Gaming and Self-Representation in Native America
Final Research Project Report for
The Sycuan Institute on Tribal Gaming

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Gaming and Self-Representation in Native America” focused on collecting data re: post–IGRA gains in Native America, specifically realized as the creation of wholly new, or the expansion of existing, venues for self-representation. For the purposes of this project we were primarily interested in exhibitionary spaces, and our research was designed to pursue how profits from Indian gaming been put to use in the creation of Native museums, cultural centers, and cultural education projects. Our initial proposal hypothesized that many tribal nations have used gaming proceeds to establish new or expand existing venues for cultural self-representation, especially in—but not limited to—dedicated spaces like museums and cultural centers.

Key Study Results:

- **Gaming profits contribute significant support to a number of exhibitionary spaces.** However, tribal nations and organizations have long recognized the priority of being able to tell their own stories about who they are and where they’ve come from. While the construction of Native museums, cultural centers, and other exhibitionary locations doubled during the 1980s and 1990s (Cooper 2006: 8), it is not solely a post-IGRA phenomenon.

- **Native governments and institutions maintain complex relationships with a variety of state, local, regional, private, and federal museums and other spaces of public representation, such as state and national parks.**

- **Public casino, hotel, and retail spaces offer powerful locations for self-representation, and public education and outreach programs also provide significant opportunities for self-representation to Native and non-Native populations and constituencies.**

II. Background

The project originally began by recognizing cultural self-representation as a critical exercise of political sovereignty, and museums and cultural centers as parallel industries created with, and in part validating the use of, Indian gaming profits. Some of the current challenges to Indian gaming raise the specters of wasteful spending, the irresponsible use of funds, and the creation of “Rich Indians” as a racist category. Spaces for cultural self-representation offer significant venues to respond to such racism, and to attendant accusations of profligacy. Casino-generated funds allow many tribal nations to create spaces for repatriated objects, and to have such spaces publicly
articulate stories about history, identity, and the practice(s) of sovereignty. Our project was initially designed to collect data about such spaces through distribution of a hard-copy mailed survey and invitation to participate, and follow-ups to the letter and survey request by email and telephone call.

III. Methodology and Project Design

Working from a 2010 list of gaming tribes compiled in the National Indian Gaming Commission’s “Gaming Tribe Report,” we built an address and contact list for 241 tribes, tribal nations, and sovereign groups. We followed our initial mailing, sent 1 August 2010 and based on this list, with an emailing to 177 Chiefs, Tribal Council Chairs, Governors, and other tribal/administrative leaders. We followed this email with a set of telephone calls based on the 2010 NIGC information and, in parallel, sent a separate email to Tribal Historical Preservation Officers working for groups included in our original set of 241. Throughout this period we also pursued conversations by telephone—over 482 telephone contacts—to better explain our project and to answer any possible questions potential respondents might have about it.

We recognize the limitations inherent in securing information in this realm through survey dissemination, collection, and analysis. Though we aimed our efforts at representatives of administrative bodies rather than individual people or households, we encountered some of the difficulties enumerated by other researchers attempting survey work in Native communities: outdated or inaccurate contact information, and a distrust of outside researchers (Lavelle, Larsen, and Gundersen 2009). We took several steps to address these issues. We combined survey distribution with follow-up telephone invitations to participate in the project. The initial mailings gave us an opportunity to do “not quite cold” phone calling, and to secure contact information beyond that of the chief administrative office. The calls allowed us to further explain the project, and to respond to specific questions about both the project and the survey questions. We also determined that some questions we planned to ask, such as the percentage of gaming funds designated for cultural programming, were not possible to ask in this format. Indeed, a number of

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1 Our email list was compiled through a combination of the NIGC list and internet database research—this preliminary follow-up email was sent 16 August 2010
2 We obtained THPO information from a list published by the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers on 30 September 2010; our cross-referenced list yielded email contact information for 116 Officers.
responses indicated that the perception that we were seeking financial information contributed to reluctance to participate in the survey.

Total response numbers following the first round of phone calls increased by 300%. Initially, we hoped to be able to work from a base of at least 100 respondents (less than fifty percent, but still a good representative population). It became clear, over the life of the project, that this target might be too optimistic. As of this date we have 57 respondents, 22 by SASE return mail and 35 via a site set up through Survey Monkey (a web-based survey facilitation and administration platform). While we hope to collect still more responses; this report is based on our current set of 57.

Partly with this in mind, we adjusted our original project and timeline to incorporate a series of field site visits into the research. This changed both the original calendar for the work and the distribution of the budget and expenses. We recognized, at the beginning, that exhibitionary spaces inhabit a variety of different venues and, further, that some examples of such venues needed to be included in our ethnographic practice and research. During phone interviews, we secured contact information for our field site visits and were able to learn more about programs currently running in the field: combinations including language programs; tribal museums; cultural centers; powwows; and collaborative projects with state, federal, and local museums.

