



Weaving Memory: (de)Constructing Meaning

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We all sort. This with that. That with this, but not that.

Across cultures, throughout history, humans sort. Everyday. It is a critical activity by which we make sense of our lives.

The good meat from the rotting meat. The ripe tomatoes from the ones left on the vine.

This photo saved; that one deleted. Put this file in a folder; drag that one to the trash.

Keep this person as my friend, this other one — not so much. Value this artwork and the artist who made it; but that other one is simply an artifact, a curiosity, a (re) presentation of a dying people. But where to put it?

One of the legacies of the European colonial project is the museum. Evolving from the connoisseurship model of classifying objects, the museum became the edifice of choice to display the many cabinets of curiosity accumulated by 17th century ‘gentlemen’ collectors.

This is a nice basket. But what is that? Is it a basket? Where does it go?

In her exhibition *Mi'kwite'tmn (Do You Remember)*, Ursula Johnson considers these questions.

Mi'kwite'tmn is actually made up of three distinct spaces. One of these, Johnson calls the Archive Room, a space that looks like a corner of a museum's storage area. On each shelving unit are rows of ‘What-is-that?’ basket-like objects. But they are not actually baskets. They resemble basket mutations, off-kilter things — aesthetic yet possibly utilitarian; mysterious yet slightly humorous.

Johnson has deliberately made them unclassifiable. They do not fit neatly into any museum category. She is subverting the power of the museum, a European based system of sorting, of classification, of value.

Johnson is also playing around with the context of reception. Following Stuart Hall's interpretation of reception theory¹, we, as audiences, decode in three basic modes: dominant — accepting the encoded meanings; negotiated — both accepting and opposing meanings; and oppositional — rejecting the encoded meanings and replacing them with our own.

Johnson insists that we negotiate with objects within her art installation precisely because she encodes them with that intention. With this intention, she re-encodes them with a deft, yet deliberately obscure, semiotic touch. The reader has no immediate decoding language with which to understand them. So Johnson ironically helps out. She advises putting on white gloves to handle the objects. Each interwoven faux-basket has a museum-like tag that, when scanned, blurts out a computer displayed description. Of course, these descriptions are fictive.

But the meaning-making process does not end there. In *Mi'kwite'tmn* Johnson elaborates how the context of reception influences how we create meaning. What is a basket? Is it commodity, craft, artifact or art? What is its value? Who decides? Where does it belong? In a craft shop? In ethnographic museums? In contemporary art galleries? Johnson's work crosses these boundaries to reveal potent layers of memory, history and meaning.

Her choice of the basket demonstrates how historical contexts transform meaning. It is often stated that in pre-contact Indigenous societies, art was integrated in everyday life. Art was everywhere. Art played vital roles in the lives of people — functional, decorative, symbolic, ceremonial and spiritual roles.

Tiffany Sark, a Mi'kmaq researcher and writer, explains that in those pre-contact days, baskets were made by following traditions that were profoundly connected to the land.² For most Indigenous peoples, the process of creating objects was (and often still is) as important as the end product. Trees were respectfully harvested and materials carefully prepared. Baskets were dreamt and sung; their stories were told.

Basket weaving was one of the responsibilities of Mi'kmaq women in ensuring the well-being and survival of Mi'kmaq communities. They were used for storing and carrying food, sometimes over long distances. They were also used for fishing. As Mi'kmaq Elder Matilda Lewis explains:

Knowledge of weaving baskets, mats, and bags was part of the important knowledge young Mi'kmaq women learned from their elders... the tradition was passed from generation to generation, from women to children, with great patience and technique.³

With the arrival of European settlers, basket weaving took on new meaning within a developing trading system, yet still maintained its critical role in Mi'kmaq communities. Basket weaving slowly evolved from a self-sustaining ecological practice to become part of an expanding trade-based economy.

European anthropologists and ethnographers were also interested in Mi'kmaq baskets, in preserving evidence of the material culture of Indigenous peoples. They were convinced that they were in the presence of a vanishing race that needed to be carefully documented before Indians and their 'primitive' artistic objects went extinct. They collected 'authentic' artifacts that they believed were part of disappearing Indigenous cultures. If not vanishing, then inevitably to be assimilated with European culture. By becoming museum collection items, the baskets acquired another layer of meaning.

The invasion of Mi'kmaq land by European colonists continued throughout the

¹ Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (University of Birmingham: Centre for Cultural Studies, 1973).

² Tiffany Sark, *Mi'kmaq Baskets: Our Living Legends*, accessed 30 June 2015, <http://www.gov.pe.ca/firsthand/index.php3?number=44605>.

³ Ibid

19th century, transforming the natural environment and creating new economic conditions. Forests were cleared for farmland and large trees cut for buildings.

The adoption of the Indian Act, combined with the creation of Indian reserves, resulted in tragically difficult living conditions for Mi'kmaw people. Baskets were given yet another meaning: they became objects to be traded or sold for bare necessities. In these conditions, the whole family became involved in the production of baskets that were mostly considered Indian craft by non-Indigenous communities.

