

Gambling on History: Shaping Narratives in Native Public Spaces¹

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Our presentation today is drawn from an extended work in progress begun with a simple question: Have profits from Indian gaming helped to establish or expand Native museums and cultural centers as venues for cultural self-representation? We approached this question through research carried out in 2009–2010 through multiple sites in Connecticut, Minnesota, and Southern California and a national survey administered to a list of 241 “gaming tribes,” compiled in the 2010 National Indian Gaming Commission's Gaming Tribe Report (see Bodinger de Uriarte and Biggs 2011). We hypothesized that gaming revenues created new possibilities for Native peoples to take control of their own public histories as expressions of cultural and political sovereignty, and we understood museums and cultural centers as a growth industry in Native America following the passage of the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) and the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). We speculated that, in many cases, such growth responded to challenges against Indian gaming as the effect of some sort of “loophole” in formal federal relationships with Native peoples, or the claim that many Indians and Indian identities had been created to take advantage of the possibilities created by IGRA.

We recognize 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” (Harmon 2010; Spilde 2004). Spaces for cultural self-representation offer significant venues to respond to such accusations and racism. Casino-generated funds allow many tribal nations to create spaces for repatriated objects that publicly articulate stories about history, identity, and the practice(s) of sovereignty. Our work explores several Native public spaces for self-representational exhibitions; many combine elements of museums, casinos, resorts, and public attractions.

We argue that one of the key components of museums is the tension between directed attention and immersive environments. Our research recognizes that seemingly disparate spaces—casinos thematic and generic, museums old and new, garden and memorial sites, village greens and hotel lobbies—can best be understood as an array of responses to the challenges of articulating Native identities to mostly non-Native publics. Such sites exemplify particular strategies of Native curation in a variety of spaces actively shaped for public attention.



Figure 1—The Tantaquidgeon Museum

We first visited the Tantaquidgeon Museum and the Mohegan Sun Casino in Uncasville, Connecticut, where we looked carefully at ideas of place and landscape, and the mutually indicating practices of museum and casino spaces. The site visit to Mohegan expanded some of our initial assumptions—for example, as Native people gained economic power, one potential priority would be to establish or enhance a tribal museum as a site to engage with increased Native and non-Native publics.



Figure 2—Details from the interior of the Tantaquidgeon Museum

In Mohegan, the Tantaquidgeon museum works as a historic site, a space for the collection and display of historic objects, an element in the tribe's history, and its own historic object cast against the background of Uncasville and other public representations of what it means to be Mohegan. The casino worked across this register, in part by not



Figure 3—From the interior of the Tantaquidgeon Museum: artifacts and figure of Gladys Tantaquidgeon

foregrounding its relationship to this museum, in part by making plain its representational function as a kind of immersive theater for things Mohegan (Tantaquidgeon Museum Director Melissa Zobel calls it a space for “ambient learning”). Here “the surround” is the densely thematic spaces of the casino, the overlays of environment and design that support a Benjaminian space of “distraction and intoxication.” Like the museum, the casino presents a thickly mixed set of signs that present a vocabulary, if not a grammar, of Mohegan self-representation.



Figure 4—Details from the interior of the Mohegan Sun

The Mohegan Sun—A World at Play

One of our primary questions in Uncasville focused on the interior design decisions made for the Mohegan Sun, and what such decision-making processes might reveal about the relationship between the museum and the casino as exhibition spaces. We knew that the thematic elements of the interior 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 “Moheganness.” We also recognized the interior as both immersive and non-didactic: there were far more opportunities for visitor engagement with the interior’s details than directed narratives about what it all “meant.” Audio tours and a free pamphlet titled *The Secret Guide*, available at the hotel’s concierge desk for the asking, are 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,” it makes no mention of the *Guide* or the tour, establishing an interesting relationship between “the secret” and the seen. This relationship is also maintained in and around Uncasville, where markers of Mohegan historical significance and presence can be found, embedded throughout the landscapes of public and private spaces.

