

Face-less Identification: Tradition and recognition in the work of Ursula Johnson

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FPA 823: New Approaches to Visual Art and Culture

April 13 2015

Word Count: 4753

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As a Mi'kmaw artist, Ursula Johnson's practice takes up traditional basketry techniques of the Mi'kmaw people to explore current and historical interpretations of Aboriginal artefacts, museological practices of display, identity, language and memory. Johnson's more recent basket works, though non-functional, point to the traditional functional form. These baskets are part of Johnson's ongoing practice of 'netukulimk,' the Mi'kmaw term for self-sustainability, knowledge and respect of the land¹ that engages questions of the sustainability of Aboriginal cultures and traditions. The materiality of Johnson's work plays an important role, the collection and preparation of the wood vital to the continuation or carrying forward of traditional Mi'kmaw practices.

For the purpose of this paper my object of study is *L'nuwelti'k (We Are Indian)*, a series of on-going performative works in which the artist weaves face-concealing baskets over a participant's head. *L'nuwelti'k* engages discourses of identity, transformation and visibility. Through the use of status-specific titles, Johnson critically comments on the government-imposed categorization of indigenous status and identity through the Indian Act (1985). Tracing the history of identification and modes of classification, it is my intention to investigate the woven baskets as presenting simultaneously inner and outer layers of publicly visible and invisible formations of identity. Through a methodology of weaving I will investigate *L'nuwelti'k* as cultural object, taking up the materiality and process of traditional Mi'kmaw basketry; as mask, engaging a discourse of visibility and invisibility; and as metaphor for the phenomenological body. From these three perspectives, it is my aim to engage and unwrap the

¹ Ursula Johnson, "First Nations Cultural Preservation Through Art: Ursula Johnson at TEDxHalifax." *YouTube.ca*. November 23, 2012. Accessed February 8, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HHvaZKFgRA>

political and social critique within Johnson's body of work. Considering the imperative of 'netukulimk,' this paper will also contemplate the sustainability of identity, and the continual transformation and adaptation of identity within our current cultural moment.

Ursula Johnson

Of the Eskasoni Mi'kmaw community on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Ursula Johnson is a descendant of a long line of Mi'kmaw artists, including her late great-grandmother from whom she learned traditional basket weaving techniques. Eskasoni has the largest Mi'kmaw community in the world, and is the largest Aboriginal community in Atlantic Canada.² An interdisciplinary artist, Johnson studied theatre at Cape Breton University, photography, drawing and textiles at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award in 2014. Johnson's background in theatre, when merged with her use of traditional basketry techniques, has evolved into a performance-centred practice that often involve the public as participants. Viewers, typically taking on the role of passive spectator, are made active in witnessing the process of harvesting, preparing, making and acknowledging the complex relationship of the gallery space, between performer and spectator, colonizers and colonized, self and other. Johnson describes her approach as "challenging the viewer to investigate their own identity, as well as examining the relationship that their ancestry and cultural practices relates to that of [her own]."³ In this way, the viewer/participant becomes implicated in the

² "History of Eskasoni." *Our Eskasoni*, accessed April 6, 2015. <http://www.eskasoni.ca/History/>

³ Ursula Johnson. "Artist Statement and Biography," *Ursula Johnson*, accessed February 8 2015. <http://ursulajohnson.wordpress.com/artist-statement/>

traditional processes and objects taken up by Johnson's practice, which are at risk of being archived, misinterpreted, overlooked or forgotten.

Johnson's creative practice has been described as transformative in relation to both identity and traditional processes⁴, engaging narratives of colonialism, memory, and self-identification. In her approach to Mi'kmaw basketry, Johnson employs traditional techniques and materials to create non-traditional forms questioning the sustainability of Aboriginal culture, customs and identity. By transforming the traditional basket form, Johnson challenges museological methods of studying, cataloguing and categorizing Aboriginal artefacts removed from their original context both culturally and historically. As sculptural objects, the symbolic emptiness of the non-functional baskets points to appropriation, misinterpretation and decontextualization of Mi'kmaw traditions, their craft and artworks.

