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Indian Time at Foxwoods

Bill Anthes

On a Thursday night in mid-September, I sat eating dinner and reading in the Festival Buffet at Foxwoods Casino on the Mashantucket Pequot Reservation in Connecticut. "What are you reading?" my waitress asked. I showed her the cover. "A history of the Pequots," I answered. My waitress thought for a moment and replied: "They were wiped out." "Yep," I said, "they had a pretty rough time for a while."

But of course the Pequot are here today. A conference focused on the question of time and the permanence of cultures is an apt venue to consider the Pequot, a nation that dodged historical oblivion, only to emerge as the wealthiest Indian tribe in the United States. But what does it mean to say that a people and a nation have endured? Have the Pequot endured? And how do the contemporary Pequot express their nationhood in an era of neoliberalism and global capitalism, in which, we are told, nations are a dying breed?

My waitress, while not Pequot herself, was an employee of the tribe. With more than 13,000 employees, Foxwoods is the second largest employer in Connecticut, and a leader in the growing service sector of the economy, regularly recruiting seasonal workers from Europe and Latin America.¹ We spoke inside a restaurant within a vast entertainment and resort complex that has grown since opening in 1986 as a high-stakes bingo room. The current complex includes casinos (featuring over 7,400 slot machines and 380 table games), twenty-six restaurants, shopping, entertainment and nightclubs, an arcade, a salon and spa, new golf resort and private golf club, and over 1,400 hotel rooms. The contemporary Pequots are the beneficiaries of a convergence of legal gains by Native American tribes in the 1970s and 1980s, and geography—located in Ledyard, Connecticut, the 1,250-acre Mashantucket Pequot reservation is a two hour drive from Boston and New York City. At 4.7 million square feet, with over one billion dollars in annual revenues, Foxwoods is the largest and most profitable casino in the world, and is wholly owned and operated by the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation.²

The Pequots' story of "rez to riches" is impressive because it begins with one the

1. Florin (2004)

2. Recent studies of Foxwoods and the Mashantucket Pequot include Bodinger de Uriarte (2003), and Lawlor (2005).



most notorious acts of genocide of the colonial period—the Pequot “War,” which nearly exterminated the tribe. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Pequots, with a population of approximately 13,000, were the most powerful Indian tribe in the Northeast, dominating their neighbors along Long Island Sound from their tribal base between the Thames and Pawcatuck rivers in what is now central Connecticut. Pequot hegemony was based on control of the production of “wampum”—beads made from the shells of whelks and quahogs that became increasingly important in the expanding fur trade with the Dutch and English.

The Pequots felt the first of several shocks when a host of European diseases decimated the Northeastern tribes in the early 1600s, reducing Native populations by an estimated fifty-five to ninety-five percent. But even with their numbers diminished the Pequots remained the dominant political power in Southern New England. The pressures of increasing European settlement, however, brought the Pequots into conflict with the Dutch traders and English Puritans, as well as with the neighboring Mohegans and Narragansetts, who joined forces with the Puritans to wage a brutal war of extermination on the Pequots. By September of 1638, when the remaining Pequot Sachems signed the Treaty of Hartford, only some one thousand remained. These survivors were parceled out as slaves to live among the English, the Mohegans, and the Narragansetts, or were shipped to the Caribbean. Colonial authorities formally declared the Pequot nation “dissolved.” Even the use of the name “Pequot” was outlawed. As one Puritan account read: “[T]he name of the Pequots... is blotted out from under heaven, there being not one that is, or (at least) dare to call himself a Pequot.”³

3. Hauptman (1990), 76.

But the Pequots persisted. Under the leadership of the legendary sachem Robin Cassasinamon, those Pequots placed under the rule of the Mohegans were in 1666 granted a 3,000-acre reservation at the headwaters of the Mystic River and became known as the Western or Mashantucket Pequot Tribe. (The Pequots who had been living under the Narragansetts were eventually established as the Eastern or Pawcatuck Pequot Tribe. Thus, the Pequot nation that had dominated trade and politics in Southern New England would never again be one nation.)