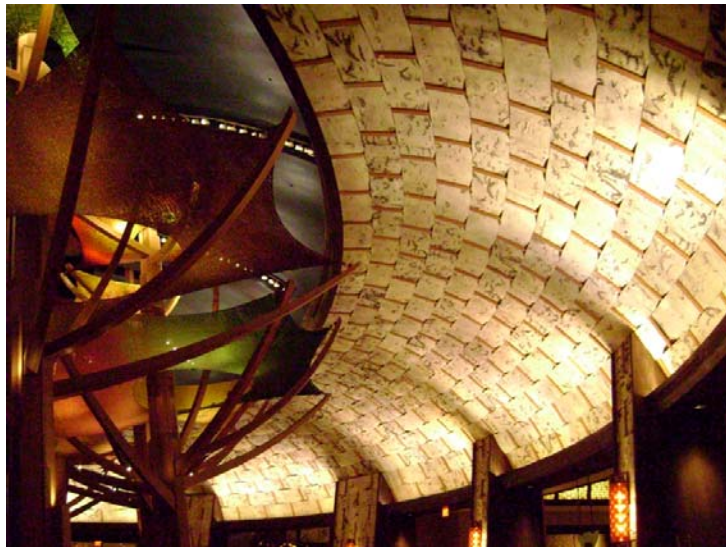


Figure 5—Birch bark detail from the interior of the Mohegan Sun

The Mohegan Sun includes many elements familiar from the museum. But the casino offers more than a series of possible attention-focusing details. Like the museum, the casino provides 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 a combined space of “distraction and intoxication,” what Walter Benjamin identifies as a richly dense place that offers different opportunities for engagement without enforcing or foregrounding any of them. At the Mohegan Sun, the density of place displays different experiments and realizations in perception.

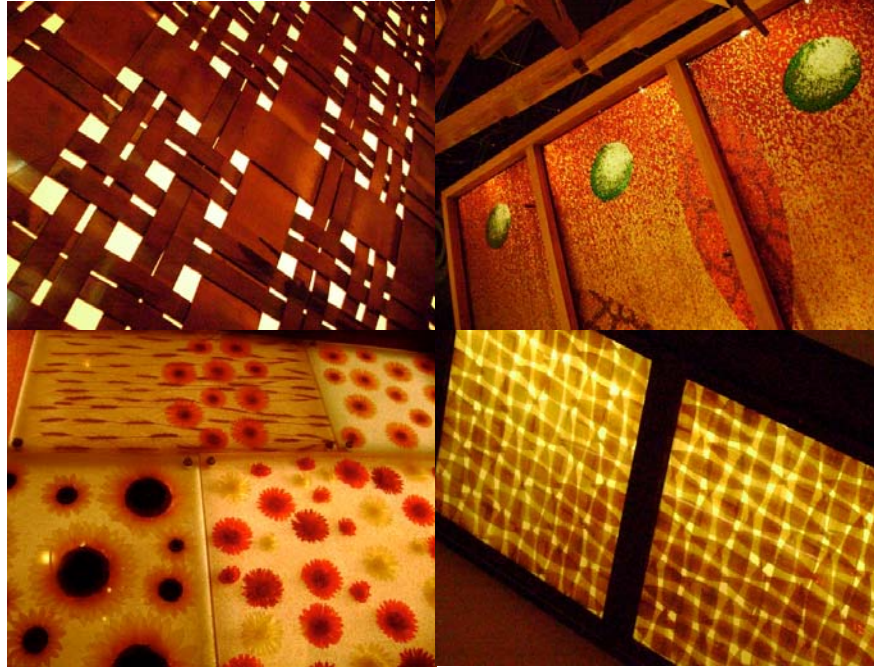


Figure 6—Basket weave, beadwork, flowers, and cornhusk details from the interior of the Mohegan Sun

Experiences in Uncasville lead us to identify 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 carefully work through “the surround” as parts of identity-making and identity-confirming practices. These practices reside in history—in the relationships between Mohegans and Europeans and Euro-Americans after contact—and in shared senses and uses of space. While the densely crammed interiors of the museum and the casino offer the possibilities of object and narrative engagement, the landscape and terrain affirms Moheganness in other kinds of public spaces.

