

Interdisciplinary PhD in Humanities Proposal

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**Plastoart - Up-cycling and Nigerian Hair Threading: Plastoart - Up-cycling and Nigerian Hair Threading: an environmental cultural art form for the transition of the 'discarded' from 'waste' to resource.**

*Abstract*

*Value is dependent on the character of functionality or utility and commands meaning in every subject, object or idea. So when an object is considered useless or to have little or no value, it is not because it has outlived its physical state but due to the imposed functionality, on which its essence is based, has expired. This phenomenon has become endemic in contemporary capitalist institutions and cultural value structures based on materialism driven by mass consumerism and excessive accumulation. This amounts to phenomenal environmental waste and also a decline in cultural elements of societies, especially in developing countries, like Nigeria.*

*Based on the interdisciplinary nature of my studio work and the concept of Plastoart, which involves areas concerned with environment and art, culture and social-politically engaged art practices, in this proposed PhD research I intend to examine important questions pertaining to my area of study, which developed within the final stages of my MFA program: What is the position of a contemporary environmental artist not just as creator of aesthetics but also as a pragmatic catalyst for social-cultural change? How viable can my concept of Plastoart and Threading be as a sculpture practice and process in the forms I create? How socially engaging are these concepts and processes as environmental and cultural Up-cycling methods? These questions serve as a point of departure and will also inspire other queries, forming the background and serving as guides for my proposed research.*

## **Introduction**

The environment is a space, which encapsulates the physical presence of a person, body or being. It is an extension of the body and allows both a human presence and the environment, to revolve and evolve around each other. It features elements that compliment and sustain our existence. These sustaining elements include the biotic and abiotic, the material and ethereal, synthetic or real, physical and non-physical or abstract. In the interactivity between this space and us we develop an understanding, a language or code of communication that redefines us into a peculiar social entity, sharing common values, needs, ideas and belief systems. These social entities or communities transit from smaller defined ideal structures with principles, and cultural forms that invariably mitigate or compliment one another in a reciprocal manner. Art, consumerism and material value, social order and activism are but a few of those cultural forms. And so is the relationship between art, the reorientation on the notion of material value (or the art of consumerism) and its support for social order and living. This support serves to maintain the environment through ecological interventions like Up-cycling, and other socially engaged art practices.

Collaborative design helps diversify the spectrum of art and project possibilities that go beyond commonly accepted confines of art practice, creating works that compliment human behaviours and sustain the elements or characters in nature. Ursula Heise<sup>1</sup> reiterates the above claim when she talks about the original inclination of the modern environmentalist movement to proclaim the importance of developing a holistic understanding of ecological connectedness to all human endeavors. Therefore, efforts to address environmental problems become more worthwhile when human values – contemporaneous and historical, valuable and disposed, modern and old-fashioned – are applied to them.

Having recognized, in the African hair technique known as ‘Threading’, a potential for projecting aesthetic recycling and mutual Up-cycling design processes, I discovered a new sculpture art form during my MFA program that I called *Plastoart*. By engaging the practice of *Plastoart* in repurposing two major environmental pollutants – used plastic bags and bottles – I created a body of unique three-dimensional forms where both the mediums and the processes used became beneficiaries of recycling. This discovery has persuaded my interest to study further (beyond the master’s degree level) the African hair *Threading* techniques – contemporary and traditional – in order to further develop the concept of *Plastoart* in my studio practice, as a sculpting process with an environmental benefit that could be enhanced under the framework of social practice. Therefore, situating my work in a larger context than what it was then. Understanding the conceptuality of my process of making and the domestic sculptural forms I create, the tactile qualities of the process of *Threading* and that of my main and unconventional medium (a.k.a. *Plasto-yarns*, which are made from braided plastic bags), all form part of my intended program of work and research for the realization of my PhD degree. In

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Heise. Sense of Place and Sense of Planet, *The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press (2008)

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addition to the above mentioned, I will be looking at: the ideology of value, through the various lenses of this art form, and its dependency on function or utility as defined by global culture and trends; how value creates significance, using the concept of reuse (*Up-cycling*) in repurposing waste plastic bag products as a way to encourage a change of the common perception on the discarded.

