

## Canada, International Students, and Fragility: An Analysis of *Òjà (The Talking Flute)* As Counter-Narrative Project

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### ABSTRACT

Canada expanded its cultural hegemony and increased its workforce through the invitation of international students, academics, and all kinds of skilled immigrants between 2014 and 2022. This invitation was part of a long history of romance with immigrants interspersed and sometimes overlapping with periods of intense hostility. Since 2023, international students have become a focal point of critique in political conversations and policies in Canada. This paper examines a counter-narrative that challenges the discourse of international students as invasive species. It focuses on *Òjà (The Talking Flute)* by Roland Samuel, highlighting international students' complex ways of being and relating with Canada while critically raising awareness of the different ways that Canada and international students demonstrate fragility.

### Keywords

Canada; International Students; Invasive Species; Immigration; Counterpoint; Counter-Narrative; Fragility

## 1. Introduction

Òjà (*The Talking Flute*) is a collection of fragmented metal pieces held together through a high-quality welding process to produce a smooth finish. In the finished object, we see a human figure, and then we observe the place where it is moving. This figure is playing the òjà while walking on a broken car door with an inscription “Greek House Restaurants Lake Country-BC” and a half-erased telephone number. Most of the work of creating this piece involved the making of the òjà player (hereafter referred to as The Player) in action. The rest of the work, which is the broken door, is almost untouched from the way the artist found it in a Kelowna junkyard, save for an erasure of some parts of the telephone number on it for safety purposes (Samuel, *The Oja Player*). It is preserved in its form with the dirt it has accumulated. The multimedia artist who made Òjà, Roland Samuel (an international student at that time), and I met on the first day of the Association for Literature, Environment and Culture in Canada (ALECC) Conference at Wilfrid Laurier University in July, 2024. Samuel presented a paper on Òjà, which he argued embodied his perception of himself as an international student in Canada and a sustainability practice (*The Oja Player*). But Samuel’s art is much more remarkable for presenting a site where we can theorize belonging, counternarrative, and fragility. The Player is an important cultural figure in the Igbo knowledge system. However, in this art installation, they are a fragile entity, whose appearance on a broken car door as an international student reveals the unsettledness in both international students and Canada and haunts Canada’s perception of itself and international students.

This art installation was completed in 2024, a pivotal time when international students were increasingly becoming subjects of Canadian national public discourse. The dominant narrative was damaging and everywhere: the news (social media and traditional media platforms), and even Parliament. A particularly unsubtle example of this narrative is in a *YouTube* video published by Juno News on May 21, 2024, in which True North’s Harrison Faulkner insinuated that immigrants, specifically temporary workers and international students, are the major problem Canadians face because they take all the jobs, cause housing problems and affect wage stability and growth.<sup>1</sup> Faulkner kept asking, “does this [or that] benefit the Canadian people” (“Temporary Workers” 00:10:13-00:10:23), as if everyone was living in a world where the interdependence of humans works once Canada and Canadians are satisfied. While Faulkner does not represent the entire Canadian population, his platform presents an avenue

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1. This video airs an interview Faulkner hosted with Dan Kelly (CEO of Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses).

into one part of the thick strand of the Canadian discourse on immigration. In another instance, an editorial on June 21, 2024 in *The Globe and Mail* linked the housing and job crisis to the inflow of international students. The writers argued that the housing crisis is due to the inability of the government and schools to agree on and take responsibility for the housing of international students, citing cases of Cape Breton University students that drive four hours to school and the horrible living situations of students in Brampton and Windsor (Editorial Board). The blame in this discourse is shared across the government, which keeps opening doors; the schools; and the international students (in an unspoken way).

Other opinions move between arguments for exclusion and fungibility of international students, as potential high earners and hard workers among them are preferred (Keller; Clark). In November 2025, Kate Porter confronted us with the reality that colleges were thriving and running due to the high cost of tuition that international students pay (Porter). This publication came after IRCC lowered the international students cap. However, this seemingly sympathetic narrative does not do justice to international students as knowing subjects, who carry knowledge and experiences and can see beyond the narratives about them and the narratives Canada has of itself. I argue that *Ôjâ* closes that gap and re-narrativizes international students as fragile knowing subjects rather than exploitable entities, and this contrary view confronts Canada's own instabilities, which lies in how it has perceived and narrated itself.

