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**A Place to Present and Represent  
Indigenous Pennsylvania:  
The Lenape Cultural Center in Easton, PA**

by  
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## A Place to Present and Represent Indigenous Pennsylvania: The Lenape Cultural Center in Easton, PA

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by Claudia Ulbrich M. A.

### Abstract

Many people assume that the Northeastern part of the United States today is largely void of contemporary American Indian life. Most representations of indigenous cultures such as the Lenni Lenape in Pennsylvania deal with artifacts, stories, and protagonists as issues that firmly belong to the past. Where American Indian lifeways are presented as rooted in the past and alive in the present of the mid-Atlantic region, questions of authenticity and authorization are immediately raised. Consequently, American Indian people of today's Pennsylvania are often faced with discrimination, judgments and disbelief outside their communities. Their struggle to present their culture, their heritage, and their present-day reality is frequently met with suspicion by other Indian and non-Indian people alike.

Reclaiming and preserving Lenape tradition and identity is divided into efforts that are directed at educating both oneself and a non-Indian audience on a local and regional level through talks, language classes, music and storytelling. At the same time these efforts aim at increasing the visibility and recognition of the change and continuity of American Indian life in Pennsylvania in a wider context. One way to achieve these goals is the creation and establishment of real places, where Lenape people come together to share their experience among themselves, to educate an interested audience, and to be open to questions from visitors and the public.

In view of the current debates of decolonizing and recolonizing indigenous cultures by means of re-/presentation, the case study of the Lenape Cultural Center in Easton, PA, is used to illustrate the many challenges and crossroads in voicing one's own identity and in bridging multiple histories.

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*Suppositions about the Representation of Indigenous Life in Pennsylvania*

Imagine that you take up any standard school book on North American history and you will most likely find Pennsylvania labeled as the “keystone” or “Quaker state” – the region, whose creation, establishment and endurance was crucial in forming the United States, as we know it today. As you run through the unfolding centuries from William Penn in 1682 to the establishment of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879, you will meet less and less Indian people who would call the area their home and those who are mentioned are in severe conditions. This mode of representation, or rather non-representation, does not seem keen on quizzing the historic development as something other than linear and evolutionary. The basic assumption is: Indian people did not hinder the process; they helped creating Pennsylvania by disappearing, once all treaties had been concluded. It is all very clear.

With only a few Indian reservations along the coastal regions, it does not come as a surprise then that many people have commonly perceived the northeastern and mid-Atlantic parts as largely “Indian-free”. This condition is attributed to devastating diseases among native populations, to violent conflicts and the increasing number of colonial settlements throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Revolutionary Wars are usually set as a final marker that not only clarified the establishment of a new nation but that also initiated the mass departure of the remaining Indian people like the Lenape and Shawnee who would gradually move towards territories in the west and, ultimately, into a state of poverty and self-pity in forbidding areas.

A second, already less widespread, perspective of Pennsylvania is attributed to the Carlisle Indian school as the prototype for off-reservation boarding schools and a place, where the process of civilization successfully assimilated American Indian children into mainstream culture.

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While such stereotypical representations keep circulating in minds educated by media products and museums, the “idea of indigenous people as an active force in the contemporary world”, much less in parts of Pennsylvania, is still met with suspicion.

### *The Myth of Indian Extinction in the East*

In her study *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (2010), historian Jean O’Brien (Ojibway) provides a plausible answer to the reasons for such a persistent conventional approach that seeks to deal with Indian lifeways as issues that firmly belong to the past. She emphasizes that in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century local history writing became a primary means for European immigrants by which they asserted their own modernity, while denying it to their American Indian neighbors.

The process of systematic erasure of Indian life from historical accounts and its distorted and simplified memorialization in commemorations and anniversaries of towns and institutions often followed prevailing ideas of racial superiority and helped to establish the myth of Indian extinction in the east. At the same time it fulfilled a very pragmatic colonial goal: to refute American Indian claims to land and rights.

In order to convince themselves that Indians had vanished despite their continued presence in New England, O’Brien finds that local historians saw living Indians as “mixed” and therefore no longer truly Indian. This biased approach did not cease when archaeologists and anthropologists like Daniel G. Brinton started to focus their attention on

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American Indian cultures in Pennsylvania and elsewhere in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>1</sup>

Scientific works like Frank Speck's *A Study of the Delaware Indian Big House Ceremony* (1931) and Clinton Weslager's *The Delaware Indians: A History* (1972) have come to be considered standard descriptions of the historic development of the northeastern tribes. They, too, assuredly claimed throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Indian people like the Lenape (who were also referred to as Delaware) had been pushed out of their homelands in the northeast due to increasing European settlements, war, and disease.<sup>2</sup> It still is a firm part of the scholastic knowledge system that the majority of Lenape bands went west in several waves, until they arrived after a long journey in what is now Oklahoma. A smaller portion relocated across the Canadian border in places like the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve along with tribal members of the Iroquois Confederacy.

