

## ANOTHER STORY OF ERASURE, A DIFFERENT ONE

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*Where's the urgency of what you're doing?* This is the question I always come back to, when thinking about my own practice, and looking at the work of others. When Maryse Arseneault and I discussed *Sanguine, Terre Brulée et Autres Angoises* last winter, I felt that her consideration of hidden bloodlines had urgency. It made me think of a conversation with Jordan Bennett about his performance piece *Status* (2012) enacted in St. John's at a moment when Newfoundland's Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation Band had recently gained legal recognition by the federal government.<sup>1</sup> "Proof of status comes by way of a federal identification card but what exactly does that card signify? What are the entitlements, stigmas, and histories that this status represents?" asked Bennett. Later, when addressing Arseneault's initial inquiry, Charles Gaffney – coordinating instructor for the Aboriginal Visual Arts program at NBCCD – brought to light the altered family histories engendered by the enfranchisement provision in the Indian Act "which allowed a status Indian to voluntarily relinquish his or her own special status," therein acquiring the right to vote provincially and federally, and possibly gaining protection from further systemic racism.<sup>2</sup> Now I'm sitting here listening to the radio and Nellie Carlson is speaking about her recently launched book *Disinherited Generations: Our Struggle to Reclaim Treaty Rights for First Nations Women and their Descendants*, and am confronted with another story of erasure, a different one.<sup>3</sup>

*They are all different stories*, and their differences are important. When gathered together, they start to build a picture of some of the violence enforced by the Indian Act, and by racist attitudes prevalent in Canada at large; however, the power of these stories is in their specificity. It's the power of Arseneault's story too: "the Mi'kmaq part of my family has been repressed," described Arseneault, "but it is common to hear that all surviving Acadians have native blood, and (through this project) I was investigating why it was taboo to talk about it in the Acadian families I know. I was interested in learning more about the history between both People, looking at shared symbols,

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett had his Indian Status card tattooed onto his arm by tattoo artist Ryan Coombs while screening images of Canadian / First Nations history, as part of Eastern Edge's Art Marathon 2012, on Wednesday August 22, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> "the general prohibition of voting privileges 'denied Indians the possession of one of the central symbols of membership in the Canadian political system. Possession of the franchise would have symbolized Indian acceptance by non-Indians as political equals, and would have provided a focal point for identification with the political community. Its absence implied the reverse.'"

Hedican, Edward J., *Applied Anthropology in Canada: Understanding Aboriginal Issues, Second Edition*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2008: 220.

Quoting Hawthorn, H.B., ed. *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada*, Queen's Printer. Ottawa, 1966-7: 255.

<sup>3</sup> This book, authored by Nellie Carlson and Kathleen Steinhauer, and published by University of Alberta Press, was launched Friday, April 12, 2013. Audio recordings of Nellie Carlson speaking, and of her descendants, as well as descendants of the late Kathleen Steinhauer, reading at the book launch were part of the Sunday Edition on CBC Radio, May 12, 2013.

habits and territory.”<sup>4</sup>

If this is the specific history *Sanguine, Terre Brulée et Autres Angoises* seeks to address, it is quite clumsy. The installation's eight-pointed star – a pattern found on traditional crafts in both Mi'kmaq and Acadian homes – is meant to function as an entry point for the discussion of a shared history, but falls short: there are too many other things going on. *In the heat of the moment* – in my first encounter with this work, I am extremely uncomfortable. I am offended by this work. I continue to think of it though, so I wonder – is there something powerful in that?

“The common thread is the notion of appropriation,” said Arseneault, “present in all aspects of the work,” and this is undeniably the overriding content of the installation.<sup>5</sup> The project appropriates photographs taken of North American Aboriginals in the nineteenth century by American photographers C.S. Fly and Edward Sheriff Curtis, which have been criticized by contemporary scholars such as Gloria Jean Frank for constructing First Nations people as ‘noble subjects’ situated in a ‘mythic past’ and perpetuating the “ethnological fate of always being presented and treated as anthropological specimens.”<sup>6</sup> While I believe the installation’s silkscreened aureoles intend to interrupt any such ‘reading,’ the project seems to uphold a dangerously *essentialized* understanding of Indigenous people and cultures.

Rather than refuting unsolicited and generalized accounts of complex histories, to me the work repeats the problematic gesture. What does it mean to speak on behalf of others, especially those who are capable of speaking for themselves?

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<sup>4</sup> In conversation with Maryse Arseneault, May 13 2013.

<sup>5</sup> In conversation with Maryse Arseneault, May 13 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Gloria Jean Frank is a member of the Ahousaht First Nation, Nuu-chah-nulth, and these assertions are quoted from Gloria Jean Frank, “‘That’s My Dinner on Display’: A First Nations Reflection on Museum Culture,” *BC Studies* 125/126 (Spring/Summer 2000): 164.