## 2. Economics of International Students: Challenging the Myths

As noted earlier, one of the perceptions about immigrants, particularly international students, is that they take jobs, especially from Canadians, while the *real Canadians* are left with no jobs. Studies show that the accusation of job-taking is untrue, as employers prefer and give better compensations to employees with Canadian experience, while international students, who do not have this experience, are instead exploited economically in the workspace (Choi et al. 14; Akbar 146). Youjin Choi and colleagues do not reveal only the lack of jobs for international students; they also show that after the investments by these students in the Canadian economy, they do not earn the same as home students after their graduation. Choi and colleagues note, "The disadvantage for international students in pre-graduation work experience hampers their ability to compete for a high-paying, high-quality job after graduation" (20). While Choi and colleagues present the fact that international students do not often get high paying jobs, Marshia Akbar argues that it is because most jobs that are available to international students "are in the low-skill/low-wage sector,

the work experience they acquire often does not provide them with any benefit in terms of finding employment in their field of study after graduation" (146). Tristan Johnson presents a different view from Choi and colleagues and Akbar, as he observes that one of the reasons for the employment difficulty is that there are no consistent ways of recognizing credentials. However, this reason does not account for those who cannot get the right kind of jobs (i.e., high paid or specialized), even with Canadian educational qualifications. Other explanations include unconscious biases people have with names among other things (Johnson). International students are not only rarely paid the same as domestic Canadians, but also in many cases, do not secure jobs at all.

Another critique of the narratives about the international students' program focuses on the broader negative economic impact blamed on international students. Conservative opposition leader, Pierre Poilievre, pontificated in a video uploaded by Question Period Watchers on *TikTok* that, as the Prime Minister, he would ensure that the door will be open to "international students if they have a way to pay their bills and a house to live in." Poilievre's pledge that his government would only admit students who would pay their rents and tuition, narrated international students in a way that suggests most of them were not doing those things. Poilievre's opinion is not new. For instance, Eunjung Lee and others posit that public discourse in Canada views international students as fungible resources, as beneficiaries of Canadian generosity, or as bad, harmful, and lawless, basing this argument on their analysis of forty-four articles and 649 comments, where there is little or no representation of "international students' own voices" (839). They suggest that international students are seen as people who Canada expends its money on and as those who destabilize the Canadian academic system with cash, thereby pushing Canadians out (853, 855). These opinions frame international students as bringing economic difficulties. However, the perception that Canada suffers economically because of the influx of international students diminishes other sides of this story. For instance, some scholars opine that the coming of international students is orchestrated on several levels to give Canada an economic advantage (Elnagar 83; She and Wotherspoon 2; McCartney 38). In his summary of this approach, Dale McCartney suggests that the history of international students in Canada

shows the deep roots and complex motivations of contemporary international student policy, and how it is enmeshed in nation-building efforts in Canada... this history shows the ongoing power of a *Canada-first* focus within the policy that belies, or betrays, claims to educational internationalism. (34; emphasis added)

Òjà presents something that is lacking in this discourse: a nuanced and culturally informed visualization of international students and Canada, by showing

the fragility of both entities. It provides an opportunity to think through an art-based representation with room for multiple interpretations and engagements. The metaphor of ójà—an Igbo musical instrument—and the exercise of its player conveys the experiences and knowledges that the international student or one international student has of themselves and Canada.

### 3. Contrapuntal Reading

The narratives from Juno News and similar platforms are part of the settler colonial narratives seeking to recreate international students as those who are undeserving, problematic and invasive in the Canadian space (against every metric possible). The mode of this narrativization reminds me of *Morus Alba* (White Mulberry), which Mariam Pirbhai reveals was brought into Canada by the white settlers only to be considered invasive after it did not serve the interest of the Canadian silk production industry (32). There is a shared otherness that comes to both species, *Morus Alba* and international students, as a result of their move to create a different destiny outside of the Canadian economy. Just as *Morus Alba* is a plant species that has escaped the purpose of its transportation into Canada, international students are one among many kinds of immigrants drawn and extracted to Canada largely by its self-marketing and implication in exploitative global economy. Both species, different in their kinds, inspire stories of blame which masks fear of dispossession. When there is this kind of fear, Chinua Achebe posits, while talking about the attitude to narrativizing colonial experiences and the colonized other, “Words become weapons... rather than tools... [and fear] and suspicion take over from openness and straight conversation” (*Home and Exile* 78). This fear is behind the narratives of blame that we witness in the cases above, particularly the case of international students. However, the openness that Achebe requests is necessary, as it will bring the “balance” (73) lacking in the conversation around international students. Achebe expects this balance to bring a better understanding to colonial experiences.

