

TERRA INFIRMA: STUBBORN AFFECT AND ARTIFACTUAL TRACES¹

¹ Terra Infirma is a play on the maritime term Terra Firma—dry land as it distinguishes from the sea. Terra Infirma is both unstable ground and a wounded earth. The ecological concerns outlined in this paper deal with the history of conquest and its relation to ecological collapse. Working in a museum's archive one will inevitably find artifactual traces composed of fiction-effects (artifice) and truth-effects (factual). Objects within ethnographic museums are framed outside of their traditional contexts and are bestowed a new function by the museum, transmuted into artifacts. The many lives of the object reemerge as stubborn affect, a continuum of intensities that respond to and activate the immediate environment beyond the confined space of the display case.

Inequalities are embedded and developed in museological framing. The museum is a political space that (re)produces civic values in its displays and exhibitions, policing sensibilities under ethnocentric value systems. Normative framing reduces complexities to an “expert’s” musings whose “allegiance has traditionally been to the objects themselves rather than the descendants of the people who produced them.”² The role of curators, scholars, and Indigenous communities then is to support and inform visual literacy in the museum, to uncover the museum’s role in perpetuating colonial mindsets, and to provide tools to continue working against hegemonic structures. The museum space brackets the objects outside of their traditional or original function and confers a different status onto them. I suggest bracketing the bracket and looking directly at the mechanisms of display that produce this form of alienation.

Museum didactics, historical documents, accession cards, and other archival ephemera can reveal ruptures, obfuscated realities (Saidiya Hartman’s “cultivated silence”³)—these prove to be helpful in clarifying material that might have been previously misidentified.⁴ Display mechanisms operate strategically both as support and foil to a narrative, reflecting simultaneously a truth and fiction effect. To identify the operations of power and undo the asymmetries in the landscapes we must think of the ways museums classify and segregate information—we must “juxtapose productively the archive’s fiction-effects (the archive as a system of representation) alongside its truth-effects (the archive as material with “real” consequences).”⁵ An example of the museum’s fiction-effects is read in a didactic and accession

² Stephen Loring, “Repatriation and Community Anthropology” in *The Future of the Past: Archaeologists, Native Americans, and Repatriation*, ed. Tamara L. Bray, (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 2001), page 197.

³ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), page 11.

⁴ The net is given a catalog number by the Field Museum (#176864) to refer to the item in question.

⁵ Anjali Arondekar, “Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), page 12.

card found in the Field Museum's database—both refer to the people who made and owned a fishing net as *Naskapi-Montagnais*.⁶ Naming practices within anthropology reveal the ways in which knowledge is constructed, trafficked, and maintained within hegemonic circles. Tracing ethnonyms in colonial archives proves to be a difficult task full of uncertainties and erroneous historical interpretations of Indigenous peoples. Ethnonyms are historical entities whose referents are dynamic and change in time—the same ethnonym can also apply to completely unrelated groups. History helps us understand the construction of social subjects and the political dimension of collective identity—subjects are designated through situations and statuses imposed on them yet conflicts within systems provide contested meanings.

Outdated and pejorative terms are used when objects are acquired by museums through colonial forms of classification and information management. *Montagnais* and *Naskapi* are generic terms that are often conflated, used interchangeably, or contrasted—both terms refer to the Innu, or the original inhabitants of Nitassinan (“Our Land”)⁷ but does not recognize regional or cultural distinctions. *Montagnais* is a French colonial name first used by Samuel de Champlain and later by Jesuits at Tadoussac to refer to the people living in the Saguenay Basin, but came to refer to other groups as well. The Innu were nomads and to refer to them by a name imposed by the French colonizers not only limits them to a set of geographic features (as if the people compose the landscape itself), but also relegates them to a time anterior to European modernity and colonization. *Montagnais* characterizes the Innu as Mountain people whereas

⁶ When the words *Montagnais* and *Naskapi* are used in reference to categories to be analyzed, they are written in italics.

⁷ Nitassinan is comprised of the northeastern portion of the present-day province of Québec and some eastern portions of Labrador. Today the Innu are grouped into a dozen communities based on designations made by the minister of Indian Affairs—ten in Québec and two in Labrador: Ekuanitshit, Essipit, Kawawachikamach, Mashteuiatsh, Matimekossh, Natashquan, Pakuashipi, Pessamit, Uashat-Maliotenam, Unamenshipit; Natuashish (inaugurated in 2003 to replace Utshimassit or Davis Inlet) and Sheshatshiu in Labrador.