The materials and techniques used in Johnson's woven works call attention to practices that have been forgotten or lost as a result of colonization and the banning of many traditional Aboriginal practices in Canada. There is a deliberateness in taking up the preservation and continuation of Mi'kmaw practices, as Johnson describes having to reacquaint herself with the land, the materials and her community of elders⁵. The materials are considered, harvested and prepared for each project as an essential element to the artist's intention and message. When making her baskets Johnson harvests splints from black ash trees, a technique she learned from her great-grandmother, renowned Mi'kmaw basket weaver Caroline Gould⁶. Johnson fuses these

⁴ Allison Cooley, "Ursula Johnson Q&A: Of Craft and Cultural Survival," *Canadian Art* (2014), <http://candianart.ca/features/2014/06/04/ursula-johnson/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

traditional techniques with her contemporary approach to the basket form, engaging an exploration of the past and future of Aboriginal identity and culture.



Fig. 1. Ursula Johnson, *Basket Weaving (Cultural Cocoon)*, 2011, Six Foot Festival, Manitoulin Island ON. Photo credit: Reit Mellink

In an interview with Carleton University Art Gallery curator Cara Tierney,⁷ Johnson discusses the relationship between her weaving practice and the act of cocooning, as metaphor for protection while in transformation. For her performance work *Basket Weaving (Cultural Cocoon)*, (fig. 1) Johnson enveloped herself inside a life-sized basket, weaving it around and over until hidden from view. The artist describes the performance as a reaction to feelings of isolation and displacement, as

representation of the desire to withdraw from the unfamiliar, to protect and preserve her culture and sense of self.⁸ At the conclusion of the performance Johnson re-emerges, tearing through the cocoon-basket. In this way the cocoon creates both a space for protecting and sustaining identity and a space that allows for potential transformation. The symbolic breaking with and breaking out of tradition reflects the artist's desire to come to terms with her identity and

⁷ Ursula Johnson, interview by Cara Tierney, artist talk following performance, Carleton University Gallery, June 20, 2014.

⁸ Ursula Johnson, "Ursula Johnson – Performance," *YouTube*, February 27, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14kunjkjSms>

culture while simultaneously merging traditional Mi'kmaw techniques with contemporary art practices and concerns.

Who Is Indian?

L'nuwelti'k (We Are Indian) was originally performed in 2012 at the Dalhousie University Art Gallery in partnership with the Schulich School of Law at Dalhousie University. It has since been performed at the Louise and Reuben-Cohen Art Gallery, University of Moncton, 2013, the Carleton University Art Gallery, 2014, Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 2014, and will continue to the Cambridge Gallery in 2015.



Fig. 2. Ursula Johnson, *Male Status 6.1a Qualipu Landless Band Member*, *L'nuwelti'k*, 2013, Galerie d'art Louise et Reuben-Cohen. Photo credit: Mathieu Léger

Working with volunteers who self-identify as Aboriginals, including terms such as 'Status,' 'non-status,' and 'half-breed,' the baskets create a type of socio-political portrait of the participant. Over a period of one to four hours, Johnson weaves a basket over the participant's head. Slowly covering

over their head and face, the basket implies both protection (like the cocoon) and mask. When asked about the possible violence of reintroduction by removing the basket⁹ Johnson notes that

⁹ Ursula Johnson, interview by Cara Tierney, artist talk following performance, Carleton University Gallery, June 20, 2014.

she feels protective of the participants, having given their identities and bodies over to the artist. As a durational performance each participant dictates when they are ready to be revealed, the artist mindful of her responsibility for their safety while in a space of isolation. The performances are followed by a private 'debrief,' which Johnson believes is necessary in order for the participant to acknowledge their emotional response to the process and experience¹⁰.

L'nuwelti'k references Indian Status classifications within the title of the works, bringing attention to a codified system for the recognition of status in a Band and the determination of descendants and rights. Titles such as *Male Status 6.1a Qualipu Landless Band Member*, and *Male Dis-enfranchised* assign participants "Indian Status," referring to the legal identity of an Aboriginal person in Canada set out by the Indian Act of 1876 and later amended in 1985. Through criteria developed by the Canadian government, legislation dictated who qualified as "Status Indians," forcing Aboriginals to live on designated reserves and to be governed by imposed systems of regulations for band administration, education and health care¹¹. Director of the First Nations House of Learning at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Linc Kesler notes, "it is most critical to recognize that this system of the regulation of "Indian identity" by the Canadian state formed a separate system, over-layering and at many points over-writing community practice, and participating, in a more general sense, in a system designed, at times very explicitly, to supersede and undermine community traditions."¹² This included making all

¹⁰ M.E. Luka, "Nujit'lateket (One Who Does It): An Interview with Ursula Johnson – M.E. Luka," *Nomorepotluck*, April 11, 2015, <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/nujitateket-one-who-does-it-an-interview-with-ursula-johnson-m-e-luka/>

¹¹ Karrmen Crey and Erin Hanson, "Indian Status," *Indigenous Foundations*, University of British Columbia, January 1, 2009. <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act>.