By extension, this research will also be looking at the social and environmental gains of repurposing and *Up-cycling*, in comparison with mechanized recycling, from an artist's perspective. Inclusive to this there shall be, a non-biometric analysis of my practice, which is characterized by its collaborative approach; involving my immediate community, my main medium (i.e. plastic bags) and the act of collecting bags. Prior to carrying this out, I will develop an in-depth understanding of the environmental and cultural effects, if any, of plastic bags as well as the politics of material culture and plastic waste recycling management systems in growing capitalist and diversified demographic economies like Nigeria and Canada. And this I hope to achieve in the PhD in Humanities Interdisciplinary program. Thus, during my PhD research I will be making a comparative analysis between my studio practice in Montreal, Quebec and Benin City, Nigeria.

### **Summary of MFA Research**

In my MFA (completed in May 2012) studio research and thesis, entitled “The Re-Validation of Value beyond an Expiration Date: The Environmental Artist As A Catalyst For Social Change”, I worked on the idea of material usefulness and reuse through the transformation of an object's physical state and purpose, as an alternative to recycling by mechanized chemical disintegration. I used discarded domestic materials as my media to visually express the narrative of an object's or subject's possible transition from the discarded to the aesthetic pictorial or the decorative or functional, in the absence of a mechanized process. This I conceived by creating a complexity of sculptural forms that allowed for multiple interpretations of the functionality of an object or subject after it has been consumed. The object and subject referred to are the disposed materials or practices considered for the waste bin or as no longer having a value. I conceived a multiplicity of uses while retaining the physical qualities of the discarded object/subject. However, the intention of my work was not an opposition to mechanized recycling nor was it to criticize the shortcomings of the concept. Rather, it was an expression of my opinion about the inadequate recycling solutions present in my home country (Nigeria) and a way of encouraging pragmatic environmentally inclined art practices by Nigerian artists. Therefore, I sought to engage myself (a consumer) in the extension of the utility value cycle of disposed common household wastes after consumption, employing simple inexpensive craft skills in my methodology. The purpose of this was also to demystify my misconception of recycling as an elaborate and intricate process that should be left for the government alone.

During this MFA research I focused my practice primarily on repurposing two major environmental pollutants in Nigeria, discarded plastic bags and bottles using two almost inactive traditional craft techniques. Traditional fabric loom weaving and Nigerian or African hair

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*Threading* were the craft techniques used in this Up-cycling process.

### Threading

*Threading* is a West African hair braiding technique, also known as African Hair Threading or Ghana plaits (in Ghana). It is the coiling or wrapping of threads around sections of hair strands to create beautiful hairstyles that look like sculptures. In the *Threading* process, the hair is sectioned off or parted into distinct areas – or delimited areas of hair – and each of these combed to provide a uniform amount of strands. The parted hair sections may vary depending on the hairstyle to be achieved or the intricacy of the intended hair design.

Subsequently, black mercerized cotton threads cut into certain lengths, depending on the length of the person's hair or the desired lengths needed for the hair style, are fastened tightly to the protruding strands in the sections. A uniform amount of these threads are taken to wrap each parted hair section. The threads are then knotted tightly around the root of the sectioned hair strands to create the impression of real hair extending from the middle of each section. This mercerized cotton thread is distinctive in that it has been treated with sodium hydroxide to shrink it and increase its luster. Therefore, giving the hair designs a nice sheen.

In a rotating downward movement of the hand, from left to right, the sections of parted hair are then covered in threads. These sectioned areas may be covered completely in threads or conversely, fashioned to leave the delineated areas - part of the hair strands - visible to the eye, therefore creating even spaced gaps on the hair sections. However, this depends on the desired end result. While the former thread wrapping process imparts a more firm form to the finished hair design, the later, referred to as 'Some-gaps' in Nigeria gives the design a less rigid look. In either case, the underlying sectioning is the same. It provides a grid-like base onto which varying hairstyles may be developed.



*Isi owu* (Mercerized cotton thread)



African hair *Threading* with mercerized cotton thread)

When completely covered in threads, each parted hair section looks like a flexible tree branch that can be bent to any direction. The diameters or thickness of these differ by the amount of hair strands covered in each section. The thinner the diameter, the more yarn-like the section looks and the easier it is to twist or fold into elaborate hairstyles.