Appreciating Ójà in the context of these normalized narratives will require a contrapuntal reading. Edward Said envisions that this kind of reading will help us to see connections between stories and experiences that would have been viewed separately or escaped visibility in conventional readings (32). Said’s theory proposes the reading of narratives alongside others which may be assumed to represent different views, to put them in conversation with each other. As he explains, contrapuntal reading makes “concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other and that attempt to distance or suppress other views” (33). Contrapuntal reading

provides space where different experiences, especially those of the dominant and the marginalized, can be viewed together. For instance, rather than depending only on the Canadian news sources and opinions, *Òjà* presents an elsewhere. Hence, I will proceed to read Samuel's *Òjà* as a counterpoint to the settler colonial narratives presented about international students. Samuel's installation does not only oppose the narratives of benefits and investments, fungibility, and harm. Instead, it creates an embodied resistance against those narratives and can be placed at the same table and viewed alongside other settler colonial imaginaries of Canada and international students to bring forth the balance Achebe expected to see. It does this by pulling from multiple histories and experiences while collapsing the assumed exclusiveness between them. It is already a contrapuntal poesis, a creative mode invested in bringing different views into conversation.

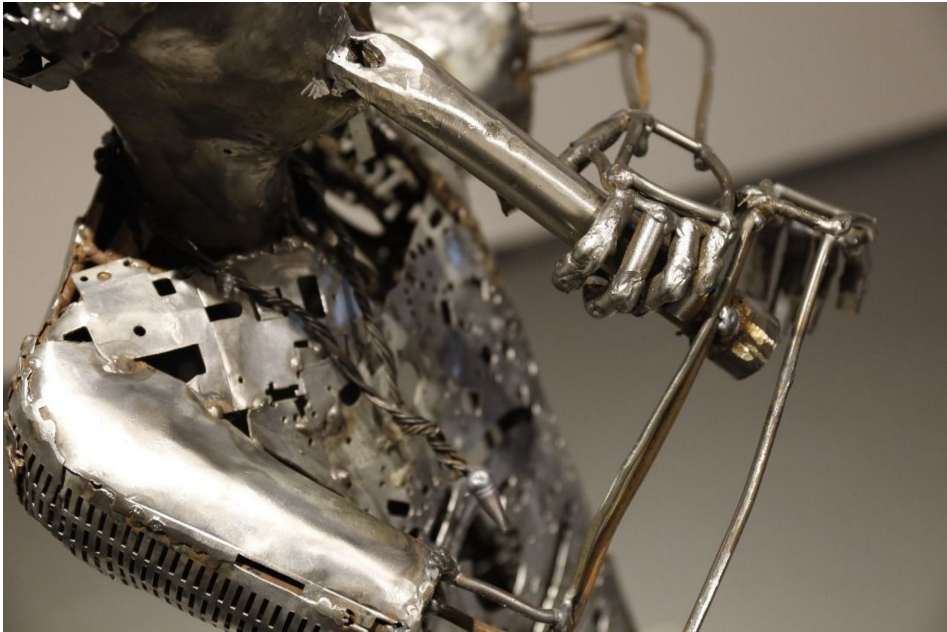


Fig. 1. Roland Samuel, *Qjà* (*The Talking Flute*), *Òjà* (*Close-up of the Qjà and its Player's Pursued Lips and Hands*), 2024.<sup>2</sup>

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2. All images of *Òjà* are reproduced from a video provided by the artist with his permission.

The car door on which The Player performs is the first signal of fragility of this piece and the art's poetic endeavour. Samuel says that car door is his understanding of Canada (*The Oja Player*). But what is a car door? A car door is an entrance to what Hannah Arendt calls the "centre of movement" (373). She uses this description to illustrate the workings of authoritarian movement where a dictator's inner circle is like the inside of a car separating those within (elites) from others outside. But I argue that the car is not just the center of movement but that which makes promises of movement and acceleration. In the time Arendt wrote, as in now, it promises the possibility of seeing enough of certain realities and locations within a particular vicinity. The car's ability to fulfil, all things being equal, promises of movement and speed is the reason people still cherish road trips and all other kinds of automobile-assisted movements for fun in addition to its utilitarian function. Now, if the car is the centre of movement and makes promises of movement, its door becomes a meeting point for or an access point to movement or journey. Samuel's understanding of the car door as Canada, then, starts to take shape.