Mall of America

Our second round of site visits began just outside the Twin Cities at the Mystic Lake Casino Store, operated by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community (SMSC) at the Mall of America, the second largest mall in North America. The mall website describes the store as “a marketing tool for both Mystic Lake and SMSC enterprises,” and as the only space in the mall “that represents Minnesota Indian Gaming.” It also identifies the site as a locus for information about the SMSC and its enterprises, other federally recognized Minnesota tribes, and the Minnesota Indian Gaming Association. Unlike other spaces considered in this paper, the Mystic Lake store is not on Native-owned property. Crammed into the hyper-retail space of the Mall of America, the SMSC storefront exercises an unquestioned access to sovereignty—self-representation—at an intersection of successful commodity consumption and essential difference, working to advance the preservation of Native gaming in Minnesota generally, and to render Native sovereignty, and its benefits to both Native and non-Native communities, visible.



Figure 7—Mystic Lake at the Mall of America

Mille Lacs

That afternoon, we drove to our next site, the Mille Lacs Ojibwe Reservation in central Minnesota. The reservation's casino and adjoining hotel and entertainment complex give little indication of their location or relationship to the Mille Lacs Ojibwe, or Minnesota at all. A generic sign featuring an overflowing pot of gold marks the casino; the hotel lobby resembles the lobby of any mid-priced business hotel in the United States. Even at midday, the casino space is dim and smoky; it is perhaps the most stripped-down gaming space either of us have ever been in. The pragmatics—maximizing the number of machines possible per square foot—overwhelms any other possible use of the space.



Figure 8—Mille Lacs Indian Museum

Less than half a mile from the Grand Casino, the Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Trading Post presents a completely different footprint. Constructed of cedar, embellished with a decorative band based on beadwork made by tribal elder Batiste Sam, the current museum opened in 1996. Harry and Jeanette Ayers, who operated a trading post and fishing resort on the site, donated it to the Minnesota State Historical Society in 1959. While the museum is a project of the Minnesota State Historical Society, the Society stresses that the Mille Lacs Ojibwe community participates in all aspects of the planning, exhibitions, and programming (Libertus 1996). Inside the museum, floor to ceiling windows frame the tourist cabins, Ayers home, and the trading post, with the lake as backdrop. A spacious activity area, including a kitchen, extends behind the reception desk. The only area we could not access on our own is the central Four Seasons exhibit, which requires a Native guide; the room imagines Ojibwe life at the time of first contact, portraying activities associated with each of the four seasons. Originally installed in 1964, and enhanced by mannequins lifecast from band members in 1972, the exhibit was carefully preserved during the transition to the current space. The newer exhibits circle around the enclosed space.



Figure 9—From the Four Seasons Room

In some ways this is familiar vernacular museum space. There are clear connections made—through panel text and exhibition objects—to the processes and history of Mille Lacs tribal sovereignty. But the museum, like the Tantaquidgeon, can also be read as its own “museum piece,” an illustration or exhibition of a particular moment of museum design and execution.



Figure 10—Exhibit spaces at the Mille Lacs Indian Museum

Mystic Lake

At the end of our last full day in Minnesota we visited the Mystic Lake casino, billed as the largest in the Midwest. Unlike the Mohegan Sun, where casino design directly reproduces particular objects and references Mohegan narratives, at Mystic Lake the references are more oblique, relying on natural materials and abstract pattern to convey a sense of place. The centerpiece, a flowing red ceiling fixture called “The River,” curves around the mostly circular gaming space. We followed it, searching for the “cultural gallery” promised by the SMSC website.