One of my objectives, while conducting research on the various *Threading* techniques, was also

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to change popular perceptions of this beautiful craft. Hair *Threading* is deeply steeped in tradition. It is a form of Nigerian craft, under the fashion industry, though now often deemed as a ‘common craft’, ‘obsolete’ or ‘out of fashion’. Modernization and the craze for Eurocentric and Anglo-American fashion ethics, in Nigeria, are responsible for the constant changes in fashion trends, and may have contributed to *Threading*’s loss in popularity. Eurocentrism, which is misinterpreted as modernization, has strong influences on traditional Nigerian mode of dressing and is culture fallout from the colonization of the British and other ensuing European interactions.

By modifying the functionality of those ‘obsolete’ or ‘common craft’ skills, such as fabric weaving or *Threading*, their prominence as essential cultural components could be extended. These old-fashioned practices may not be utilized for their original functions, but like my current art practice, they can function as a method for achieving a different purpose. For instance, I consider *Threading* as an innovative method for repurposing discarded waste materials, like my mediums of interest – polyethylene bags and bottles. It transforms these materials into objects with new worth. Incorporating *Threading* into my concept of *Plastoart* for a purpose other than hair beautification, but for an environmental objective, validates its practice and significance as an integral factor in sustaining socio-cultural values.

I chose to work with traditional fabric weaving and *Threading*, in particular, because they are two craft practices whose cultural essence in the contemporary Nigerian societies were gradually declining. The transformation of their uses on hair and textile/fabric design into my art process was to emphasize my idea of extending value and utility, whether material or otherwise. I consider these craft processes of production as a less expensive means for recycling waste materials. Besides, it offers a means to harness a non-fossil fuel material and provides alternative option to the poor recycling practices in a less developed economy like ours. This creative alternative could be exploited within a large context (e.g. Nigeria), and eventually become a source of economic growth for many communities.

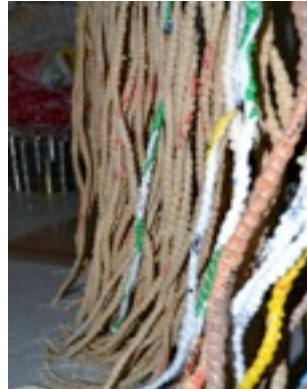
### **Plastoart**

Plastic bottles and polyethylene bags – also commonly known as Poly-bags in Nigeria – serve as my primary artistic medium. The fascination for this material began due to its ubiquitous nature. Poly-bags are a universal pollutant, particular to any consumerist environment. Within my home country where petroleum resources abound, Poly-bags are the resultant byproducts and are becoming evermore present, and exceedingly difficult to eliminate from both urban and rural environments.

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(a)



(b)

(a) Ifeoma Anyaeji, *Threading* plastic bags, 2012 (Plastic bags and carpet yarn)

(b) Plasto-yarns (yarns made from discarded plastic bags)

I call my style of art "Plastoart", coined from the words plastic and art. Repurposing these plastic bags and bottles with the *Threading* method, I was able to make objects that conveyed a sense of the transformative potential of discarded or redundant objects. I create two and three-dimensional forms with multiple interpretations which may be equally translated or perceived as functional objects. These have both an aesthetic value - which allow the viewer a point of access - and a functional quality (e.g. *Oche Onodu (Couch)*, 2012) that lends itself to different environments, be it a gallery space or a household setting. Using forms inspired by architectural structures and household furniture I explore the possibility of achieving an environmentally sustainable practice through these unconventional *Up-cycling* (recycling) processes.



