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FOLLOWING THE TROPES OF ORIENTATION:

A PENOBSCOT NATIVE AMERICAN

BASKET IN THE MAKING

by

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## I. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## II. INTRODUCTION

*Glooskap came first of all into this country, into the land of the Wabanaki, next to sunrise. There were no Indians here then. He took his bow and arrows and shot at trees, the basket trees, the ash. Then Indians came out of the bark of the ash trees.*

(Molly Sepsis 1884, Hoffman and Mundell 2002:1)

A woman at the Maine Indians Basketmaker's Festival shows me how she weaves a brown ash *abaznoda* or basket. She sits on the other side of a folding table under a white canopy. Long lines of similar tables reach out on either side of her, covered with everything from heart shaped baskets to potato baskets, to acorn baskets, to Chief Barry Dana's maple syrup. Although I have not met her before, her name sounds familiar—Pam Cunningham. One of the baskets in the Penobscot Nation Museum is hers. She pushes some small acorn baskets out of the way and puts her elbows onto the white table cloth, as she holds an ash strip in her right hand. "First the brown ash tree is selected and harvested," she tells me. "The ash has to be of good quality...Otherwise it breaks." She pauses, "Then it's pounded. The strips come right off." As she talks, I can hear the soft "thwunk" of the dull end of an axe across the field. A young man there with long dark hair in a pony tail is bent over a log. His hands are bleeding from unaccustomed blistering. A number of people gather around him watching. She continues, "Once they've been shaved down, I pick nice pieces. That's the trick. Sometimes I layer light then dark, heart wood standards and the outer ones." She reaches under her table and picks up a partly finished basket. It is a simple basket, made with wide strips of ash. The

bottom is round and tightly woven with ribs of ash forming an open frame, at least ten of them. She holds the basket from the inside and they surround her arm like the frame of a cage. “The hardest part is the bottom,” she says. She turns it over and begins to weave another ash strip through the frame, holding the base with one hand and turning it as her right hand weaves a second strip over and under, moving the basket as she weaves. She is a Penobscot basketmaker.

The tropes of the weaving of a basket provide a Penobscot way of understanding and embodying the multilayered oral narratives, images, and movement that come together around the objects of the Penobscot Nation Museum. During the summer of 2004, I spent three months working with and learning from Penobscot Native Americans at the Penobscot Nation Museum on Indian Island in Old Town, Maine. The Penobscot Nation is a federally recognized Native American Tribe currently located primarily in Maine. Of the 2,093 enrolled tribal members, 416 live on Indian Island, a small official reservation located “at the place where the rocks widen out”<sup>1</sup> or *panawahspkek* in the Penobscot River. This thesis follows the weaving paths of ten emergent, traveling objects whose narratives of arrival to the Penobscot Nation Museum, or whose arrival itself, intersected with my internship: a pair of child size snow shoes, two birch bark canoes, a photograph of a ferry, a painting of a White Buffalo, a photograph of Big Thunder, rootclubs, Molly Spotted Elk’s traveling bag, George’s birch bark hat, a poster of the “Ten Indian Commandments,” and baskets.<sup>2</sup> The cultural objects in this thesis are

the ribs of ash that frame out of a partly finished Penobscot basket. They flow firmly, rising vertically, from a woven base. Each ash strip provides a framework for the basketmaker to weave secondary strips of ash, one on top of the other, layering and embedding the frame—a basket in the making.

Arjun Appadurai (1988) has written that exchange is not the by-product of an object's value, but its source. He argues, "We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories" (Appadurai 1988:5). Moreover, "Even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (1988:5). In contrast to Appadurai, I take as my object of inquiry not material things alone, but emergent human-thing *relationships*, illuminated through histories of travel and movement. Unlike things on their own, such relational histories—taken as the ethnographic object—pose a question of how people and things diverge and come together.

For the Penobscot, this is a question of histories of orientation; the narratives that trace the social and cultural movements of objects through time. In this thesis, I borrow from Irving Hallowell's concept of object-orientation to follow ten objects or object groups at the Penobscot Nation Museum as "moving orientators" of Penobscot self, orienting the Penobscot spatially and temporally to particular Penobscot points of reference (Hallowell 1955:186). I argue that these ten incoming objects, authenticated by connections to Penobscot family and ancestors, embody and become entextualized in a

complex narrative weave of history, identity, place, and experience. My intent is two fold. The cultural objects of the Penobscot Nation Museum, what I term “moving orientators” of Penobscot self, are doubly the nodes of emergent oral narratives of past, present, and future and also transformers and tricksters that instigate the recombination and emergence of new museum displays—displays that are themselves embodied narrative texts of Penobscot identity.

I want to be extremely clear that this thesis is not an account of Penobscot identity. Instead, I attempt a narrative analysis in which the flow of the text is determined by the enacted connections of the objects and the richly textured stories and images that surround them: the interweaving of the Penobscot basket. Following Clifford Geertz’s notion that humans are “suspended in webs of significance they themselves have created,” this thesis, itself a narrative text, is both the interpretive subject matter and the product of ethnographic work (Geertz 1973:5). In other words, this thesis itself is a text-artifact, and each chapter, or “rib,” is an exercise in ethnographic writing. I purposefully leave rib-chapters open ended to attempt a text that keeps Penobscot agency and multivocality alive. Some of the ribs of this basket are descriptively “thick,” often delicate. Some are long. Others are short. Some end bluntly-cut off. Others have fraying ends. And like the Penobscot ash basket, connections and disconnections do not always emerge explicitly. Often, they emerge from the interrelationship of the weave and the tiny spaces between the ash strands.

In the following, I will present some brief background information on the Penobscot Nation Museum and its umbrella organization, the Department of Historical Preservation.

### The Museum

The Penobscot Nation Museum is located on a small 500 acre island called Indian Island, a place within a place, whose granite outcroppings part the blue arms of the Penobscot River, the major watershed of central Maine. During the summer of 2004, I made the three mile trip from Orono, to Old Town, Maine, more than eighty times, on bike, on foot, or more often by car. The traveled landscape in my memory is in motion: flashes of images and smells, pine trees, paper mills, paper mill fumes, supply trucks, gas stations, old brick buildings, and modern establishments. Just beyond the town center, past a bar called the Northend, a store labeled Penobscot Arts, some tourist stores, and the Basketmaker's shop, past the landscaped park where the historical Penobscot village existed, past a red brick retirement home poised on the banks of the river, is a sign and a bridge. The sign reads, "Home of the Penobscot," and the bridge represents the main connection of the Penobscot to Old Town.

Visitors to the museum drive about a quarter of a mile through the older part of Indian Island, past Charlie's wooden teepee, past St. Ann's Catholic Church, past several houses, until suddenly on the right is a small brown building with a sign across the front that reads, "Penobscot Nation

Museum.” The space currently used is an old one room house whose garage has been converted into a second room. Beyond this, there is only a small office, a bathroom, and a furnace room.

When the museum is open, a big van with a coyote-ugly stuffed animal visible in the front window, a Penobscot Nation Museum flag, and a wooden statue of an Indian with a headdress take up most of its three car parking lot. The door to the building opens with a jingle and the museum visitor is washed by cool, air-conditioned air that carries the scent of sweetgrass and other old musty baskets. James Neptune, the owner of the van, the museum coordinator, and a Tribal Council Member, greets visitors and gives them guided tours of whatever they are interested in. Baskets fill glass cases held up by birch poles, and the walls are almost invisible behind beautiful black and white photographs imaging ordinary Penobscot people and their ancestors in the past. In the main display room, the floor is a deep red and the walls are made of dark brown paneled wood. Hanging from the walls are snowshoes, rootclubs, black and white photographs, a Molly Spotted Elk dress, informational posters, treaties, and newspaper articles. Two three-hundred year old canoes find room on one side of the museum floor. Metal chairs, a television screen, birch bark displays, intricate wood carvings, paintings, and baskets find room in other corners. The lighting is dim, punctuated every so often by a bright florescent bulb carefully positioned in a display case.

Museum Funding and the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation

As is evident from the above description, the Penobscot Nation Museum operates within strict financial guidelines. Funding comes from the Nation's Tribal Fund, visitor donations, and grants applied for by the staff of the Penobscot Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation. The Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation is a recently created umbrella organization through which the museum is officially directed. During the summer of 2004, however, the Department had little additional time or resources to devote to the museum.

Approximately three paid staff at the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation work on projects as diverse as documentary films, interviews with Penobscot elders, funding for and creation of a potential cultural center, language immersion programs, ritual advice and counseling, archeological mapping, and cultural property rights. Several Penobscot youth also participate regularly in the work of the Department. Bonnie Newsom, a Penobscot who is both an archaeologist and the Director of the Department, explains, "We have a lot of ambition and things that we want to do, but we just don't have the resources to do them...If we don't get some funds in, we're not going to make it" (Dolloff 2004:A1).

As the larger organization that officially directs the Penobscot Nation Museum, the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation has two main goals. The first is to preserve Penobscot culture and language in a

meaningful way. In terms of language, this means active and immediate revitalization. Bonnie Newsom explains,

Things that I do have to have meaning and have to have some benefit to the community...creating a community that's culturally strong again. A lot of times you'll see tribes do things because there's a grant out there to do them. I try really hard to figure out what our needs are first and then try to identify how we're going to fund those kinds of things... to set up cultural programs that have meaning. We definitely need to be healed spiritually and how do you do that? It's hard (8/24/05).

For Bonnie Newsom, The Penobscot Nation Museum facilitates the preservation of material culture and irreplaceable artifacts, artifacts that are integrally connected to community health, ancestors, and Penobscot identity.

I would like to see the Penobscot Museum viewed as an education space. Not just for non-Indians, but for our own people. That tends to be my focus first. Let's get our own people knowledgeable... Give them access to the resources that they need to learn more about their culture and history...Like basketmakers can use the baskets down there [at the Penobscot Nation Museum] to replicate old baskets and that kind of thing. Because as these things deteriorate, we lose part of who we are. And I think we owe it to our ancestors. They worked very very hard to try to keep our culture, and we owe it to them, not only to them, but to our young people as well, to keep it alive. It's what keeps us healthy (8/24/05).

The second goal of the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation is the *protection* of Penobscot culture. In another interview Bonnie explained, "There are a lot of non-native people capitalizing on our culture [and] we have a lot of concerns about that. If people are more educated about us, they'll be less likely to capitalize on things we deem sacred" (7/17/04). Here, Bonnie is referring both to non-Native entrepreneurs and researchers. For example, she spoke to me at length about a woman who was making money by impersonating Penobscot dances. She also talked about

researchers who don't "approach the Penobscot and say 'Why don't we do this together.'" Bonnie connects this need for protection of the Penobscot Nation back to colonization and a need to keep Penobscot culture safe. She told me,

You know it's interesting...Native people are very close doored about sharing their spiritual beliefs and that kind of thing...You know, other religions are always trying to recruit people. It's very opposite. I think that's because we've had so much stolen from us and so much taken from us, you know? We don't want that taken... So many Native ceremonies nationwide have been corrupted. And that in itself is unhealthy. It's unhealthy for the communities for people to do that, but it's also unhealthy for those individuals. They're messing with something they shouldn't be messing with (8/24/05).

Here, Bonnie is referring to the danger of upsetting what she later spoke of as "the balance," a natural balance of things that can be disturbed by people who experiment with Native spirituality without realizing the implications of their actions. Thus, in addition to the preservation and protection of the Penobscot Nation's more material cultural property, Bonnie seeks to protect this natural balance. In the following section, I point to how the discipline of museum studies has approached some of the same problems and goals.

### Museum Studies

Before I begin this ethnography of relational objects, it is important to address how this thesis fits in to the larger academic area of museum studies. Recently, those interested in museums have been concerned to articulate the ways in which museum exhibits are not neutral but are instead highly contested and political places (Karp and Lavine 1991, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

1998, Clifford 1997). These authors point to the high profile of the curator in the museum setting. “The struggle is not only what is to be represented, but over who will control the means of representing (Karp and Lavine 1991:15).” In particular, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in her important work *Destination Culture* (1998), tackles the *agency of display*, asking such seemingly simple questions as “what does it mean to show?” and “who is doing the showing?” (1998:2). Acknowledging that ethnographic objects are the objects of ethnography (they are objects created by ethnographers when they are detached, segmented and carried away), she approaches the agency of display through the notion of performance. Exhibitions, she argues, are “fundamentally theatrical, for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create” (1998:3).

Even more importantly, the subfield of museum studies is beginning to articulate the ways in which visitors, “interpret museum exhibitions through their prior experiences and through culturally learned beliefs, values, and perceptual skills that they gain through membership in multiple communities” (Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine 1992:3). For example, in *Museums and Communities* (1992), Ivan Karp addresses how museums relate to the changing configurations of communities that surround them, ranging from the neighborhood to the nation-state, from groups defined in ethnic and racial terms to social classes. This is a conscious move toward the museum as an experienced place and the multiple community connections that inform these

experiences. I intend to write this paper at the cutting edge of the museum as an experienced, relational, embodied place.

Although museum theories have become more holistic and context based, there continues to be a paucity of material on tribally owned and run museums. Clifford and his analysis of four Northwest Coast museums, including two tribally owned museums--the Kwagiulth Museum and Cultural Centre and the Umista Cultural Center--is one important example. Moreover, Clifford's notion of public space as a *contact zone* of culture is extremely useful in approaching a study of museums. According to Clifford, *contact zones* are created through reciprocal movements and exchange of people and things through and across real and imagined borderlands of different worlds, histories, and cosmologies. Museums as *contact zones* are borderlands of transculturalism in which identities and relationships are actively reflected, constituted and negotiated (1997:194). In a sense, they are "between place" or are "marginal places." But contact zones do not necessarily imply exchanges between equals, even though processes of mutual exploitation and appropriation may be at work (Clifford 1997:195). Instead, in the Penobscot case, they provide a framework with which to conceive of the power-situated exchange and border-crossing travel of the objects that constitute the Penobscot Nation Museum.<sup>3</sup>

Another insightful work is John Bodinger de Uriarte's dissertation, "The Casino and the Museum: Imagining the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation in Representational Space" (2003). This work addresses several

important topics as they occur in the self-representational industries of the Massachusetts Mashantucket Pequots, the casino and the museum. In particular, he focuses on the Pequot use of display in the form of “photographs; narratives of the exotic, the essential; and the real; geographic location; and architectural design” as a method of self-representation and self-definition, as well as the strategic *authentication* of Pequot identities (Bodinger de Uriarte 2003: vii). Finally, Bodinger de Uriarte discusses Native museums as a point of intersection with the non-Native. The Native museum is a place of experience that is both mediated and intensified by the poetics and politics of museum display (Bodinger de Uriarte 2003:62).

One question raised by these works is how Native-owned museums confront the dominant western museum priorities of preservation, trends in labeling, control of exhibits, and authoritative museum tours (as opposed to possibilities of outside of this paradigm: continued use of “cultural artifacts” or allowing decomposition of objects)? Bodinger de Uriarte’s dissertation sheds light on some of these questions through his understanding of the Pequot museum. “Self-representations in Native-owned museums often offer counter-histories and cultural narratives that challenge widely held public notions about Indians” (2003:62). The Pequot, he argues, practice skillful oppositional maneuvers within a hegemonic notion of the “Indian” or “Indianness,” at the same time as directly confronting and resisting these notions (Bodinger de Uriarte 2003:63). Similarly, I ask here, how do the

Penobscot reinvent the museum displays and exhibitions in specifically Penobscot ways?

It is also important to address the concept of cultural property as it intersects with the objects of the Penobscot Nation Museum. There are many problems with the cultural property debate as it is often conceived in museum studies. In *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property?* (1993), Karen Warren problematizes two main conceptual frameworks which underlie the “cultural property debate.” First, she argues that the debate “presupposes the efficacy and legitimacy of construing the debate over cultural properties in terms of properties which can be said to be owned” (1993:14). Second, Warren criticizes what she terms “the rights/rules” ethical framework, a dualistic notion that characterizes the cultural property debate as it is deliberated by collectors, archeologists, and museum directors, in terms of the legality and illegality of cultural property and the morality of these legal structures (Warren 1993:15). It is important to note here that Warren’s essay exemplifies a lone voice amidst many problematic chapters in the volume. The majority of the other essays fall into the very paradigms of rights/rules legality and illegality which Warren seeks to problematize.

The definition of *intellectual property*, a sub-category of *cultural property*, is also a problematic issue for other authors (Strathern 1999, Greaves 1995, Greaves 1994, Posey 1996, Posey and Dutfield 1996). One important question currently debated by both anthropologists and Native Americans is whether Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) is the appropriate

vehicle for conserving native peoples' rights to their heritage and belongings. Is a device of European capitalism good for solving problems capitalism created in the first place? (Strathern 1999:167) One argument posed by Tom Greaves (1994) is that IPR can be of benefit provided that it is used in a specific way. According to Greaves, IPR is a creative and determined concept of "ownership" that could be used in defense of indigenous rights (1994:4). Furthermore, Greaves asserts a fundamental difference in IPR as utilized by Native Americans, arguing that IPR for Native Americans rests on collective possession (1995:4). Strathern notes, "The market thus disembods what is usable whereas the thrust of the indigenous IPR movement is to re-embed, re-contextualize, indigenous ownership in indigenous traditional culture" (1999:167). In the Penobscot context, the question of intellectual property and its use as a method of defending indigenous rights are clearly exemplified in the Penobscot Heritage Preservation and Protection Committee. I will return to this point in a moment.