We found it in a pedestrian thoroughway, across from the Minnehaha Café and close to the hotel’s registration desk. It is essentially a walk-in vitrine, all but one wall made primarily of glass. The Lakota word *Tatanka* (buffalo) is written in gold above the entrances. A stuffed bull buffalo, positioned to face out through longest wall, draws passers-by. The room contains few elements: vertical vitrines display various buffalo-related artifacts; one horizontal display case holds two decorated buffalo skulls presented to the SMSC by other tribes; and an interactive flat-screen kiosk leads the visitor to a wealth of information about all things buffalo. The space works both as a self-contained gallery and as a thematic element and interactive vitrine within the casino complex. The glass walls overlook the main gaming floor, and the raised platform exhibiting a car, the jackpot prize for one of the progressive slots. The walls also preserve the hush characteristic of museum spaces.



Figure 11—Tatanka and Minnehaha at Mystic Lake

“Tatanka” provides another way in to thinking about the relationships between the casino as a thematic space and as a space that provides for the exercise of a more museum-influenced curatorial design. The active play between representing Indianness in general (and the buffalo is a powerful popular icon of this) and in specific (the buffalo figures as part of Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux history and culture) are melded and made plain. This exhibitionary space is both spectacle and space for contemplation.

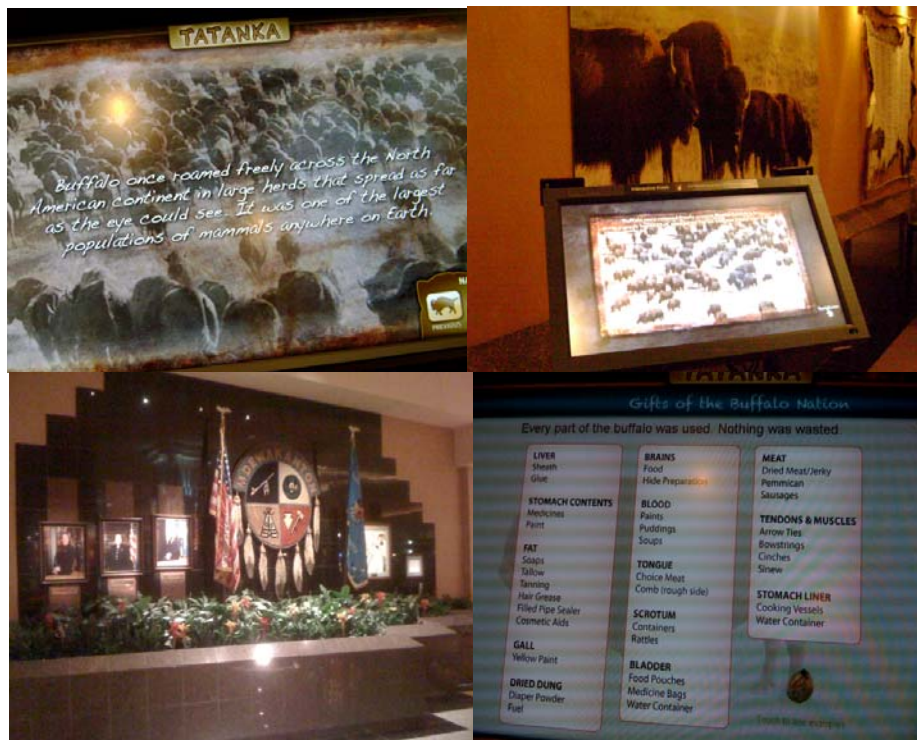
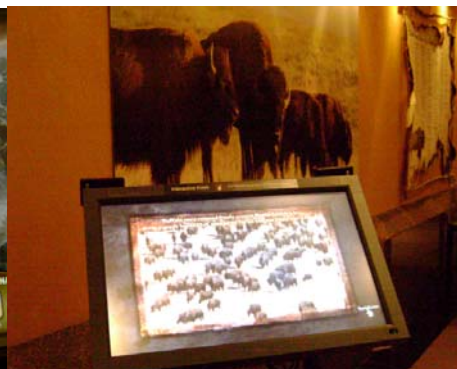
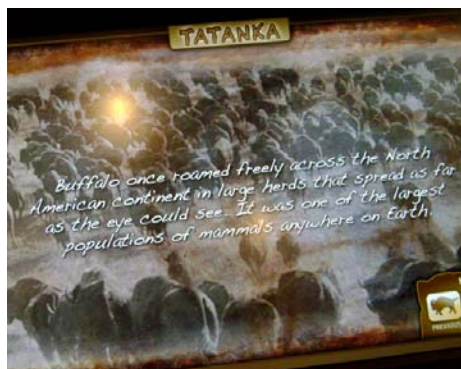