Naskapi is a bastardized version of the Innu-aimun word “Ounachkapiouek” meaning “people from where things disappear.”⁸ Europeans used the terms to designate degrees of savagery along a continuum, with the *Montagnais* being more docile and closer to civilization than the wild and inhospitable *Naskapi*. The distinction of *Montagnais Naskapi* “originated at the turn of the nineteenth century and it is founded on criteria which are neither cultural nor linguistic, and even less are they territorial.”⁹

The net was acquired between 1927-28 during the Rawson-MacMillan Subarctic Expedition by American archaeologist and anthropologist William Duncan Strong where he spent the winter of that year living with the Mushuau Innu near Utshimassit (Davis Inlet). The net has recently been deinstalled from the Native North American Hall so that “conservators and technicians [may] examine each item, assess, and document its condition, perform surface cleaning, and verify descriptions of materials for accuracy in the database.”¹⁰ It is important to note that Strong learned about Innu culture through participant observation to stress “[t]he fact that the first European explorers to visit Labrador relied on Innu knowledge of the land to find their way.”¹¹

Affective disciplining begins in the body’s perception, parameters worked out by museological displays. The Field Museum articulates the affective capacities of the cultures whose objects are displayed, determining what can be perceived and made possible—they are always already accounted and spoken for within the museum. Similarly, the Field Museum’s

⁸ José Mailhot, “Beyond Everyone’s Horizon Stand the Naskapi,” *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 33, No. 4, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), page 390.

⁹ Ibid, page 388.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Peter Armitage and Daniel Ashini, “Partners in the Present to Safeguard the Past: Building Cooperative Relations Between the Innu and Archaeologists Regarding Archaeological Research in Innu Territory,” *Études/Inuit/Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (Québec, QC: Université Laval, 1998), page 38.

display mechanisms presuppose a present that ignores colonialism and the changes it enacted that allow for this kind of ethnographic observation. These formulations cast the Innu and their cultural objects into a de-historized and timeless place, outside of contemporary sensibilities. The act of “seeing” an object is culturally constructed and carries with it an authoritative weight—the *ethnos* is apprehended at a distance, the eye scopes out and isolates fact from context.¹² Display case is a highly contested surface, a threshold operating as mediator between myself and the net—my face is reflected in the glass, I see myself softly gazing. Intersecting planes of perception grab hold and suddenly slip away with a tilt of the head, with the appraisal of a new angle, legibility shifts between the visible and invisible, between appearance and disappearance. My reflection in the glass returns the gaze of the objectifying eye, an uncanny sensation.

The net is not only a “visual image” to be looked at but rather an object that contains and carries affect. Amy Lonetree states that “every engagement with objects in museum cases or in collection rooms should begin with this core recognition [that]...we are privileged to stand as witnesses to living entities that remain intimately and inextricably tied to their descendant communities.”¹³ The net as mnemonic technology creates its own historical and political significance—it has a wayward life, a stubborn affect, whole realms of possible ideas, interpretations, and complex relationships synthesized at its core. Encounters in the museum evoke a different set of sensibilities that have once been disavowed. Affective experiences transform our critical strategies, they force us to confront the concept of culture as an uneven, incomplete terrain of meaning and values. The Innu net points to the ways in which nature and

¹² “Nature” and “culture” do not denote a Universal reality but rather a construction, ontological domains carved into the texture of things. These ontological predications are not worldviews but rather styles of worlding—a process of stabilization of certain features.

¹³ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), xv.

people are interconnected, implicated in a mutual relationship—the net is made of caribou that had once been hunted and is now repurposed for fishing. “For the Innu, the past has always been the purview of elders whose knowledge of resources and place-names have filled the vast expanse of Nitassinan with stories and history.”¹⁴ Descendant communities redefine the sensible from within the parameters of exchange, particularly those that cannot be reconciled with or limited by the visual. A revision of museum displays is a challenge to the affective disciplining, disrupting the notion that a museum must rely on passive spectators with ideas of participation and active engagement.¹⁵ Decolonization describes an active intention to undo the will to exploit peoples, land and their cultures, a process of becoming characterized by uncertainties, a reconfiguration of relations. Franz Fanon spoke of decolonization as a total rearrangement of spatial relations, a type of ungrounding. The net’s delicate meshwork is analogous to this radical shift, but might also suggest ways to foster hospitality, forming homes where existence is made acceptable. This synergistic system is a vast plane of unknowns composed of holes, supported by threading that connects parts—each point of the mesh is both the center and edge of a system. The net draws from other textile tectonics, techniques transferred largely from braiding, knotting, and weaving. The whole knotwork is about a continuity of joints, patterns emerge in the midst of line and surface, a transitory mass. These textile tectonics migrate, travel, and transfer from one use to another—a unit is drawn into the territory of , changing its value as an element, bringing about a new unity. The thickening, dividing, and complicating of interactions eventuate in knots and interfaces, a complex meshwork, a topology of knots, energetic buddings. A single fiber has

¹⁴ Stephen Loring and Daniel Ashini, “Past and Future Pathways: Innu Cultural Heritage in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World*, eds. Claire Smith and Graeme K. Ward, (Sydney, NSW: A&U Academic, 2000), pages 168-9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

a cellular memory, ceaselessly dancing, growing and diminishing, responding to its environment, braiding through differential co-operation, catalyzing a transfer of character. Meshwork names the becoming of things in their ongoing entanglements, an interweaving of lines—real lines of life, of movement, and growth. Innu perceptions of their heritage and the land coalesce around the notion of *kanauenitam* which “is equivalent to the concept of stewardship; it is used to convey the idea of taking care of something, or watching over it, preserving or conserving it.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Sylvie Vincent and José Mailhot, “Montagnais Land Tenure,” *The Indian and Inuit Supporter*, Vol. 3 No. 1, 1983, page 21.