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HOST: Before we get started today, this is your PSA that coming up on Oct. 14: The Walrus Talks at Home: is about Intelligence - specifically Minds, machines and the complexities of information. INTRIGUED? Register at the walrus DOT ca SLASH events for a front-row seat from the comfort of your own home.

People from all over the world call Canada home, weaving together cultures from across the globe to create the Canadian identity. But, with this blended cultural identity that we are so proud of, what does it mean to understand your own cultural history? Is it time to redefine multiculturalism? Welcome to the Conversation Piece. This is writer, director and producer Atom Egoyan.

ATOM EGOYAN: Near the end of a film I made many years ago, a Canada Customs officer played by Christopher Plummer is interrogating a young man he suspects to bringing something illicit into the country. Plummer's character is about to retire. This is his last night on the job, his final customs interrogation. He's having problems at home and all sorts of things don't make sense to him anymore. This weighs heavily on his mind as he asked the young man he suspects of trafficking drugs into the country a simple question, "What exactly are you bringing into the country?"

The young man being interrogated, Raffi, is full of questions about his background. I won't go into the details of the plot, the film is called Ararat. You can see it on iTunes, but suffice it to say that this young man like myself is Armenian. Put simply, that means that there are a ton of things he's trying to figure out about his identity and somehow all those issues are mysteriously contained in some cans that Plummer's customs agent is extremely suspicious about. What exactly are you bringing into this country?

When I immigrated to Canada with my parents as a young child, I'm not sure we understood what we were bringing into the country. I'm not sure that a lot of immigrants would be able to answer this question and that's because they are often so concerned with leaving the place they're from, they haven't prepared themselves for this delicate and wondrous gift we call Canadian citizenship. In the few minutes, I have to talk about our future as a country, I like to situate my own background as a child growing up in Victoria, British Columbia.

I have no doubt that if some things in my childhood had been put into a proper context, my entire formation as a Canadian might've been quite different. When my family moved from Egypt to Canada, my parents made a curious choice, they headed west. My uncles and aunts all moved to Montreal, where they live to this day. My cousins and their children all went to Armenian schools in Montreal, attended Armenian church and community activities, made friends with other Armenians. In short, they came to Canada, but stayed within a very Armenian bubble. In heading west, my parents decided to buck this trend. They wanted to assimilate. The reasons for this decision were complex and I don't have the time to get into that now. Suffice it to say that in defying the route the rest of my family took, I was raised in Victoria without the structural pillars of any traditional Armenian upbringing.

This meant that my understanding of my own cultural history was almost nonexistent. In fact, it wasn't until I left Victoria for the University of Toronto, that I began to understand the details of my background. As a boy, I would spend hours scanning the beach in front of our house in



Victoria, searching for arrowheads. They'd be easy to find after big storms, when the waves would wash away the sand and reveal these precious artifacts. I love to imagine these ancient arrowheads as they would spring from taught bows to strike intended prey. How exciting this was for a young boy, having these spearheads from historic long forgotten adventures in his hands. It never occurred to me why those first nation tribes that made and used those arrowheads were no longer on the beach I was playing on. That was never discussed.

When my friend and I began digging a fort in the bushes beside my house, we began to collect other artifacts we found in the ground, even some bones. We never considered that this might have been sacred ground, that other people had lived here before us, that this is where they might have buried their dead. We called our secret fort, Triton Tunnel and we dreamt of selective rules from membership and elaborate secret codes, dreams that were shattered when the provincial museum heard our exploits and visited us. I'll never forget the man from the museum who destroyed our boyhood fantasy, his name was Don Abbott. He had a uni-brow and a quiet intensity, as he explained why he had to take our arrowheads and mortars and pestles and bones away for safekeeping. He told us that we needed to stop digging around in that area and that Triton Tunnel had to be filled in. I started to cry. I was perhaps nine or 10 at the time and felt this was all so unfair.

All so unfair. Obviously, Dawn Abbott hadn't done a great job of explaining to us the nature of our boyhood transgressions. I've been thinking about this encounter and this idea of what we are bringing into this country. What if my parents hadn't decided to assimilate quite so fervently? What if they had told me the story of how my grandparents were erased from their ancestral lands in Anatolia? What if Don Abbott knew this part of my history? What if he was able to make some sort of parallel between the naive disregard two boys displayed at digging up this ancient site and the history of devastation and genocide my own grandparents had experienced? I have no doubt that these revelations would have enriched my nascent sense of Canadian citizenship.

We all appreciate that we are part of a unique and unprecedented experiment, but in the Petri dish we call Canada, we should ideally understand how and why we are so intricately connected. We need to reinvent the idea of multiculturalism, which has become tired and reductive. We need to define ourselves in a way that truly reflects the task we have ahead of us. It is only through absorbing someone else's experience of the world through their eyes, that we can draw any hope for profound reconciliation. As a child of multiculturalism, I'm here to declare its possible obsolescence. While it certainly helped me understand my place in my new country, it no longer serves to exclusively and even accurately locate new Canadians in their adopted home. Further, I would think that any First Nation, Metis or Inuit person would find the idea of being part of a multicultural fabric misleading, if not downright demeaning. They are not part of a new country struggling to find a collective identity, but rather a collective identity forced to accept the multicultural blanket which has been thrust upon them.

Multiculturalism suggests by its very name that we are composed of individual components. And this idea certainly made some sense at one point in our national evolution, but multiculturalism favors the idea of people from elsewhere trying to reconfigure themselves in a new place. It's only very recently that we're just beginning to understand this isn't a new place. We didn't come here from many different places to make a new country. This was never a new country and the First Nations and Inuit people who had been living here are not part of a multicultural fabric. In fact, our country is based on the principles of multi-narrativism, a prismatic sense of culture. We must see ourselves as refractions through this very specific lens. It's a lens we need to recalibrate. Through the prism of this lens, we are willful distortions of the nation we can

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Atom Egoyan from The Walrus Talks



become. This is what we have brought into the land and this is what we are bringing into the country.

Thank you.

HOST: Atom Egoyan spoke at The Walrus Talks National Tour: We Desire a Better Country. Recorded in May of 2017 at the Banff Centre. If you enjoyed this podcast, consider donating to The Walrus. We are a registered charity that relies on our community of donors and sponsors to produce compelling journalism, events and podcasts. Learn more about how your support can make an impact at [thewalrus.ca/donate](http://thewalrus.ca/donate).

Next week, we are wrapping up season one of The Conversation Piece. We'll be taking a break for a few weeks, but then we'll be back with season two with more of your favourite speakers from the past who were a part of The Walrus Talks.

In the meantime, we'd love to get your feedback on season one of the podcast. Please email us at [web AT the walrus DOT C-A](mailto:web@thewalrus.ca). That's [web AT the walrus DOT C-](http://web@thewalrus.ca)