Figure 12—Details from Tatanka Gallery



Golden State South: Desert Resorts

In our final section, we examine representations of tribal identity in two of the sites we visited in Southern California: the Barona Valley Ranch Resort and Casino, operated by the Barona Band of Mission Indians, and the Agua Caliente Spa Resort, managed by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

Nestled in the rocky hills east of San Diego, the Barona Valley Ranch Resort and Casino invites visitors to “enjoy a rendezvous with nature” while taking advantage of “the loosest slots in San Diego.” Operated by the Barona Band of Mission Indians, the Resort and Casino makes much of its scenic location, promoting the nature paths and various gardens on the grounds and its commitment to environmental sustainability. The US government established the Capitan Grande reservation in 1871 for the Kumeyaay ancestors of the present-day Barona (Wood 2008-09: 348). As the city of San Diego’s need for water resources increased, city interests determined that the solution lay in damming the San Diego River, which ran through the reservation. After some initial resistance from the federal government, which held the land in trust, water rights and land in the Capitan Grande were transferred to San Diego. Construction of the dam flooded the homes of the majority of Capitan Grande residents in 1931.



Figure 13—Barona Valley Ranch Resort and Casino

Thirty-two families from the communities accepted government offers of restitution and relocation, purchasing a portion of the Rancho Cañada San Vicente y Mesa del Padre Barona, which included territories recognized as originally Kumeyaay. Now known as the Barona band, they attempted to maintain themselves by ranching and farming. Neither proved lucrative. Following the lead of the Seminole in Florida, the Barona in 1984 became the first Native group in California to offer high-stakes bingo. Conflicts with the original management company and other problems led to the decision to replace the profitable bingo operations with a card hall. The success of the card hall and subsequent gaming enabled the construction of the circus-themed Big Top Casino on Barona property. Casino developers considered the relatively remote site of the Barona

reservation a handicap; the themed casino was seen as one way to attract customers. When the band decided to diversify casino operations in the late 1990s, they also decided to capitalize on the “backcountry” location. The new Barona Valley Ranch Resort and Casino opened in 2003.



Figure 14—Barona Valley Ranch Resort and Casino Porte-Cochère

Barona promotional material states that the ranch theme selected for the hotel and casino intends to honor the band’s ranching past. The hotel, casino, and other buildings resemble the idealized ranches of TV westerns more than anything that might have been typical of 1930s Barona. Rustic exterior details combine with decorative elements such as vintage farm machinery to create a comfortably bucolic atmosphere. Enlarged reproductions of photographs depicting Barona ranching activities hang on the walls of the hotel. The most specific reference to the band’s ranching heritage is the incorporation of the cattle brands belonging to the 32 original Barona families as a recurrent motif. Impressed into the walkway surrounding the pond, the brands also appear on small markers at each of the golf course’s holes. Complementing the “big house” façade of the hotel, the casino exterior replicates a barn, complete with silo and hayloft.

From the initial construction of the golf course, the band and resort planners developed strategies that combined careful manipulation of the existing environmental features with the introduction of elements intended to enhance those features. The course designer incorporated boulders already on the grounds into the course plan, and moved nearly 200 full-grown native oaks from another part of the reservation onto the course. Viewed through the picture windows in the hotel lobby, the course appears to be a sweep of open grassland. The golf course and all of the resort grounds are watered using captured rainwater and wastewater processed through an on-site water reclamation plant. The retention ponds and some of the filtration processes form part of the advertised “stunning visual landscape.”