In that way, local histories and scientific studies have shared a preoccupation with the myth of Indian extinction in the northeast – a myth that has stubbornly survived in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, and in many other places. This myth continues to hurt the efforts of those who struggle for ways and means of self-representation, of reclaiming their cultures in the midst of a wider audience. Similar to tribal groups like the Wampanoag, the Penobscot, or the Abenaki in the area of New England,

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<sup>1</sup> Brinton is also known as editor of a translation of the “Walam olum” (1885) – ostensibly a collection of pictograms, which tells the creation story of the Lenape people. Many contemporary researchers like David Oestreicher consider the “Walam olum” a hoax.

<sup>2</sup> The Lenape are commonly referred to consist of three subgroups, which belong to the Algonquian language family: Munsee, Unami, and Unalachtigo. In historical accounts these bands are usually named Delaware, according to their settlements sites along the Hudson and Delaware rivers in eastern Pennsylvania, southern New York, and western New Jersey. The term “Delaware” is derived from the Englishman Lord de La Warr, who helped in fostering the colonial settlement of Jamestown in 1610.

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the Lenape people of Pennsylvania have set out to tell their own story. This story is one of continued presence in an area that has always been Indian to begin with.

In the latest U.S. census of 2010, 0.3 % of Pennsylvania's population is officially recorded to be American Indian or Alaska Native.<sup>3</sup> I will not go into the complexities of census history here; I would like to stick to the numbers: even if the percentage 0.3% may seem small at first sight, it means that out of a total population of about 12.8 million in Pennsylvania, 38.400 people formally identify entirely or partially as American Indian or Alaska Native.

### *Decolonizing and Representing the Homelands*

Now I would like to come to the more recent debates on indigenous agency and the connection to a homeland under continuous colonized circumstances. Hardly any contemporary academic contribution that is dedicated to the current developments in indigenous museum making and notions of self-representation can escape the ongoing discussion of who should be counted as »indigenous« in the first place. There are abundant efforts in defining and conceptualizing the term. For my talk here, I would like to stress the observation that "indigeneity" as a concept has been asserted through political and legal discourse by civic institutions and organizations representing indigenous peoples. The growth of the international indigenous movement has found a common language employed by peoples across the globe in order to make claims to political autonomy, land and resource-use with varying levels of success. It has also encouraged

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "State and County quick facts: Pennsylvania," *2010 Census of the United States*, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42000.html> (accessed October 11, 2012).

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people to turn towards those parts of their cultures more strongly, which may have been suppressed, privately hidden, or otherwise withdrawn from public view.

Western images of indigenous people living ‘in harmony with nature’ play an important role in these efforts, too (Conklin and Graham 1995). Yet this public image, which is often used by indigenous organizations themselves, may be at odds with local understandings of ecology or belonging to land. These perceptions define indigeneity on an everyday basis for the people making claims to this status or onto whom the tag of indigeneity may be imposed by states and other actors.

It is an ongoing task to examine the relationships between localized and more public articulations of belonging to land and to a particular group of people by considering how indigeneity is constituted and asserted through representations of various kinds.

Questions like “who is doing the representing?” and “what is the relation between representation and the representative?” have to be asked, especially when dealing with collective identities that seem to have been silenced or obliterated from society at large. As Stuart Hall has said, representation and identity are intimately interwoven: “identities are ... constituted within, not outside representation”.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, representation itself is understood as “constitutive of meaningful realities in the mode of not merely re-staging or accounting for social processes, but creating them in a performative manner”.<sup>5</sup> Thus, representation inevitably influences the way identities are constituted and asserted as well as the way others perceive them.

Where American Indian lifeways are nowadays presented – be it Pennsylvania or New England territory – questions of authenticity and authorization hang in the air. The

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, “Who Needs Identity?” In: Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: Sage, 1996: 10.

<sup>5</sup> Anette Hofmann and Esther Peeren, “Introduction.” In: Anette Hofmann and Esther Peeren (eds.) *Representation Matters: (Re)Articulating Collective Identities in a Postcolonial World*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010: 9-29, here 13.

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subject of debate continues to evolve around the overarching issue of “how ‘native’ does an Indian person have to be to count as Indian”? By what means should he or she verify that?

The notion that “true Indians” are only those dark-skinned individuals who can prove that they belong to a ‘full-blood’ Indian family is still prevalent. Assumptions that northeastern Indians have ceased to exist and that a handful of their descendants live outside the mid-Atlantic area have remained powerful. Consequently, American Indian people of today’s Pennsylvania are often faced with discrimination, judgments and disbelief outside their family networks and they can usually recall a long record of it. In fact so long, that their struggle to present their culture, their heritage, and their present-day reality more publicly continues to be met with disbelief by other Indian and non-Indian people alike.

In order to illustrate a number of aspects in the occurring shift of representing Lenape culture, I am going to introduce the example of the Lenape Cultural Center, located in Easton in eastern Pennsylvania.