Mi'kmaw people continued to make baskets, but their baskets changed. The use of European tools transformed the holistic nature of traditional basket weaving practice and techniques. Saws and axes were used to cut down trees. Hammers and pounding machines made wood splints. Often the shape of the basket was created to suit European settlers' agricultural and household purposes — the Mi'kmaw basket as commodity.

Today, much of the traditional knowledge about baskets is fading. Customary techniques are not always passed down and this concerns many elders. Some younger Aboriginal people are eager to learn but they want to do this quickly. Johnson recognises that impatience in herself.

She references this wanting-to-know-everything-in-a-day conundrum in what Johnson calls the Performative Space of *Mi'kwite'tmn*. She starts early in the day, hours before the official gallery opening, labouring hard in the space, sweating as she works on a tree log.

Besides being a cogent and skilled artist, Johnson is also a dedicated researcher. In conversation, she speaks intensely about the historical context of baskets. Using traditional materials and processes, she describes her performance:

I'm actually going to be sacrificing a tree. I'm going to get the log and process it in the space, but I'm only going to do the first four steps of processing, instead of the whole twelve steps. I want to create this really dynamic, hasty energy in the space, where I look like I'm fumbling over my tools and I don't know what I'm doing, like I'm essentially just killing this tree instead of actually creating something out of it that could be later used as materials. I'm essentially going to obliterate the tree in the [performative] space. And that's to talk about this disconnect between people from my generation in regards to our relationship to the natural world.

In the performance piece she deliberately wastes the wood chips as a kind of representation of her own — and other Indigenous artists' — ignorance of traditional ways. A subtle but compelling metaphor for lost knowledge.

Lost knowledge. Johnson alludes to that in the space that she names the Museological Grand Hall. Museum-like display cases sit atop plywood plinths. Inside each plexiglass case is, well, nothing. *Mi'kwite'tmn*, an intense, rich exhibition — with three distinct spaces about baskets — turns out to be a show without one basket in it!

The Archive Room presents the gallery-goer with non-functional, mutant baskets. The Performative Space provides a deconstructed view of 'wasted' basket materials created during an artist's performance. And, in the Museological Grand Hall, empty display cases with no baskets in them.

Instead, Johnson offers us carefully created images of baskets which, at first glance, appear to be projected on the walls of the plexiglass. Are they some kind of virtual images of baskets? No, not projections, but painstakingly sand-blasted on the plexiglass itself.

What is Johnson signifying here? Are these sand-etchings ghosts of baskets past? Are they a lament to the loss of traditional knowledge? Can we understand them as bringing back the spirit of baskets that have been placed out of context in collector's homes; at Indian craft markets; on the archival shelves of museum inventories?

Johnson, again in her sly way, upturns museum classification systems by rendering the sand-blasted basket images in diagrammatic form so as to show their component parts — parts that she then names in the Mi'kmaw language. This gesture becomes one part museological critique; one part 'educational' device; and one part poignant homage to Mi'kmaw basket weaving, recalling the names her great grandmother, Caroline Gould, herself a master basket maker, had shared with Ursula.

With *Mi'kwite'tmn*, Johnson takes us on an exhilarating ride through Mi'kmaw basket history up to the present day. And she offers a glimpse of the future of the museum as institution. Undermining museum displays and systems of classification, she deconstructs the authority of the museum by revealing its often unquestioned mechanisms of power. How are meaning and value created? How does the museum, intentionally or not, create a hierarchy of knowledge systems?

The 'new museology' — so beloved by progressive museum theorists and curators over the last couple of decades — offers the promise of what museums could become.

Less of a noun; more of a verb. Less product; more process. Less infallible sites of authority; more places of discourse and negotiation. And finally, less certain academic elitism — the 'truth' about history; more community-based versions of poly-vocal truths — a kind of truth-telling through story-telling.

If this vision has any hope of being realised, it must involve Indigenous peoples at the core of its transformation. Cultural institutions, by their very nature, cannot change themselves, by themselves. As Kwakwak'wakw artist Marianne Nicolson knowingly observes,

It is ironic that part of the recovery of the oral tradition stems from an engagement with the anthropological record. The very system that removed this information from the communities and placed it within Western institutions is being re-appropriated back into Indigenous community consciousness.⁴

Johnson's exhibition *Mi'kwite'tmn*, with its three discursive spaces, embodies Nicolson's 're-appropriation'. And it adds valuable, traditional knowledge to the mainstream understanding of customary Aboriginal art making by using the deconstructive strategies of contemporary visual artists.

Finally, it poses a common dilemma for Indigenous artists, especially those living in cities. How to honour the material culture of Aboriginal traditions when one does not really 'know' the way to do this?

With *Mi'kwite'tmn*, Johnson takes a stab at coming to terms with this question. We ride along with her, all the while in admiration of her talented intelligence; her intense commitment to tradition; her quiet vulnerability in acknowledging what she does not know and her passionate courage to go ahead anyway.

Ursula Johnson's remarkable contribution — *Mi'kwite'tmn* — helps to nudge Aboriginal art, in all of its manifestations, closer to the centre of our collective understanding of this land called Canada.

And we, as audiences, are wiser because of her work.

⁴ Marianne Nicolson, *Political Identity and Museum Collections: The Shifting Boundaries of How We Define Community*, unpublished working paper for the Awakening Memory project, 2015.