Figure 15—Barona Valley Ranch Resort and casino cattle brands

The site plan includes four gardens: the water garden; the rose garden; the chef’s garden; and the Chekwaa Gardens, a native and ethnobotanical garden. The gardens illustrate the complex blend of “natural” and “cultivated” at the heart of the Barona Resort representational strategy. Of particular interest is the rose garden, which contains over 200 varieties of roses. One section of the garden serves as a test site for English roses created by renowned British rosarian David Austin, one of only ten operated by Austin in the United States.

The golf course and the rose garden provide two illustrations of Barona ability to transform and manage the environment. While the golf course design highlights native plant and climate knowledge and implies a certain intimate connection to the land, the rose garden indicates mastery of the care of introduced species, and the skills necessary to adapt the environment to best maintain them. Technical acumen and wise management of resources permits both the ‘natural’ and the cultivated landscapes to flourish.

Beyond the Salton Sea

The Agua Caliente Cultural Museum is located in the downtown Village Green Heritage Center of Palm Springs, near the Agua Caliente Spa Resort, which is partly marked by a traffic island statue depicting two Cahuilla women gathering acorns. The Museum is a modest, modern structure. A door at the rear of the reception area leads to a small outdoor patio. A kish (a traditional stick-frame dwelling covered by palm fronds) sits in one corner; native plants grow in the perimeters, and the walls are decorated with murals illustrating traditional Cahuilla desert life. The museum was founded in 1991, and permanent installations use photographs, text, and touchable objects to present Cahuilla history. Surrounding wall texts provide information about the Cahuilla environment, and their utilization of natural resources. The main gallery holds temporary displays.

Objects from the museum’s collections are also displayed at the Salton Sea History Museum; California State University–San Bernardino; Palm Springs City Hall; and the

nearby Spa Resort Casino Hotel, where the lobby and grounds serve as extended exhibit space. A walkway lined with native plants guides visitors through glass doors etched with desert scenes and, as in the museum, murals depict scenes from traditional Cahuilla life. In the hotel lobby, display cases and photographs present tribal history. Photo exhibits



Figure 16—Mural detail at the Agua Caliente Spa Resort Casino Hotel

describe the Agua Caliente relationship with the area hot springs, and the history of their struggle to retain control over this resource. Glass cases hold grinding stones and pottery, and a temporary art exhibit hangs in one of the smaller hallways.



Figure 17—Hotel lobby case at the Agua Caliente Spa Resort Casino Hotel

The sitting area contains a replica of a door from the hot springs bathhouse hanging on one wall, and a single stand-alone case holds an old-style slot machine. Both artifacts speak to a history of Cahuilla economic enterprise and its interface with a Southern California tourist trade, but the 1936 slot machine concretizes a few different ways to think about recognizing and renegotiating a nostalgic past. The Chief both offers a generalized and stereotypical working of “the Indian” as a site for projected history, and as a confirmation of a working present. As an affirmation of a claim to inherited sovereignty, The Chief references the Agua Caliente Tribe of Cahuilla Indians as able to both own and display this object in the lobby of their own spa and resort, an institution connected to (and partly made possible by) a sovereign nation status claimed and verified through political and cultural continuity.



Figure 18—Details from the Agua Caliente Spa Resort Casino Hotel exhibits

As an old object, The Chief connects the history of gambling with a nostalgic history of a Western past, narrativized and made popular in large part through Hollywood movies. But the location of The Chief also speaks to the history of the Tribe, both as major players in the development of Palm Springs as a resort, and as Native people with very specific claims to the land, verified through an identity grounded in blood reckoning and federal law. Contemporary Indian gaming spaces are sites for making claims to gaming and non-gaming past selves—re-articulated and re-animated through contemporary gaming practices. The Chief, displayed within its plexiglass cube, invokes heritage and the past through an articulation of the untouchable (the museum object) as a site for attention and contemplation. As an object in a lobby, however, it oscillates in the spaces between what sorts of attention it can command. The Chief makes active a space that both recognizes Agua Caliente gaming and calls to it as a spot for attention or even scrutiny. Here the practices of public exhibition are able to articulate and rearticulate objects and evidence of representation. While we can think of the slot machine as a certain kind of inheritance—the legacy of popular images of Indians and how they surface in and shape the American imaginary—it also indicates a contested terrain: who gets to control the representation of Native peoples, how, and where?