In terms of this thesis, these concerns are important in contextualizing the issues that surround scholarly approaches to museums. In the following section, I explore the broad anthropological theories that have deeply influenced this work. For the most part, I choose not to make explicit theoretical connections in the body of this work. Instead, I attempt a narrative analysis in which human-object relational histories emerge through the flow of the text. In the following paragraphs, I point to the main anthropological theories that inform this work.

### Theoretical Engagements

Several key areas of anthropological literature are crucial to this study as it moves toward the realm of embodied museum experience and memory. The first is mainly concerned with *place* or *senses of place*. The concept of *place* and *senses of place* has become an important notion in anthropological ethnography and discourse (Basso 1996, Casey 1996, Feld 1996, Blu 1996, Bender 1993). Moving beyond facile cultural constructions of *place*, anthropologists have engaged post-modern tendencies and have begun to explore “the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested, and struggled over; and the multiple ways places are metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities” (Feld and Basso 1996:11). As anthropologist James Clifford has expressed, in a local museum, “here” matters (1997:191).

In his article, “How to Get from Space to Place” (1996), philosopher Edward Casey applies a phenomenological understanding to questions of place and space. In particular, he seeks to reverse the paradigm by which space is imagined as a priori to place. If perception is seen as primary, he argues, place is also primary. We come into the world already placed there. “Both sensation and space are themselves emplaced from the very first moment” (Casey 1996:18). With this framework in mind, Casey goes on to explore the way *place* (not *space*) is both enacted and embodied. In *Senses of Place* (1996), he asserts that the living, moving, and sensorial body is

essential to what he calls *emplacement* (1996:24). Casey writes, “*Lived bodies belong to places* and help to constitute them” (1996:24), and more importantly, “*places belong to lived bodies* and depend on them” (original emphasis Casey 1996:24). In other words, people don’t just dwell in place or out of place, empowered or disempowered, “people everywhere act on the integrity of their dwelling” (Feld and Basso 1996:11). Places, then, are not only manifested through subjective, personal memory, meaning, and experience, but often integral to collective meanings, and community self-definition. The Penobscot Nation Museum is a highly contested and multivocalic place itself, and the ten objects of the Penobscot Nation Museum in this thesis depend, in many ways, on their relationship to *place* and movement through *place*.

However, I argue that place not only roots individuals within social and cultural soils, but can also unroot them. Place must be envisioned as dynamically constructed as it is experienced: through movement, through memory, and through time. As Barbara Bender writes, “A place inflected with memory serves to draw people towards it or to keep them away, permits the assertion or denial of knowledge claims, becomes a nexus of contested meanings (1997:104).” Clifford, moreover, has drawn our attention to notion that movement between places (both for the anthropologist and the subject) is a crucial concept often overlooked in localized ethnographies. In his book, *Routes Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997), he points to the ways in which notions of travel challenge the localism of many common assumptions about culture. He argues that “practices of travel are

constitutive of cultural meanings rather than a simple transfer or extension” (Clifford 1997:3). As I show here, the objects of the Penobscot Nation Museum actively orient visitors to *place* and are themselves oriented by *emplacement* (within a particular display). *Place*, then, is one important layer of the Penobscot basket.

The notion of the multiple layering and embeddings, and re-embeddings as the basket is woven, its meaning and the narratives that surround it, are heavily influenced by Greg Urban and Michael Silverstein in their book, *Natural Histories of Discourse* (1996). In their introduction, they argue that processes resulting in what they term *phenomenal textuality* are “central to ongoing processes within cultural orders” (1996:1). Moving beyond the idea of culture as text,<sup>4</sup> they argue that text, such as an object or document in the Penobscot Nation Museum, is only one part of a process of *entextualization* and *co(n)textualization*. And further, to turn something into a text, often conceptualized in our minds as precipitate of continuous cultural processes, is to give it a “decontextualized” structure and meaning. In other words, to turn something into a text is to give it a form and meaning independent and “imaginable apart from the spatiotemporal and other frames in which they can be said to occur” (Silverstein and Urban 1996:1). It is this very process of entextualization, or deprocess, that allows “meaning to be clearly transmitted across social boundaries such as generations without regard for the recontextualizations it might undergo” (Silverstein and Urban 1996:1).

Text, then, is a metadiscursive notion that has “the ability to instantiate the timeless context free character of culture, which can be uniformly shared within a community and passed down across the generations...” (Silverstein and Urban 1996:12). This process, moreover, is reliant upon “periodic performances or re-embeddings in actual discourse contexts that count as projectively ‘the same’” (1996:13). An alternative to periodic re-embedding, however, is the creation of new texts on each successive occasion. According to Silverstein and Urban, this is possible because each text (by virtue of having been entextualized) “has the ability to freeze-frame past and future, eliminating the dynamically and contingent social properties from which it is assembled” (1996:13). It is this ability to detemporalize, despatialize, and deprocessualize that allows for the transmission of text<sup>5</sup> across social boundaries such as generations or interactional sites, regardless of the recontextualizations it might undergo. And the same can be said of what Paul Ricoeur terms “text-artifacts” (Ricoeur 1981:197).

In regards to the objects at the Penobscot Nation Museum, one may begin to grasp the utility of this argument as it relates to a single cultural object, what they would term a *text-artifact* with a human relational dimension. The snowshoe is surrounded by co-objects or texts and carries certain residual meanings or traces that contain the temporality of the original social interaction and yet are partly dependent on and understood through the surrounding co-texts—the other snowshoes and objects in the museum. Narratives that surround the snowshoes are able to inscribe new meaning. In

the museum, they now represent Penobscot culture and identity. In other words, the snowshoe as a text-artifact has been taken from its original use and has been re-embedded and recontextualized into the museum. Not only into the display on the museum wall, but into the narrative through which it is entextualized in the present “real time” and is even incorporated into projections of the future, taking on yet new meanings and new narratives.

Silverstein and Urban summarize the tremendous agency and powerful implications of this process. According to them, social analysts are not the only ones who find utility in the notion of culture as text.

But this utility of texts is precisely what ‘the natives’ (including us) see as well. They engage in processes of entextualization to create a seemingly shareable, transmittable culture. They can, for example, take some fragment of discourse and quote it anew, making it seem to carry a meaning independent of its situation within two now distinct co(n)texts. Or they can transcribe a fragment of oral discourse, converting it into a seemingly durable and decontextualizable form that suggest to interpreters a decontextualizable meaning as well. Or they can take such a durable text and reanimate it through a performance that, being *a* (mere) performance of *the* text, suggests various dimensions of contextualized “interpretive meaning” added on to those seemingly inherent in the text. [Silverstein and Urban 1996:2]

Similarly, in this thesis, I talk about text because this is a form of remembering to the Penobscot, empowering them by textualizing them with their agreement.

A final important body of literature which informs my understandings of these “moving orientators” of Penobscot identity is the discussion of relationships between, property, substance, and “the biographical object” (Strathern 2004 and 1999, Hoskins 1998). Strathern’s work, for example, expands the definition of *possession* to include relationships and practices of

exchange. Her definition of an *artifact* likewise encompasses more than just physical objects (2004:17). Of further relevance to this study is Janet Hoskin's book, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (1998). Here, Hoskin argues that the significance of the relationship between objects and their owners is not only that they are mutually defined and reciprocally constitutive, but also that they are used to "reify characteristics of personhood that must then be narratively organized into identity" (1998:24). Although one could make the argument that the objects in the Penobscot Nation Museum are "public commodities" and not autobiographical objects as such, Hoskins' focus on the narrative creation of self and personhood through the vehicle of an object is still useful and centrally important.

### Methodology

A large part of this study concerns the positioning and reflexivity of the anthropologist who works with Native peoples. Triggered by a general trend of anthropological reflexivity in the 1980s as well as Vine Deloria Jr.'s seminal critique of anthropologist-native relations in *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969), the issues of positioning, reflexivity, and relevance to Native lives have become increasingly significant (Deloria 1969, Deloria 1995, Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997, King 1997, Churchill 1992, Abu-Lughod 1991). Here, the supposed "alliance" between anthropologists and Natives becomes contextualized in the anthropologist's scholarly pursuit of prestige. Further, it is increasingly recognized that Indian languages and

cultures, as well as Indian objects and bodies have been subjected to scholarly appropriation and *representation*. But it is not only anthropological theories or ethics that need to change; it is the scholarly basis for knowledge production within academia: a basis that often reflects the agendas of the “establishment” rather than Native Americans. Odawa scholar, Cecil King, reveals a Native perspective on the subject.

We have been observed, noted, taped, and videoed. Our behaviors have been recorded in every possible way known to Western science, and I suppose we could learn to live with this if we had not become imprisoned in your words. . . linguistic cages, hypothetical constructs, and theoretical frameworks. [1997:116]

In terms of my endeavor in this thesis, two questions emerge. First, what claim to the cultural property and heritage of the Penobscot as a theoretical subject do I have? And second, how does the anthropologist negotiate relationships and gain friendship amidst an emotional history of domination, genocide, misappropriation and misrepresentation? These questions are both extremely relevant to my experiences on Indian Island are located in my empowerment to travel to this place. In fact, my positionality in this whole history was put into an especially interesting situation when I was asked to research a model to help the Penobscot eliminate misappropriation and misrepresentation of their culture at the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation.<sup>6</sup> In this thesis, I intend to weave the story of myself as a young, learning, anthropologist who is in the field for the first time. I am certainly not immune to the identity forming experiences, oral histories, and encounters at the Penobscot Nation Museum.

Methodologically, this project is comprised of data from daily participant observation and field notes as well as several tape-recorded interviews. Although I spent most of the summer at the Penobscot Nation Museum, I also worked with the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation. In addition, I attended several festivals and community gatherings. As my focus for this project became increasingly clear, I often visited James at the museum and discussed my ideas. My approach is both humanistic and experience based. In particular, I take the humanistic approach of reveling in the messiness of human life and the felt experiences of both the anthropologist and collaborator.

In many senses, this ethnographic method parallels what Elaine Lawless, in her book *Holy Women, Wholly Women* (1993), has termed “reciprocal ethnography.” Lawless writes, “this new approach which I take to be inherently feminist and humanistic, takes *reflexive anthropology* one step further by foregrounding dialogue as a process in understanding and knowledge retrieval. [It] seeks to privilege no voice over another and relies on dialogue as the key to understanding and illumination” (Lawless 1993:5). *Reciprocal ethnography* relies on mutual sharing and knowledge building between both the anthropologists and those with whom they work. To this end, I present this dialogic process by including my own questions and thoughts in the interview excerpts (Lawless 1993:6). As I result, I hope to constitute a process of shared, examined, re-examined knowledge through my connections to the Penobscot Heritage Preservation and Protection Committee

and the Penobscot Nation Museum employees as this work rests on their guidance and revision. More importantly however, by using the term *reciprocal ethnography*, I want to be clear that I shared my life with those I worked most closely with, as they did with me. I will not be left unmarked by this friendship and it cannot be separated from the meanings and experiences I will relate. This ethnography will come out of these cross-connections.

Furthermore, I have thought long and hard about how I may contribute to the Penobscot community through this project. I think I can do this by working with Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation to understand the uniqueness of the Penobscot Nation Museum and the aspects that should remain when it is replaced by a new museum. I was asked by the Historical and Cultural Preservation Committee to document tourists' opinions and statistics of the current museum. This issue is especially important because the Penobscot Nation is searching for funds to build a new museum. The Tribal Council has not yet decided whether it would be better to build the museum on Indian Island as a place for Penobscot, or to build it in Millinocket as a tourist and teacher educational destination 30 miles away. Perhaps by helping the Penobscot Nation committee members and Tribal Council understand the workings of the old museum, they will be better able to create a place that empowers them in relation to the dominant society while providing a unique place of cultural identity for the Penobscot.

I will begin with *o'gemak* or snowshoes, the first *rib* or chapter of the text-artifact *abaznoda* (basket) that is this thesis.

### III. MAIN TEXT

#### RIB I

#### *O'GEMAK* (SNOWSHOES) AND THE “BIG PICTURE”



**Figure 1**

James picked up one snowshoe by the base and turned it over. He ran his other hand along the full length its frame.

“They’re beautiful,” I said, “What happened, how’d you get them?”

“This man brought them,” he said. He pointed through the window to a car that was pulling out of the driveway. I could make out an elderly man with white hair. James continued to admire the snowshoe. “It’s a child size snowshoe, ah the lashing is a little broken.” He examined the moose hide lashing that hung loose from the frame.

“Do you know how to fix it?” I asked.

He said he did.

The next day James stood on a chair. He huffed and coughed as his fingers attached the latest addition to the Penobscot Nation Museum, the pair of child’s snowshoes, to the wall. He used special museum supplies that he had ordered from a catalog to hang them: clear plastic tubing and wall hooks that would not damage their ash frames. The snowshoes themselves were small and deep brown, with little colored feather tufts and beads ornamented along their outer edge. James carefully arranged the child’s snowshoes to fit the display. Their frames were small in comparison to the adult sized pairs already on the wall. He called me into the room, “What do you think?”

I nodded, “It’s good.” I noticed that he had repaired the lashing. The child’s snowshoes are the pair to the far right in Figure 1.

For the next couple days the story of James’ acquisition of the snowshoes became a common topic of conversation in the Penobscot Nation Museum. He told visitors about the man who had given them to the museum for free. “He originally gave them to the Old Town Museum to display,” James would say, “but when he came back to see what they did with them

over there, they were sitting in the box he'd put them in, gathering dust on a shelf." He explained how the man had used them throughout his own childhood and how his father had applied varnish so they wouldn't get wet in the snow. "His grandfather polished them every year to keep them in good shape," he told one visitor who seemed interested a few days later. James guessed they were from the 1930s. He explained that they were still useable, if the leather straps weren't quite so worn.

He told visitors how he had rearranged that side of the room to fit the new snowshoes, developing a snowshoe display with two large adult snowshoe pairs and the new child's pair. Months later, if some visitor points out the snowshoes, James will tell this story, nodding and admiring them with whoever may be there.

Snowshoes travel. One hot afternoon early in my internship at the museum, James looked out the window and jokingly warned me, "Here comes the linguist." The middle-aged Penobscot woman I would come to know as Carol Dana bustled into the museum. Carol Dana is Indian Island's foremost Penobscot language expert. When she arrived at the museum, she immediately and exuberantly greeted James and began singing in Penobscot, a language left mainly to several Penobscot elders. I folded brochures at a small reading table as they talked.

Carol told me later that she has to know you and trust you before she'll start using Penobscot with you. But she had no such constraint in the museum with James. She began singing a tune in Penobscot and asked James if he

remembered it. He said it sounded familiar, but he didn't know it. Carol put his name in the song. He joked, "Oh no! Don't put my name in it. I don't know what you're saying about me." He looked at me and winked. James winks a lot.

Later when I came to know Carol Dana better, I asked her, "Who are Penobscot?" She told me about snowshoes,

I think a tribal person who has freely roamed this earth. I mean, when you look at where we are now... I met a man with the snowshoes, the o'gemak, that's ours, they're central Canada...put that.

And when I look at the land without the states and the borders and all that, that's a big area. Maybe we roamed way up there. He can't answer himself why these people made this snowshoe, and we over here make the same thing at the same time. Usually, there's a graduation there that you find. He doesn't see one. So I think we roamed and ranged a wide area...

Now someone told me, wanna learn your language, go live with the Cree. Now I've seen some of their language. I can understand a word here and there. But it's not that. We're all the same people. I think along with teaching our language and our culture, I would have wanted to teach the kids that there's a big picture here. Who are the Algonquin people? You know? And Penobscot's just a little piece of this larger picture...Our relatives, and how did we relate to this land. To me, being Penobscot is probably using this river, watershed a lot. But I think in the past, it all depends on what you're talking about. Like what being Penobscot meant. And today, I'm proud that I belong to a people that survived on this land area for thousands of years. See I think you have to... we're not fixed in time and space. We're always changing and flowing and going along just like the seasons and the water to the ocean that was our migration route (1/21/05).

On another day, Carol walks into the museum, glancing only briefly at the snowshoe display. She tells me it laughs at her. The ash frames mimic the time when her elders were forced to make snowshoes and sell them to survive. They mimic the representations of her people, the stereotypes. In the museum, however, it is deliberate. The physical object before her is a point of reference

to the more figurative Penobscot snowshoe in her mind. She is interested in its construction. She has talked to others about this: someone showed her how the lashings that attach to the frame, the design, and the shape of the wood, show little difference across vast spaces. They have the same marking. The snowshoe becomes important beyond its conventionality as an “Indian object.” It illustrates Carol’s notion of the “big picture,” a way of seeing things beyond Indian Island, the current Penobscot “reservation” to the traveling, unbounded past.

Anthropologist Frank Speck, writing in the 1930s, describes the Penobscot snowshoe’s physical similarities to those of other Native American nations.