¹² Dr. Linc Kesler, "Aboriginal Identity & Terminology," *Indigenous Foundations*, University of British Columbia, accessed February 8, 2015. <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/?id=9494>

Aboriginal peoples wards of the government, fiscally and politically directed to adhere to colonial structures and systems.

Section 6 of the Indian Act (1876) outlines the qualifications for 'Indian' status in Canada as: "First. Any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band; Secondly. Any child of such person; Thirdly. Any woman who is or was lawfully married to such person."¹³ Not only did these categories circumvent ancestry, but resulted in discrimination against Aboriginal women. In 1985, the Bill to Amend the Indian Act (Bill C-31) attempted "to address gender discrimination of the Indian Act, to restore Indian status to those who had been forcibly enfranchised due to previous discriminatory provisions, and to allow bands to control their own band membership as a step towards self-government."¹⁴ Though amendments were made in order to raise gender equality to the level of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and to allow room for bands to attain greater self-government, the overall categorizations and classifications of 'status' continues to over-write the identity of Aboriginal peoples.

When referring to 'the people,' political theorist Jacques Rancière¹⁵ notes that this does not mean all people but only those who 'count,' or who can and are allowed to engage in political discourse. The imposition of status codes within the "Indian Act" engages the demos, as the part of no part, and the marginalized Aboriginal population. In his analysis of Rancière's *Ten Theses on Politics*, Nicholas Mirzoeff writes: "Rancière shows that the *demos* has no 'proper' place in the political and the institution of the people in democracy is 'the supplement which

¹³ Karmen Crey and Erin Hanson, "Indian Status," *Indigenous Foundations*, University of British Columbia, January 1, 2009. <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act/indian-status.html>

¹⁴ Karmen Crey and Erin Hanson, "Bill C-31," *Indigenous Foundations*, University of British Columbia, accessed February 8, 2015. <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act/bill-c-31.html>

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001), accessed January 25, 2015. http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.3ranciere.html

disjoins the population.”¹⁶ As a supplement, the so-called ‘community’ engaged in democracy lacks power and is discounted from political society. The imposition of the Indian Act segregated/separated Aboriginal communities, ensuring they were “kept in a condition of tutelage and treated as wards or children of the State...to prepare [them] for a higher civilization by encouraging [them] to assume the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship.”¹⁷ The codes (of conduct, citizenship and identification) set forward by the Act simultaneously stripped Aboriginals of their cultural identity and communities while also providing historical affirmation of status and legal representation. As such, many contemporary Aboriginal people continue to take up and identify with the status codes to maintain a sense of belonging, legitimacy and authenticity, and to hold the Canadian government accountable to their legislative obligations. To eliminate status would imply assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into mainstream society, increasing invisibility and further displacing cultural identity. Johnson’s *L’nuwelti’k* series makes visible the obliteration of personal identity, the gathering of all Aboriginals into (in)distinct categories, and the emptiness and isolation these codes and laws evoke. The artist refers to the basket forms as ‘cultural cocoons,’ engendering the metamorphosis of both the artist and the participants through the process and acknowledging the difficulty of identifying with a system of codes that has historically and politically diminished the identities of millions of Aboriginal peoples.

¹⁶ Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Division of the Sensible,” in *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 19-20.

