# Legitimizing a People: The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center

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In the Connecticut River Valley, the thirteen-thousand-strong Pequot tribe lived in villages, practicing agriculture and trading products with neighboring groups. Similar to so many other Native people across the nation, the arrival of the English and their foreign diseases decimated the Pequot, reducing their population by close to eighty percent. Following growing hostilities between the Pequot and Colonial authorities, the Pequot Wars of 1636-1638 further diminished the tribe. Surviving Pequot, numbering between two thousand and twenty-five hundred, were either captured and sold into slavery or absorbed into neighboring tribes with whom they had ancestral ties (Bodinger de Uriarte 2007:42; Quin 1999:54; Lawlor 2006:35). In 1638 the Pequots became the first “terminated” tribe with the Treaty of Hartford. The Treaty declared that “the Pequots shall no more be called Pequots, but Narragansetts and Mohegans” (Bodinger de Uriarte 2007:43). In the years that followed, the Pequots reclaimed their name and petitioned for expanded lands for their reservation. However, their reservation lands continued to be sold off by the state and, by 1972, 204 acres remained, with only two women—Elizabeth George Plouffe and Martha Langevin Ellal—left living on the land (Bodinger de Uriarte 2007:43-44).

Skip Hayward, the grandson of Plouffe, was inspired by his grandmother’s commitment and encouraged tribal members to move back to the reservation “to reclaim illegally seized land, gain federal recognition, achieve economic self-sufficiency, and revitalize tribal culture” (Quin 1999:54). The Mashantucket Pequot Indian Claims Settlement Act of 1983 granted the tribe with federal recognition and $900,000 to purchase back their tribal lands. Ten years after the ruling, the tribe expanded into gaming as a means to support the future of their reservation. The Foxwoods Resort and Casino provides funds for the reservation’s infrastructure and has made the Pequot the wealthiest tribe in the nation (Lawlor 2006:31; 35-36).

To gain tribal membership one must provide documentation that lineally links them to a person appearing on the 1900 or 1910 tribal roll calls. After so many decades away from the reservation, the Pequot today represent a highly diverse ethnic background (Lawlor 2006:34). Because of this racial component and the fact that history considers them to be long extinct, the “Indianness” of the Pequot has been called into question over and over. For example, Atlantic City casino developer Donald Trump, who faced direct competition from Foxwoods, stated to a Connecticut legislative subcommittee: “Go up to Connecticut, and you look at the Mashantucket Pequots…They don’t look like Indians to me. They don’t look like Indians to Indians” (Bodinger de Uriarte 2007:46). The Pequots faced a continued need for legitimizing their presence even after gaining federal recognition and chose to open a tribal museum. Tribal museums throughout North America are “sites for establishing Native American humanity, historical presence, and contemporaneity for post-colonial audiences” (Erikson 1999:46). In 1998, the Manshantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center opened and serves as a vehicle for authenticating the Pequot people both past and present.

*Source:* http://www.flickr.com/photos/mpmrc/2889751391/

CONTEXT OF TRIBAL MUSEUMS

Before I delve into the specifics of the MPMRC, it is helpful to know the definitions and history of tribal museums. Lisa J. Watt, a member of the Seneca tribe, is the founder and principal of Tribal Museum Planners and Consultants, an organization in place "to inform tribes about the challenges and opportunities that building a museum entail and present program ideas that help meet [their] cultural goals" ("Lisa"). She defines a tribal museum as a "museum, cultural center, heritage center, history center, or interpretive center that is owned and operated by any one or more of the federally recognized or unrecognized American Indian tribes, either on or off reservations" (2007: 71). They exist to perpetuate tribal culture and traditions, to hold onto the material culture, to construct and instill a tribal identity, to maintain a presence in the world, to define tribal territory, to exert tribal sovereignty, and to reinforce treaty rights. They serve as a public declaration, saying "we are important and worth culturally maintaining" (Watt 2007: 73). Tribal museums help reclaim and preserve their cultural heritage, often by building upon earlier traditions concerned with protection and transmission of knowledge, and expand to include overall community development (Kreps 2003: 114). Anglo-American understandings of ownership and rights of access do not always translate in the realm of tribal museums (Isaac 2007: 5-7; Kreps 2003: 114). In his observation of four Northwest Coast museums, Clifford notes that, in contrast to majority museums, "tribal museums express local culture, oppositional politics, kinship, ethnicity, and tradition" (1991: 225). He lays out the agenda of a tribal museum as follows:

(1) its stance is to some degree oppositional, with exhibits reflecting excluded experiences, colonial pasts, and current struggles; (2) the art/culture distinction is often irrelevant or positively subverted; (3) the notion of a unified or linear History (whether of the nation, of humanity, or of art) is challenged by local, community histories; and (4) the collections do not aspire to be included in the patrimony (of the nation, of great art, etc.) but to be inscribed with different traditions and practices, free of national, cosmopolitan patrimonies (Clifford 1991: 225-226).