Time and funds allowed three field site visits. When selecting the sites for visits, we considered geographical location, range of exhibit spaces and practices practices in place, and population densities. We also considered how different areas or specific casinos contributed to the trajectory and history of Indian gaming in the US, and how they were constructed with specific local and regional audiences in mind. We made our first visit to Uncasville, Connecticut in October 2009; the second to Minnesota in October 2010; and the third to Southern California in November 2010. At each place, we incorporated visits to a variety of sites.

While the initial survey was designed to yield information on what we designated as our primary focus areas—the history of museums and cultural centers operated or planned by specific tribes/tribal nations; relationships between gaming profits and the creation of museums and cultural spaces; and relationships between tribes/tribal nations and other entities designed for cultural representation, both Native and non-Native—the field visits provided a different wealth of ethnographic data, and led us to questions and relationships we did not consider in our initial
survey instrument. Additionally, our contact base expanded as we visited each site, as people with whom we met recommended others who might provide useful information.

IV. Findings

(For brevity, this section is only available in the report’s complete version, as are the Appendices.)

V. Conclusions

We started this project with the recognition that Native museums and casinos were mutually supportive and somewhat porous—that counter-indicating and counter-supporting exhibition designs and narratives flowed back and forth between these structuring structures, but that the relationship was somewhat bounded by discrete poles: you slide too far in one direction, you are definitely in a museum, in another and you are most certainly in a casino. Over the course of the project, some active challenging of our thinking about Native museums and casinos as part of some sort of ongoing dyad of representational space unfolded: both offer immersive and thematic places for the presentation of specific kinds of identity-focused narratives, no matter how fantastic. The play between these poles, the different places where these definitions failed to hold up, or where the mesh on their containing aspects was too wide to keep them from contaminating\(^3\) one another, were the really interesting places. What did it mean to have a slot machine as one of your gallery exhibition elements, for example? A case filled with artifacts in the foyer of the casino’s hotel entrance? A stuffed buffalo overlooking gaming space?

Working through the survey data and field visit materials, we developed a preliminary typology of exhibit spaces maintained by gaming tribes, or in which gaming tribes participate:

- Tribally owned and operated, within the casino complex.
- Tribally owned and operated, on tribal land.
- Owned independently of the tribe, private, used to display tribal artifacts/tell tribal histories on tribal land.
- State-owned and operated, used to display tribal artifacts/tell tribal stories on tribal land.

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• Lobby or other public space in a tribally owned facility, such as an administrative building, hotel, or other business (excluding casinos)
• Lobby or other space in a casino.
• Casino theme used as part of a strategy to tell tribal stories in a public space.
• Federally operated, on federal land, used to display tribal artifacts and histories in cooperation with tribal entities
• Tribally operated, leased space on non-tribal land
• International museums
• University museums or collections

This typology represents a work in progress. We recognize that the categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

A preliminary analysis supports our conclusions that Native governments and institutions maintain complex relationships with a variety of state, local, regional, private, and federal museums and other spaces of public representation, such as state and national parks. While our findings also indicate that Native self-representation through museums, cultural centers, and other exhibitionary locations is not solely a post-IGRA phenomenon, the 1980s and 1990s saw a doubling in the construction of Native museums, cultural centers, and other exhibitionary locations. Without clear tribal budget figures—which are outside the design and access of this project—it is difficult to do hard analyses on how casino profits have been used across a variety of exhibitionary opportunities or practices, or how fungible casino monies may be used to relieve on other sectors of tribal economies thereby freeing otherwise encumbered funds that could be newly applied to exhibitions. Some survey respondents indicated that casino funding supported specific cultural programming or facilities. One respondent noted: “without casino revenue, we would close.”

Self-representation—in Native and non-Native public spaces, and imagined primarily as elements of exhibition and narrative—has long been a Native priority. Many Native American communities, governments, and organizations have consistently recognized the need to publicly tell their own histories, sometimes to counter other, dominant histories, and sometimes in concert with them. Indeed, the variety of relationships between Native and non-Native exhibitionary spaces indicated by this project may have been built on a history of compromise and opportunity.

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in the face of limited economic power. If so, continuing developments in post-IGRA Native American exhibitionary spaces will continue a direction for fruitful future research: how will these spaces change, or be newly established, in the face of new economies?

Visitors to Native casinos represent a growing potential audience for Native self-representation. They may also be more focused on gaming and entertainment than historical and cultural narratives. As Native communities look to build museum and cultural audiences, hybrid exhibitionary spaces—like those at the Mohegan Sun, Mystic Lake, and the Agua Caliente Spa Hotel, for example—may continue to develop, with self-representational narratives and experiences specifically designed to reach this visitor base. In fact, it is these hybrid spaces where some of the more complicated and intriguing public expressions of Native sovereignty are enacted and presented. A good deal of our fieldwork navigates some of these spaces as multifaceted locations for engaging larger audiences to either introduce or reinforce particular understandings of tribal and Native identities. The expanding influences and opportunities of entertainment and gaming spaces present promising arenas for future research, including the following questions: How are such hybrid spaces used as sites for “ambient learning,” especially through immersive ethnic thematics as carefully considered design elements and environments? How do Native casinos, in particular, and “Indian Gaming,” more generally, form an accelerating focus for “ethno-enterprise”\(^5\) as an expression of Native self-representation and sovereignty?