

## Mosaic, Melting Pot and AI (Excerpt)

### Mosaic or Melting Pot

Consider the different approaches to multiculturalism taken in our settler nations of Canada and the United States. At least, the theory—the effectiveness of these approaches is a separate discussion!

The book *The Canadian Mosaic* was written by John Murray Gibbon in 1938. The mosaic idea — that each cultural group would retain a distinct identity and still contribute to the nation — would shape our country’s immigration and multiculturalism policy in the last century’s latter half. This idea of *distinct cultures* echoes the strength of the French population in Quebec and throughout other parts of the country.

In contrast, the United States has a more assimilationist approach, the melting pot: in theory, everyone comes and becomes American. One big happy family! (Your mileage may vary).

Drawing in from a national scope to a community lens, it is easy to see the benefits to the mosaic – the opportunity to learn from each other, to sample new foods, to experience new celebrations and rituals. New ideas, innovations and businesses strengthen our economy. Many of us prize this more *cosmopolitan* experience, which offers the rewards of travel without having to leave home. As Steve Earle sings (ironically about New York—an American city), “Living in the city of immigrants, I don’t have to go traveling. Open my door and the world walks in.”

At the same time as we enjoy experiencing the world this way, nearly every Nova Scotian has heard a version of “*they moved here, why can’t they just talk like / act like / be like us?*”

This sentiment is not a singular stop on a right to left single-plane political spectrum. Sure, sometimes it stems from xenophobia or racism. But sometimes it means, “why does it appear that the women of this ethnic or religious group are still oppressed, despite being in our free country?” Or, “Why are these two nationalities that have long been at war not able to lay down their disagreements now that they are on neutral territory?” Or, “Why do students from this part of the world seem extra reluctant to ask questions in class?” These questions are often resolved by building relationships.

### An Artificial Melting Pot

Our cybersecurity trainer recently made the point that our IT system, comprising a dog’s breakfast of different devices since we mostly use our own, is actually harder to hack because of this diversity. The exploitable weaknesses of an Android phone, ASUS laptop, Apple tablet and Windows Surface are all going to be different. Again, diverse systems are stronger.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the current inescapable Hot Tech Trend™. All social media platforms are awash in posts either describing how to harness AI in your business or advertising training seminars on this topic. Probably a high percentage of these posts are themselves crafted

by AI, which begs the question around what “social” means, and if that includes bots talking to bots.

One solution to making AI more equitable is finding a wider, more diverse array of materials to train the AI tool on. Setting aside for a moment the massive concerns this raises about intellectual property, consider how this might result in an AI melting pot.

If AI learns from and expands its understanding based on all the information it reviews, and lacks a fundamental ‘self’ to provide a point of view on this information; and if AI is heading toward ubiquity in our online lives, as it certainly seems to be now; and finally, if we accept (and this is definitely my experience) that our culture in Canada at this point in time is shaped in large part by our online experience; then we are headed toward a neutral beige future, a melting pot pouring out cement.

All of the colour and vibrancy that the image of “mosaic” brings up is going to go into that blender of assimilation and come out the other end... boring. Safe? Middle of the road. The non-colour of blended recycled paint. Go ask AI for the Bhagavad Gita rewritten in the style of Keats, then rewritten again as Ernest Hemingway. Now turn it into a James Gunn film. Now a restaurant menu. Is it still the Bhagavad Gita?

Algorithms offer shortcuts to serve us things “we may find interesting” on many platforms: Google, Youtube, Spotify, X, Facebook. But do the machines really know us, in our full complexity? There are some good examinations of how algorithms work to influence and affect culture, including the 2020 New York Times podcast [Rabbit Hole](#) and the new book [Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture](#) by Kyle Chayka. The latter asks the question, “What happens when shareability supersedes messiness, innovation, and creativity—the qualities that make us human?” Technology is about smoothing out the outliers, the ragged edges of the statistical graphs... the parts where we find innovation, glitches, uniqueness.

Let’s not let that happen. The more appreciation we individually develop now for the people and cultures around us, the more we seek to understand and be curious, the more value those individual cultures will be assigned. And value is what matters – that will move the programmers to figure out how to accommodate a mosaic and avoid the flattening, or the melting.

With AI more and more used in social scenarios like communications, hiring employees, and recommending criminal sentencing, we need AI that can see colour. AI is often celebrated as a way to avoid emotional human biases. That is desirable, but only in that “equity-versus-equality” way in which “fair” treatment considers historical injustices and current biased systems.