Carla Roberts, director of a Phoenix-based Native American Arts organization writes "there have always been mechanisms in native communities for transmitting cultural values from one generation to another" (Kreps 2003: 107). The curator of New World Ethnology at the Burke Museum in Seattle James Nason supports this statement with his description of the Southwestern kivas, which were used "[to house] collections whose use was vital to the members of the pueblo and their sense of place in the world" (1999). The widely practiced method of passing on cultural knowledge through oral traditions and ritual practices has been inhibited in recent years because of an increasing generational gap in Native American communities (Isaac 2007: 9-10).

The Osage Tribal Museum in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, established in 1938, is considered to be the oldest tribal museum in the United States (Watt 2007: 70). The first wave of tribal museums coincided with the American Indian Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, during which time tribes began to question the museum's authority and Native American representations. Under President Nixon in the 1970s, tribal museums were also seen as a source of job opportunities and a chance to diversify tribal economics. The next wave of tribal museums occurred in the 1990s when tribes with resources, knowledge, and desire established museums (Isaac 2007; Nason 1999; Watt 2007: 70-71). Gwyneira Isaac, an assistant professor and the director of Arizona State University's Museum of Anthropology, cites Fuller and Fabricius' argument that links the growth of tribal museums to a loss of tribal knowledge and a rise in self-determination, causing "the need for a new forum to transmit cultural knowledge [to meld] with the needs for autonomy and self-sufficiency" (2007: 10). Nason feels that tribal museums "complete a circle that began with alien institutions imperialistically collecting and interpreting Native American culture and ended with a resurgence of tribal communities" (1999).

THE MASHANTUCKET MUSEUM AND RESOURCE CENTER

The MPMRC is a 308,000-square-foot facility opened on August 11, 1998 and was founded to "serve as a major resource on the history of the Tribe, the histories and cultures of other tribes, and the region's natural history" (Quin 1999: 54). Funding for the facilities came from the lucrative gaming industry at Foxwoods, which also helped fund education and healthcare on the reservation. Costing close to two hundred million dollars, more money went into the Pequot tribal museum than the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (Erikson 1999:49). Exhibits cover Pequot life in southeastern Connecticut from the last Ice Age to the present, featuring displays like "a glacial crevasse, a caribou hunt of 11,000 years ago, a sixteenth century Pequot village, an eighteenth century farmstead, and a twentieth century trailer home" (Erikson 1999:46). It features a high level of transparency by featuring curators' and researchers' voices throughout the exhibits, as well as including information about how the exhibits were constructed (Lawlor 2006:46).

Source: http://www.flickr.com/photos/mpmrc/2889752101/

Anthropologists have long acknowledged the draw of life group dioramas, however, the MPMRC has taken this technique to new heights (Hinsley 1991: 347-348). The largest display in the MPMRC is the 22,000-square-foot immersion style diorama of a 16th century coastal Pequot village. There is also a palisade fort next to the village, set fifty years after the village scene, included to represent the impact of European presence in the area. Patricia Pierce Erikson, currently a visiting professor at the University of Southern Maine, described the Pequot Village as follows:

Bombarding visitors' senses are the smells of the forest and campfires, the sounds of chipmunks and running water. The human dimension of the diorama depicts daily life and provides a basis for interpreting coastal subsistence activities and Contact-period social structure (1999:50-51).

Source: http://www.flickr.com/photos/mpmrc/2889752079/

Visitors use audio-guides as they walk through the display. It offers both "unattributed" Pequot perspectives, as well as anthropologists' and archaeologists' interpretations of the diorama (Erikson 1999:51).