*Oche Onodu (Couch)*, 2012



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Ifeoma Anyaeji, 2012. Weaving Plasto-yarns on a fabricated loomed arm-rest (Plastic bags and carpet yarn)

### Up-cycling

The term "recycle" has a slogan-like quality, urging environmentalists and the general public to be conscientious about the environment. It represents a means of minimizing damage and waste. Albeit, it should not be perceived as the sole transformative means of recyclable materials, nor the only system by which redundant objects are reused and reincorporated into our daily lives. Non-conventional localized structures that can be likened to a small-scale industrial process may provide an alternative approach. For example, communities which appropriate recyclable materials for their craft related work, are a benefit to the environment and creatively provide an alternate solution that does not involve a mechanical system of "recycling". This also allows for greater accessibility to the general public to partake in a collective solution in what has become a global problem. Suzanne Seriff reverberates this general thinking about recycling in her essay, *Folk Art from Global Scrap Heap*:

“...When we think of recycling in America and other industrialized nations we imagine an automated sequence beginning with a curbside disposal of aluminum cans, plastic bottles, and old newspapers. These postconsumer items are then systematically collected and transformed at giant recycling centers where they are smelted and de-linked and returned to the industrial process” (Pg. 11)

The common belief is recycling is the solution to controlling waste. Yet, it is not. In their book, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, William McDonough and Michael Braungart argue against relying completely on recycling. To them, the approach causes a one-way, "cradle to grave" product cycling system. A system, with a large percentage of waste generated, which could be traced to the Industrial Revolution. This is different when you repurpose or *Up-cycle*, especially when simple techniques, that promote a culture rather than undermine it, are used.

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In mechanized recycling, the closed cyclical procedures do not guarantee a total elimination of waste. On the contrary it also generates its own kind of waste. Whatever cannot be chemically disintegrated completely for reuse is disposed as non-recyclables in dumpsites and landfills. This means only a percentage of the material is recycled and there is a limit to the number of times it can be recycled. Plastics, for instance, can only be recycled once or twice. And then what happens to it after? This is a question I keep at the back of my mind as I pursue my research on repurposing this material (plastic bags), which has become my ultimate medium of interest and means of transcending beyond what I did in my MFA program.

In *Up-cycling*, the cycle is not closed but a spiraled process. Waste is usually not expected, because everything is considered useable. Every part of the waste material is transformable with a new purpose assigned. *Up-cycling* continuously repurposes, instead of breaking down the waste materials and selecting a percentage to be used. Unlike most mechanized recycling, *Up-cycling* requires little or no fossil energy, except for human labor and this is an economic advantage because it empowers the human hands through employment (small-scaled and self organized). But more importantly, it encourages innovation and creativity in remaking an object, which re-invokes value. Through its localized process *Up-cycling* emulates a craft tradition that is social because it can be learned and shared communally through community engagements. It becomes catalytic. More to its advantage, *Up-cycling* does not rely on industrial and government support or control the way mechanized recycling does. Instead it encourages individualism (through its craft orientation) to develop stronger communal environmental responsibilities. It also applies dexterity in selection of expressive media to reclaim value and history and to reduce temporality in the worthless. Most of the craft techniques it employs have communal qualities and are applicable in communal professions, such as textile weaving, basketry, and furniture making, structure building and product manufacture in general. These techniques include: weaving, braiding, and knitting, which reflect a connectedness between the producer and the products, and help transfer an element significant to the sustenance of a product – value – as well as the process or practice itself (this is why I chose to work with hair braiding and weaving). It is this last quality that has prompted my interest in researching further correlation between the processes of repurposing polyethylene bags and African hair Threading, and the aesthetic, and socio-cultural impact they could have on a contemporary Nigerian environment and related environments.

### **PhD Research (Goal / Objectives)**

Through my MFA research and personal practice afterwards, I have come to visualize my *Plastoart* process as a simple but strategic way of up-cycling common domestic waste materials, like polyethylene bags and bottles, to create new meaning for the creator and end the question of use and purpose of the discarded subject. However, it is still my expectation that this process could be perceived as a catalytic form aimed at refreshing the historical value of one of my country's declining traditional practices, hair *Threading*. At the same time, the process could become a potent resource that applies other practices. Practices, such as public



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participation/performance, which could form a conglomerate of skills for the environmental benefits of highly commercialized multicultural cities particularly those with poor environmental management system, like Nigeria for example.

Using the above analysis on the potentials of up-cycling as my backdrop for embarking on the Interdisciplinary PhD in Humanities program, my proposed doctoral research, entitled “Plastoart, Up-cycling and Nigerian Hair Threading in Domestic Environmental Waste management: A Co-operative Social Practice for the Discarded” will explore the extensiveness and potentiality of the Nigerian hair Threading concept and my *Plastoart* process in repurposing discarded plastic bags and bottles in the form of sculptures and installations that replicate select traditional and contemporary Canadian and Nigerian architectural design structures and domestic furniture.

