“The End(s) of Sovereignty: Anthropologies, Native Identities, Museums, and Casinos”

Paper presented as part of panel: “Representation, Reflection, and Resistance: Museums and the Construction of Community Identities”

2009 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association

John Bodinger de Uriarte and Melissa Biggs

Not to be cited without permission.
Introduction—In Space (Or Conversations with the Big, Red Pin)

“Is that it?”

“No, that can't be it. There's no sign.”

“What does the GPS say?”

“It says we're here.”

We drive past the small, unassuming structure one more time, looking hard for something we're sure we'll recognize, something that will pulse “museum” just like the glowing red pin marking our destination on the GPS 2 x 4 inch screen. We pass what looks like a defunct Asian grocery, some small houses, some undeveloped lots. For the second or third time we turn around, head back toward what we must have missed, driving along the Norwich New London Turnpike, past the intersection with Church Lane. (And past the Tantaquidgeon Museum, set back from the road, looking like a small outbuilding for the larger house facing the turnpike.) We finally realize that the small structure really is our destination and park the rental car in the single slot in front.
We begin with this story, not to overly focus on an establishing anecdote as much as to foreground a lot of what went into making sense of Mohegan uses of location and exhibition as part of narrativizing public space. And to think about what it might mean to shift back and forth between location as a product of satellites and dead reckoning, a culminating “aha!” born of both directed and distracted attention. We are in Uncasville, Connecticut, home to the Mohegan Tribe, the Mohegan Sun casino complex, and the Tantaquidgeon Museum as the first site visit for a research project posing the question: In the wake of the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act and the birth of Indian gaming, how have many tribal nations used gaming proceeds to establish new, or expand existing, venues for cultural self-representation, especially in dedicated spaces like museums and cultural centers? A range of Native public spaces for self-representational exhibitions exist; not all such spaces are exclusively museum spaces. Our field visits include specific Native casinos and museums, to look at public strategies of cultural representation, a critical exercise of political sovereignty. The Mohegan Tribe uses both its museum and its casino as densely realized spaces for self-representation; they are also part of a larger web of articulated relationships with the place and space of specific locations in and around Uncasville.

The Tantaquidgeon Museum opened in 1931, the personal project of three members of the Tantaquidgeon family, John and two of his children, Harold and Gladys. Gladys, born in 1899, trained in tribal history and healing practices by elder women, went on to study
anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania under Frank Speck. Focusing primarily on the healing practices of the Mohegan and related East Coast tribes she traveled extensively, collecting information and publishing numerous articles. Her family home became a repository for Mohegan artifacts and documents, as well as objects collected during her research. In 1930, her father and brother began building a small structure to house the objects accumulated in their home. At first, the museum featured family artifacts. Gradually, other tribal members began contributing items. During the 1930s and 40s, Gladys worked for first the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and later the Federal Indian Arts and Crafts Board. Objects she gathered and was given during her tenure with both agencies also made their way into the Museum.

A small placard on the door welcomes visitors and presents the museum’s restricted operating hours, Wednesday through Saturday, April to October. We enter the building. There is a guest book to the left of the entrance, old-fashioned flat industrial carpet on the floor, and objects: dolls, arrows, photos, coffee mugs, portrait busts, signs, weavings—everywhere. The initial impression is of the crowded home of a well-traveled elderly relative, souvenir items next to finely carved crafts, newspaper clippings, snapshots, and formal portraits competing for wall space. Baskets, paddles, fishing spears, and a canoe balance across the open rafters.
A woman comes forward to greet us; she is Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel, tribal historian, medicine woman, and grand-niece of Gladys Tantaquidgeon. She presents a brief history of the museum, and offers a quick overview of its organization. The front rooms, holding Mohegan and other East Coast artifacts, are “home;” the back room contains objects from the western tribes with whom Gladys worked, as well as donated objects representing a variety of peoples. Renovations completed in 2008 provided for climate control, fire protection, a new roof, and other structural improvements, but kept the exhibits mostly unchanged. She points out a few pieces: an 18th century wampum belt, the case holding Gladys Tantaquidgeon’s regalia, and the life-sized carved wooden statue of Gladys herself, moved from its previous home at the casino.
The house and its contents remain closely tied to a Mohegan presence that pre-dates federal recognition and the casino’s construction. It serves as a site for Mohegans to apprehend connections to place and family—“my great-grandfather carved this spoon--” and to make those connections visible to interested outsiders. Unlike the casino, the museum maintains a low exterior profile. With no external signage marking its presence, simply locating the museum—at least for someone coming from outside the area—requires a certain intention.

The museum’s interiors contrast with its subdued exterior. The intimate space and the approachable scale of the exhibits invite an attuned attention. Labels provide the names of artifacts in both English and Mohegan, and provenance; some identify materials or processes used to produce the item. A few placards balanced against the cases offer more detailed information. Most of the exhibits feature quotidian items appealing not only to the gaze, but to touch as well. A comment about a finely carved club prompts Zobel to tell us that visiting school children so frequently moved the club around that the staff decided to put it in a case, to save the trouble of having to find it.

We continue conversing as we peruse the displays. A question about the casino interior designs leads Zobel into a discussion of what she calls “ambient learning.” Patrons absorb the atmosphere of the casino imbued with Mohegan sensibility. She likens it to walking down a street in Paris, breathing in the ambience. For a certain number of
visitors, this absorption activates a desire to learn more: why the tortoise shell motifs on the carpeting? But even for those who are not so motivated, the exposure itself results in small shifts in awareness.