Source: http://www.flickr.com/photos/mpmrc/2889751271/

An important element of the Pequot Village display is the use of sound. Douglas Quin was one of the researchers who developed the soundscape. In addition to recreating what the environment sounded like in the 17th century, researchers had to figure out a way to represent the Pequot language as there are no native living speakers. After looking at other Algonquin languages, tribal members from Maine were brought in to record exhibition scripts in the Passamaquoddy language (Quin 1999:64). Other portions of the exhibit that utilized secondary voices—areas such as the sweat lodge ceremony and the hide tanning display—utilized recordings of voices of Native peoples from all over North America, including Navajo and Osage, to create “a collective resonance and identity” (Quin 1999:65).

In addition to the Pequot Village, the MPMRC has exhibits that speak to the continued presence of the people and culture. The Life on the Reservation gallery establishes Pequot presence in the Post-Pequot War time period, effectively dismissing accepted notions that the tribe was extinct. The stories featured in this exhibit include those of Pequot children working as indentured servants in colonial households, as well as those tribal members who learned the English legal system in an attempt to hold onto their traditional territory. This gallery is where the trailer home sits to represent the hardships faced by those who lived on the reservation in the 1970s. Also present in the Life on the Reservation gallery is the story of the casino and how it impacted the Pequot’s land claims and their contemporary lives (Erikson 1999:47-48).

Native Americans have been the subjects of portrait projects since the nineteenth century during the age of salvage anthropology (Bodinger de Uriarte 2007:179). The MPMRC appropriates this method not to capture the evidence of a dying people, but to show the cultural survival of the Pequot tribe:

The portraits reinvigorate the historic progression of life on the reservation by introducing the contemporary to the visitor experience. As the oral histories provide a shared remembered history, the portraits give that history an individual face. While they indicate each other as a group and destabilize essential notions of “Indianness,” the portraits provide a progression of possible singular connections for the visitor, mixing elements of person al, historic, and cultural markers, and offering multiple routs for recognition (Bodinger de Uriarte 2007:208).

The Tribal Portrait Gallery is an exhibit that “encourages visitors to humanize popular notions of Native peoples generally, and Pequot people in particular” (Erikson 1999:46). It is comprised of black-and-white portraits of tribal members and has accompanying recorded interviews from the Mashantucket Pequot oral history project (Bodinger de Uriart 2007:163). John J. Bodinger de Uriarte, who worked for and studied the MPMRC and the Foxwoods Casino, feels that the Tribal Portrait Gallery, like the overall museum space, becomes a charged contact zone (2007:208).

THE POWER OF A TRIBAL MUSEUM

Tribal spokesperson, Lori Potter, made a statement to the Tribal Tribute that effectively sums up the MPMRC’s purpose and power to bring legitimacy to the Pequot: “When I was a little girl and I looked up our tribe in an encyclopedia, it said we were a warlike tribe that was extinct. That was a lie, and I never forgot it. Now, our tribe is strong and united again, and this museum will make it possible for the world to know the truth” (Erikson 1999:46). In addition to the impact of the physical institution, the MPMRC is also making a presence on the internet. Its website has information about the tribe history, the exhibitions, as well as educational resources and information about programming. They have also broken into the realm of social networking sites, like Facebook, which serves as another outlet to make connections with people and maintain their contemporary presence (“Mashantucket”).

A criticism of the MPMRC concerns the “Disney-fication” of the displays that supposedly distracts from the authenticity of the information (Lawlor 2006:49). The style of display toes the same line of “infotainment” that other majority museums face. Curators have had issues with the level of entertainment present in the museum since Franz Boas’ time at the American Museum of Natural History. It persists in this case as well, yet the immersive life group experience at the MPMRC appears to be awe-inspiring and engaging. Coupled with their institution’s transparency, the technology remains grounded by the cultural information.

Another criticism is that the Pequot Village exhibition falls into the museum trap of displaying Native American cultures only in the light of the pre-Contact past and that the sheer size of the exhibit (22,000-square-feet) physically overshadows the displays about current Pequot life, thus diminishing their importance (Erikson 1999:52). Size, however, is not always a fair indication of social importance. People are proud of their heritage and possibly feel an ache of nostalgia for a life they never had the chance to know first hand, so they put that past on full display. Some museums only present Native peoples in the past and include nothing of their contemporary life. The MPMRC, however, makes the effort to include present-day elements of their culture to show the ties to the past (the recognizable “authentic Indian”) and how through all the changes time has brought, they are still a living, breathing, distinctive people with a legitimate claim to their culture.

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