Snowshoes, a’gamak, next to the canoe are the most essential means of travel in the Penobscot country. The frame is perfectly flat, with no upturn at the toe, and from 4 to 4 1/2 feet long and about 18 inches wide. The rather sharply rounded toe and lengthened tail show proportions differing slightly from Malecite and Abenaki forms. In other respects, however, the type of snowshoe of the whole region occupied by Wabanaki tribes is about the same, in having a one-piece frame, two bars, and deer or moose rawhide filling with similar qualities of weave and fastenings. [Speck 1940:61]

As we sat in one of the rooms of the Penobscot Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation, Carol went on from the snowshoes to explain Penobscot connections to the Passamaquoddy and Maliseet, two other tribes of the Wabanaki Confederacy, a continuing coalition of closely related Native American nations that began officially in the 1700s.<sup>7</sup> She said, “We’re all Abenaki. We’re so intermarried that we are all Maliseet and Passamaquoddy,

and I think we always have been. That's why I like that language, understand their language."

This important collaboration extends beyond the Wabanaki Confederacy. Carol recently collaborated with specialists from other Native American Nations to help with language revitalization. An elder member of the Passamaquoddy Nation has helped Carol immensely as has a Mohawk woman who recently came in to teach about immersion programs. Someone told Carol, "If you want to learn your language, go live with the Cree." As we talked, she laughingly told me that she understood a few Cree words here and there.

Later, I asked Carol, "What about connection to other people, or any kind of common sense of struggle?" As my intention had been to talk about connections within the Penobscot Nation itself, her answer surprised me. "Yeah, with people like myself." "Like-minded people?" I asked. She explained,

Well, any native person, because we all face the same things. I found out when I worked for Wabanaki Maine and the Maritimes, even though they might have lived in Houlton, or been up here, or Passamaquoddies were over there that we all faced the same issues of identity, struggling, people face the same issues of identity, struggling, people co-opting your ways or, all the stuff that happened to us, stereotypes, you know people looking down on us, racism, prejudice (1/21/05).

For Carol, the topic of snowshoes is one way to approach the commonalities and hardships shared by Wabanaki people living "over large territories." The similar patterns of the lashings of the child's snowshoes across the Wabanki land area suggest "deerhide smelling" weaves of common struggles as well as

the interrelationship of people who have survived through stereotypes, racism, prejudice, and language assimilation. As she told me in the museum, “the curve of the frame smirks, maybe they are laughing.”

### **Walking with Snowshoes and “Relating to this Land”**

As much as snowshoes are illustrative of the “big picture” in terms of “our relatives,” they are also important in terms of the experience of movement through place and relationship to the land. “We roamed and ranged a wide area,” Carol told me. “To me, being Penobscot is probably using this river, watershed a lot. But I think in the past, it all depends on what you’re talking about. Like what being Penobscot meant. And today, I’m proud that I belong to a people that survived on this land area for thousands of years” (1/21/05).

Longevity and connection to the land and river are also central themes in the Penobscot Nation Museum. According to James, the Penobscot, whether they were known as such or not, have been living “here” (the area of the Penobscot watershed) for thousands of years. He points out the display case of arrow heads and stone tools in a dimly lit corner of the museum to indicate this longevity. Nor is this connection to land conceived of in terms of possession, although pressure to do so is increasingly necessary for Penobscot *survivance*.<sup>8</sup> Rather, a person or community enters into a *relationship* with the land. Ideally, place is constitutive of self through a kind of social relationship, rather than through ownership.

I asked Carol about her connection to Indian Island.

I feel connected here like when I walk around my mother's home. I get the feelings I had when I was a child when I'm out in the woods. I realize that it isn't just here I guess. I'm peaceful out in the woods. I like hiking, I like the water. I think we've been restricted to being just here, but I love all the land just as much. In fact, that's where I feel more spiritual, it's like I'm near the ocean too. The river and canoeing and snowshoeing and traveling. I can feel an affinity for certain land areas. I feel real good there. I think it's because my ancestors took us to the land. It was the same when I went to the Connecticut River, Conituck in our language. I realized that our people have been going there for years. I just felt good there. I took a little walk in the woods near some ash trees, and I just felt good there (1/21/05).

“Like somewhere you could have gone...?” I asked.

She continued, “Yeah, I felt safe or protected or I don't know how to describe it. It's like an affinity. When I was in college I used to write poems and say that I loved the land. My teacher would write on there, you can't love the land, and put check marks on it.”

For Carol, land is not just about Indian Island or one place, it is about a “big picture” a sense of travel and movement, or “roaming.” It is about ancestors.”

A Penobscot basketmaker turns a basket in her hands as she weaves another strip of ash. As her hands twist the strips, the first rib of this thesis begins to bind with a second. A new shape comes into focus. It is a photograph, one that enacts connections and disconnections to *place*, to Carol's “big picture,” and to the history of Indian Island. As James explains to visitors to the museum, “Before the bridge, there was a ferry.”

## RIB II

“BEFORE THE BRIDGE, THERE WAS A FERRY”



**Figure 2**

This photograph, hanging on the Penobscot Museum wall, portrays the ferry that used to be the only means of travel across the Penobscot River to Indian Island and back to Old Town in summer. The people shown in this photo are Penobscot ancestors. The images of this moment in time, of the landscape *before* the creation of a bridge that now orients Penobscot memory to their recent past, plaster the Penobscot Museum walls, the gift cards, note cards, and calendars. On more than one occasion, a Penobscot Tribal Member who visited the museum would tell me what they remembered, or what was passed on from their parents, about the ferry that used to be the only way to cross the river. Many tribal members today still remember riding this ferry, a two cent round trip for tribal members and five cents for visitors.

A Penobscot woman from Indian Island reminisces.

Growing up we had the ferry to go back and forth across the River. The ferryman was the one who really policed who was over here and who was not. At a certain time of day he knew anybody that was not supposed to be over here, and notified the Constable. So you really had a safe environment, because you had only your own people to contend with. [Maine Indian Program 1989:C75]

The history of Indian Island's present day use as a "reservation" for the Penobscot, and the bridge that has traced changing Penobscot relationships to the predominantly "white" mainland, shed light on Penobscot concepts of place, land, and travel. Frank Speck, whose early ethnography *Penobscot Man* (1940), has both been both criticized and utilized by Penobscot as a source of cultural endurance, described Indian Island in 1915.

*Panawa'bskik* is the oldest known center of the tribe, from which it takes its name. Various translations of the term have appeared, but the most satisfactory are "At the rocks," or "The white rocks place," and "Where the river broadens out." These and other names of places, however, are archaic, and translators do not agree among themselves. The village is on Indian Island opposite Oldtown. In colonial times there was a palisaded village here, and the first Catholic mission was founded at the same place. The population in 1914 was something over four hundred including Indians of other Wabanaki tribes. All the villages are prettily situated on rather high land, preferably at the southern ends of the islands in the river" (Speck 1940:25).

James often passes on further knowledge about Indian Island to visitors. He talks about how he found a stone corn grinder, three sides round and one side flat, when construction workers were digging up the area to build a road and a park just across the river in Old Town. He explains that this old village site, located across from Indian Island on the mainland, was actually the original Penobscot village. Today, the history of this park is largely unrecognized by Old Towners. The area has become a green, sterile town park.

It is used mainly by the middle class residents of Old Town to sing country music or to stroll in the sun.

The history of the bridge between Indian Island and Old Town also highlights the changing relationships between the Penobscot and Old Town communities, their senses of place and history. In a way, the bridge is a living text, both in its actual manifestation, and in documents and photographs through which it is remembered. It speaks to the changing relationship between Indian Island and Old Town, their borderlands, connectedness and disconnectedness, and belonging in and of each other. Before the bridge there was a ferry.

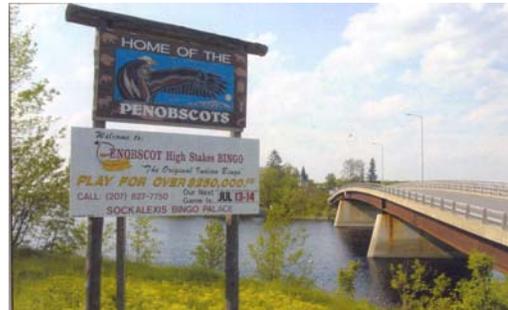
In 1940, Speck wrote his vision of the ferry based on his fieldwork on Indian Island. He describes the Penobscot River and the mills in Old Town that continue to resonate in the lives of the Penobscot today. His depiction is vivid if highly romanticized.

The same old river sweeps past the island and tumbles over the rocks a few hundred feet below the still-water where the bateau-ferry crosses in its leisurely passage to and from the “landin” on the Oldtown side as it carries the constant flow of brown-skinned basket sellers on missions of peddling or shopping for groceries in the still dingy stores on Main Street. And the ferrymen are still brawny Indian youths who collect five cent for the round trip from their restless tribesmen and ten from the curiosity haunted “tourists” whose cars roll over the vacationland highways of Maine. The distant low mountain domes to the south and east still rise their forest slopes...Many of the men whose fathers knew chiefly the mysteries of the woods now know better the intricacies of Oldtown Woolen Mill whose five-hundred-foot sweep of brick wall has since its erection in 1889, been a shadow on the horizon of Indian Island and a factor in breaking the morale of the people. The white-water anciently boiling over the ledges below the island is now diverted into the sluice way of the monstrous mills, and the clatter of looms by day and many nights pervades the silence... [Speck 1940:303]

The history of the Indian Island and its people are intrinsically linked to the history of the Penobscot River, the border of flowing water that the current bridge crosses.

In 1950, the first bridge connecting Indian Island to Old Town was installed. This bridge was moved to Indian Island when the town of Howland, Maine received a modernized bridge (see Figure 6).

When I asked James if he remembered the one lane bridge he joked, “Oh yeah . . .



**Figure 3**

Long lines of cars used to build up on either side and they’d be honking. We’d take turns and let each other through.” The current bridge connecting Indian Island to Old Town was installed in 1986 by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

All these notions, the bridge, the river, the longevity and connectedness to the Island itself can be understood as the landmarks by which the Penobscot spatially and temporally orient their history and that of Indian Island. The words “Indian Islander” and “Penobscot” were often used interchangeably in my presence. When Penobscot described the island, they were also describing the community. But what did people say about the Island? How is it experienced? How is it felt?

There is no one answer; no unified vision. And there is striking ambivalence; many sites of tension. During my research, people sometimes

explained to me that the island was a “funny place” or a “cut throat place,” often, the Island came alive in terms of disease. For example, the Penobscot River is described as a “cancer” or “sickness.” A male Penobscot living on the island told me, “My main goal is to get off the island, away from the sickness...” But as an afterthought he added, “My heart will always be there, my family is there.”

During the summer I interviewed John “Bear” Mitchell, the director of Wabanaki Studies at the University of Maine, a storyteller, and a member of the Penobscot Nation, and listened to one view (among many) of the island. When I asked how he envisioned the future of Indian Island. He responded,

From *my* observations again, I see us, I see our government, I see our schools looking more outward than inward. Which is good. It’s progression. It’s good and bad. It’s good and bad in the sense that we lose identity. Another thing I’ve noticed, another observation I guess, is that there’s a number of people who have lived entire lives and generations on the island who are now looking for land off. And more people coming on the island who we never met. You know? I had the paper route on the whole island in the late 70s, all eighty-seven houses. And I couldn’t tell you how many houses are there now but I’ll tell you, a paper boy walking around with a news bag on his shoulder, her shoulder, could absolutely not pick up the entire lot all night. You obviously need a car and the boxes, and it’s not as personal. . . I knew everybody. (8/12/04)

The future of Indian Island is deeply connected to its changing population, economic developments, and educational system. For John “Bear” Mitchell, the most important word describing the island is “change.” While he recognizes that this change is not inherently good or bad, he seems sentimental about the past, about the tightly-knit community he remembers, and to which he belonged. He continued,

It's people trying to get back to their roots, but looking at a very generic Indianness in order to get back to their roots. You know? It's not happening. The more people come back to look for their roots, the more we lose because the more other people are leaving the island. So, I can tell you just in my lifetime, and anybody can tell you who grew up there their entire childhood, that the island is not the same. It will never be the same. It's forever changing. It's changed more in the last 24 years than it's changed in the last 200 years before that. It's just not the same place. It never will be the same place. In another year, it will be a different than it is this year. It will be more progressive. You know, the more economic industry we get involved in, the more money that comes back to the community, the more town-like I see we've become. . . I think the bridge has had a lot to do with that.  
(8/21/04)

His spoke with the force of an experienced story teller, and in some senses, an outsider. His comments were valuable precisely because of the borderland position he occupied between the academic world of Native American Studies and *belonging* in the Tribe. As the anthropologist Vikki Bell has noted, the notion of belonging allows an affective dimension: not just be-ing, but longing or yearning (1999:1). I find this notion of *belonging*, as a structure of feeling, useful precisely because of its ambiguities. One does not simply or ontologically belong to the world or to any group within it. Rather, it a dynamic process that lies on the borders of absolute connections to one place, one group or one community, suggesting movement between “in” and “out” as well as dialogically negotiated claims of and to (Bell 1999:1).

Because of his borderline position, John “Bear” Mitchell was able to step back and observe. Yet despite all his strong feelings about tribal policy, he reveled in his strongest connection to the island: his family. He continued,

So it's changing. It's changed, and it will continue to change, and people will continue to leave. And they're not leaving very far. They're not going far away. They're going across the bridge to build

houses to build equity. To get their own life. To get their own feelings of what it's like to be who they are within the confines of their walls that they put up around them and not outwardly beyond that. The island's changing. It never will be the same.

In a way, John's words were very personal. He expressed the difficulties of trying to forge a new belonging, a new sense of self, a distance from the place of his memories, and the many reasons for doing so. More importantly, his words signify his strong emotions about Indian Island as inscribed through its changing geographical connections to the mainland. As James explains in the museum, "Before the bridge, there was a ferry." The photograph imaged above (Figure 2) is just one of many representations of this changing relationship in the Penobscot Nation Museum. Moreover, as we have seen with John "Bear" Mitchell, such photographs inscribe more than the broad relationship between the Penobscot community and the mainland. They orient personal histories and memories as well as feelings of connection and disconnection.

When I asked John "Bear" Mitchell what he felt the solution was to this negative change, our conversation returned us to the unsettled ground of belonging and identity. He emphasized that his voice is but one among many. But for John "Bear" Mitchell, the answer seems to lie in specifically Penobscot forms of education, story telling, and learning. This is a brief excerpt from our conversation.

John: The only way they can do that is to work it with the kids. And to inundate the kids with it. You know, put it in their face the whole time. So that when they walk out of that school and somebody says, "You know what's it like to be Indian?" They can answer that question. You

know? What's it like to be Penobscot? They can answer that question with more than we build birch bark canoes, we used to do this we used to do that.

Rose: Right, it's something you actually feel...

John: Right, its part of them. You know? And they feel it as much as they feel when you're at high school and you're on a basketball team, and you're playing the *rival*, you know? And you feel like you owe so much to that town and you're *part of it*, and you need to just beat your rival. Yeah, we don't have it anymore. It's just... So they need to inundate the kids with programs. I think that the boys and girls club is important in that.

The Penobscot basketmaker continues weaving. The ribs are beginning to come together as ash strips entwine them, hold them steady. As she twists the ash, over and under, the flowing water that separates Indian Island from the mainland becomes visible. She twists again. Now, a small dot is visible on the water. It is a Penobscot birch bark canoe. It paddles toward her as she weaves.

## RIB III

## TRAVELING WIGWAOL (CANOES) AND “LIFE BLOOD RIVERS”



Figure 4

*Klose-kur-beh* (Gluskap)<sup>9</sup>, the first man, introduced the canoe among the Penobscot and taught them how to use it. He said to the people,

And when the time comes that you need a vessel to bear you upon the water, you shall first cut from the soft wood tree, strips of it so small you can easily bend, and the strips shall be in length according to the vessel wanted; both ends shall come to a point, so it will cut the water when you make it go. The vessel must be propelled by the power of your arms and hands with a paddle made from the hard wood tree. Some strips of the soft wood you shall shave out for linings; one lengthwise and one cross-wise; after these are ready you shall level and smooth the ground, and lay the bark of the white wood tree on the ground, and cut the bark on each side, so you can shape it to a point on each end....after sewing up the seams you shall raise the frame; it will be ready to receive two linings; and the seams you shall close up with the sap of the pitch wood tree called Puk-go, “pitch,” so that the water will not enter into the vessel; after this is done your vessel will be read to bear you upon the water. [Nicolar 1893:34]<sup>10</sup>

A young Penobscot man of about eighteen wandered into the Penobscot Nation Museum in late June. James knew the boy's father. He told me to show the boy around while he finished up something in the other room. "This birch bark canoe is big," the young man told me, walking right up to it and putting his hands on the rim. Then he touched the side and gave it a gentle push. "How old is it?" he asked. I told him, "About 300 years...Somebody came in the other day and we noticed that it has wooden nails, not metal." I pointed to what looked like nails in the wood. But the boy had other canoes on his mind. "I helped my father build one," he said. He described the splint and the shaping of the birch bark. "I don't know where they took the canoe we built. I thought it might have gone to the cultural preservation center or the museum." We laughed. "I don't think this is it," I said. When James finished in the other room, the boy asked James the same question, "Where did that canoe go?" James didn't know either.

