Public Native America: Tribal Self-Representations in Casinos, Museums, And Powwows.

Reviewed by John J. Bodinger de Uriarte

Mary Lawlor’s Public Native America sets out to pull together analyses and observations from a small selection of public performances of identity across Native America. Lawlor works with Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of “contact zones,” which she understands as “favoring the indigenous hosts” by allowing them to make their own choices for the shape and content of their public displays. Among these zones are casinos, powwows, public tours of tribal communities, and museums. These are places where Native hosts practice what Lawlor identifies as “displayed withholding”—a concept central to her analysis and one that she defines as “a practice of showing something that is not being shown,” where “this something marks the crucial differences which furnishes distinctly Navajo, Acoma, Mashantucket, or Eastern Shoshone styles of being and knowing.” In further clarifying and using “displayed withholding,” Lawlor looks to sites where Native peoples create public spaces for the performance of distinctly Native identities and, she suggests, where Native peoples both reveal and hold back key elements of self-representation. She also focuses on the concept of melancholy as the site of loss and resistance, the publicness of mourning as “polititized sadness,” the postmodernity of powwows and their primers, and the relationship between casinos and museums.

Lawlor correctly sees these different sites as places where Native peoples work between essentialist and constructivist identities. She recognizes that essentialism can provide “cultural stability” and a particular political space where a community “can stand … in the process of negotiating with more powerful others.” Here tribal self-representations honor certain Native understandings of cultural essentialism while also deploying constructivist notions of cultural identity and knowledge, especially in places designed as public attractions. In such spaces, Lawlor also recognizes Native venues seeking to attract predominantly non-Native tourists are also recognized as evoking an exotic other as the locus for “consumerist desire.” This seeming paradox is at the heart of much writing about Native America tourist venues, including museums, casinos, and powwows. Some of the issues resonate profoundly in parallel discussions of sovereignty, Native authenticity, Federal recognition, and international indigenous rights and economic security. Public Native America reaches across these issues to bring them into dialogue with each other and, to link them, or in Hall’s sense, to see how they articulate together.

While Lawlor rightly looks to articulations between the essential and the constructed, some of her analysis of the sites seems to deny the same articulation between specific casinos and museums, or between museums and powwows. For Lawlor, Native casinos do not exist to “educate off-reservation audiences,” in part because they do not “have the seriousness or the steady focus of museum displays.” But such assertions assume that Native casinos are each only about one thing—tourism and incitements to consumption. Even in the mixed spaces of Foxwoods and, perhaps more significantly the Mohegan Sun, the public-focused registers slip back and forth between consumption, displayed Native American identity as postmodern pastiche, “serious” engagement with issues of self- and popular representations of Indian identity, and questions of sovereignty and economic and political independence. To see casinos as solely making “the most of tribal motifs and images in the process of pursuing profit” potentially discounts the different registers where popular and Native audiences work in these saturated spaces of articulation. Likewise, to see Native casinos, museums, powwows, and cultural centers as only focusing outward, to popular and non-Native audiences, may overlook some of their impact and, indeed, purpose. Such sites serve as archives or resources for tribe members, as locations for essential and
traditional historical knowledge and practice, and as places for a consciously constructed pastiche of self-referentiality.

Lawlor’s analysis acknowledges, on the one hand, places where history and tradition inform knowledges, and, on the other, places awash in the post-modern mixing of signs. This is particularly true in the chapters devoted to the Shoshone and Northern Arapaho, but also surfaces in her discussions of the differences between the Acoma-led tours of Acoma Pueblo and the Acoma’s Sky City Casino. There is less discussion of tribal members that may feel comfortable living within the seeming contradictions or those, indeed, that see no contradictions there at all. This sense of comfortable navigation may be different for the Acoma than the Mashantucket Pequots, for example. But southwestern Native peoples have long negotiated the touristic space that mixes popular notions of Indianness with commodified representations of Native and southwestern people, shifting back and forth between places like Navajoland as the focus of projected popular imagination and as a traditional and ancestral Native homeland. Some more direct engagement with Native people—the Acoma guide; the curators at the Navajo Museum, Library, and Cultural Center; and members of the color guard for the 2003 Indian Days Powwow at Wind River, for example—would clarify and strengthen some of her observations and analyses.

Public Native America closes with a useful discussion of indigenous rights as a global issue and site for activism, in part framed by interaction and articulation with the United Nations. In discussing the aims of the UN’s Working Group on Indigenous Populations, however, she suggests that the book’s previous examples of tribal displays were “aimed at less powerful audiences” while the UN’s audiences include “states and international agencies.” While the local or regional may be “less powerful” as realized on an international stage, they are certainly more powerful in terms of local, regional, state, and federal effect. For example, the 40,000 people that visit Foxwoods daily provide the Mashantucket Pequots the economic clout necessary to influence and shape not only the destiny of their tribal nation and its people, but also policy and understanding of Native peoples across the United States. The self-representations practiced through the museums and the casino—at Mashantucket and elsewhere in Native America—have profoundly political aims and effects.

An ambitious book, Public Native America works across a range of sites to engage a number of complex ideas focused on issues of representation. Her insights into public displays as sites for a mix of partial revelation to outsiders, cues to insiders, and spaces for touristic commerce and income gathering are interesting to consider and provide key sites for considering seriously both the poetics and the politics of representation. “Displayed withholding” offers a useful way to think through some of these issues but, while Lawlor offers the concept as a particularly Native practice realized in museums, casinos, powwows, and tours of Native sites, it also applies to a wide variety of non-Native public displays, exhibitions, events, and tours of historically significant sites. It is not an exclusively, or even necessarily, Native practice.

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