Canada is historically a place of migrants and settlers (movement). It marketed itself as part of the center in the fast moving (modern) world. But it revealed in the current immigration crises that it has become a place shutting people out. The art offers one possible answer in the representation of Canada as a broken car door. If the car door is separate, it is because the centre is a fiction; Canada is no longer a key player in the global economy, if it ever was. The crisis in this absence of the centre introduces a certain kind of vulnerability that brings about the panic reactions observable in public discourse. What kind of movement can a severed car door enable? This question demands thinking because when we see a severed car door with little information, we know that an aberration has occurred and must seek its implication and meaning. In this case, the broken car door can only make sense when engaged in relation to other components of this art installation, and whatever meaning we make becomes stronger when we marry it to the Igbo conceptual system. Òjà then becomes both an artwork that embodies a storytelling of an immigrant student's view of Canada and concretized sustainable praxis; it tells a story of a coming, even as it repositions waste from colonial capitalist endeavors into an art piece that can exist for its own sake. Its state of being, as a three-dimensional art piece, allows for an intimacy that could endear one to it and what it represents. There is something fragile about the entire piece—something that calls for curiosity and care. It would be good to understand the implications of this art in the culture that informed it in order to consider what its fragility meant for me as an international student and for Canada as a country. Hence, I turn to theorize Òjà within the Igbo culture.



Fig. 2. Sophia Igbani, *Traditional Igbo Òjà Flute Carved from Wood*, 2024.

What is òjà and why is it important to the art installation? In the Igbo worldview, òjà is a sacred and powerful object handled carefully by experts. It serves as a passage for melodies that are edifying and inspiring, but also dangerous (Onyekwelu 42). It means that whenever we hear òjà we know that communication is taking place and we carefully listen to decode based on the circumstance. This power sets òjà apart from other kinds of instruments. Òjà can address a person or a people, and call up the spirits. We believe that in this role, it can reprimand a person or people. But it does not do only that. It can soothe a person and cure illnesses, releasing both therapeutic and spiritual healing power (Onyekwelu 43). It can also praise people. In its healing and therapeutic role, òjà reaches into the minds of those who are hurting. Its player is also “a poet whose skills manifest in his poetic aptitude” (43). According to Onyekwelu, “In a social situation, the oja player uses melodic statements to emphasize notable feelings or emotions or [grander] thoughts in well-painted phrases with the aim of generating feelings by communicating with personalities” (43). Looking at Òjà, we do not need to ask what òjà is used for here.

The human figure moving on the white metal car door is The Player. An òjà player in the social fabric of Igbo people is a figure that connects stories, spirits and humans, and healing and madness. An òjà player is a craftsman whose status does not diminish whether they come invited or not. Here, I connect The Player and the international student. I draw this connection because, outside of what Samuel says,

the artist is also The Player. Samuel is an artist like an *òjà* player, and his installation is a show (representation) of an international student doing their work as The Player. The art and its making share the same complex symbolic essence. But The Player also reminds me who I am as an Igbo immigrant-student in Canada. If The Player is an embodiment of international students, the international students in Canada, in this instance, become beings that move based on demand by Canada, either explicit or implicit. For instance, my movement to Canada is somehow informed by the marketing of Canada as one of the choicest higher education spaces. I, too, have first been attracted to the narratives of cheaper and quality higher education with the experiences attached to it, with only hopes for my future. But that is not the only case. An intricate combination of reasons shape the pull Canada has on international students, including global interdependencies; imperial extractive forces operating in their country of origin;<sup>3</sup> Canada's branding as a global equitable state; and the intensive beckoning through high-level marketing of Canada and Canadian schools as a choice place. All these reasons named above motivate this coming and landing for myself and others.

#### 4. *Òjà (The Talking Flute)*



Fig. 3. Roland Samuel, *Òjà (The Talking Flute)*, *Òjà (A full image of Ojà)*, 2024.

3. Canadian oil companies like Meren Energy are still operating in my country (Nigeria).

I have noted earlier that *Òjà* makes us think about fragility, which can also be understood as a mode of instability. How do we make sense of the instability in this art installation? When we see The Player playing in an unsteady but rooted stature, observe the dirty space—the broken car door that is Canada—fragility becomes an important concept that we can use to understand the art installation. Fragility is a condition of instability, tenderness, and complexities in bodies, structures, and nation states. Paul Ricoeur observes that fragility is a visible mode in both human beings and nonhuman entities (such as states), something that requires an action, a “help” (16). When the fragile entity is human, Ricoeur asserts that they appear “to us as entrusted to our care, placed in our custody.” He further notes that the fragile being “relies on us, expects our assistance and care, and trusts that we shall fulfil our obligations” (16). One can understand fragility here to signify care to an equal or at least care to a being within one’s group, a recognition of need within another.<sup>4</sup> The need for care exists whether there is acceptance and yielding to care or not. In that way, fragility exists whether acknowledged or not. However, *Òjà* represents more than weakness or need; it presents strength, too. This strength does not imply dominance and mastery; it signals resilience and survival. The Player remains rooted on the car door, almost immovable. The car door, broken as it is, balances whenever it is placed on the ground and cannot deteriorate further when preserved well. Hence, Ricoeur’s general explanation is not enough as it misses the recognition of strength and weakness that can co-exist in any entity or structure at any given time.