As part of the above research, I would like to understand and hopefully prove (i.e. identify) how the dissolution of the environment by the changing cultures of the human body through fashion statements like hair design in Nigeria, in this case contemporary artificial hair extensions as opposed to traditional hair *Threading*, is caused by the repetitive consumptive structures of a capitalist society. Also, I would like to observe the materiality of one of the outcomes of these repetitive consumptive structures (i.e. plastic bags) in relation to human hair, the human body and the environment – either as conceived objects or spatial spaces and how the corroded environment could be potentially “repaired”.

*Threading* is tactile and has a communal quality to its practice and because this process of making bears a major role in the production of my works, engaging the communal side of it would also form part of my research. By this I mean there will be areas of social engagement and public practice as my work/research evolves throughout the stages of the program. Therefore, there will be the environmental side of my work, social practice and public participation, construction of ritual and the collective examining of spatial spaces.

### **Proposed Research Components**

To achieve the above objective, my research for the Interdisciplinary PhD in Humanities will be an interrelation of three (3) disciplines: Studio Arts, Art History and Social practice, under the Geography, Urban and Environmental Studies department.

Professor Trevor Gould in the Studio Arts department will be supervising me in my major field – sculpture and coordinating my studio work as I develop my *Plastoart* concept. Professor Alice Ming Wai Jim in the Art history department will be supervising me, through independent studies, on one of my minor fields – socially-engaged arts focusing on recycling, up-cycling and garbage art. She will also be supervising my research on African hair *Threading* and the implications of cross-culture and global civilization and colonization on its advancement as a body beautification art practice in Nigeria. For my second minor field of research, in Geography, Urban and Environmental Studies, Professor Norma Rantisi will be supervising me

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on the socio-cultural and environmental form within my art practice as it involves my culture, with emphasis on relating features of Montreal.

It is my conception that a successful *Up-cycling* process should not focus only on the transformation of a discarded object into something of new value. The process should be both object and subject transformative. By this I mean that the transformation – or process – is jointly an integral part of the subject, which unfolds within a given time and functions as a conveyor of meaning. Much like a performance that transmits meaning within a time/space framework.

Therefore, from a studio perspective, I will be extending my study in the use of the aesthetic, craft and design components of African hair *Threading* and traditional loom weaving as forms of body beautification to methods for creating environmental and utilitarian sculptures. To achieve this, I will be studying the structural design complexities of traditional and contemporary furniture, domestic architectural structures and environmental sculptures (especially those made from repurposed discarded materials) found in selected commercial centers in the multicultural cities of Montreal and Toronto in Canada, and also Lagos and Benin in Nigeria. These studies will be used as guides to explore the materiality of discarded plastic bags. In addition, this line of study will serve to determine the extent to which plastic bags, are used and collected in and around these cities; and allow also, to observe the transformative process of African hair *Threading* in the realization of environmental and utilitarian sculptural forms. The slides of images included with my application are some examples of my previous works that illustrate my attempt to emphasize the importance of *Up-cycling* and the repurposing concept of hair *Threading*. Also part of the studio component of my PhD research will include public participatory activities, focused on youth development and environmental responsibility, within the local communities of my residences during the course of the program. Therefore, I will be taking courses in Community Participation in Environmental Conservation.

From the art historical, I will be researching on the historical context of traditional and contemporary African hair braiding vis-à-vis contemporary global fashion trends. This cross section, ranging in time and within different cultural settings, is pertinent to my area of study. My own work addresses the hair *Threading* technique. Hence, delving into the evolution and varying manifestations of hair related forms of art, will allow me to better define and situate my own work within a given time and cultural framework.

Part of my research will involve studies on traditional and contemporary environmental architecture and interior design in Canada and Nigeria. My projected intention for these research studies is to understand the material culture, and environmental design elements of my process in order to create a series of sculptural forms and installations of similar complexities, with an eco-design format, using plastic bags as my main medium. This means I will be taking related studio based courses from the Fibres and Material Practice program to broaden my understanding of the plastic bag material. To further balance my studio practice with a theoretical component, I will conduct my research toward the following areas of interest: Hair and identity, the cultural evolution of *Threading*.