Other canoes intersected with my time at the museum. There was the one that James Francis, an employee at the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation, had on display at the Maine Indians Basketmaker's Festival. This one was newly made (see Figure 5). Although it was much smaller than the canoes in the museum, James explained that it was built in the "old way." Former Penobscot Chief Barry Dana relates,



**Figure 5 – James Francis at the Basketmakers Festival**

It would be one thing to say well, we used to have birch bark canoes. And up until a couple of years ago, that's what we would have said. Now we have birch bark canoes 'cause we built them. . .To really know about it, you gotta do it. We built this one the same way our ancestors have for thousands of years. [Morrison 2004:1]

Later in the summer of 2004, the same canoe appeared again in a similar display. This time, it was put on display at the Canoe Hullabaloo, a festival in Old Town that took place on the bank of the Penobscot River across from Indian Island. In September, the same canoe journeyed all the way to Washington D.C. in the back of a truck, accompanied by a group of Penobscot Tribal Council Members to celebrate the opening of the new National Museum of the Native American. Of this museum opening, former Chief Barry Dana remarked, "Carrying the canoe here [in Washington D.C.] marks a return to forgotten traditions" (Morrison 2004:1).

Like snowshoes, canoes travel. But unlike snowshoes, canoes are currently being taken up as an explicit vehicle by which to create, enact, and engage with "a return to forgotten [Penobscot] traditions." As Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern writes, "An object may make present powers or forces that affect a person's life, whether as imagined as the environment, the cosmos, or the community" (Strathern 2004:7). I argue that the Penobscot canoe has this ability. In its multiple manifestations, whether on film, on public display, or in its making, the canoe makes present the "life blood" of the Penobscot, and thus their struggles for the health of the contaminated Penobscot River.

### **Canoes and Rivers: the Film of the Penobscot Nation Museum**

One man from Indian Island expresses the importance of canoes for the Penobscot, “They were river people – canoes. Their only transportation was canoes. That’s how they survived. They always lived on the river, surrounded by water” (Maine Indians Program: 1989:C16).

Often described as the flowing “veins” of the Penobscot people, the Penobscot River is intrinsically tied to the health of the community. “The river has always been our life blood,” a Penobscot woman on the small museum television screen shown tells visitors to the museum. A middle-aged man and

woman from Virginia sit in metal folding chairs watching the 28 minute film entitled, “Penobscot: the People and Their River.”<sup>11</sup> In the film, they see beautiful images of the Penobscot River, Indian Island, and Mount Katahdin (the wigwam of Gluskap). Several minutes ago, these visitors had driven across the Penobscot River on the bridge that connects



**Figure 6**

Indian Island to the mainland. On the bridge, they may have smelled the Old Town paper mills whose fumes rise down river from a hidden plant. They may have noticed the dam that slows the water to a trickle just past Indian Island.

They may have noticed the landscape of Indian Island's shore as they drove across, the same landscape imaged in photographs on the Penobscot Nation Museum walls. As museum visitors, they are multiply embedded. Not only are they physically surrounded by photos of the past through which they just drove in the present, but also by the same Penobscot River that they now watch on the TV screen.

James shows "The Penobscot: The People and Their River" to almost every museum visitor. He greets them and then leads them to the museum's main room where six metal chairs are situated before a small TV attached to the ceiling (see Figure 6). The film is the first glimpse many visitors have of who the Penobscot are, and when it is over, discussions in the museum often arise out of its subject matter.

In the film, Penobscot Tribal Member John "Bear" Mitchell tells how Gluskap, the first man, a magical person who was sent to the people to teach them how to survive, rescues the flowing waters of the river from a big frog who is holding all the water within his great belly. Gluskap's methods vary in the different tellings of the event. As John "Bear" Mitchell, also a story-teller, explained, "Each telling is alive. Our stories evolve with changing times, but their lessons stay the same." In the telling of the river creation I heard at the Maine Indians Basketmaker's Festival in Bar Harbor, Gluskap wields a great branch against the frog, thereby letting the water out and forming the branches of the Penobscot River.

As the woman mentions in the film, the branches and flowing streams of the Penobscot River are the “life blood” of the Penobscot. Animated individuals in the film express this relationship in terms of the Nation’s future. Former Chief Barry Dana explains,

We are inextricably tied to the Penobscot River through a cultural, physical and spiritual relationship that runs in our veins as the original inhabitants of this region...This restoration effort [The Penobscot River Restoration Project]<sup>12</sup> gives me great hope. Hope that society better understands in this day and age the need to look into the future as we make decisions today. Hope that, like the blood in our veins, the waters of the Penobscot River will become healthier. Hope that future generations of all peoples may benefit from a restored riverine ecosystem that has sustained life for thousands of years. [Adams 2003:2]

The film also captures the importance of solving the pollution problems of the Penobscot River and the efforts that are being made. Another man in the film explains, “There is now a sickness in the river...I would like to be able to enjoy it...being in the water in the healthy sense not worrying about it if it splashes you in the arm or leg.” He continues, “We’ve lost a great deal of our culture and identity by not having the river available.”

As the film describes, the problem with the river is two fold. First, energy dams divert the river and keep it at a practical standstill around Indian Island, and second, the paper mills’ bleaching process and chlorine usage release dioxin, a substance dangerous in minute amounts. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, dioxin is a potent human carcinogen (Saucier 1999:np). Moreover, in regards to the dioxin limits set by the EPA, the amount of Penobscot River fish that can be consumed safely is about 65 grams a day (roughly the amount that could fill a thimbleful) (Saucier 1999).

To make matters worse, in 2003, the EPA announced that Lincoln Pulp and Paper (the main polluting agent in the region) would not be eligible for a federal Superfund listing. A letter signed by the full Maine congressional delegation urged the EPA not to list the mill for fear that clean up costs under the federal program would impede financial recovery and risk harming the mill's employees. But as John Banks, Penobscot Director of Natural Resources, explained, "The decision was not based on sound science. It was based on political pressure" (Edgecomb 2003:A1). In reaction to this decision, the Penobscot, in conjunction with several federal agencies, have attempted a comprehensive study of the river bottom and the high level of dioxins. The EPA has not incorporated this data. When I asked James what was most important to him, what he thought would be the most useful thing for me to research, he told me, "the river."

### **Canoes and Life Blood**

The Canoe Hullabaloo is a new event that attempts to celebrate canoes in both their contemporary and traditional manifestations. Produced by the Old Town Public Library and the River Coalition, the event took place for the first time at the Downtown Riverfront Park, just across from Indian Island at the historic site of a Penobscot village (although this is unrecognized or unknown by most of Old Town's white residents). The Canoe Hullabaloo brochure reads, "Come to our week-long celebration of Old Town's rich cultural heritage."



**Figure 7**

Events at the Canoe Hullabaloo ranged from a canoe regatta that aimed to break “the world record of 777 boats,”<sup>13</sup> to a professional canoe race, to a “traditional Indian dance” performed by Wabanaki Mike Sockalexis, to a Knights of Columbus Bingo game. The festival concluded with a Penobscot closing blessing. On July 17, 2004, the last day of the four day event, Wabanaki singing and drumming combined with crafts from people all over Old Town: stands with necklaces, handkerchiefs, tee-shirts, hotdogs, baskets, soda and sausages. Small, five foot, canoes painted by the kids at the Indian Island School were propped up on the green, waiting to be auctioned.

Turnout was surprisingly low both for Penobscot and the predominantly white, Old Town residents. When the Wabanaki drumming and dancing reached its peak at the height of the festival, only a few people sat to listen. But a lone man in a black tee-shirt and shorts danced to the drums. He held a paper bag with a bottle in one hand, and he moved gracefully, stepping in time to the music. When the music ended, he found himself surrounded by tourists. Later, I found the man sitting alone in the shade. I asked him why he

held his hands up to the sky as he danced and he told me that he was bringing the spirits around him. He showed me that I could do it, too. “No, I’m serious,” he said. “If someone’s sick, and you have to remember this, you need to dance like this...” He moved his hands in front of his body, palms toward it. “This protects their spirit. When I was very sick my mother danced like that and I recovered.” He focused on his hands as they moved first around his belly then up toward the sky. I asked him if he was Penobscot, and he told me that he wasn’t accepted as an Indian, but that he was one. His mother was one. He lives in Old Town.

Although the man spoke to me through the twisted shades of alcoholism that has assaulted many Native communities, his veins carried more than alcohol. He was a mixed blood, an unrecognized halfie. The “life blood” of the Penobscot, as John “Bear” Mitchell described it to me, is also a “blood quantum.” “It’s like an Olympic size swimming pool with a hole in the bottom,” he said. “The water is draining. It’s going down and down.” He told me that of the 120 students enrolled in the school on Indian Island; almost half of them would not make the Penobscot Nation’s eligibility requirement for tribal membership by blood.

Despite this image of blood depletion, the notion of blood or “life blood” for the Penobscot is not confined to the transmission of physical blood from ancestors. A strong sense of transmitted tradition is also crucial for tribal membership. For example, when Crystal Treadwell, a potential candidate for tribal membership by blood quantum sought membership in the tribe, she was

rejected due to a lack of “social or economic ties” (Tuttle 2004:2). Here, relations and living connections to Indian Island are important to the claim of Penobscot “life blood.”

The Penobscot notions of “blood quantum” and “full blood” are malleable. Although eligibility for Penobscot Nation Membership currently states that individuals must be one quarter Penobscot, this one quarter blood quantum requirement shifts depending on changing valuations of who constitutes a direct descendant. For example, the required blood quantum for membership within the Penobscot Nation was recently relaxed by the Tribal government to allow for consideration of earlier Penobscot ancestry. Significantly, the most commonly used word to denote “Penobscotness” is not full blood, but “direct descendant,” a term that implies proven links and family connections, not just generational blood transmission.

The neighboring Passamaquoddy Nation has recently taken similar steps. In 2004, the Passamaquoddy Tribal government decided to have people previously considered one eighth Passamaquoddy re-evaluated to twenty-five percent. In other words, the particular amount of blood quantum associated with tribal membership changed drastically because of the declining number of “full bloods” in the community. The Lieutenant Governor of the Passamaquoddy, Joseph Socobasin, explained his view of recent changes, “It’s good for our tribe in that it keeps the bloodline going... We have to change something. If we leave things the way they are, we’ll eventually just fade out” (Tuttle 2004:3). However, the issue of blood quantum and

bloodlines are also continual sites of contestation. Former Penobscot chief Barry Dana explained his views, “Regardless of one’s perception, they may be as much Penobscot as I am. Some of them are even more Penobscot...On the other hand, it could be that, in their heart, someone is 100 percent Indian, but that doesn’t do much for the bloodline.” He continues, “There are subtle hopes that [people will marry within the tribe], but also a realistic acceptance that it’s difficult” (Tuttle 2004:4).

Native American scholar Gerald Vizenor has written on this notion of a blood quantum. According to him,

The racialism that surrounded the documentation of the tribal descent of individuals, reservation residence, and the obscure measure of blood quantum was driven by tedious bureaucracies. Government attention has turned from the blood quantum of each tribal person recorded on a reservation to natural resources, casinos, and reservation economies; even so, the notion of an arithmetic reduction of blood as a historical document is no less detestable and detrimental to mental health. [Vizenor 1994:101]

In other words, Gerald Vizenor argues that the common attributions of tribal descent—framed in terms “crossbloodism,” “determinism,” and “racialism”—are the products of the manifest manners and the literatures of dominance which simulate Native American identity. More than that, they are statistical genocide. They are ethnocide. He continues,

Some postindian warriors feign the sources of their own crossblood identities, the masks of a real tribal presence. Others, the wannabes, posers, and the missionaries of manifest manners, would threaten the remembrance of tribal identities with their surveillance and terminal simulations; the scriptures of dominance are the absence of tribal realities not the sources of presence. [Vizenor 1994:14]

My conversation at the Canoe Hullabaloo with the mixed blood, Penobscot dancing man was suddenly interrupted by bugles signaling the start of the canoe race. Chief Berry Dana and others paddled in new fiberglass canoes quickly around a cone set up in the river, two to a canoe, paddling in unison. They completed this circuit twice, and then disappeared up stream. When I turned around, the man with the black tee-shirt was gone. I never saw him again.

RIB IV  
DISPLAYING ROOT CLUBS: THREE MUSEUMS



Figure 8

The clubs that line the Penobscot Nation Museum walls have had many names: root clubs, tourist clubs, war clubs, and spirit clubs. James likes to call them root clubs. There are at least twenty along the main room's wall as well as two more recently carved clubs for sale in the gift shop. These are priced for hundreds of dollars. The intricate carving on the clubs' long handles and the elaborate human and animal effigies on the birch root systems at the top of the club are visible in Figure 8. Black and white photographs of root club artists are also part of the museum display. In photographs situated amongst the root clubs, Claude Dennis and Stanley Neptune sit in the process of carving. As James explained many times over the summer, the significance of Penobscot root clubs lies in the artistry, elaborate carvings, and the

geometric designs utilized by their creators. He often said, “No two root clubs can ever be the same because no two root systems are ever the same.”

One Wednesday in the middle of July, a man of about 60 years walked into the Penobscot Nation Museum carrying his own club. I noticed that it was very different from the root clubs on display on the museum walls. James identified it as a tourist club (a club made for sale to tourists). It was much smaller than the museum’s clubs and was painted red. Many small indents ran vertically, mimicking the more complicated etchings of the museum’s clubs. The wood was light-weight and the root system had only two sharply carved points. An Indian face on the top by the birch roots was worn and unrecognizable. The man who had brought it explained that he had come to Indian Island as a little boy, when there were all kinds of shops along the main road. “We bought this for one dollar,” he said. James tried to guess who had made it, mumbling names incomprehensibly. “Is it worth anything now?” the man continued.

James was curt, “Nope.” But he continued to examine the carving. “Yep, definitely Penobscot,” he said.

The man told us how he had come to own it, “We went to one of the shops. Probably down the road there.” He motioned through the wall in the direction of the Island’s main street. “My mom bought it... We had a picture of it, I remember, of my sister and me with the club, but I’d entirely forgotten it until I came back to clean my brother’s attic. He’s passed. We live out in Florida now.”

“Do you want to donate it?” James asked. The man said that he didn’t.

Then, James explained the history of root clubs to both of us.

They start out as a simple tool, basically hunting and trapping and then they developed into a war club. The war club had a longer handle ‘cause the people they were fighting [most often the British] had guns and bayonets. After the wars were over and the small pox had wiped out 90 % of the people. . . It was harder to survive. In the early 1800’s and 1900s, white people started seeing these clubs. Anthropologists and archaeologists came to see us as a tribe that was going to disappear. They liked the clubs and the Penobscot saw that. The plainer ones are tourist clubs like this one. The headdress is made with the Plains [Indians] style headdress, not our type, but that’s what most people recognized as being Indian (see Figure 8).

James showed us how the carved wooden feathers were bent backward. Then he continued,

The Plains Indians style is longer. Penobscot headdresses go up like a crown. . . Now, the root club is a unique form of art itself because there’s never two root systems the same. Most of these were done by my brother Stanley Neptune. The others were done by Claude. Some of these walking sticks have the Penobscot headdress.

He pointed across the room to the rows of walking sticks, distinct from the root clubs in their long slender shape, yet often carved with similar patterns.

The man left with his tourist club in his hand. It would not become part of the museum displays.

In a sense, the root clubs in the Penobscot Nation Museum are objects of inquiry for more than museum visitors. Many of the clubs in the Penobscot Nation Museum have traveled to exhibits across Maine. For example, two years ago, the Maine Historical Society in Portland exhibited several of the Penobscot Nation’s root clubs in their “Spirit Club Display.” The exhibit included a full-sized colorful brochure which James now keeps at the

Penobscot Nation Museum. More recently, in July of 2004, the Hudson Museum at the University of Maine in Orono had a special display of Stanley Neptune's spirit clubs.<sup>14</sup> Figure 9 below shows the Hudson Museum display.



**Figure 9**

The differences between the Hudson museum root club display and that of the Penobscot Nation Museum are astonishing. The Penobscot Nation museum display exists in a tiny two room museum, while the display in the Hudson museum is situated in spacious rooms and high ceilings of the Maine Center for the Arts.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the Penobscot Nation Museum, where root clubs are positioned in relation to each other and to artist photographs, in the Hudson Museum, the root clubs are laid flat in a glass case that stands alone in one of the museum's long red carpeted corridors. A small white plaque with printed black writing provides the only context for the display.

The Abbe Museum is another important Native American museum in Maine. This museum, devoted to Wabanaki collections, is located in Bar Harbor, a town largely defined by its summer tourist industry. Like the Hudson Museum, the Abbe is not tribally owned and run. However, the Abbe houses many of the same items as the Penobscot Nation Museum: root clubs, basketry, woodcarvings and birch bark containers, as well as moccasins and other beaded items. In 2001, the Abbe expanded and modified its displays. This recent expanse of 17,000 square feet contains exhibition halls, education centers for adults and children, a conservation laboratory, and a gift shop. This funding disparity between the Penobscot Nation Museum and the Abbe is apparent in every feature of the museum: the hardwood floors, the gleaming white walls, the engraved plaques, and the beautiful architecture of the building.