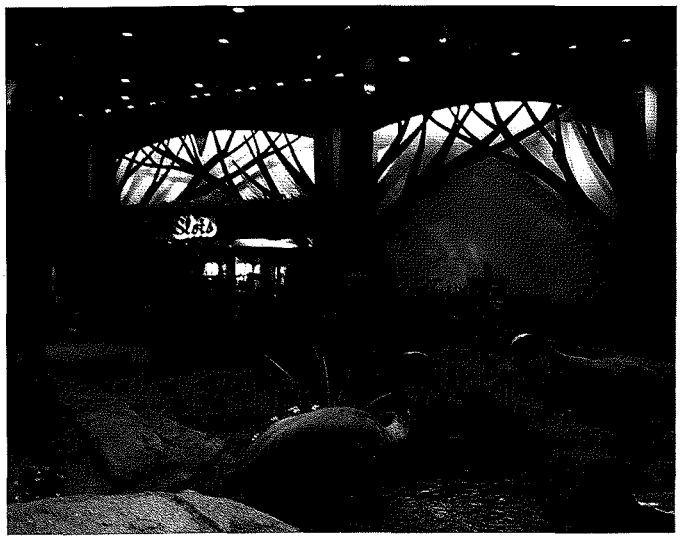
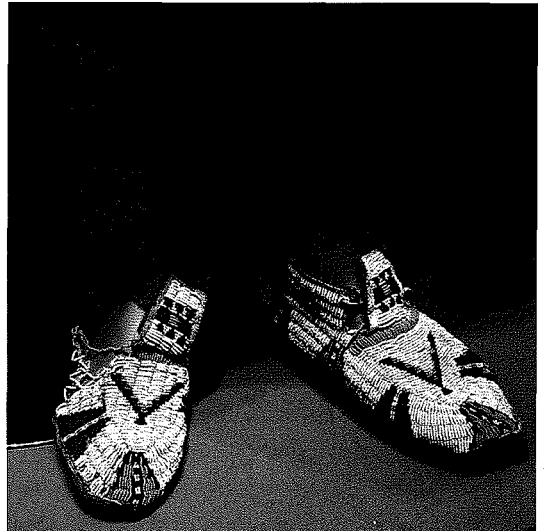
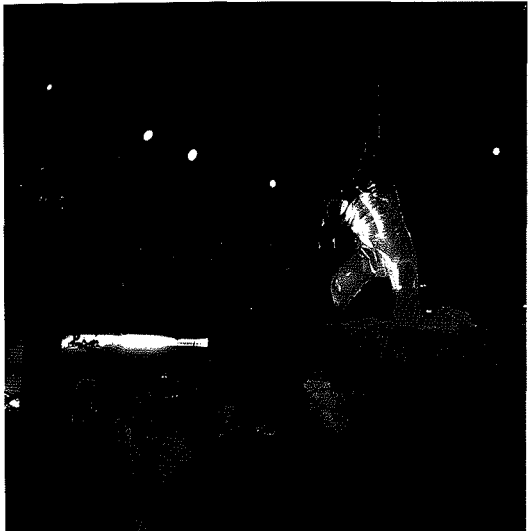
The next three centuries saw gradual losses of land. In 1761, the Connecticut colony reduced the reservation to 989 acres. In 1856, the State of Connecticut sold off all but two hundred and thirteen acres of the Mashantucket reservation without tribal consent. The shrinking reservation also hemorrhaged population. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, more than half of the Pequots had left Mashantucket to join the Christian Brotherton Movement, which attracted Indian followers first to Oneida Territory in New York and later to Wisconsin. Tribal members also left to find wage labor in the surrounding communities, where they intermarried into white and black families. By 1935, only 42 Pequots remained on the reservation, and in 1974 the two remaining Pequot tribal members living on the reservation, two half-sisters, Martha Langevin Ellal and Elizabeth George Plouffe, died. The state of Connecticut planned to turn the reservation into a park.

But Plouffe's descendents, led by her grandson Skip Hayward, mounted an effort to save the reservation. With the assistance of the Native American Rights Fund, and following recent precedents established by the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy Indians of Maine, the Mashantucket Pequot Indian Land Claims Settlement Act was signed by President Reagan in 1983. Under the act, the tribe recovered lands that had been illegally sold by the state of Connecticut in 1856, and were formally granted federal recognition. The swampy reservation as yet had no roads or permanent housing to speak of, and the few development schemes launched by Hayward, now tribal chairman – the harvesting of fire wood, maple syrup production, a hydroponic greenhouse, a hog farm, and a pizza restaurant, had barely moved the tribe beyond a subsistence level. However, the tribe's new status as a federally recognized Indian nation made it possible for the Pequots to open a high stakes bingo hall in 1986, and in 1992, the quincentennial of Columbus's discovery of the New World, Foxwoods Casino opened its doors to capacity crowds. It has not closed since.

