

THE McGill Daily

| Intertwining tongues

English Language Arts Network brings together English and French arts communities

Written by: [Victoria Lessard](#)

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The English-Language Arts Network (ELAN) of Quebec recently organized and hosted the “State of the Arts” summit in Montreal. Running from September 22 to 25, the event brought together representatives from the English and French artistic communities to discuss issues facing Anglophone artists and cultural producers working in French-majority Quebec. The summit consisted of a two-day conference entitled “Creative Solutions for a Creative Community,” open only to invited participants (all notes from the conference are available to the public online at <http://www.scribd.com/elanquebec>). On the third day of the event, the ELAN opened the summit to the public with two panel discussions: “Many People, One Official Language” and “Invisible or Too Visible?” where audience members were encouraged to participate in the lively question and answer sessions following each debate. The summit concluded with the premiere of a bilingual musical, “The Season: a Musical by So-called,” held in conjunction with Pop Montreal.

The ELAN organized the “Creative Solutions” forum to examine the issues faced by English artists in Quebec, with participants actively putting forward solutions to resolve the topics debated at the conference. Some of the issues raised affected both language communities, and discussions united the two groups in the creation of action plans to resolve these common problems. Topics included building a network of assistance for “first-time artists,” creating more support for cultural and racial diversity in the arts, and getting educational institutions more actively involved in the arts community.

However, many discussions dealt with the language divide between English and French artists working in Quebec. These included topics such as: the accessibility of cultural productions in other languages (for example, the accessibility of a French theater piece to an English audience, as well as the reverse), the possibility of a “backlash” by Quebec art funding programs against English artists out of fear for the deterioration of French culture, and the public image of the English artist among the French community, among many other subjects.

The resounding issue that seemed to keep appearing throughout the summit was the topic of cultural participation and exchange between the French and the English artistic communities. In the conference entitled “Are we part of the Quebecois nation?”, participants questioned their role as English art producers in a primarily French artistic population. Contributors asked if they needed to more actively participate in and support French cultural productions, or, alternatively, whether they should be focusing on promoting and pronouncing their own Anglophone identity. This became a huge source of debate within the conference, especially in the “Invisible or Too Visible?” discussion. The title of the panel seemed to present the overall deliberation of the summit – is the English arts community suffering from under-funding and lack of exposure in Quebec? Are Anglophone artists and cultural producers an important part of the arts in Quebec? Or are English-speaking artists “threatening” a thriving French cultural community that one would struggle to find in other areas of Canada?

The participants in this panel all brought up the lack of coverage of cultural events in the other language group’s media. Each group felt underrepresented in everything from popular culture, such as the movies, to more erudite productions like theatre. D. Kimm, a Francophone artist who participated in the discussion, felt especially strongly that cultural events targeted at a particular language group (for example, a reading by a poet that identifies themselves as a Francophone) were poorly attended by the other language group.

The panel equally represented self-identified Anglophone and Francophone individuals, and once all of the participants recognized their similar concerns about the lack of representation in the other artistic community, the panel began to work more productively together. They agreed that there was a need for dialogue on the part of the English and French arts groups, in order to become more supportive of one another. The idea of bilingual artistic endeavors was put forward, and the concept of Montreal as a shared linguistic space became a unifying idea for both the panel participants and the audience members. Montreal's mixture and support for both languages in creative enterprises was lauded. Brendan Kelly, an Anglophone panel participant, put forward a question that seemed to resonate with many audience members: why are there no representations on the CBC, or in other Canadian cultural productions, of French and English people living together and navigating cultural differences and similarities on a daily basis? In other words, why are so few national movies or TV shows set in Montreal?

The ELAN summit raised many important topics that are integral to the continued support and growth of arts production in Quebec, and created many viable action plans that can start to be implemented throughout the province. Though the focus of the summit was on the issues that English-speaking cultural producers face in French-Canada, the conference and the panels were most productive when they were united in recognizing the similar goals of both communities. This recognition began a better dialogue between the two language groups, and led to interesting discussions that focused more on the possibilities of increased interaction between the communities, rather than on the question of majority versus minority. The cultural richness of Montreal was emphasized and celebrated throughout the panel discussions, but the possibilities of creativity and diversity would be wider if the idea of collaboration and dialogue could be expanded upon, rather than continuing to focus on two identities. This collaboration cannot solely extend to the artists though – audience members must actively participate in order for our two enriching identities to flourish side by side. So, to Anglophones and Francophones, see a French movie, check out an English poetry reading, and enjoy the thousands of artistic possibilities that Montreal has to offer.

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