But there are other striking differences between the two museums. In the Abbe, the visual flow is dictated by the architecture of the building. Upon entering, the visitor follows the walls of the museum, past the plaques on white walls, past podium-like displays, past the empty spaces that surround each object. The experience is a silent flow of plaques and themes, possibly punctured by the whispered reactions of visitors. In the Penobscot Nation Museum, on the other hand, the visitor is most often guided through the displays by James Neptune himself. Oral histories enact the relationships between the objects and the ancestors. The museum is largely experienced through conversation, through questions and answers.

In terms of collection, however, the Penobscot Nation Museum and the Abbe Museum have two main differences. First, collections at the Abbe Museum focus on archaeological findings. On its website, the Abbe Museum boasts of its bone objects such as harpoons, fish hooks, combs and needles, some of which are as old as 3,000 years. It declares that its artifacts span from 10,000 years ago to the present. In fact, when I visited, one room was devoted to the process of archaeology itself. The second difference is that most of the Abbe's displays are organized by conceptual themes. In the following, I will briefly look at the Abbe's version of a "birch root club" display.



**Figure 10--The Abbe Museum's "Birch Root Club" Display**

In contrast to the Penobscot Nation Museum where the root club display enacts relationships between root clubs, the process of root club artistry, and the artists themselves, the display in Figure 10 is designed to enact notions of "Enduring Traditions." In the display, birch bark baskets on the left exemplify Wabanaki basketry dating to the 1700s. These baskets are

positioned next to their contemporary woven ash counterparts visible on the right. (I will explore this distinction more closely in a later chapter). All aspects of the display fall under the theme, “Enduring Traditions.” The juxtaposition of objects highlights a sense of continuity with the past. For example, ancient stone tools are placed in connection to contemporary baskets and root clubs. The two contemporary root clubs arch over the display, themselves positioned in association with other objects of Wabanaki cultural endurance.

Sociologist Krishenblatt-Gimblett describes this type of thematized display as *in context*. She writes that for *in context* displays, “objects are the actors and knowledge animates them. . . [They] are arranged according to conceptual frames of knowledge and taxonomy, evolution, and historical development . . .” (1998:2). Yet Krishenblatt-Gimblett raises another, more important point in terms of museum displays: the agency of display. Through their production, their creation, and decontextualization in the museum setting, objects and their exhibitions are made to perform powerful messages (1998:2). Moreover, who has the right to control the exhibition and how cultural and community identities are defined within it? It is important to remember that the Penobscot Nation Museum is the only tribally owned and run museum in Maine.

In an interview, John “Bear” Mitchell, the Penobscot director of the Wabanaki Center at the University of Maine, described his use of the three

museums (the Hudson, the Abbe, and the Penobscot Nation Museum), their differences, and the agency of display. He explained,

I've used the Penobscot Nation Museum for purposes of teaching mostly. That's what I use all these museums for: the Hudson Museum, the Abbe Museum and all that stuff. I think it's interesting to go see what is displayed and see what's important. No, because what's displayed obviously is what's important. (8/11/04)

I responded, "People definitely make a choice as to what they display." John continued,

Yeah, right! Because if we. . . There could be too much out there. And I think the smaller museums tend to do that, more is better. You now? Throw five ancient axe heads in a cabinet instead of one. Or you know have three canoes instead of one. I think there could be an overkill and what not. It's too overwhelming. That's why we need a bigger museum for the Penobscot Nation. It's too much to see and too much stuff in too little a piece of space. (8/11/04)

According to Mitchell, "What's displayed obviously is what's important." The Abbe, the Penobscot Nation, and the Hudson Museums all have exhibits that represent and authenticate Penobscotness differently. Curators at the Abbe purposefully demonstrate endurance by showcasing Wabanaki artistry as it has developed and continues to thrive. Their approach is thematic and engages with Wabanaki "Enduring Traditions" as something which can be grasped and viewed. The Penobscot Nation Museum, on the other hand, enacts human-object relationships through root club displays privilege connections to root club artists and ancestors. In contrast to both the Abbe and the Hudson Museums, the Penobscot Nation Museum does not attempt to situate displays within carefully bundled themes and plaques, but

allows connections to be drawn through the malleability of speech and conversation—through oral histories.

It is important to see the Penobscot Nation Museum in this context. As in any museum, decisions are made to emphasize one element over others or to arrange displays in certain ways (Ivan and Karp 1991:1). Moreover, these are political decisions, often inscribing membership into the community. For example, in depicting ancestors, families, and clans, the walls of the Penobscot Nation Museum authenticate connections to living Penobscot.

As Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine have pointed out in their book, *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1991), museums are not neutral but are filled with cultural assumptions and political contestations. Moreover,

Museums are organized on the basis of assumptions about the intentions of the objects' producers, the cultural skill and qualifications of the audience, the claims to authoritativeness made by the exhibition, and judgments of aesthetic merit or authenticity of the objects or settings exhibited. [Ivan and Karp 1991:12]

To conclude, when James rejected the tourist club at the beginning of this section, he was affirming that the value of the root club lay not only in the object itself, but in his ability to create connections between the anonymous tourist club and those who had made it. It is through these connections that cultural objects at the Penobscot Nation Museum are authenticated.<sup>16</sup>

As one follows the basketmaker's hands to the next rib, a black and white photograph becomes visible. As more strips of ash are woven, an important ancestor begins to appear in the photograph. He stands with a canoe

in his hand and wears Penobscot crown-like headdress. He is Chief Big  
Thunder (Frank Loring). The basketmaker continues to weave.

RIB V  
CHIEF BIG THUNDER



Figure 11

One day, I sat in the museum's small office with James trying to organize some of his file drawers when the phone rang. I heard him saying a lot of "hms" and "ahems," and then, "We'll do that for you. I'll make copies, yep." When he finished talking, he told me that an old woman living in Bucksport, Maine wanted some photographs of Big Thunder. "She said she was related to Big Thunder. She wants me to send them to her," he explained. He didn't look very convinced. "Who is Big Thunder?" I asked.

James carefully took the photograph of Big Thunder (Frank Loring) out of its plastic casing on the museum wall as he explained,

Big Thunder was a show person. He went out and explained the Penobscot Tribe. He wasn't really a chief, but he was called one. Back in the 1900s, tribal people went out to sell their goods in tourist areas by the coast – the family of Big Thunder would go do their craft down in Kennebunk.<sup>17</sup> Big Thunder would explain Penobscot culture, old snowshoes, root clubs, and baskets [to tourists].

In her book, *Women of the Dawn* (1997), Bunny McBride briefly explores the legacy of Big Thunder as part of the first wave of Indian entertainers and performers that influenced Molly Spotted Elk, the famous Penobscot film star and vaudeville dancer.

Best among early Penobscot performers was a fellow called Big Thunder. His real name was Frank Loring. In 1833, when he was just a boy, Frank's mother died, and he and his older sisters went on the road to make a living for themselves. They roamed New England selling baskets, and they spent eight months on display in P.T. Barnum's American museum in New York City...Frank grew to be a six-foot-four inch showman worthy of the name Big Thunder. He directed and performed in Indian traveling shows for several decades. [McBride 1997:107]

Of these traveling shows, Big Thunder was best known for his production of the popular play Pocahontas in which he played both the fierce Indian chief who falls in love with Pocahontas and Captain John Smith.

In the above photograph (see Figure 11), Big Thunder is the man on the right wearing a traditional Penobscot headdress with its feathers in the shape of a crown. He stands to objects of all kinds that spread out along his canoe. James has a good eye for pointing out the objects in photographs, “There's a lacrosse stick, deer hide, a knife, bows and arrows, eagle feathers, a birch bark basket,” he told me. “That's Big Thunder's friend, Nicholas

Andrews.” The photograph seems to resonate for James. He brought it out on his own when I mentioned Big Thunder and showed me that he had made copies. Perhaps he feels some connection to this early Penobscot keeper of objects.

In Figure 12, shown below, one can see the many objects that converge around the Big Thunder photograph. The arrangement and types of objects in this museum display are strikingly similar to those in Big Thunder’s photograph. Here, however, Big Thunder’s photograph is only a small part of a larger display. His picture is in a white frame in the lower right. A sign directly below the pictures lists in hand written script every single object that is visible. Masks surround the photo like a plastic pan-Indian shrine. Above and below are intricate Penobscot birch bark carvings of deer and trees, a miniature canoe, wolf skin, a drum, bows, arrows, and a rootclub. Photos of other ancestors related to Big Thunder are also visible.



Figure 12

Big Thunder, then, is an ancestral figure who “explained Penobscot culture, old snowshoes, root clubs, and baskets.” Like James, he stood between the world of tourists and Penobscot, narrating and talking about many of the same kinds of artifacts and objects. For both men, the objects are the medium through which they perform or narrate the stories of their people and themselves. In a sense, both James and Big Thunder are what Levi-Strauss has defined as *bricoleurs*. They speak not only with things but through the medium of things, working with and reorganizing a set collection of *signs* (in this case cultural objects) both narratively and physically to collect and transmit a message (Levi-Strauss 1966:20). Big Thunder’s careful showcase of objects by his canoe, the way he spreads things out and balances the materials, resonates with the same aesthetic artistry that James applies to his reorganization and balancing of displays to fit other objects and object-histories into visual relationships of people, their things, and their ancestors.

Later in June of 2004, Big Thunder appeared again. This time, however, he was “Great Thunder” and his name was on a show-billing advertisement that passed through the museum in the hands of Bunny McBride, the Maine Indians ethnographer and historian mentioned previously. She bustled into the museum early in the morning and gave James a big hug. When she learned I was an intern, she was extremely enthusiastic, whispering that I should help James organize his files. Immediately, she pulled a large brown piece of newspaper that was folded in half and slightly ripped from amidst a pile of notebooks. The words “Chief Great Thunder” were written in

bold at the top. Directly below this was a character drawing, complete with a headdress, moccasins, deerskin clothes, and an accentuated nose. Along the bottom, more text appeared, “Come see wild Indian performers.” James laughed uproariously at this, almost driven into a fit of coughing, as Bunny read it aloud. Her pointer finger trailed over the words. Her mouth grimaced. They stood huddled over the artifact in the gift shop room, both fascinated. Then, suddenly, they switched to conversing and mulling over some other photo albums, the ones depicting Penobscot ancestors and landscapes. The “Chief Great Thunder” newspaper disappeared back into Bunny’s notebooks.

Just to the left of Chief Big Thunder’s photograph, past an open doorway, is a newly created Molly Spotted Elk display. Although Molly Dellis, most often known as Molly Spotted Elk, was not yet three years old when Chief Big Thunder died at the age of eighty-three, she knew about and was inspired by his adventurous life because folks talked about it long after he was gone (McBride 1997:107). As the basketmaker continues to weave, Molly Spotted Elk comes into focus. This is her story, and it is the story of her traveling bag.

RIB V

MOLLY SPOTTED ELK'S TRAVELING BAG



Figure 13

“Jean Moore, Molly’s daughter, gave us a bunch of her stuff, the bag, the moccasins, the drum, the bracelets, the new dress on the wall over there, the necklace. Molly had the bag all her life and made the dolls herself.” James was talking about the recently donated belongings of Molly Spotted Elk

(1903-1977), a famous Penobscot woman. The glass case was dramatically different from the last time I had seen it, populated at that time only with dolls. Now, a worn looking bag drew attention at the center, and Molly Spotted Elk's eyes peered out from an enlarged photograph, her name inscribed on new looking books and articles beside it. To the left, a square brown drum made of hide balanced on its woven frame. James told me about the bag, "That's the bag Molly brought with her to France." The objects were lit with one of the new fluorescent lights James had bought recently. The glass case is shown in Figure 13.

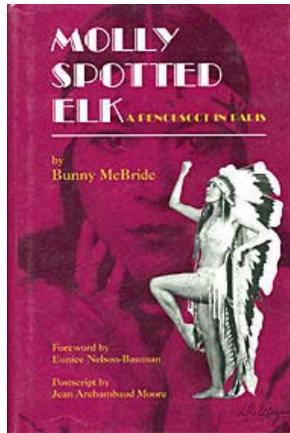
Molly's traveling bag, now displayed in the Penobscot Nation Museum, holds within it the many paths of her life. As anthropologist Janet Hoskins writes, "Things tell the stories of people's lives" (1998:2). But I would also argue that the reverse is true, lives also tell and retell the stories of things. In the following, I will briefly represent Molly's story as it is also the story of her carrying bag.

Molly Dellis chose her stage name, "Molly Spotted Elk" herself. She was born in 1903 on Indian Island under the Christian name Molly Alice, which became Molly Dellis in the Penobscot way of pronunciation. Her parents were both Wabanaki. Molly's mother, Philomene, a woman who created her livelihood through basketmaking and selling, was a Maliseet with Penobscot and a little French ancestry (McBride 1999:15).

Molly Spotted Elk's story has been skillfully articulated by Bunny McBride, an ethnographer and historian of Maine Native Americans, in her

two books, *Molly Spotted Elk* (1995) and *Women of the Dawn* (1999).

Whereas *Molly Spotted Elk* is written in historiography/biography from,



*Women of the Dawn* is a creative nonfiction that draws directly from Molly Dellis’ journals and the words of living relatives. Both of these books are physically presented in the museum’s Molly Spotted Elk display and are also available for browsing in the gift shop’s small library bookcase.

**Figure 14**

In the new display arrangement, Molly Spotted Elk’s green bag is surrounded by signs of her in the past and present. She is forever a beautiful 21 year old with her chin in her palms, her black part, and headband (see Figure 14).

During her life Molly was many things: a student, a mother, a writer of poems, journals, and history, a vaudeville dancer, and an Indian show girl. She was also a ballerina, a social thinker, a Hollywood film star, a member of the *Wild Wild West* TV show and a refugee from German bombs in France during World War II. In her diary, and even in the printed newspaper, Molly commented on the racism of her crowds. For example, she challenged racist insults at a school performance by writing what she explained in her diary as a “criticism on a school problem and racial feeling to the Boston Telegram” (Molly Dellis: quoted in McBride 1995:49). On another occasion she explained, “A front row couple made fun of us. I flirted with the fellow and the girl became silent.” As Molly grew older, she became increasingly aware

of the layered conceptions her audiences had of her. She wrote, “Cried after performance. . . Why? Heard a cutting remark” (Molly Dellis: quoted in McBride 1995:49).

Molly’s multiple identities are embodied by her love of dancing the waltzes of Europe as well as the snake dances of her people that were often performed directly following each other in Penobscot Chief Inauguration ceremonies on Indian Island (McBride 1999:111). Dance and performance were her passions and she traveled far beyond Indian Island in pursuit of them.

When Molly was young, she was part of a road show that performed all over New England. At one point, she worked in the

office of Frank Speck, the anthropologist whose book, *Penobscot Man*, is another of the books on the Penobscot Nation Museum’s shelf. She went briefly to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire,

to Swarthmore Preparatory School, and to the University of Pennsylvania. Molly was also the

star of a 1923 film called *Silent Enemy*. Her billboard advertisement is illustrated in Figure 15.



**Figure 15**

During her travels, much of the money Molly earned she sent home to her family on Indian Island (McBride 1999: 113). Of this home, which she would return to many times throughout the years, she wrote, “Indian Island is part of the land not sold, leased, or relinquished by the tribe, and rights to it are retained by the Penobscot people. No white man can own land here.”

(Molly 1955, quoted in McBride 1999:8). For Molly, Indian Island was much more than a piece of property, and her gifts of money “home” traced her connection, bridging her modern life and knowledge with the island’s “contemporary pastness,” re-orienting the fruits of her work to the land as a *place*.

In 1931, Molly traveled to France with the famous United States Indian Band<sup>18</sup> and performed the opening dance for the International Colonial Exposition in Paris (McBride 1997:115). Her family listened to the broadcast on a radio, the first one on Indian Island. In France, Molly fell in love with a man named Jean Archambaud. She returned briefly to Indian Island during the Great Depression, but returned to France again to find Jean, and they married. During the war, however, Molly was forced to flee again, this time with her child, separating from Jean to escape the German World War II planes. While in Royan, France, she wrote in her journal, “Panic ahead, wonder, doubt, prayers, longing, writing—and a woman walks alone. Everywhere there are Germans...There remains only one thing for me: to go home” (Molly Dellis: 1940 quoted in Bunny McBride 1999:116). Although Molly and Jean wrote many letters, they did not see each other again. He was unable to obtain an American visa. Molly spent the last years of her life on Indian Island, now connected by a one lane bridge to the mainland.

James showed me a photograph of her as an old woman in one of the Penobscot Nation Museum albums. She stands in a long line of people in front of one of the houses that was once a few hundred yards from the museum. She

is wearing a deerskin dress, a necklace, and moccasins. Her hair is braided. James dates the photograph to 1957. “She is partaking in a dance that Chief Poolaw used to participate in the dancing season,” he told me.