At Foxwoods, as on other Indian reservations, the casino has become the economic engine that drives tribal revitalization. Since the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988, which recognized the authority of federally recognized Indian tribes to operate gaming facilities free from state and federal oversight and taxation, tribal casinos have emerged as the major industry in Indian Country, offering poverty-stricken communities confined to meager slices of marginal land a shot at new economic self-sufficiency and unprecedented political power.⁴ (The Mashantucket Pequots were among the biggest contributors of soft money to the Democratic Party during the Clinton presidency.) As of 2004, two hundred and twenty-six of five hundred and sixty-two federally recognized tribes were in the casino business, generating a total of \$16.7 billion in gross annual revenues.⁵ On the Mashantucket Pequot reservation, casino revenues have enabled the tribe to build a modern, liberal social-welfare state complete with cradle-to-grave services including health and child care; police and fire departments; housing in a comfortable, gated, suburban compound; annual stipends and tuition from kindergarten through graduate school for the approximately eight-hundred tribal members; seven-figure salaries for tribal council members; a public relations office and a full-time staff of Washington lobbyists. Most spectacularly, the casino profits underwrote the construction of the \$193 million Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, opened in 1998. At 308,000 square feet, the museum is the largest Native American museum in the world.

Ironically, the engine of Pequot tribal revitalization and nation-building is an instrument of economic globalization, catering to an international tourist market. Initial financing for Foxwoods was provided by Lim Goh Tong, a Chinese national, whose Kuala Lumpur-based corporation developed the largest casino, resort, and entertainment complex in Southeast Asia. But indeed, it would seem the Pequots have managed to turn precisely those economic forces that have devastated so

4. See also the recent phenomenon of impoverished cities and states contracting with Native American tribes to operate casinos on non-reservation lands, e.g. the Seneca Niagara Casino, operated by the Seneca Nation in Niagara Falls, New York, and the Greektown Casino in Detroit, Michigan, operated by the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. Michael Sorkin notes that this is an ironic reversal, as economically unviable reservation land is transformed into valuable real estate and becomes a regional economic boon. See Sorkin (2001).
5. National Indian Gaming Commission (2004).



many other rural and traditional communities to their advantage—embracing multinational corporations and the boundless, international space of late capitalism to underwrite their exemption from state and local authority and to shore up an expression of tribal sovereignty in the bounded space of the reservation.

Foxwoods is not just the engine of Mashantucket Pequot sovereignty; it is its most public expression. The nearby Mashantucket Pequot Museum, which has attracted more than one and a half million visitors since opening in 1998, marshalls an impressive array of state-of-the-art multi-media technologies, and drawing from ongoing archaeological and ethnohistorical projects, the museum links the diverse members of the contemporary Pequot tribal nation to the histories of Native Americans in general and to the historical Pequot in particular. The museum itself houses very few historic Pequot artifacts, featuring instead interpretive galleries devoted to the geology and climatology of the region, the early years of the reservation, the federal recognition process, the development of the reservation and the present-day economic enterprises of the Mashantucket Pequot, and a series of portraits of current tribal members. In particular, two spectacular elements leave the most lasting impressions on most viewers: First is the 22,000 square foot, “immersion environment”—a life-size diorama of a sixteenth century Pequot village on the eve of European contact, which draws on the findings of the tribally-funded Mashantucket Pequot Ethnohistory Project. Second is a thirty-minute, seventy-millimeter film entitled “The Witness,” shown in two wide-screen theaters. With B-movie bluster, “The Witness” recounts the history of the Pequot War and the 1637 attack on Mystic fort by English colonists and their Mohegan and Narragansett allies, in which some six hundred Pequot were massacred. While much of Native Pequot culture has been lost (the actors in the film speak Passamaquoddy, a related Eastern Algonquian language that stands in for the lost Pequot), the film’s foregrounding of oral history and the rejoinder to “remember the story,” places the narrative of destruction and dispersal of the Pequot at the center of contemporary Pequot identity. The museum, then, grounds the tribe in a suitably authentic past and tells a familiar, if tragic tale of murder and dispossession.

In the casino and resort the Pequots present themselves as a nation returning from diaspora to reclaim an ancestral homeland. However, the Mashantucket Pequots as such did not exist as a separate tribe prior to the seventeenth century. They first split with the Mohegans around the time of first contact with the Dutch and English, and were again divided and reconstituted in the years following the Pequot War, when the tribe was split into the Eastern, or Pawcatuck and Western or Mashantucket Pequot tribes. This is not to say, as have some recent commentators, that the Mashantucket Pequots’ claim to tribal status is spurious.⁶ But Pequot identity might be understood, then, not as some irreducible core of essential peoplehood that has somehow endured, but as a nationhood formed through the narrative of diaspora.⁷ Indeed, as if to acknowledge the historical, genealogical,