The Mohegan Sun—A World at Play

One of our primary questions in Uncasville focused on how interior design decisions for the Mohegan Sun were made, and what such decision-making processes might reveal about the relationship between the museum and the casino as exhibition spaces. Based on earlier visits to the casino, we recognized that the thematic elements of the interior were closely linked to specific Mohegan narratives of place, and to a careful inscription of the public spaces of the casino as opportunities for presenting significant elements of what we might call “Moheganness.” We also recognized the interior as both immersive and non-didactive—there were far more opportunities for visitor engagement with the interior’s details than there were directed narratives about what it all “meant.”
(While audio tours and the free pamphlet *The Secret Guide* were available at the hotel’s concierge desk, and one might be directed to these resources after asking questions about the interior design, their availability was not obviously advertised. Indeed, while the Mohegan Sun’s brochure states that “every inch” of the casino is “infused with the spirit of the Mohegan Tribe,” there is no mention of the Guide or the tour.)
The Mohegan Sun presents a space with a lot of elements familiar from the museum. But the casino presents more than a series of possible attention-focusing details. Like the museum, the casino offers a space saturated with opportunities for engagement and a sense of accretion, of details layered over other details, of spaces and objects that surface and recede against a larger background of traffic and activity.

As exhibitionary space, the casino oscillates in this combined space of “distraction and intoxication,” a richly dense place that offers different opportunities for engagement without enforcing or foregrounding any of them. We are again reminded of Benjamin’s discussion of the differences between concentration and distraction in an engagement with a work of art—the former allows an individual to be absorbed by the work, the latter an opportunity for “mass absorption” of art. And Benjamin was, in part, speaking to the ways in which architecture works, calling it “the prototype of a work of art, the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction.” As Howard Eiland writes, the Paris Arcades, for Benjamin, are both “laboratory and atmosphere.” Here the density of place offers different experiments and realizations in perception; like the museum, the casino presents a thickly mixed set of signs that present a vocabulary, if not a grammar, of Mohegan self-representation.
Our experiences in Uncasville lead us in a couple of possible directions and thoughts. Perhaps the first is a recognition of exhibition space as permeable space, as a set of interior and exterior possibilities for making sense, or different kinds of sense, in the gaps and fissures that exceed formal museum spaces. In Uncasville, Mohegan articulations of self-representation are carefully worked through “the surround” as parts of identity-making and identity-confirming practices. These practices are located in history—in the relationships between Mohegans and Europeans and Euro-Americans after contact—and in shared senses and uses of space. While the museum and the casino offer dense interiors crammed with the possibilities of object and narrative engagement, the landscape/terrain offers other affirmations of Moheganness in other kinds of public spaces.

These affirmations include inscribing and re-inscribing places with new meanings, allowing older meanings to resurface, and to put these potentially contentious figurings of time and space into active dialogue. Keith Basso suggests that, “places consist in what gets made of them.” Landscape and significant landmarks are places that hold, reflect, and are reflected in, self-representational narratives. Places in space become rich repositories of potential and actualized knowledge.
We point here to two places: Shantok, on Mohegan land, and the Royal Mohegan Burial Grounds in nearby Norwich. Shantok, recognized by the Mohegans as their first settlement, continued to be used as a gathering place and traditional burial ground until 1926, when the state claimed the land through eminent domain and converted it into Fort Shantok State Park. Efforts to reclaim the land began in the 1970s. Shortly after it received federal recognition, the state transferred the property back to the tribe. The tribe renamed the site Shantok, Village of Uncas. A sign outside the park welcomes visitors to the Mohegan Reservation. On the park grounds, park regulations are posted in English and Mohegan. Signs also identify the Sacred Fire site and the burial ground.
Inside the burial ground, a cairn, erected in 1923 by the Society of Colonial Dames, commemorates the friendship between Uncas and the English lieutenant Thomas Leffingwell. It stands among the old and new graves.

The burial ground is still in use: on one of our visits, we encountered the tribal burial committee, conferring about an upcoming interment.
The Royal Mohegan Burial Ground is in downtown Norwich, about a block from the town green. Mid-nineteenth century development desecrated the grounds, leaving just $1/16$ of an acre of the original approximately 26 acres intact. This compact parcel holds the graves of Uncas and members of his family. A small obelisk, dedicated by Andrew Jackson in 1833, memorializes Uncas and the alliance of the Mohegans and the colonists. In the 1920s, the remaining land became the site of a Masonic temple. As Masonic membership declined, the temple fell into disrepair. Casino profits enabled the tribe to purchase the temple, demolish it, and restore the burial site.
The completed monument, dedicated in September 2008, recognizes the impossibility of completely reinstating the burial grounds; the official Mohegan press release describes the site as having been “left to nature.” An open green surrounds a circular arrangement of short columns, each engraved with one of the 13 moons that make up the Mohegan year. At the center, a flat red stone memorializes the site and lays the desecrated to rest. While plainly visible from the street, the markers cannot be read unless one actually enters the site.

In Uncasville, different sets of reckoning incorporate the local and the known, actively pushing at the boundaries of how space is made significant. Multiple meanings saturate the landscape, those built up and invested in the terrain over time, and alternate or additional ones poured into reclaimed and reconfigured places. Casino profits enable the Mohegans to reposition dominant narratives about land and presence. Fort Shantok moves from a space where Mohegans are objects of its history, to a space in which they articulate history. The razing of the Masonic Temple allows the Royal Mohegan Burial Ground to resurface and reclaim its space in a network of memorials and historical configurations. Mohegan representational strategies rely on the relationships between interior and exterior, between the spare aesthetic of the Royal Mohegan Burial Ground or Shantok and the dense environments of the museum and casino. Distraction creates opportunities not only for complacent contemplation, but also for disquiet.