Today, the bag that traveled with Molly throughout New England and onto film sets and to France rests in the glass display case of the Penobscot Nation Museum. It is soft and worn with use. Its green color is faded. A sturdy zipper winds across the top. It has come to rest in the glass case by way of Molly’s daughter, Jean Moore. James reorganizes around it. He moves some objects out of the display case and keeps others. He finds symmetry with dolls and photos in which Molly still seem to watch, her head in her hands and her long slender fingers visible.

When visitors ask about Molly Spotted Elk, James begins by talking about her bag and its journey to France and then to the Penobscot Nation Museum. Molly’s life tells the story of the worn bag, and her worn bag evokes the story of her life. They write each others histories, each a thing on display and each made more tangible by the other. Hoskins terms this kind of object a *biographical object*. She writes,

At the temporal level, the biographical object grows old, and may become worn and tattered along with the life span of the owner. . . . At the spatial level, the biographical object limits the concrete space of its owner and sinks its roots deeply into the soil. It anchors the owner to a particular time and place. . . . Finally, the biographical object imposes itself as the witness of the functional unity of the user, his or her everyday experience made into a thing. [Hoskins 1998:8]

But this biographical object, Molly Spotted Elk’s bag, is multiply embedded in its display. In the museum, James again describes how he created the new

display to several tourists. Then he continues, “And that’s a new dress Jean Moore donated over on the wall.” He points to it and to the beads that hang from a coat hanger with the dress.

But the museum tour does not stop there. In the background, one can hear the faint music of Native Choice Radio. The sound comes from James’ tiny office behind the gift shop. There, James’ White Buffalo painting rests, an object equally entwined with life decisions and travels, yet composed of very different substances and imagery. Although the White Buffalo painting has been purposefully created, it too follows James’ travels to the plains of the mid-west, far from Indian Island. This time, the basketmaker’s weave speaks of James’ wandering life-history.

RIB VII

JAMES AND THE WHITE BUFFALO



Figure 16

James' White Buffalo painting hangs on the wall of the museum's tiny office above an eraser board that is often covered by the scribbles of his son. The painting is acrylic on a piece of compressed fiberboard. Three lines run through the painting where the boards are glued together. In the center of the work, the White Buffalo rises from a pipe held by a brown hand in the lower

center. The canvas itself is shaped in a four leaf clover. This is a traditional Penobscot design that can be found in old books and prints. The colors of the painting are purposeful. According to James, the four colors that trace this design are the four colors of the cardinal directions. Yellow is east, white is north, red is south and blue is west. James explained that it is the cycle of all human beings: birth, youth adulthood and old age. “When our physical body is gone, we become part of the whole universe and we may come again. That’s what I believe anyway.” He laughed inwardly a little. “Not everyone believes what I believe.” James tilted his head back to look more closely at his painting. “I wanted to show those elementary colors to show that the universe is connected to everything that I saw.” He talked excitedly and stood up as he described the sky behind the buffalo. He said he had stood at equinox and had seen the earth move, day to night. He pointed to the brighter star in the painting to the right of the buffalo, “the North Star,” he said. Then he followed the line dividing day and night down and laughed, “I was smoking and there was the White Buffalo.” It appeared as tendrils of smoke.

### **The White Buffalo and Pan-Indian Life Histories**

As Hoskins writes, “Since a life history is not only a recital of events but also an organization of experience, the way memory is rendered in a narration of the self is a part of both individual style and cultural fashioning” (1998:7). According to James, the White Buffalo is part of a Sioux legend, as well as being a tee-shirt design, a painting of the cosmos, a symbol of the life

cycle, and a personal history. It is Penobscot, and it is “Plains Indian.” The smoke from the pipe finds image within the loops of a Penobscot clover. But this is not a contradiction. The White Buffalo painting declares a pan-Indian relationship that cannot be separated from personal experience in the making. It expresses the lived paths of shared Native American experiences: the destruction of homelands, of language, and religions as well as the shared healing.<sup>19</sup> More particularly, it is the way that James traces his life, his journeys across the country in a beat-up old car to the Institute of Native American Art in Santa Fe.

The Institute of Native American Art developed from and contributed to the rise of the Native American art market in the 1970s. It was established in 1962 to train Native American artists by bringing Native Americans from across the United States together with an esteemed faculty of Native art professors (Bernstein 1999:66). According to Bruce Bernstein, the current assistant director of cultural resources at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., students at the institute were encouraged to use their creativity to respond to life experiences. Their work began to represent a pan-Indian expression of the modern conditions of Native American lives. For James, this is a more personal story. As he explained, “The White Buffalo is interwoven with the path of my life and the decisions I made.”

James told the full story of the creation of the White Buffalo painting on one hot summer day. He began, “It started at a time when I was working in

Bar Harbor selling tee shirts.” He stood, leaning on a stool behind the gift-shop counter, his elbows crossed. Two male tourists listened. Another flipped through the tee-shirts. “On the way down, there’s a zoo,” he continued. “Every time I went by there, I’d see that buffalo outside laying down. I thought it was sad because the buffalo had done so much for Native people. So I did a tee-shirt of the Buffalo.” He explained that it was a black tee-shirt. He had used white ink because the guy at the tee-shirt print shop had thought it would show up better. He went on, “According to Sioux legend, White Buffalo Calf Woman brought the pipe of peace to the Plains Indians. From that point on there’s been critical points in my life where I had to make decisions and usually a White Buffalo would show itself to me.” He nodded across the room to his White Buffalo painting, then continued,

“The first time I saw the buffalo, I was in Santa Fe. I was at school, headed North at Cline’s Corners. There was all kinds of weather that day. Sunshine to hail. I was driving through the prairie and pulled out because it had stopped raining and stuff. I thought: do I really want to do this, go to school?” He cleared his throat. “Looking straight ahead, I could see the mountains in the direction of Santa Fe. The clouds started breaking over these mountains and a white cloud started puffing out, getting bigger and bigger. The cloud formed just like my tee-shirt design. I said, I guess I’m supposed to go. . . Then, when I was getting ready to graduate, I was sitting on the porch, a cloud came by blowing eastward and I knew that I had to come back home.”

A tourist interrupted James to buy a print out of the “Ten Indian

Commandments,” a gift shop favorite, and the story ended. James accepted the five dollar bill and put it in the safe box under the counter.

Later I asked James to tell me more about the White Buffalo. This time he sat in his office chair in front of his computer printing out photographs on shiny photo paper. I leaned on a stack of papers and wrote furiously as he talked. “At another time,” he said, “I wanted to get a B.A. so I could start teaching at the school here [on Indian Island]. I was taking care of my uncle’s place. The only lamp [there] was dim, and there wasn’t enough light to see in the laundry room. When I got to the light, there was a little white Buffalo fetish telling me to either go to school or work at the museum.”

“What was it?” I asked, looking up from my paper. James stood up to explain, tracing the shape of the fetish with his forefinger and thumb.

“It was a stone piece like they use for earrings, the shape of a buffalo with a turquoise eye. I decided not to get my B.A.” he clarified. “Those two more years [he already had an Associates Degree of Arts from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe] could be spent doing art history of my people without jumping through the hoops of college. Maybe I could do some sculpting in the office at the museum.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Projects and Dreams**

James and his White Buffalo painting are mutually defined and reciprocally constitutive (Hoskins 1998:24). The White Buffalo, both as a painting and as an apparition, continues to influence and inspire the turns of

his life. This is most strongly manifest in his hopes for the future, in his projects and dreams. As James explained, “More years could be spent doing art history of my people. . . Maybe I could do some sculpting at the museum.”

I came to know James through these projects and dreams. The White Buffalo painting was a constant companion in the museum’s office, reminding James of the contours of his life, the decisions he made, and his goals for the future. The following is a brief excerpt from my notes on the first day I went to work at the Penobscot Nation Museum. It was early in June and I remember feeling butterflies as I drove for the second time ever across the bridge that connects Indian Island to the mainland. The summer began with projects.

We shook hands. I said something about it being nice to meet him or see him again, finally after all this time. I asked him how he was. He said, “Good good.” and showed me into his office where he described his organizational piles. He sat down in front of an old looking computer and began talking about the various projects that he wanted to do and how I could help. One project was a Penobscot-English primer; another was Penobscot language flashcards with Penobscot written on one side and English on the other. He also talked about making a calendar and showed me a folder with some black and white drawings. James wanted to advertise the museum more and make a color pamphlet with pictures. The current pamphlet is black and white and is mostly covered by a text history.<sup>21</sup>

Then, James began to tell me his dream for a new museum. This new museum will be a better place, with an air conditioner, and a bigger building. James said that he wants the museum to face east to be traditional. He showed me a design of a museum floor plan that the Seminoles had used, and explained that he wanted to do basically the same thing. It would have a big open room with a gift shop, a bathroom, and a place to watch films. He took out a map of the island and showed me the plot of land he was thinking of. Some plots of land were 100 percent tribally owned and others were only 52 or 90 percent. He was thinking that the museum should go on a particular spot that was 100 percent and on part of another piece of land that was something like 70 percent tribally owned and the other part was owned by his uncle. He said from there they run canoe and camping trips up

the river. He said the new museum might be built in two or three years and that it would cost about 5 million dollars.

We began talking about the real purpose of the museum. He said, "To provide a social place, to start the Green Corn Ceremony<sup>22</sup> again." James told me the story of Gluskap, the first man and the first woman. He told me that the first woman gave her body so that the people had resources. Her bones became corn. The new museum, he explained, could revive this ceremony. He told me how he'd grown up with it every year when he was a kid, but for the past 30 years they didn't do it. I asked why, and he said it was because of volunteerism. The same people had been doing it year after year. He spoke so fervently that my eyes became glossy with the strength of his dream. He spoke of pride in "Penobscot identity" and the importance of having a place for ceremonies and dance.

James' desire to have a new museum on the island and a field for dancing is linked to his strong connection to the island and his memories of the Green Corn Ceremony. According to James, the Green Corn Ceremony occurred once a year at the time of the first harvest. It was a festival in which people celebrated Penobscot identity and continued traditions. James' foremost concern is for his people and their needs.

One day, he told me about cultural day at his son's school and how they had invited male Penobscot to dance. "The boys were too shy. They didn't want to dance. There was a bad feeling," James said. "What we need are male role models who weren't afraid to get up there and dance." He looked me in the eye as he spoke. This time, however, James said that he had gone to his son's cultural day and that there were other Indians there. Some were dressed up with normal work cloths and others in traditional garments. "I wore my rainbow suit," he told me. He leaned back on one of the basket cases, "They all danced and my son joined. People in the audience joined. I want

people in the community to get through their division and come together at a new museum where they can dance.”

Echoing James, Barry Dana explained,

For about twenty years people [Penobscot] were not dancing. When I was hired by the school as the cultural teacher, I began teaching dancing. Dancing represents a real community celebration where we can have fun. It also represents a tradition passed on from our ancestors. [Macdougall 2004:24]

James’ dream for a new museum on Indian Island did not materialize over the summer. On the one hand, the area he wanted was prone to flooding. On the other hand, people weren’t sure they wanted increased tourist traffic on the island. John “Bear” expressed his sentiments about building a new museum on the Indian Island.

Well I don’t think people [tourists] come to the island to get updated on culture or whatnot. They come to the island mostly out of curiosity with their windows rolled up, driving around like they’re watching a movie. To see if they can see any real Indians or to enjoy artist’s shops. I think the one in Millinocket makes more sense for a few reasons—the main reason being there’s traffic there. ...And obviously, it’s a distance from other tribes as well but, what isn’t. I think we have enough small island stuff. I think we need to keep it simple on the island. I mean, we have enough shops over there and stuff where people can come over and observe and see what we have to offer and see what we are today. That’s they way it should stay I think. (8/11/04)

But James’ dream for the new museum hasn’t faded. He is passionate about his culture and people and even refuses to go to events like Indian Field day that he feels are shallow traces of the past. For James, the place and the ceremonial field need to be created before things can change. For James, place comes first, yet place is limited by money and resources, as well as by

disagreement over logistics. James says, “We need a place, a social place, to start the Green Corn Ceremony again.”

As James talks, his White Buffalo peers out from behind him. It is later in the summer and we are working on a brochure for the museum. Next, we will make a basketry calendar. I ask him if he wants to include his White Buffalo painting. He laughs and tells me, no. As we talk, we see a black Ford pulling into the museum parking lot. It is George Francis, a Penobscot elder who lives off Indian Island. He enters the museum carrying a birch bark hat in his left hand.

## RIB VIII

CREATING THE SSIPSIS DISPLAY: GEORGE'S BIRCH BARK  
*ASOLKWÔN* (HAT) AND THE *MGESO* (EAGLE)

Figure 17

The first time I met George Francis, he was leaning against the wall of the gift shop, his back to a stack of postcards, talking about pacemaker defibrillators, sugarless sugar, suppers for elders on the island, and moose hunting. It was a humid morning in late June, and he was dressed in a tee-shirt and pants. He had short white hair and a big stomach. The next time he came in, about a week later, he was wearing a birch bark hat that sat on top of his head like a baseball cap two sizes too small. Pieces of birch were woven together with hide that visibly curled around the rim and bottom. He told James that the hat was one of Ssipsis's.

Ssipsis (1941-2003), otherwise known as Jean Thompson, was a famous Penobscot writer, social worker and artist who George had known. She died very recently. One of the books that she wrote sits on the Penobscot Nation Museum bookshelf. It is called *Molly Molasses and Me: a Collection of Living Adventures* (1988). The book is a collection of the adventures of

Molly Molasses, a Passamaquoddy, who likes to tell stories in her native tongue, go berry picking, and fish. Ssipsis was also a social worker. As James explains, she developed Indian leadership programs and school curricula appropriate for Indian school children. She also gave lectures at colleges all over Maine and displayed art work in the Abbe, Hudson, and Penobscot Nation Museums.

### **The Emergence of the Ssipsis Display**

Arjun Appadurai has written that the trajectory of a thing-in-motion may be understood as a *life history* of a particular object (1988:5). The birch bark hat and the eagle discussed in the following section are visibly invested with this sense of life history, with these human relational trajectories and exchanges. The birch bark hat, for example, actively draws particular Ssipsis-made objects together into a display and displaces others. James, as a keeper of objects and a museum coordinator, recognizes the importance of a particular object's life history or trajectory. In fact, the displays he creates amplify these connections between humans and objects, exchange and movement. But more importantly, the objects come alive through his vivid oral histories of object trajectories and displays in the making. The following is the hat's life history, its trajectory.

As we stood in the museum gift shop, George tried the birch bark hat that Ssipsis had made on my head and joked that it would look perfect on me. The bent birch bark rim dug into my head. I reached up and felt a small two

inch crack along the top of the hat where the wood had split. George told us that he had used it for fishing. He said that when it rained, nothing would touch his head. “Probably smells like bug spray,” he said. He took it back from me and put it on his own head again. I could hear the birch bark creak as he tried to fit it on. “See, Ssipsis made it for me.” Taking it off again, he held it upside down. “She usually put my name on everything she gave me.” Inside the hat, the name Francis was written in black ink. A colorful cloth lined the inside hem. James joked, “You could donate it to the museum.”

George Francis grimaced, “It’s worth something ain’t it? Do you think some tourist would buy it for fifty dollars?” When a mother and father came in with their son a few minutes later, he tried to sell it to them. He told them he had never worn it. But instead they asked for a picture of a little Indian boy so their son could play dress up. James found one in the photograph album, and I scanned and printed it. He did not charge them anything. After the hat remained unsold for several days, George decided to donate it.

The arrival of the birch bark hat instigated the creation of a new Ssipsis display case in the main room of the museum (shown in Figure 17 above). When visitors ask about the display, James explains how he reorganized the prior exhibit around George’s donation, moving some ancient birch bark baskets to the top shelf and installing new fluorescent lights. He further explains his decision to put an *Indian Country* article about Ssipsis’s accomplishments as an artist and social worker at the display case’s bottom center.



**Figure 18**

The article is now surrounded by other objects Ssipsis made during her life: miniature birch bark canoes, a small drum with a painted figure on its hide, and some moccasins. The hat which had been an inspiration for this new display rests in the lower right. James explained that he had been meaning to make a Ssipsis display for some time.

More recently, George brought in another one of Ssipsis's works, a beautiful birch bark eagle. "I had this eagle in the Abbe for two months. It's a beauty," George said. The eagle now hangs from the ceiling in the corner next to the TV that shows the daily film, "The Penobscot: the People and Their River." James paid George 200 dollars for it.

One day in August, I went to George's apartment at the Penobscot Terrace. This apartment complex, designed for the elderly of Old Town, is located next to a gas station. Behind it, the Penobscot River rushes past. When I arrived, George was waiting in the lobby. We took the elevator up together. George's apartment has two rooms and a bathroom. It is very clean and very sparse. We sat on two of those comfortable chairs that rock. I asked him more about Ssipsis and how he had known her. He explained,

Oh I met her a long time ago. When I started going to the spring some 20 something years ago. Ahhh, I helped her with a few moose. Most of the time I was over there alone and in the hunting time you know. And they always cooked something for me or had me over for a meal. She said come on over. So I'd give her a little bit of money and go buy the chicken. Her and Georgia Mitchell. They lived together. (8/22/04)

George spent much of his life as a yacht builder and lived in Bass Harbor.