Over the course of the project, some active challenging of thinking about Native museums and casinos as part of some sort of ongoing dyad of representational space has unfolded: both offer immersive and thematic places for the presentation of specific kinds of identity-focused narratives, no matter how fantastic. Our work continues from this realization, and presents a wealth of possible engagement sites for further analysis of the formation and presentation of self and nation as the exercise of sovereignties and self-representation.

In Native America, claim rights to the past, as both narrative and property, are paramount. Contemporary battles over authentic identities are located in authenticated pasts and these, in turn, are often grounded in relationships to property. Material objects, especially in museums, serve as evidence of identity relations shot through with power. Much of the critical literature on museums produced in the last thirty years focuses on how their ownership of objects is used to wage histories that affirm and support the relationships and identities of the nation state. Much also focuses on museums as sites for the re-imagination of the nation: places for the waging of alternate histories.

Native museums have long been recognized as sites for this kind of history-telling, and the curation of objects significant to these histories has been an active site for struggle; institutions like the National Museum of the American Indian are prominent examples of histories and object relationships retold. But museums are not the only public sites significant to such reconfigurations. Native casinos and hotels also provide spaces for the retelling of histories—stories and relationships inherited from the past—to newly configured, and increasingly significant, publics. As vernacular spaces, such sites are able to draw from different fields of objects and styles of storytelling. And, as Indian gaming moves from innovation to a new tradition, the objects used to tell this story shift as well. Hotels and casinos are display environments where latencies can be made obvious, and the boundaries and expectations of visitor experience can be stretched and re-imagined; the public landscape also resonates as a site for telling stories of place and space.

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. Visitors to Native casinos and resorts represent a growing potential audience for Native self-representation, one typically 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 Resort Casino Hotel, for example—may continue to develop, with self-representational narratives and experiences specifically designed to reach this visitor base. It is in these spaces where some of the more complicated and intriguing public expressions of Native sovereignty are enacted and presented, specifically aimed at engaging larger audiences to either introduce or reinforce particular understandings of tribal and Native identities.

While this project is a work in progress, at this point, our work yields the following as some key results. First, that self-representation—in Native and non-Native public spaces, and imagined primarily as elements of exhibition and narrative—has long been a Native priority. The variety of relationships between Native and non-Native exhibitionary spaces indicated by this project builds on a history of compromise and opportunity in the face of limited economic power. Continuing developments in post-IGRA Native American exhibitionary spaces provide a direction for fruitful future research: how will these spaces change, or be newly established, in the face of new economies?

Second, 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. Our findings also indicate that Native self-representation through museums, cultural centers, and other exhibitionary spaces 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 (Cooper 2006: 8). Without clear tribal budget figures 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 other sectors of tribal economies, thereby freeing otherwise encumbered funds that could be newly applied to exhibitions (Cattelino 2008).

Third, the public exhibitionary spaces presented here are multifaceted locations for engaging larger audiences to either introduce or reinforce particular understandings of tribal and Native identities. 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 admittedly ideal 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 one another (Stewart 1991), were the really interesting places. The expanding influences and opportunities of entertainment and gaming spaces present promising arenas for future research, including the following questions: How are such spaces realized 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” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) as an expression of Native self-representation and sovereignty?

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¹This paper is partly drawn from a much longer work "Wag(er)ing Histories, Staking Territories: Exhibiting Sovereignty in Native America" first published in 2013 by *Museum and Society* 11(2).