¹⁷ *Department of the Interior, Annual Report for the year ended 20th June, 1876* (Parliament, Sessional Papers, No. 11, 1877), xiv, quoted in Karrmen Crey and Erin Hanson, “Indian Status,” *Indigenous Foundations, University of British Columbia*, January 1, 2009. <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act/indian-status.html>

In relation to visual culture, the system of codes and classifications of the Indian Act refers to what art historian W. J. T Mitchell calls the social construction,¹⁸ and Johnson's work can be understood as taking up a political and social critique of this construct. According to Mitchell¹⁹, the visual world is made up of codes to be deciphered and elaborated. Raising the discourse of visual studies to one of political and social critique, visual culture allows for an investigation of a social construction: what is inherited and what is interpreted, what is visual and what might be experienced more holistically. Mitchell proposes an approach to visual culture that engenders a balance between visual image as instrument of manipulation and as source of meaning-making. What this perspective might allow is a treatment of visual culture as a mediation between social relationships, human encounters and the re-cognition of the Levinasian Other:

Stereotypes, caricatures, classificatory figures, search images, mappings of the visible body, of the social spaces in which it appears would constitute the fundamental elaborations of visual culture on which the domain of the image – and of the Other – is constructed. As go-betweens or subaltern entities, these images are the filters through which we recognize and of course misrecognize other people.²⁰

As portraits Johnson's *L'nuwelti'*k baskets are certainly visual, acting as woven 'mappings of the visible body,' while evoking invisibility, assimilation and the haunting anonymity of the status codes. At the same time, the completed basket/portrait forms are manipulated transformations of traditional techniques, embedding within them the importance of materiality and the process/performance of making in relation to identity. In this way, the baskets can be interpreted as weaving together the individual 'portrait', as well as coded representations of

¹⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 171.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

²⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 175

relationships with the land, relationships to history and culture, and the self- versus government-imposed identity.

Making Weaving

In his essay “On Weaving a Basket,” social anthropologist Tim Ingold describes the process of making as synonymous with weaving a basket,²¹ stating “in the process of weaving, the surface of the basket is not so much transformed as built up.”²² The method of applying force to material allows it to bend and shape into a generative form. In the case of basketry, weaving complicates the conditions of inside and outside, creating what Ingold refers to as “a peculiar kind of surface that does not, strictly speaking, have an inside or an outside at all,”²³ engaging a dialogue that coincides with that of being/becoming, self/other. In this way, the



Fig. 3. Ursula Johnson, *L'nuwelti'k*, 2013, Galerie d'art Louise et Reuben-Cohen, University of Moncton, Photo credit: Mathieu Léger

process of weaving has implications in the construction and building of identity. Rather than highlighting difference, each basket-portrait seems to look alike in the end (fig. 3), and as such the work challenges the legitimacy of the definitions established by the

²¹ Tim Ingold, “On Weaving a Basket,” in *The Perception of the Environment, Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling & Skill*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 339-348.

²² *Ibid.*, 341.

²³ *Ibid.*

Act and those who wrote it. For Ingold, the rhythmic movement of weaving imbues meaning into the object as a symbolic function, such that “weaving focuses on the character of the process by which that object comes into existence,”²⁴ therefore “the action has a narrative quality, in the sense that every movement, like every line in a story, grows rhythmically out of the one before and lays the groundwork for the next.”²⁵ In this way, *L’nuwelti’k*, woven in the traditional Mi’kmaw technique, can be understood as building a narrative of identity and tradition, doubled by the title of the works. To complicate this narrative, the baskets are woven in a downward, top-to-bottom trajectory. The reversal of the typical base-to-top movement implies a covering-up or masking-over (of identity), rather than a more generative ‘coming into existence’. The visual similarities of the finished works questions how the marginalized Aboriginal communities are being seen within the socio-political landscape, and the imperative for greater, individualized recognition. Taking up Ingold’s discussion of making as synonymous with weaving, there is a connection to be made between ‘making’ and ‘performing’ identity that is both highlighted and obscured through Johnson’s work. Though the artist is not performing or making identity on behalf of the participants who already voluntarily identified themselves as having ‘status,’ the performance of weaving-to-obscure can be said to generate in itself a shell that represents status codes; a husk that can visually stand in for an identity, but when displayed remains empty and void of meaning. From a visual cultural perspective, *L’nuwelti’k* complicates the face-to-face encounter, creating an in/visible representation of the ‘other’ that purposefully embodies misrecognition: the face of the participant is replaced by a mask, a textural surface

²⁴ Tim Ingold, “On Weaving a Basket,” in *The Perception of the Environment, Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling & Skill*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 346

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 347

without features, though not featureless. The durational performance of *L'nuwelti'k* confronts the viewer by weaving together past and present, self and other, face and mask, demonstrating that none can be separated from their counterpart without unravelling the whole.