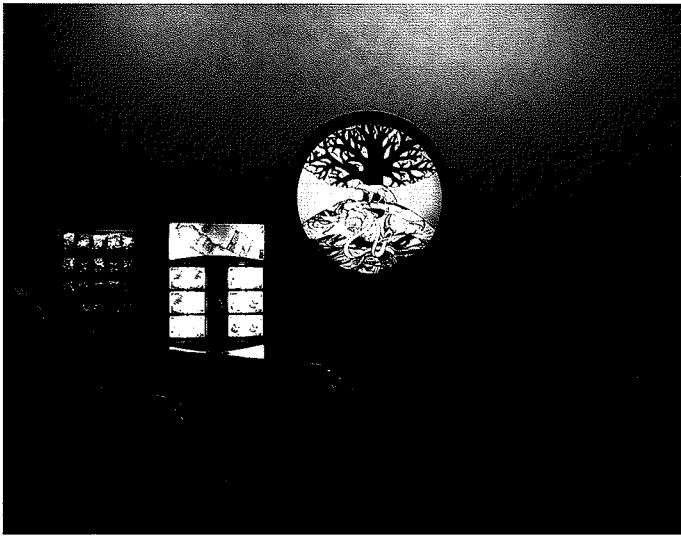
6. This is a common theme in popular accounts of the Mashantucket Pequots’ successful bid for federal recognition and the financial success of Foxwoods. See Benedict (2000). For an alternative perspective on the complexities of contemporary Native American identity and a useful comparison and a discussion of why historical continuity is particularly elusive vis-à-vis New England tribes, see Clifford (1988).
7. On diaspora, see Boyarin and Boyarin (1993) and Clifford (1997).

and geographic problematics of contemporary Indian identity, in 1997 the Pequot eliminated the notion of “blood quotient” as a requirement of tribal citizenship.

But what of the built environment at Foxwoods? How does the most public expression of Pequot revitalization signify? As already noted, the casino and resort could easily pass for any number of shopping malls of similar vintage in southern New England. The Warwick Mall, outside Providence, Rhode Island about thirty minutes north of Mashantucket, shares Foxwoods’s palette of teal and violet. And like many regional malls, Foxwoods trades in a stereotypical New Englandiana: Public areas are made to look like a postcard-quaint main street, a little like Disneyand’s “Main Street USA.” But, more specifically, these spaces also recall the nearby villages and towns of Mystic, Ledyard, North Stonington, and New London, Connecticut, although cleaned-up and much livelier than these down-on-their heels remnants of New England’s commercial and industrial heyday. And like other malls, which are enclosed and protected from the vagaries of New England weather, Foxwoods makes every effort to bring the outdoors into its purview. The open areas for shopping, eating, and walking are filled with light from floor-to-ceiling windows, which open onto sweeping views of the forested landscape of the reservation. Real and artificial flora and fauna abound. Shrubs fill planters, artificial maples, oaks, and pines stand in for columns and piers. Oversized (and artificial) trout swim in crystal clear streams.

But beyond these features, which seem to be standard-issue shopping mall decor, a number of motifs can be seen around the casino and resort that are best described as Pan-Indian, that is, they speak to a generalized sense of “Indianness” that is not specific to the Mashantucket Pequot or even Southern New England. Examples abound: Foxwoods displays a collection of large bronze sculptures by celebrated Native American artists Allan Houser (Apache) and Bruce LaFountain (Ojibwe). On the main shopping concourse, a store called “Native Nations,” sells Native-made gifts. Glass display cases elsewhere in the galleria feature museum-quality Native American artworks. And, with what is likely unintentional irony, a Native American-style costume worn by (non-Indian) bassist Felix Pappalardi of the 1970s power trio Mountain.

The most spectacular of Foxwoods’s pan-Indian motifs can be found in the center of the complex, directly across from the Festival Buffet: the twelve-foot, translucent plastic sculpture known as “The Rainmaker.” Loosely based on a nearby sculpture by Houser, The Rainmaker crouches atop a rocky outcropping below a skylight in a grove of artificial trees, shirtless, his bow drawn. Much like the famous talking sculptures that tell the story of Atlantis in the forum shops at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, the Rainmaker on the hour comes to life in a fog and light show. A recorded narration locates the origins of the Pequots in the primordial mists, before (incongruously) a laser beam shoots from the tip of the Rainmaker’s arrow, causing a momentary downpour that cascades through the branches of the surrounding trees and into the fountain.