To make up for that intentional or unintentional masking of weakness or strength in the fragile, I view fragility as the unsettling simultaneous presence of strength and weakness in a body or structure. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* presents an interesting theorization of this. The text is a metonymic progression of fragility. For instance, while Okonkwo is recognized as a powerful warrior, the best wrestler and the man who defied poverty, he does not confront his fear of weakness. Such performance is similar to Ikemefuna’s,<sup>5</sup> a strong boy who wants to return to his mother. And the same issue of weakness intermixed with strength haunts Umuofia village and the novel itself. This discovery of weakness changes our perspective of each entity mentioned here. They became entities that needed care even without asking, entities that persevered through personal and communal tragedies and stood together, respectively, until they did not.

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4. Hoffmaster, Barry. “What does Vulnerability Mean?” *The Hastings Center Report*.

5. Ikemefuna was one of two humans (a woman and boy), the boy, that Mbaino offered as a replacement when one of their community members murdered the pregnant wife of Ogbuefi Udo.

The Player in *Òjà* is unsettling because there is a casualness in their posture that a complete stranger cannot achieve, evident in their rootedness and perseverance as they play on this dirty car door. The player does not only remain but also performs. This action takes root in the culture which informs the art itself, where an *òjà* player who has come to perform must do that notwithstanding the situation. It is also interesting to note that the art itself introduces a complementary idea from the worldview of the artist, Igbo culture, instead of appropriating one from an Indigenous culture or acculturating to *Canadian values or culture*. This action resists the idea of integration but still suggests a certain capacity to contribute to and shape national conversations in Canada.<sup>6</sup> *Òjà*, then, asks bold questions about naturalization. How does one become natural to a place? Who decides who becomes natural to a place? I argue that *Òjà* recasts the international student, The Player, as a needed and rooted entity to show their connection to that piece of metal that is Canada. This strength that the international student possesses in the figure that we see is an epistemic power, something that is not available in the national discourse. It is not the kind of strength that directly implies dominance, as mentioned earlier, or the use of force, but a strength that comes from purposeful resilience, a flexible yet consistent disposition to survival, meaning-making and knowledge. Fragility, here, redefines itself outside of its normalized understanding because it does not stop at being a breakable quality but also becomes a flexible mode of being.

The strength of The Player or the international student is not the only thing that we see; *Òjà* highlights the weakness of international students in the presence of Canada they encounter. The Player is rooted but has a slanted nature. This slanted stature combined with the location of the landing signals a vulnerability and helplessness that is evident in The Player's lack of control with regard to the place where they have landed. One question to ask in this regard is why it has to be that location. Of all the places to land, they land on a piece of scrap. Who would willingly land on a broken car door? This oddity makes us consider international students as people who, primarily due to having little to no chance of deciding where they land, are bound to land on pieces and debris. There is a signaling to what Homi K. Bhabha considers the "unhomely," a location of displacement and uncanniness (9). *Òjà* balances the responsibility of playing the *òjà* and landing in this place of uncertainty. The artist performs his rootedness by depending on the materiality of the art and his readiness to let the art go into the world where it will be managed either to be understood

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6. A lot of Canadians, according to an *Environics Institute* survey, argue that "that too many immigrants are not adopting Canadian values" (Neuman). Lack of integration of newcomers is a worry for this group.

or contested. And the international student, as The Player, receives this art and is urged to *play* within this space of vulnerability through their own rootedness in material/cultural conditions and openness to movement as the Other in Canada. They move here and participate in the Canadian space knowing the restrictions that exist for them, and that they exist at the mercy of the Canadian immigration policies. There are other forms of unhomeliness: difficulty with housing, susceptibility to exploitation in the housing market, and vilification for the rising cost of housing in Canada. In the 2025/2026 academic session, this unhomeliness could mean the constant reminder that the student does not belong, even when they pay a tuition that is around 5.0 times higher than domestic undergraduate students and 3.0 times higher than domestic graduate students with no idea of what happens after their graduation ("Tuition").<sup>7</sup> This combination of weakness with the resoluteness that we see earlier cannot be imagined outside of the conception of the fragile which I present in this paper.