Bass Harbor is a small coastal down on Mount Dessert Island, Maine. We found out that we knew some of the same people through my dad who had grown up on Mount Dessert Island and the Isles that surround it. "I'm a Bunker," I told him. "My grandmother's buried on Cranberry Island."

"You don't say!" he said. "I used to go deer hunting out there all the time. Do you know Wilfred Bunker?"

I told him that the name sounded familiar. After we had made this connection, George seemed to loosen up. The conversation turned to George's favorite subject, moose hunting.

George told me how he used to go up to the fee lands<sup>23</sup> to hunt moose. He would park his car and then make a few moose calls. He demonstrated by holding his hands up to his mouth and making bellowing noises. Then, "I'd just sit right in his truck and wait for them to come. Usually at dusk," he said. He continued,

I remember this one time this ole great moose got stuck in some mud right down by the road where I was parked. When I saw her, I got out of the car real quiet. She didn't hear me at all! You know, the best place to shoot a moose is right behind the shoulder blade. Either that or the throat. Well this one, I got right behind the shoulder blade. Boy was she a tough one. She had a friend right near too. We almost took two home that night. Enough to feed a whole family for a year! Have you ever had moose burgers? We'd keep the meat or months in our big

freezer. Sometimes I'd bring some up to Ssipsis. Maybe that's why she gave me the hat. (8/22/04)

“Yep, it's a good hat,” George continued. His eyes seemed to momentarily lose focus. Then he repeated what he had told James and I in the museum, presumably in reference to rain and mosquitoes, “When I wore it, nothing touched by head.”

Now, the hat rests in a newly created Ssipsis display, enacting its life history in two ways: through James' oral narratives of arrival to the museum and through its placement among Ssipsis objects in the new glass case.

But the corner from the Ssipsis display, in the museum gift shop, is a very different kind of object. It is brightly colored and recently printed. It costs five dollars for one and seven for two. The basketmaker turns her basket to weave another strand of ash, over and under the next rib. It is a poster of “The Ten Indian Commandments.”

## RIB IX

## THE TEN INDIAN COMMANDMENTS AND THE “UMBRELLA OF COLONIALISM”

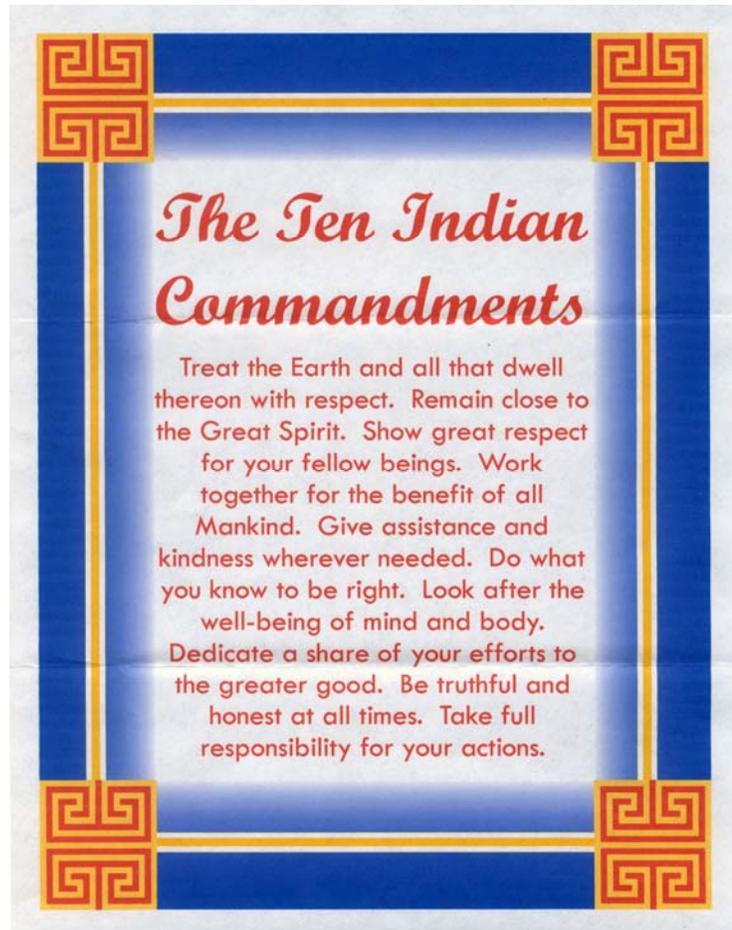


Figure 19

This poster of “The Ten Indian Commandments” was the most commonly purchased item in the museum over the summer. James prints them out from the museum computer onto high grade paper and sells them to tourists for five dollars each. Overweight women coming back from High Stakes Bingo<sup>24</sup> on Indian Island buy them. Forty year old men looking for something to decorate the walls of their California home buy them. “That

would be nice in a frame,” one man said. Two Swedish visitors bought it as a “memento.” “That’s nice,” they said, as I wrapped it in a brown envelope.

“Feel free to look around some more,” I told them. “Thank you for coming.”

Originally derived from somewhere on the internet, the Ten Indian Commandments twist notions of colonialism and Christianity into a purposeful *simulation* of the “native real” (Vizenor 1998:2). As Native American theorist Gerald Vizenor writes,

The simulation of the Indian is the absence of the native, and the absence is a presence of the *other* ... The chiasmic inversions of *indian* simulations, the mock unities of culture and exclusion are the ironies of representation, and deconstruction; the *differance*, and the anticipation of native stories over the margins of ethnographic documents. [Vizenor 1998:35]

James is aware of the apparent<sup>25</sup> contradictions in this poster – “the chiasmic inversions of *indian* simulations” enmeshed with the Christian Ten Commandments – but he also knows that it sells well among the tourists. He only laughed when I remarked on this, smiling knowingly. He knows that Penobscot traditions and Christian values are not mutually exclusive. And he also knows that it is not “The Ten Commandments” but the photographs and proclamations that surround it (its co-objects and texts) that tell the Penobscot story.

Just through the corridor from the stand that holds copies of “The Ten Indian Commandments” is a proclamation. It hangs over one of the basket cases in the first room of the museum. Issued by Spencer Philps, the governor of New England on Nov 3, 1755, roughly at the time of the French and Indian

War, the proclamation states in calligraphic penmanship that a bounty of 40 pounds will be offered for every male Indian scalp brought forth. For women and children, the reward will be 20 pounds. Similarly, 1756, at the House of Representatives, the following statement was issued, “For every Indian enemy that they shall kill and produce the scalp to the Government and Council in evidence, the sum of three hundred pounds. . . (Speck 1940:xix).”

Beginning as early as the 1500s, colonialism brought death, destruction, and assimilation to the Penobscot people. Initially, environmental changes due to European farming and harvesting of lumber took a great toll on the Penobscot, causing soil erosion and drastically reducing the wealth and abundance of Maine’s woods. Diseases common in Europe swept through Wabanaki villages throughout Maine and New England (Maine Indian Program 1989:A8).<sup>26</sup> James tells museum visitors that close to 90% of Penobscot died. In the wake of epidemics, Christian missionaries often replaced Wabanaki shamans.

St. Ann Catholic Church, for example, was founded on Indian Island in 1688 (see Figure 20). A flyer available in the church today and at the Penobscot Nation Museum gives one version of the Penobscot encounter with missionaries. It states,



**Figure 20**

The Penobscot would have had their first encounter with a Catholic priest when Samuel de Champlain sailed up the Penobscot River in 1604...The British under Colonel Westbrook in 1723 came upon Indian Island and burned the village including the Catholic Church...Our current church was built by Father Virgil Barber SJ between 1828-1830. Saint Ann—Indian Island is the oldest continuous site of Catholic worship in New England and our present church building is the third oldest Catholic Church in Maine (St. Ann Church Flyer).

Within this new faith, however, the Penobscot invented new ways to embody their past. For example, it became a tradition in the summer for members of the community to canoe upriver after mass on Sunday to picnic on an island. Most of the middle aged Penobscot now living on Indian Island were educated in Catholic school on Indian Island. Their grandparents and parents often fed them by engaging in crafts. For example, they made snowshoes, walking sticks, and baskets for sale. They also made Catholicism their own (Maine Indians Program 1989:A20).

Across the room from the proclamation and the flyer, and above the guest book that every visitor signs, is a black and white photograph of approximately 12 Penobscot school children standing in front of St. Ann Catholic Church, which still stands on the Island (see Figure 21). They wear pressed cotton clothes that resonate



**Figure 21**

both with childhood nostalgia and with the more famous images of the Carlisle Indian School, the first off-reservation government boarding school

for Native American children. Carlisle served as the model for dozens of schools throughout the U.S., some of which are still in existence.<sup>27</sup>

During the summer of 2004, I attended the release of the Wabanaki oriented film “Invisible” in a community building on Indian Island. (According to the Episcopalians who funded the project, “Invisible” is an anti-racism video project of the Committee on Indian Relations of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine). The gathering at the screening was quite large, mostly made up of Penobscot and several Episcopalians who had worked on the film with the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation.

At the screening, two versions of the popular carol “Silent Night” framed the film, the opening version in Micmac and the closing in English. As a soulful voice sang, the camera panned to an Episcopal church where priests were walking through the pews. However, most of the film portrayed the voices of Wabanaki people and their hardships. In one striking scene, a Micmac woman speaks about her hardships at one of the Indian boarding schools. She talked about her treatment and how she had not been allowed to look at her brother because if she had, he would be beaten. For punishment, she said, they were forced by nuns to stand in front of the class with all eyes on them. “Children came in not knowing any English.” She continued, tears in her eyes, “How could they expect the children not to know English on Monday and on Tuesday to know it. They were beaten for it.” She went on, “When I left school, I didn’t know what to do with myself. No longer was there the Indian agent or the school nuns telling me what to do...” She spoke

stiffly, her head barely turning. The school she attended remained in service until the 1960s.

In our interview, Carol Dana adamantly tied many of the problems Indian Island is facing today to contemporary colonialism and racism. She explained,

I was getting ready for a talk and I found out, to have your culture, your language repressed is a form of racism. I didn't know that, and that's what I've been struggling with and feeling. It's like I didn't have the words for it. It's like a rubber wall. It will go with you, but it's still there blocking you. I'm finally starting to have a clue now, and maybe I'll have to speak to that at some point, but colonialism. . .

She stressed this word,

All this stuff comes out of the greater umbrella of colonialism, and that's what we've got going on right now... These institutions, they still wash over us with their ways. And our way is not evil. It's not bad. Our people aren't bad. Our Shamans aren't bad. But when you look at the words, they're witches and sorcerers. They weren't. They're supernatural. (1/21/05)

As Carol explained later in the interview, many Old Town residents continue to resent the "free lunch" they think the Penobscot receive. But as she told me, "We, more than anybody know that you don't get things for free. We've given up our freedom, our land bases, our woods, our grass, and whatever else they made money off from us. They don't need to tell me there's no free lunch. Indians know that better than anybody." James had to defend this point to several tourists during the summer.

And as Carol Dana asserts, the umbrella of colonialism continues to resonate today.

We're always made to feel that we're the problem and we're not. That's when I could finally turn it around was when I was in college.

This guy said, “The problem with the American Indian is that even though they might try to marry outside their race, they still show up with their jaw bones and their hair and whatever.” I thought he was talking about me and I was so mad because I couldn’t say anything. I just wasn’t sure what he was getting at. When he left I thought, it’s not my problem. It’s not our problem. . . . It’s the first time the light came on and I could see that people couldn’t accept somebody else that’s different. It’s the first time I turned it around. . . .

And I know we can’t go back to the old ways, but we want to retain our values. We have good values and it’s in our stories. You know? And the worldview and everything is in our language and it’s not bad. You know, we have to lift ourselves up because the people there aren’t lifting us up. It’s to their benefit that we’re down here. It always has been. But I think that people are starting to lift themselves up. I hope so. It’s about time. It’s way over due.”

The room was silent for a moment. We sat in stillness. Then Carol continued,

They don’t want to recognize us as a tribe. The memory I have that’s so strong is during the land claims, they said, “We don’t want a nation within a nation. And this woman got up and started speaking in Passamaquoddy.”

She laughed at that. For her, language and resistance to colonial world views mean strength. Vizenor could easily be writing of Carol’s memory of the Passamaquoddy woman,

These are the stories of native endurance and survivance; the stories that create a sense of presence, a native self, a teasing self in names, relations, and native contingencies. . . . More than survival, more than endurance, or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence. [1998:20]

## RIB X

REPLICATING OLD *ABAZNODAL* (BASKETS) AND FESTIVALS: THE INTERSECTING WEAVES OF EMBODIED MEMORY

Figure 22

One mission of our museum is to have the resources available for people to continue culture. Like basketmakers can use the resources down there to replicate old baskets and that kind of thing....We owe it to our future generations to make sure that they have access to those things just as we do.  
 -Bonnie Newsom<sup>28</sup>

The first room in the Penobscot Nation Museum is a room full of baskets. Display cases are filled with fancy baskets, or baskets with ash shaped like ribbons, fine weave, and intricate patterns, as well as more utilitarian baskets. Posters on the wall explain how baskets are made. Black and white photographs, laminated and shiny, show *noji-abaznodakad* (basketmakers) from the past at work, bending over the long ash strips used to

make baskets, women weaving strands of ash in lawn chairs in the on the grass. During my internship at the museum, James acquired a new basket from the Basket Maker's Shop down the road. These baskets in today's markets are worth hundreds of dollars.

"Where'd you get most of these baskets?" I asked James. We had just finished eating some food I had heated up in the museum's microwave. It was a cold winter day in February and James and I had a lot to catch up on since the summer. His five year old son sat in the other room watching cartoons.

"A lady at one of the big bingo games came and gave us this one, this one and this one," James said. He gestured at some of the baskets lined up on a top shelf. "Pam Cunningham gave us the near one." James' son ran up and knocked on the front door from the inside, trying to trick us into thinking someone was there. "Who is it?" James asked, laughing. He continued, "Basketmaking started for commercial reasons between 1750 and 1850. Before that, we mainly had the larger baskets, the utilitarian ones, like the fish trap."

Prior to contact, Penobscot baskets were more often made out of single pieces of birch bark stitched together, decorated, and waterproofed with resin. Birch bark containers ranged from baskets, boxes, buckets and pails, to meat bags (Maine Indian Program 1989:D57). The museum houses several of these older baskets. The woven fish trap, however, barely visible to the left in Figure 22 was used to catch fish in rivers and in ocean tides. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, woven ash baskets became increasingly important.

James explains, “The 1850’s, that’s when a lot of the baskets got smaller, the tools got smaller. They call them fine weave – fancy baskets.” His son came back and repeated the play. James continued,

When a lot of the native people went out to tourist areas, they’d be invited to people’s houses. They’d make things out of ash because they now knew how people might use them: glove box baskets, handkerchief baskets. They’d see these European things and redesign them as baskets. See that acorn basket. It was made with a hole in the top for people that knitted. The yarn would feed out that hole. They’d sell them to the tourists (1/20/05).

We peered together at the basket case exhibiting these small artistic fancy baskets (see Figure 23 below).



**Figure 23**

“The square basket in the center is a napkin holder,” James said. “They were always looking for uses for them. A lot of different baskets have been adapted to modern times...They come in a little at the time.”

James seemed less interested in the history of the baskets (although it was clearly important) than in how they were made and who had used them.

“Vase baskets were made by forming them around a bottle, something that could hold water. Shopper baskets were made to go get bread, cheese and milk.” He pointed to yet another basket on top of one of the cases, its shape and design looked slightly utilitarian. This basket is shown in Figure 24.



**Figure 24**

“This milk basket was donated by Carol Gostin. Her grandmother, Edith Mitchell used it. Carol donated it after her dad passed away. Milk used to be delivered to the island, so when the guy came to deliver the milk, he’d take the empty one and put a new one in there. It was used for years.” He went on to explain the complicated process by which blocks were used to create some of the bigger baskets meant for carrying things. “They would form the basket around the blocks and then take it out, just like a jigsaw puzzle.”

### **Weaving Baskets and Embodied Memory**

In his book, *How Societies Remember* (1990), Paul Connerton argues that “patterns of body use become ingrained through our interactions with

objects” (1990:94). His book, an effort to understand *incorporating practices* (repetitive embodied habit) as an inertia in the way societies pass on social memory and structures, has much relevance to basket weaving and the festivals that surround it. Not only are the baskets that sit behind the display cases of the Penobscot Nation Museum physical memories of hands of weaving baskets, but as Bonnie Newsom says, they are “resources” that can be used to “replicate old baskets.” Replicating techniques and basket designs are important here because this is precisely how today’s basketmakers weave, repeating and learning the motions of their grandparents and great grand parents until they become unconscious motions of the hand, an embodied past.

The film, “Penobscot Basket Maker” (Sharkey, 2003), repeats continuously on a small video screen at the Hudson Museum at the University of Maine. In the film, Penobscot basketmaker Barbara Francis talks about how she learned basket weaving and particular basket styles from her grandmother. She narrates her life story as she weaves a basket, beginning with the base which she calls the “circle of life.” When she was young, she explains, she became pregnant and her parents kicked her out. She found refuge with some elderly Penobscot women who began to teach her basketmaking. Later, her grandmother took over her training. Although the baskets appear empty, she explains, they are filled with culture, history, tradition and spirituality.