Taking up Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the 'plane of composition,' Elizabeth Grosz²⁶ describes the organization of art works, techniques and qualities within a shared environment. The plane of composition is the location where subject and object encounter one another as energy and rhythm. According to Grosz, art – as the meeting between energy and rhythm – intensifies and produces sensations, which can then affect the nervous system/body of the viewer²⁷. The rhythm and energy of the performance of *L'nuwelti'k* that can be understood as a site of multiple encounters of intensifications and sensations between bodies (the participants, viewers and artist), and the political imperative of summoning what Grosz refers to as 'people to come,' stating: "Art [...] is where intensities proliferate, where forces are expressed for their own sake, where sensation lives and experiments, where the future is affectively and perceptually anticipated."²⁸ As with Johnson's 'cultural cocoons,' *L'nuwelti'k* slowly wraps and weaves the participant into a safe space, away from scrutiny. While protected, both artist and participant are engaged in a becoming-other, a transformative experience that cannot be prepared for or fully anticipated. In the case of *L'nuwelti'k*, to cover over is also to reveal. The participant must engage willingly with a prescriptive status (and the cultural cocoon) in order to experience the transformative power of removing the basket-mask. As identity is central to this research, it is

²⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, "Sensation, The Earth, A People, Art," in *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 63-103.

²⁷ Ibid., 72

²⁸ Ibid., 78-79.

my aim to also take up *L'nuwelti'k* as a mask to further explore the transformative effects of the work, and to build upon the analysis of becoming-other.

Performance of Identity

Through a semiotic perspective, anthropologist Donald Pollock examines the mask's role in the construction, performance and modification/altering of identity²⁹. Masking as a cultural phenomenon is inherent to masquerades or ritual, and psychological or social enactments of power.³⁰ Pollock states that many cultures display or hide identity through masking techniques and rituals, noting "the mask is normally considered a technique for transforming identity, either through the modification of the representation of identity or through the temporary – and representational – extinction of identity."³¹ The psychological implications of masking is in its demonstration of power – either to disguise, transform or reveal. In performing *L'nuwelti'k*, Johnson weaves the face-concealing 'mask' over the participants face, evoking the extinction of Aboriginal identity through the function of the mask itself. Further, the title inscribes both the work and the sitter with a socio-political status that points to the replacement of individual identity with an out-dated government imposed system of classification and cultural annihilation. Pollock, borrowing from C.S. Peirce, describes the semiotic structure of the mask as an indication of displaying or changing identity, stating "...the identity of the mask wearer can be transformed into that of the beings being displayed; masks are not merely pictures of other beings, but are more fundamentally considered to be ways in which identity of those beings is attributed to or

²⁹ Donald Pollock, "Masks and the Semiotics of Identity," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1, no. 3 (1995): 581-597.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 583.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 582.

predicated of the mask-wearer as well.”³² According to Pollock, the mask, when used in relation to semiotics, is no different than the performance of the face in everyday interactions. While the participant is wearing the basket-mask they are transformed into the face-less representation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, void of individuality and identification, implying that upon removing the mask the participant’s authentic identity would be revealed. The woven basket protects the sitter from view, immobilizing the facial surface. No longer identifiable, the participants face is replaced with an exclusion of subjectivity, resulting in what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the deterritorialization of the face³³. The participant’s identity becomes overcoded by their status, the face (and visible identity) now redundant. While this deterritorialization could be understood as a move away from the binary codes of self and other, I would propose an alternative analysis. By covering the face, the basket-mask highlights the Indian Act’s continued over-writing of ancestry, tradition and authentic Aboriginal identity. The face disappears behind a socio-political mask. The authors note that the face is a sign of what is being conveyed, adding another form of communication that exists outside language. *L’nuwelti’k* reminds the viewer that the status codes not only assimilate or make invisible Aboriginal identity, but also take away the ability to communicate.

The Invisible Body

In *The Absent Body*, professor of philosophy Drew Leder describes the various absences and disappearances of the body from a phenomenological perspective built upon the theories of

³² Donald Pollock, “Masks and the Semiotics of Identity,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1, no. 3 (1995), 583.

³³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “Year Zero: Faciality,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 167-191.

Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Hegel and Polanyi. Borrowing from Merleau-Ponty's perspectival nature of embodiment and Husserl's notion of the nullpoint, Leder notes that the head is one of the bodily regions that escapes visibility and lapses into invisibility³⁴. This includes the act of covering up, as both concealing and revealing what is Other than the self.³⁵ *L'nuwelti'k* engages invisibility through the perspective of the participants: as the basket is woven around and over their heads the participant disappears from view. The covering of the face reveals in its stead a coded mask, making invisible the authentic identity of the participant and calling attention to the over-coding of Aboriginal identity. Describing the effect of the performance, Johnson states that the audience will often engage in a dialogue with her, though rarely address the participant as they are closed off, encased in the basket form. This can be understood as the dual effect of inside and outside, visible and invisible. As a sculptural form, the baskets, once removed from the participants head, could be said to make invisibility visible, as they stand empty, upturned on the plinth.

Philosopher and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thesis on the perceivable world and the perceiving subject locates the body as the primary site for knowing the world. Merleau-Ponty designates perception as that which is present, or "understood as a reference to a whole which can be grasped, in principle, only through certain of its parts or aspects."³⁶ The paradox of perception is both its immanence (that the object is not entirely foreign) and transcendence (as there is always more to be perceived)³⁷. Phenomenological experience is

³⁴ Drew Leder, "The Ecstatic Body," in *The Absent Body*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences," in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, translated by James M. Edie (Northwestern University Press, 1964), 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

both bodily experience of the self and the recognition of the experience of an 'Other' in the same world. Understanding the world from a singular cognitive perspective disembodies, while generating knowledge from 'within' allows for being-in-the-world. In his analysis of Merleau-Ponty's theory of visuality, sociologist Michael Gardiner describes the "bodily and perceptual introjection into world" as a cognitive and corporeal mode of self-perception.³⁸ This perceptual construct is only from one view-point (*my* view-point), and meaning is in fact pluralistic. Echoing Merleau-Ponty, Gardiner reminds us "we continue to inhabit the same world – that is we are co-participants in a universe that ultimately transcends any particularistic perspective,"³⁹ and further these perspectives "overlap, intertwine and together give each of us a more complete opening on to the world."⁴⁰ Through the performance of *L'nuwelti'k* the artist and participant are each engaged in a phenomenological experience, generating multiple perceptions and communications of the same instance. These experiences intertwine – or weave – together the imposed and authentic identities of the participants, and make visible a people masked by codes.

Conclusion

The *L'nuwelti'k* series currently includes eight baskets, each calling upon the status of the participant. As the performances continue, Johnson notes there are "anywhere from two to three hundred membership codes that [she will] attempt to capture."⁴¹ Most of the performances have taken place in front of court houses or law schools, as the membership codes

³⁸ Michael Gardiner, "Phenomenology and its Shadow: Visuality in the Late Work of Merleau-Ponty" in *Handbook of Visual Culture*, edited by Barry Sandywell and Ian Heywood (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2012), 121.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 125

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴¹ M.E. Luka, "Nuji'tlateket (One Who Does It): An Interview with Ursula Johnson – M.E. Luka," *Nomorepotluck*, April 11, 2015, <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/nujitlateket-one-who-does-it-an-interview-with-ursula-johnson-m-e-luka/>

are directly related to legislation. The imperative to acknowledge and make visible the various codes has the potential to greatly impact the awareness of status for Aboriginals across Canada. Throughout this paper, it has been my intention to draw attention to the performance of identity within Johnson's work. The woven surfaces generate a push-pull effect that complicates the relationship between the socio-political and the ancestral identities of the participants.

L'nuwelti'k weaves together numerous concerns for the future of Aboriginal peoples, not only engaging socio-political critiques of identity, but the overarching concern for sustaining and teaching traditional techniques and cultural identity. By continuing this series, one can only imagine the repetition of the bust form as a confrontation of similarities that points to the ways in which Aboriginal people have been assimilated and categorized as others.

As basket-forms, *L'nuwelti'k* take up traditional Mi'kmaw methods of harvesting and weaving the materials. As sculptural objects, they turn tradition on its head, representing the need to revisit/rework the conditions and status of Aboriginal peoples. Displayed on their plinths, the basket-forms stand as codes for each participant, empty shells that leave no trace of the true identity and history of the individual. The invisibility of the participant, replaced by the membership code title, generates a visibility located in the forcible isolation, segregation and assimilation caused by the Indian Act. Powerful and haunting, Johnson's *L'nuwelti'k* is the representation of the fraught relationship between sustainability, tradition and the future of Aboriginal people in Canada.

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