Fig. 4. Roland Samuel, *Òjà (The Talking Flute)*, *Òjà (Close-up Image of the Broken Car Door Showing "Greek House Restaurants - Lake Country BC")*, 2024.

7. Only doctorate students in some Canadian universities pay the same tuition as domestic students. I am one of those students.

The second fragility *Òjà* exposes is Canada's. It is in the dirt on the car door, and the visible and redacted writings, which I will explain below. State fragility has been the subject of different scholarly engagements with different opinions, where fragility signals an instability, helplessness, or failure/weakness in a state (Ricoeur 20; Elagin 107; Martin-Shields and Koester 3). Here, I will return again to Ricoeur's insights. Ricoeur links fragility to state's association with and use of power (20). This power is seen in the violent oppression which brings the state into existence: the gathering of lands, seizing of inheritances, and oppression of minorities; and the institutionalization and enforcing of this "initial violence" (20). The initial violence and the structure of the state ensures that domination replaces the will to live together within the state. The implication is that the state becomes a space destabilized by force that does not allow for collaborative participation of everyone within it on a horizontal level. In *Òjà*, the artist does extraordinary work in exposing this fragility in the metal platform which represents Canada. Canada is considered the poster country for prosperity, good governance, accommodations, accessibility, safety, cleanliness, and peaceful coexistence. Enakshi Dua, Narda Razack, and Jody Nyasha Warner opine that Canada considers itself to be at the periphery of the Western hegemony, welcoming to immigrants, "innocent of racism," keeper of peace, and a nation that looks out for the marginalised (1). However, this piece of art balances the already good narrative with the dependencies that Canada has refused to accept. We can think again of the dirt and the brokenness of the car door, and the redacted writing on it. These are the marks that allude to Canada's dependence on immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and the extraction of Indigenous land. *Òjà* encourages an inward reflection on Canada's origin and existence.

Canada seeks to forget the violence of its beginning and the harm done to Indigenous peoples or to believe in having pacified or already reconciled with Indigenous peoples. The conversation about invasiveness seldomly engages the experiences of Indigenous peoples as we can see in the xenophobic True North video. Invaders are other people, racialized or non-white immigrants and international students, and the invaded are *Canadians*, people like Faulkner. Indigenous peoples are absent. We see this move to forget in the obvious absence that confronts us. The figure moves on the space that is Canada to tell of that absence, just as the *òjà* player of the Igbo culture does. It considers Canada primarily through the histories of the land that the Canadian narrative has sought to conceal. If this broken car door is an end of movement, it highlights a fragile little space (quite an irony), from where not much lateral movement happens. Considering Canada in this context means that while it presents itself as an access or entrance to a fast-moving world, through education, it does not fulfill that promise because the centre of movement (and lateral movement) is no more. The broken car door cannot be part of movement on its own and



Fig. 5. Roland Samuel, *Òjà (The Talking Flute)*, *Òjà (Close-up side shot of The Player in Action)*, 2024.

does not give space for enough movement to happen on it. The entrance then becomes a platform of its own, a place of impasse and no lateral movement. This impasse inspires a reflection on the past and present. That reflection is The Player's performance. The Player's reflections on anti-immigration narratives disallows easy conclusions about who deserves to be inside and outside of Canada.

For instance, the landing and movement on that metal piece with an inscription referencing a former Greek restaurant in BC does two things.<sup>8</sup> First, it reminds us that Canada's fragility lies in its history as a nation of migrants whose settlement contributed to the erasure of Indigenous peoples symbolized by the absence that confronts us. The art uses what is available to show what is present and what is left out. The absence is in the non-presence of any Indigenous marker save for the name of the city.<sup>9</sup> And if the broken door is Canada and The Player and inscription signal international students' and other immigrant presence on it, we have to ask what (or who) Canada outside those people is. The subtle ignorable reality, the absence, highlights the alienation of Indigenous peoples in this Canadian narrative. What would BC, especially Kelowna, be without a palimpsestic settler state? Sakiru Adebayo reminds us that it would be a living home of the Syilx people (283).<sup>10</sup> It would be a place where they were not struggling to assert their jurisdiction ("About"). Moreover, as an immigrant myself with a lot of curiosity and anxiety, I understand that Kelowna would not only be a living home of Syilx people but also place where everyone who enters would be invited into the kind of stewardship that Syilx people of the Okanagan uphold. This mode of viewing reveals what Canada hardly acknowledges when discussing international students. The Player shows the weakness beneath Canada's strength by beaming light on the historical absence of the will to live together (see earlier quotation from Ricoeur) and alongside the other, the Indigenous people.

