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2017 Recipient of the Jean Royce Fellowship

Summary Statement of Studies and/or Research:

According to the 2011 Census, one fifth of Canadians possess a mother tongue other than English or French. While there are many studies on how English may be taught to child and adult learners, very few address the complex, experiential elements of that process for the learner. My project uses three phases to artistically and communally explore the experience of learning English: the writing and publication of a book of essays, the conducting of group workshops, and a culminating art exhibition.

The first component is the production of a book of lyric essays, which are based on my own experience of moving from the Dutch to English language beginning at age nine. I received early funding for this project from the Ontario Arts Council ($3,000), with which I was able to do intensive preparatory research, and to write drafts of several of the essays. The pieces use anecdote, poetry and reflection to explore multiple elements of language transition, ranging from the effects of hearing a language in utero, to the loss of untranslatable words, to the stigma of accent. My family's multi-lingual background, in which some spoke Punjabi, Urdu and Swahili as well as Dutch and English, also informs the writing. A fellowship would allow me to complete the manuscript, a process that I estimate will take eight months. Two literary publishers have expressed interest in the completed work.

In stage two, I plan to conduct Kingston-based workshops for others who have learned or are learning English as an additional language. The sessions will revolve around the question of how English is perceived from various linguistic backgrounds, and use conversation and artistic exercises to create word images of the English language. The single, half-day sessions will be suitable for learners who are comfortable with some English expression and instruction, and will ideally include people at very different stages of language acquisition. I intend to recruit participants through a range of community organizations and educational institutions. Funding at this stage would cover advertising, workshop instruction, venues, materials, and refreshments.

For the third project stage, and only with participant permission, I will compile responses into a lyric text that forms a collective portrait of English. Unless a participant prefers anonymity, I will be careful to credit the contributions of each individual in the final work. I intend to create a visual display, as well as a group performance reading. The Curator of Contemporary Arts at the Agnes Etherington Art Center and the director of the Skeleton Park Arts Festival have expressed interest in providing venues. In every instance, I want the work to be characterized as community art, rather than immigrant or multicultural art, in acknowledgement of our pluralist communities, and in avoidance of centralizing native English speakers. Funding at this stage would be for my work and materials, compensation for readers in the performance, and the cost of an opening reception.

The ability to devote a year to this project would be an enormous gift to my continued work as a writer. It will benefit workshop participants by allowing for communal reflection on what is often a private or intra-familial experience of language shifting. The wider public will be offered an original and evocative perspective on the English language. If well received, I will pursue future funding to allow the project to travel to other communities in Canada.