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Art, as a social practice, is an investment in the collective well-being of a people. The modes of art making, as they relate to the community, are constructed within a network of activities that contribute to the practice itself. This means everything an artist does is integral to the work. The activities of assembling, fabricating and placing of the materials, the process of making, the finished work itself, the presentation of the work and the response to it, are all done to benefit society. As a social practice, art “advocates a practice that is invested in questions challenging the surety of knowledge to displace the flow a bit or redirect it” (Barbara Kruger)<sup>2</sup>. The endeavor for art, as a social practice, is to challenge the level of social collaborative productions in resolving environmental problems, with the intent to redirect the dialogue from politicized interventionist artworks to affective cultural practices. According to Kruger, artists engaged in social practices create cultural productions, which are collaborative and involve dialogue. I am of the opinion that the idea of repurposing and reuse can have substantial positive effects and future benefits for an environment through collaborative dialogues via socially engaged art practices. This is why I will also be investigating plastic bag accumulation and the transition from waste to resource through community participation in environmental conservation art practices.

### **Conclusion**

Up-cycling intervention systems, of material and or culture, should not end as a protest against high culture, beauty, and consumerism, as seen in subversive forms of most contemporary interventionist art. There should be co-interventions between disciplines, which can offer better resolutions on social, political and cultural matters, especially those pertaining to the sustenance of society and traditional environments. This is why I chose to pursue an interdisciplinary arts program, to direct my discourse and practice on *Plastoart* and expand the potentials of this concept. My proposed research study draws from the political, social, environmental and cultural. And by thinking across academic disciplines, I am able to build a theoretical and practical background on my concept in the course of the program. Fortunately, Concordia University has a strong and well-developed program designed for such research as mine.

Based on the extensive outline of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture (CISSC), which cuts across the Social Sciences, Fine Arts and Humanities disciplines, the Humanities PhD Program (through the CISSC) has an academic content and objective that will provide a flexible experience for a scholarly development of my research goals while supporting my practice in the studio area. This is the reason why I have chosen to pursue an interdisciplinary PhD in Humanities degree in Concordia University. Since the program’s unique structure requires and encourages interaction with other fields related to my study interests, by embarking on this Interdisciplinary PhD in Humanities program I believe I will be

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Kruger is an American conceptual and pop artist known for her collaged photographs. Through her works she has examined the importance of aggrandized politics and evolved consumerism cultures to the experience and making of social identities

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able to build a solid theoretical and scholarly background for my art concept, *Plastoart* as well as an in-depth practice on the process of *Threading*, understanding its social, cultural and historical relationships with the environment – which I started off towards the concluding part of my the MFA program in 2012. And this decision to study in Concordia is further reinforced with my visits to the university and interacting with some of the professors and students in the CISSC program, studio arts and art history departments.

In addition to the above benefits from the CISSC program, my choosing to apply to Concordia University for my PhD studies is due to my interest and admiration for the university's ideal academic environment for studying, especially as it is located in a very historical place, not to mention its collaborative relationships (Inter-university research, cooperation and joint programs) with other institutions Université Laval, McGill, Université du Québec à Montréal and Université de Montréal. Furthermore, based on brief visits to Montreal, I have been able to identify some cultural similarities between Montreal and my immediate home environment, in Benin City Nigeria, which will be useful in my PhD research studies. Bearing this in mind, I envisage my final research outcome taking the form of a performance, installation and a written thesis, culminating from a combination of guided studio work, oral and theoretical seminars and workshops. All of these reasons have guided my firm decision of applying to Concordia University for my PhD studies.

I think I am right for the program not just because of the uniqueness of my studio concept, but because the interdisciplinary nature of my proposed research interest is in line with the program's mission of fostering social interactions and encouraging professional communication among global researchers and graduate students to accomplish a greater universal humanities-oriented scholarship. In addition, the university has a vast knowledge pool of academic scholars, including my advisors Professor Trevor Gould, Professor Alice Ming Wai Jim and Professor Norma Rantisi who all will be supervising me in my major and minor fields of Sculpture, Art History and Geography, Urban and Environmental Studies.

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