The second thing that car door and its inscription remind us about Canada's instability is that the narrative of immigrants and international students focuses on the students of colour, who are not integrating well in the Canadian imagination. (Remember they are not getting jobs, are burdens to the Canadian economy, etc.) What is largely not emphasized is how the skin colour of the white

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8. Samuel mentioned that he called the phone number which he would later partly efface to know if it was assigned but could not reach anyone.

9. According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Kelowna is an Okanagan word meaning "grizzly bear" and was chosen by settlers in 1892 (Marsh).

10. Sakiru Adebayo, reflecting as a Nigerian academic, reminds himself of his implication in the ongoing settler colonial project that is Canada.

person moving around anywhere in the West becomes integration software that separates them from those to be domesticated. However, Samuel's piece operates on the level of synecdoche here by substituting the part (the Greek restaurant) for the whole (Western influence in Canada). Understanding food as an identity marker and shaper (Koc and Welsh 46), allows us to ask ourselves who becomes an outsider in these conversations, and why we cannot see Europeans in the conversation about immigration in Canada despite the priority given to them throughout Canada's immigration history. For example, a look at this history will show that when Canada was becoming populated by settlers, Black refugees fleeing enslavement in the US were not given land grants or allowed to settle among white society in Nova Scotia (Dyk). Furthermore, most cases in the past century in the immigration timelines favoured European settlers (see "A Hundred," *Canadian Council for Refugees* website). Even some of the cases that favoured non-Europeans still showed the preference for European immigrants. For instance, Assisted Passage Loan Scheme became universal after nineteen years, and it was no longer interest-free at the point when it became world-wide in 1970.<sup>11</sup> Samuel's piece reminds us that the population of Canada historically favoured white immigrants. While it does not speak against the struggle of white immigrants who come with different experiences, it allows us to think about their absences in the anti-immigrant or international students' narratives and refuses them the degree of anonymity they usually enjoy. The Player re-invents themselves on that car door rather than being what Sherene H. Razack calls "a dark background in a canvass of white subjects" (161). They impose their Black presence upon the European background and show themselves in the places where they are historically removed or diminished. *Òjà* does two things: allows The Player stand on a broken car door/country and shows by omission how easy it is for white settlers/immigrants to blend in the migration/settling process.

These absences in Canada's narrative of itself are not the only revelation to be noted in *Òjà*. The art installation shows us that Canada persists, even as severed and dirty as it is. The car door, in its dirtiness, could last for a long time without tampering. And it is its ability to exist, even as imperfect as it is, that makes the landing of The Player and other entities possible. Canada's immigration records show the kind of people that have landed on it. Some of them are running from ruins of their countries and wars, others are running to Canada

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11. The Assisted Passage Loan Scheme helped immigrants settle without charging them interests. From February 1, 1951, to 1970 European immigrants got this loan, which helped them establish themselves. It meant that they were given a headstart and privilege that others did not get.

because they have a purpose they need to achieve. International students are also running not just because they are needed here, but because they are being pushed. Canada, as a modern state, provides that space. In a world where international travels are difficult, most travel advisory platforms, such as Global Citizen Solutions, place Canada at the top of the easiest immigration countries (Campos). Its ability to hold the international student(s) and provide not only a landing space, may not be very easy to acknowledge in certain areas when countering the anti-immigration narratives. However, if, as *Ôjà* shows us, The Player plays because they must play, and have successfully begun their performance, then they perform because Canada makes it possible. Canada makes it possible by being a space where performance and survival (of some people) can happen. This strength is often misappropriated into creating a subtly dominating narrative of a *better-than-others* Canada. Canada's strength is also evident in the historical learning and unlearning of Canada as a nation. It has come out (although grudgingly) on different occasions to acknowledge what it did, such as in the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and commemoration of people like Viola Desmond,<sup>12</sup> even if it has not done everything right. While these might be dismissed as isolated, even tokenistic gestures, the ability to engage in this reflection in the face of a failure is both messy, unstable, and self-baring. Whether Canada does these due to an imminent need to extract and survive or to protect/recreate its images, the *Ôjà* shows a limitedness and messiness through the remnant materials that feature in it and the historical, physical and the social contradictions of the nation that that we, as viewers, must behold.