The mustering of a standard set of motifs seems understandable for the Pequots, a people whose link to the past was, after all, deliberately broken in the colonial period and repressed for over three centuries.⁸ Perhaps the preponderance of the stereotypical and expected signs of Indianness speaks to the impermanence of the Pequots and the constructedness of modern Pequot identity.⁹ But if Foxwoods looks at first blush like a shopping mall stocked with dime store Indian art, we also know that the Pequots worked closely with the design firm to ensure that their casino would be an appropriate symbol of the tribal nation. Indeed a number of design motifs might actually be read as references to Mashantucket Pequot tribal history and the experience of dispersal and revitalization, embodying the Pequots' claims to authenticity and permanence.

The Mashantucket Pequot tribal seal is featured above the entrance to Great Cedar lodge, and inside the lobby. The seal, which depicts a tree to represent Mashantucket, the "much wooded land"; sachem Robin Cassasinamon's symbol; and the fox, which represents the Pequot as the vigilant "fox people", is also inscribed on the landscape itself in the escalator atrium that leads guests to the gaming floor and bingo hall above. There are also echoes of the outstretched branches of the tree in the Grand Pequot lobby, and on the guestroom furniture.

Other motifs and design choices operate as a subtle—indeed nearly invisible—iconography of the Pequots' endurance, for the most part unnoticed by the casino's non-Native patrons. The teal and violet color scheme, although a popular palette for non-Native shopping malls in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was in fact chosen for its resemblance to the Wampum that was so central to the Pequots' regional power in the emerging global system of the seventeenth century. Wampum is also used metaphorically as the basis for the Casino's rewards program. Other predominant colors—navy blue and copper—relate to the tribe's connection to the sea and the metal used by the tribe before European contact. Multiple references to nature are also specific references to the local landscape; as efforts were made to bring the wooded landscape of the reservation into the interior spaces of the casino. Wildlife were chosen for their regional importance. The artificial trees are actually copies after the maple, pine, and cedar that predominate in the Mashantucket woods.

Perhaps the most powerful of these nearly hidden motifs is a stylized floral pattern, usually in stained glass, which can be found throughout the casino and resort. This pattern represents the Mast Swamp Rhododendron, which grows abundantly in the swamps of Eastern Connecticut. The Mast Swamp Rhododendron is famous for its blood-colored heart, which local folklore attributes to the blood spilled when a remnant of the Pequots were massacred by soldiers from the Massachusetts colony in the swamp at Cuppacommock, where they had taken shelter under the leadership of a Pequot named Puttaquapouck after the Pequot War of 1637. Before he was slain, Puttaquapouck was said to have uttered a curse, declaring "that the golden hearts of the Cupacommack rhododen-

8. On the construction of a "Pan-Indian" identity see Hertzberg (1971).

9. On the power of "expectations," see Deloria (2004).

drons would turn to blood as a perpetual reproach..."¹⁰ Rhododendrons also figure prominently in the landscaping around the casino and resort. And finally, we might read what seems to be a stereotypical New England main street as a historical acknowledgement of the fact that the Pequots existed as a people in diaspora—"outwaiting," to use Kiowa novelist N. Scott Momaday's phrase—living for three and a half centuries among their black and white neighbors in the towns and villages of central Connecticut.¹¹

Thus, while the museum thematizes a self-conscious exploration of Pequot culture and identity as historically figured from the mists of prehistory through the current moment of revitalization, the casino – that ambivalent postmodern space that embodies the tribe's renaissance and new economic and political clout, might be read as a more forceful statement of the contemporary Pequot nation than the museum and the tribe's ethnohistorical projects. The casino demands to be read as a deliberate statement of the Pequots' dynamic reinvention and newfound power and influence – a program of nation-building in an era of neoliberalism and global capitalism.

Foxwoods Resort and Casino and the Mashantucket Pequot Museum, then, figure important questions about how the permanence (and impermanence) of cultures is embodied and represented. For the Pequot, the excavation and exhibition of authentic artifacts or the performance of time-honored traditional practices that would vouch for the unbroken connection between past and present is out of the question, as the colonial experience of destruction and dispersal forever altered—indeed created—the Pequot nation. At Mashantucket, a twelve-foot plastic Indian in a forest of artificial flora and fauna in a multi-billion dollar gaming enterprise becomes the authentic expression of a nation that has endured. Indeed the modern Pequot nation as such is a product of a history of destruction and dispersal, and the display of what seems impermanent—even inauthentic—may speak most eloquently of that history of loss and redemption.

10. Quoted in Simmons (1990), 151.

11. The concept of "outwaiting" is a central motif in Native American studies. As Kiowa novelist N. Scott Momaday writes of contemporary Native American communities, "They have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held on to their own, secret souls; and in this there is a resistance and an overcoming, a long outwaiting." Momaday (1968), 58.

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