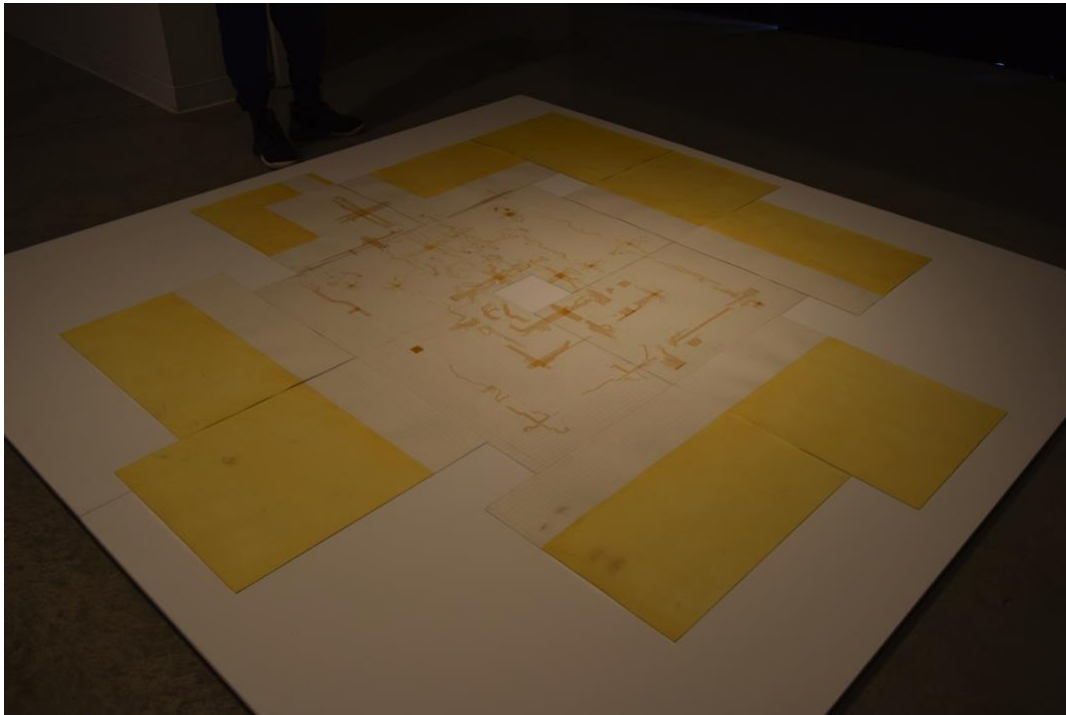


Figure 10. Gautam Garoo, *3°42'48.5''S 79°36'48.8''W*, earth and turmeric pigment on paper, variable sizes, 2015. Photograph: © Alena Robin

As some students commented, it is interesting that *Mountains & Rivers Without End* addressed through art many issues that are of current interest. Yet it did not openly address the presence of Canada in the mining industry in different Latin American countries. This could have been a great opportunity for further discussion.

Final Reflections

It is curious that, in such a short period of time, different art shows related to Latin America were exhibited in London, Ontario. Both exhibitions taking place in the fall of 2016 confirm that Latino art is currently taking place in Canada, even in mid-size cities like London, and not only in larger cultural centers, such as Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver.¹⁴

Latin American art has a presence in Canada. It is taught in some Canadian universities, it is collected and exhibited in major museums, but it also has its place in smaller galleries (Robin,

¹⁴ For the situation in Québec analyzed through different artistic disciplines, see: Mariza Gonzalez, ed., *Vues transversales. Panorama de la scène artistique latino-québécoise*, Montreal, Éditions CIDIHCA/ LatinArte, 2018.

2019). Art from Latin American roots is currently being made in Canada, as demonstrated in *TransAMERICAS*; Latin American topics are of interest to Canadian artists, as was demonstrated in the *Mountains & Rivers Without End* exhibition. These art exhibitions address issues of identity and cultural exchanges. It would be interesting to trace other local initiatives of the sort in Canada as ways to create a sense of art community from a multicultural perspective.

As a teaching experience, it is a way to go beyond the canon of what is normally addressed in a panoramic class of Latin American art and address topics that are contemporary to the students' experience. Students gained the knowledge I hoped they would gain through the course. Their proficiency in the target language improved, they became familiarized with different kinds of texts related to visual culture, they developed knowledge of different monuments, artworks and artists of the Hispanic world, and overall, acquired a more profound understanding and appreciation for the artistic legacy of Hispanic cultures. The fact that the group was small made it possible to have interesting discussions on the material. In their evaluation of the course, students commented on the hands-on elements. They mentioned that they had learned a lot during the semester, and that the evaluation activities made learning enjoyable, removed from the stress associated with midterms and final examinations.

One of the unforeseen outcomes of the course was achieved by taking students twice to an art exhibition. It broke the intimidation that some had previously felt in relation to museums and art galleries. Some had never entered a museum because they had no interest in art. Yet, the experiential learning segment of my course revealed to them the fact that a museum is another learning space, and that students can relate to art even though they are not specialists in the field. The final assignment of the course was to plan a small hypothetical exhibition of an artist or topic of their choice. Many students went back to the museum or the university gallery to reflect on and imagine their own exhibition.

As this essay demonstrates, including active and experiential learning experiences in a university environment promotes effective education that empowers students and is both lasting and transforming. Rapidly expanding globalization and the mobility of populations open many doors to further contacts and mutual interests between Canada and Latin America. Artistic relationships between Canada and Latin America are not a new phenomenon, and such relationships will continue to flourish in Canada for many years.

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Alena Robin is Associate Professor in the Department of Languages and Cultures at Western University (Canada). She specializes in religious art from New Spain (Colonial Mexico), specifically on the representation of the Passion of Christ. Other fields of interest are theories of art and artistic literature in the Hispanic world, the historiography of painting in New Spain, issues of the conservation and restoration of cultural heritage, and the presence of Latin American art in Canada. Her book, *Las capillas del Vía Crucis de la ciudad de México. Arte, patrocinio y sacralización del espacio* (2014), was published by the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas/UNAM. She is currently working on two research projects: one that revisits 18th century painting in New Spain, and another on collections of Latin American art in Canadian collections. For both projects she received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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