Fragility extends through the individual elements of the piece to create a profound image of what I call hyper-fragility. Each body or entity within this piece carries its own fragility. International students or immigrants arrive in Canada fully aware of their own fragile existence within the Canadian context. These two fragile entities, international students and Canada, result in a hyper-fragile entity. This intensiveness of fragility shows excess. The excess of fragile imagination in the art draws us to it and normally inspires self-preservation or colonial nation-preservation. However, when we come to terms with how the meeting of these entities with all their historical baggage and fragility creates a hyper-fragile object, then we must recognize that simultaneous multiple

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12. Viola Desmond fought racial segregation in Canada, from her Nova Scotian Residence. *The Canadian Encyclopedia* notes that her decision to go to Cinema when Canada was still practicing racial segregation earned her an arrest and conviction for tax charges. She lived and died without pardon and eventually became a *Canadian Hero* several decades after her death (Bingham).

existence of strength and weakness. Thinking of myself, as an international student, and *The Player*, I realise that my experiences of perseverance from home and conscious acknowledgement of Canadian history and my place within it are areas of strength. My ability as an emerging thinker and servant in many communities I have belonged adds to that strength. However, I am vulnerable insofar as there are certain resources that I cannot afford. These resources can limit my ability to not just be committed but live. Canada, on its part, has been a major player in catering to advanced research, and a prosperous nation. However, Canada has some level of weakness due to its relationship with Indigenous and racialized peoples and its inability to fully come to terms with the relationship needed to build an inclusive, less exploitative nation. *Òjà* provides us with the avenue to have a more humane and inclusive view by showing us a different range of things that we would not have considered: fragility is not a problem that should be avoided. In the midst of the narratives of cohesion, it is a reminder that sometimes acknowledging the acceptance of fragility does not mean the demand to be “left alone,” as Nassim Nicholas Taleb has suggested (12);<sup>13</sup> rather *Òjà* is an active negotiation between strengths and weaknesses, a deliberate decision not to replace reflectiveness and care with toughness. It reminds us that recognizing the messiness of our collective reality is more valuable than toughening up through exclusion. An exclusionary relationship inspired by toughness does not allow an all-encompassing care that is beneficial to every party involved.

Based on all these interpretations here and many more available to viewers of this piece, I consider the art as haunting Canadian national imaginaries. Samuel, in creating this, alludes to the general knowledge with which each international student comes. Still, with his specific knowledge, which I can relate to, he fashions what haunts every viewer. This art becomes that which is ready to bring both the social violence of the past and present into view, showing us a ghost of Canada, something we think is forgotten or already pacified. *The Player*’s lack of desire to resolve Canada’s paradoxes reminds us of Avery Gordon’s insight on ghosts and hauntings: “The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course” (8). In this piece, *The Player* carrying *òjà* is a double-layered phantom that embodies the international student and signals a readiness to continue

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13. Taleb presents antifragility as a good thing since the fragile, in his basic logic, would not benefit from challenging and volatile situations and would desire to be left alone (12). Antifragility for him, benefits from randomness just as evolution does (69). This seems like an invitation to uphold collective and communal cruelty.

haunting because they have in their possession a tool that speaks and reveals. It is in this haunting that the artwork fully becomes what it wants to be and assumes spectacular significance for everyone to whom it would appear. Its beauty is not just in its ability to situate the international student's voice but in the complex manner with which it codes the message.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined how international students contend with narratives about them in the Canadian public and national discourse by positioning art as counternarrative tool of importance. I argue that Samuel's *Òjà* is a counterpoint to the language of invasiveness embedded in the discourse of international students. *Òjà* serves as an articulation of self and the communal. It situates international students as if they were rooted and needed, thereby complicating their being in Canada. The rootedness and motion of *The Player* (international student) in this art complicates Canada's narrative of international students as temporary, creating a tension between what is narrated about them and what is. Thus, the art shows epistemic awareness of both international students' fragility and Canada's fragility, respectively. The international student is no longer a complete outsider but a knowing subject threading through Canada with full awareness of who they are, where they come from, and the situation they have landed in. Canada is not only a strong space but a sequestered one. The aim here is to study *Òjà* not as an exhaustible material, but as a haunting material with a capacity to inspire mutual care. The jolting effect of the art should make both international students and Canada seek care. International students must commit to the work of surviving while pushing Canada far beyond the limits and boundaries its set for itself, and Canada must reconsider the borders it is creating to discover the power of mutual co-existence.

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## Samuel Ikueze

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