### *The Lenape Cultural Center*

Easton is a city in Northampton County, eastern Pennsylvania, located on the confluence of the Delaware River and the Lehigh River. Among the Lenape people the place was earlier known as Lechauwitank (the place at the forks). The 2010 U.S. census gives a population number of 26,800. Of those, 306 (1.1%) formally identify entirely or partially as American Indian or Alaska Native.

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The site of longstanding Indian settlement, Easton became a venue for several meetings between various American Indian and colonial representatives, also due to its equidistant location to New York in the east and Philadelphia in the south. During the French and Indian War one of the most significant contracts – the Treaty of Easton – was negotiated here in October 1758. It was to ensure a broad Indian alliance with British forces against the French troops in return for Native hunting rights in the Ohio valley and included the government’s promise of preventing non-Indian settlements west of the Appalachian Mountains.

The Lenape Cultural Center is located in the Bachmann Publick House in Easton’s downtown historic district. Originally a 3-story stone building erected in 1753, it is the oldest remaining colonial building in the city. From the beginning, it served as an inn and tavern and repeatedly as courtroom, until the original courthouse was completed in 1765. *The Morning Call* – one of the region’s local newspaper – reports “some of the negotiations between England and Native Americans during the French and Indian War took place in Bachmann's Tavern”.<sup>6</sup> Throughout its existence the building has stood in both active and abandoned states and housed a variety of businesses. After a long period of restoration, it became a museum and historic site about six years ago.

The Northampton County Historical Society purchased the house from the city administration in 2009; and the Society then extended unlimited access to the Lenape Nation to use the facility. The Lenape Cultural Center is located on the second floor. It was officially opened in the summer of 2010 and is run by a group of volunteers and members of the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania. The building also houses the Nation’s main office for administrative and public relations purposes. The group is formally registered as a non-profit organization.

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Whelan, “Historic Bond Diverse Talents Join to Restore Easton’s Bachmann Tavern”, *The Morning Call*, 01 July 1999. Online available: [http://articles.mcall.com/1999-07-01/features/3269699\\_1\\_tavern-keeper-native-americans-colonial](http://articles.mcall.com/1999-07-01/features/3269699_1_tavern-keeper-native-americans-colonial) (accessed January 30, 2012).

From my point of view, the center ties in to the global indigenous movement of self-representation and museum making, as it incorporates different functions. The members of the Lenape Nation have established two showrooms and a trading post, which offers hand-made clothing, jewelry, books, and postcards. It is also a place for lectures on Lenape history, culture, language, and present-day issues such as the continued validity of signed treaties and the renewal of agreements between Indian and non-Indian groups.

In such a combination, the place aims to fulfill three central tasks: a) it enhances the visibility of American Indian life in past and present Pennsylvania; b) it serves as a meeting place for members of the Lenape community as well as the exchange with other Indian and non-Indian groups and individuals and c) it is a place where formal and informal education of oneself and others can be accomplished. In that sense, the center creates the space where issues and modes of presentation and representation of indigenous Pennsylvania become tangible through the efforts of a group of people, whose presence has long been hidden from the public eye.

What is being presented? The display of artifacts like stone tools, arrowheads and pottery found in the Delaware River valley create a link to the local history of regional settlement; it underlines the awareness that American Indian people have lived in North America long before the arrival of the Europeans. For this part of pre-contact and early contact history, the center closely cooperates with the local Sigal Museum, which also opened in the summer of 2010 and is located just a few blocks away. It stages a scenery of Lenape lifeways in the past through a birch bark wigwam, hunting gear, and cooking utensils. Members of the Lenape Nation have been involved in curating this section and they are active as docents, telling visitors about their family histories.

When I visited the Lenape Cultural Center in Easton last summer, I was fortunate to meet and talk to a woman whose German ancestors have lived in Northampton County since the mid-1700's and whose Lenape ancestors have always been here. She patiently answered my questions and through her I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the

story of how Lenape life in Pennsylvania has continued. This story has been publicly presented in an exhibit at the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia, which ran for almost three years from September 2008 until July 2011.

### *Fulfilling a Prophecy*

The exhibit at Penn Museum was entitled “Fulfilling a Prophecy”, it has now found a permanent home at the Cultural Center in Easton. “Fulfilling a Prophecy” relates to Lenape history as the flight of the four crows.

The flight of the first crow was the time before European contact, the part presented at the Sigal Museum. The flights of the second and third crows relate to the period of persecution and exile, when many Lenape moved to scattered settlements in places as far away as Oklahoma and Canada and when those remaining hid away from public eyes through marriage, fake names, and other strategies of “passing” in mainstream culture.

The flight of the fourth crow is the time when Lenape culture will be restored, a process that began in the late 1960s with the American Indian Movement. From my point of view, the process of restoration has gained more strength and attention in the last ten years. It is certainly highlighted by the latest achievements in creating a real place: the Lenape Cultural Center. This center testifies to a continued presence of Lenape life in Pennsylvania. It encourages people with Lenape heritage to end the silence about their family histories. In that way it offers a space of healing and restoration, of pride and self-representation, and of education and dialogue with the many other cultures, who call Pennsylvania their home.

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