Skilled Penobscot basketmakers like Barbara Francis and Pam Cunningham learned to weave baskets from their elders and relatives. In 2005, their hands trace their grandparents’ hands, weaving brown ash over and

under. Moreover, by using baskets preserved in the Penobscot Nation Museum, such basketmakers can go back even further in time to replicate hundred year old baskets that sit on the Penobscot Nation Museum shelves. Often, this is not only replication, but *mimesis*. The replication or copy acquires or brings out the power of what is represented (Taussig 1993:16). Anthropologist Michel Taussig writes, “. . . the model, if it works, gains through its sensuous fidelity something of the power and personality of that of which it is a model (1993:16).” But this replication also has a historical dimension, a particular thickness through the repetitions of time. As anthropologist Andrew Lass would explain, these basketmakers are recollecting the past and bringing it into the present as lived (Lass 1994:99).<sup>29</sup> In the following I will explore the Maine Indian’s Basketmaker’s Festival, an amazing display of such basketry, as an embodied re-enactment and honoring of the past and its basketmakers. This is how the Penobscot remember.

Every year the most important cultural celebration and gathering for the Penobscot and the other Wabanaki Nations--the Passamaquoddy, the Micmac, and the Maliseet--is the Maine Indians Basketmakers Festival. The more official title is the “Native American Festival in the College of the Atlantic,” but the festival centers on baskets. The 11<sup>th</sup> annual festival took place in Bar Harbor, Maine, about an hour and a half away from Indian Island on Mount Dessert Island, a region known for its island tourist attractions and Acadia National Park.



**Figure 25 – Chief Barry Dana and Co dancing at the Basketmaker’s Festival**

The grounds were set up with a small white canopy tent in the middle with musicians and dancers, speakers and microphones. To the left was a larger canopy tent with at least a hundred booths selling everything from sweetgrass braids, to Chief Barry Dana’s maple syrup, to intricate fancy baskets, beads and necklaces. John “Bear” Mitchell operated the microphone, announcing who would perform next to dance or sing and to give information about the silent auction that was taking place. (The silent auction was a way to bid on various items at the festival by simply casting pieces of paper. This took place in an indoor location nearby). A young woman I met working at the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation accompanied me throughout the festival. We ate “Indian Tacos” together and I looked after her baby.

The most solemn moment of the festival occurred in honor of several basketmakers who had passed away since the last festival. Penobscot leaders, Barry Dana, John “Bear” Mitchell, and some elders whom I did not recognize performed a Penobscot version of a Micmac song. They apologized ahead of time for any mispronunciation. The audience sat around the small white tent that shielded the singers from the sun. Basket stands and basketmaking displays surrounded the audience. The song was slow and dark, low in pitch. *Yem me day deboneh! Do gaido Sote.* It was beautiful and sad. The performers sat facing each other in a circle around their one drum which they hit in unison. The song was long and repeated its main stanza many times. After it was over, John “Bear” Mitchell said on the microphone over a now hushed audience, “That was again an honor song done for Teresa Gardner, Angela Barnes and Sylvia Gabriel. This festival is in their memory.”

After a short break, however, John “Bear” Mitchell came to the microphone again, inviting everyone to join in a round dance. He motioned for me to come up too. This time we formed a large circle around the center tent, holding hands on either side. I was pulled by a small girl wearing a deer skin dress who seemed to know the steps perfectly. The circle turned clockwise at first, then counter clockwise gradually picking up speed. In the middle of the dance, another circle with people wearing colored robes and regalia started to form inside the first. The rhythm was quick and the footwork more complicated than it seemed. Suddenly the link broke and people fell

away laughing. The dance dissolved back into the basket booths and goods for sale.

In the Penobscot Nation Museum, James explains this celebration,

The Penobscot people have been making baskets since our creator Gluskabe gave us the gift of brown ash, birch, and sweet grass. Whether made of brown Ash, birch Bark, or sweet Grass, the talent and detail can be seen in each and every piece. Penobscot would make their baskets, with the entire family being involved in the process sometimes, and travel around the state to sell their wares. Today, Penobscot make baskets that are seen as more of a cultural art, selling for much higher prices. Some of the fancy baskets now are made to resemble different items, such as the acorn, or the strawberry baskets. The museum has many assorted baskets on exhibit made over the past two hundred years that show Penobscot artistry.

At the Penobscot Basketmaker's Festival, the silent auction continues.

## IV. CONCLUSION



**Figure 26**

In this photo, three elderly Penobscot women carefully weave brown ash baskets. I focus on the woman on the left. She sits in concentration and is unaware of the rows of baskets that line the museum's display cases across from her photograph. Recently, she has been transfigured, transformed into the binary zeros and ones of computer language to reappear on the museum's computer screen, and then again re-forming in the print of the museum's calendar. Now she has been placed back on the wall, into her shiny plastic frame. For James and for the woman in the photograph, this reconfiguration is irrelevant.

What *is* important is the quality of the ash which must be freshly pounded from the log of a tree whose roots have thrived through Maine's frozen winters, splintering off into long gray strips that do not break when their moistened fibers are shaped. What is important is the sound the dull end of the axe makes as it hits the wood, "thwunk, thwunk." And what is important is the way she begins a basket by turning it over and working on the base, first soaking the ash to make it malleable, then letting the perpendicular strips of ash touch her arm as she pulls them through in a tight web—a round bottom with ten ribs coming out. What is important is the way these strips of ash, at first freely floating, become firmly connected as more and more strips of ash are added to them parallel to the base, each woven under one and over the next. Over and under until they create a circle. What is important is the conversation and stories told while weaving and the money that comes from selling baskets. What is important is her daughter, now working in the Basketmaker's Shop across the bridge in Old Town, Maine, her hands following the same motion, the same process.

The structure of this thesis has attempted to follow the fingers of the Penobscot basketmaker as she weaves the brown ash around the wood block of her ancestors. The cultural objects of the Penobscot Nation Museum – the snowshoes, the canoes, the bridge, Molly's bag, a photograph of Chief Big Thunder, George's hat, "the Ten Indian Commandments," and the root clubs – are the ash ribs of this basket. They rise vertically from the base of the basket gathering and layering the horizontal ash strips that are woven through them. I

have attempted “to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” (Appadurai 1988:5). More importantly, I have attempted to follow human-thing relations as they emerge in relation to each other, writing each other’s stories.

### **Moving Orientators**

The Plains Indian ethnographer, Irving Hallowell cogently argues that, ...culturally reified objects in the behavioral environment may have functions that can be shown to be directly related to the needs, motivations, and goals of the self. Symbolically represented, such objects are integral parts of the psychological field of the individual as well as the group and must be considered as relevant variables because they can be shown to affect actual behavior [1955:87]

Through processes of entextualization and co(n)textualization, both physical and narrative, the object-ribs of the Penobscot basket manifest not as static self orientators, but as “moving orientators” of Penobscot self: orienting and re-orienting Penobscot bodies and narratives to particular points of reference as they travel.<sup>30</sup>

While all ten ribs or objects embody this travel history to an extent, some draw their orienting ability through physical paths of movement between *place* more clearly than others. Obvious examples are the canoes and snowshoes, objects whose meaning, history, and narrative construction embody travel. The snowshoes, for example, have their own travel and use history. First used by a young Penobscot boy to cross the snowy Penobscot River in winter, they found their way into the care of his grandson who carefully preserved them just as they were. But the snowshoes also found their

way in the hands of his anonymous grandson, first to a dusty box in the Old Town Museum, and finally to the Penobscot Nation Museum. And in the museum context, the child size snowshoes' travel history is interwoven with the history of all Penobscot snowshoes and their uses. Big adult snowshoes physically surround the small pair. Now as a trope of orientation, they are recontextualized into a narrative about the "big picture" of Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac connections. They are also recontextualized into the "big picture" of the land and space of a people who as Carol Dana explained, "roamed and ranged a wide area." Ribs II, canoes, likewise have a similar affect. This time, however, they point to travel on rivers as a "life blood" of the Penobscot, to belonging, and to "our flowing changing identity."

Other ribs of the basket, however, are "moving orientators" in other ways. Molly's bag, for example, traces the life history of an amazing Penobscot woman who crossed borders and boundaries of country and ocean in her resolution to be a film star that portrayed a stereotypical Indian princess, a French dancing star, a ballerina, and a well-loved Penobscot tribal person simultaneously. And more recently, one can follow her bag from the hands of her daughter, Jean Moore, to the museum shelf. Molly's "traveling bag" as it is called, is a museum gift that physically actualizes connection to place and family: to ancestors.

Similarly, certain objects at the Penobscot Nation Museum seem to embody a more biographical orientation to self. As Hoskins argues, the biographical object imposes itself as the witness of the functional unity of its

user, his or her everyday experience made into a living thing. They “share our lives with us” (Hoskins 1998:8). Strathern, in her book, *The Gender of the Gift* (1999), further notes the distinction between the western notion that “things exist in themselves,” and the idea that things can be seen as detached parts of persons or metonyms for their producer (1988:161).

James’ White Buffalo painting and the Big Thunder photograph both seem to take on some of these properties. It is through his White Buffalo that James follows the turns of his life. His painting is an embodiment of this relationship. It is his spirituality. The photograph of Chief Big Thunder, on the other hand, as an object of the museum is also a kind of biographical object because of James’ felt connection with it. He displays the photograph in the museum almost as a shrine to Big Thunder, the traveling showman who has so much in common with him.

In a sense, both James and Big Thunder are what Levi-Strauss has defined as *bricoleurs*. They speak not only with things but through the medium of things, working with and reorganizing a set collection of *signs* (in this case cultural objects) both narratively and physically to collect and transmit a message (Levi-Strauss 1966:20). As Levi-Strauss writes,

Those which the bricoleur’ collects are, however, ones which have to some extent been transmitted in advance – like the commercial codes which are summaries of the past experience of the trade and so allow any new situation to be met economically, provided that it belongs to the same class as an earlier one. [Levi-Strauss 1966:20]

As I write this thesis, I realize that I, too, am participating in *bricolage*.

I am constructing a narrative of a museum within a museum of object

narratives, choosing to put one object's narrative in a particular place in the overall weaving of the basket and reorganizing. As Jacques Derrida has written, "If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*" (Derrida 1990:88). However, I would argue along with Derrida that there is a certain poetic contour to the term *bricolage*. What he terms an "abandonment of all reference to a center, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin..." (Derrida 1990:88)

Part of the Levi-Strauss' formula for bricolage is that the objects of the *bricoleur*, in this case the "moving orientators" of the Penobscot Nation Museum, are permutable. They are "capable of standing in successive relations with other entities – although with only a limited number and, as we have seen, only on the condition that they always form a system in which an alteration which affects one element automatically affects all the others" (1966:20). This resounds with the Penobscot Nation Museum and is crucial to Levi-Strauss's definition of *bricolage*. He states, "In the continual reconstruction from the same materials, it is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of the means: *the signified changes in to the signifying and vice versa*" (emphasis added, Levi-Strauss 1966:21).

However, as we have seen in the Penobscot Nation Museum, incoming objects, although they must first be authenticated by their co-objects or co-texts, also have the ability to create new connections: the museum is a recombinant space of person and things, their images and words. A new flood

of materials is always available and the internet serves to increase this potential. Through their movement across place, through their decontextualization and recontextualization, these ten object-ribs of the Penobscot Nation Museum, among others, instigate the creation of new meanings not only in the reorganization of the display, but in the lived moment of object orientation—whether it is experienced by James, a tourist, or an anthropologist. In fact, this is intrinsic to the museum setting itself. The setting necessitates the decontextualization of objects through which new meanings can be inscribed, embodied and transmitted.

James' creation of the Ssipsis display, the snowshoes, and the Molly Spotted Elk's display case exemplify this recombinant ability. For example, when George gives his hat to James, James is inspired to create a new display. He takes out magazine cuttings and gathers several of Ssipsis's birch bark pieces from around the museum to place in a single case. His aesthetic sense of arrangement effectively enacts and authenticates the objects, his relation to them, and the interconnections between co-objects in the same case.

### **A Return to Object Narratives**

In the museum, surrounded by these objects that are somehow a moment of the past in the present, Penobscot often spoke of the need to “wake up,” to heal spiritually, to be culturally strong again. The words, “we’re waking up, a lot of people are waking up...” have the force of a personal and community history behind them. The following is a brief excerpt from an

interview with Penobscot Bonnie Newsom at the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation.

Rose: Why do you think it's important to preserve Penobscot culture? I mean I know why it's important but I wanted to hear what you...

Bonnie: Right now our identity is very fragile and uh, culture is. . . It is our identity, and all of those things that are involved, that are part of culture. . . Everything from housing, to language, to music, all of it. . . Keeps, keeps us Native, keeps us as Penobscot people. And as these things deteriorate, or as we lose them, we lose part of who we are. And I think we owe it to our ancestors. They worked very very hard to try to keep our culture and we owe it to them. Not only to them, but to our young people as well, to keep it alive. It's what will keep us healthy. We're not a healthy tribe right now . . . But if we can be culturally strong maybe we can go back to being more healthy than what we are now...

Rose: There's so much good in Penobscot culture. It would be such a good thing for people to tap into. . . That I see. . . You know?

Bonnie: Yeah, yeah, it's very healing. We spent a few days at a language camp and it was healing for everybody that was there. I think that part of the reason is that we can all be Penobscot there (yeah) without any external influence. It was like we were secluded—Penobscot Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and maybe that's the way it should be, who knows? But we're always trying to conform to ways that are not indigenous to us.

On another day in the Penobscot Nation Museum, Carol stood looking serious and determined. I continued folding brochures as she and James walked into the museum's main room, the location where the snowshoe display would soon be. At this point, a few snowshoes were simply piled in the corner. She told James that she had just quit her job as Penobscot language teacher at the school on Indian Island, and that she was learning to stand up for herself. She had just been to a Passamaquoddy immersion course in which she was learning to be more fluent in Penobscot.<sup>31</sup> I continued folding

brochures as they pored over photographs together, talking of connections between the Penobscot and the Passamaquoddy. Before she left, Carol told James that she was finally waking up. That a lot of people were waking up. James replied, "Yeah, that's what we need to do. We need to wake up." I asked her if there was one thing she would like to say in my paper and she told me, "Language it is our identity. It is everything." I began to think of language as the narrative strips of ash that weave in and out of the ribs. She continued,

Maybe just for our people, that, all those worldviews or thought our people had are in the language, like our idiomatic things, our jokes. I think that's what got me interested in language is when I used to hear my grandfather talk and my older relatives, and I wouldn't know what they're talking about, even in English because they were coming from another place. They were coming from their culture, and they would make jokes and I wouldn't get it. So I felt cut off. You know what I mean? My grandmother would talk with her friends and she was kind of a quiet woman, a stern woman. She didn't talk much. But when she was with her friends, she'd laugh and joke. I think that's what I felt cut off from. Although I knew what they were talking about, or I knew if they were talking about me. So. . . There's a loss there. A part of your spirit. Something's missing and you know it is. And it's not our fault. I think people want to make blame or whatever or other Indians because we're too close to town and our tribe did make the decision to put their language aside. . . The big wigs in the tribe went door to door and said never mind talking your language now. We've got to go to town and get jobs. At the same time, the men came down from up river trapping because of the state Maine laws. IT was the advent of radio television. Never mind talking your language or making baskets. You know, that's kind of done now... But those are exactly the things we like to do to feel connected to them because those are the ones that struggle the most and I think were hurt the most....I think it's away to honor them (voice breaking ...silence).

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted from an interview with John “Bear” Mitchell (7/3/04)

<sup>2</sup> Following Reynolds in his article, “Material Systems: an Approach to the study of Kwanu Material Culture” (1986), I approach photographs not only as semantic representations, but as material objects with material constitution. The material system of photographs includes other artifacts, conceptions governing their use, and the organization of procedures, knowledge, materials, and agents engaged in their production, circulation and consumption.

<sup>3</sup> Although Clifford’s notion of *contact zone* accurately points to certain power-situated exchanges, the word *contact* also evokes, in the Penobscot context, a painful historical moment of “contact” between the first white settlers and indigenous peoples. In this thesis, I use it to emphasize the practical movements, exchanges, and discourse of tourists, Penobscot, and anthropologists, as they are mutually implicated in one another’s relations in the Penobscot Nation Museum.

<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur (1981) postulated culture as a text that can be read. Geertz (1973:452) has also played with the notion of culture as an ensemble of texts.

<sup>5</sup> Note here that in Silverstein and Urban’s view, texts and social identities are also intrinsically linked. Social identities, they argue, are “durable projections of texts when read in terms of their entextualization process” (1996:7).

<sup>6</sup> As part of this ethnography, I went before the Penobscot Indian Nation Heritage Preservation and Protection Committee, a fifteen person counsel. They accepted my proposal with the requirement that I give them a finished copy. They also encouraged me in my endeavors at the Museum. I thank them for their support.

<sup>7</sup> By the 1700s, the Abenaki, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac had formed into what is known as the Wabanaki Confederacy. Meeting on Indian Island, this confederacy worked together for common objectives of defense and survival.

<sup>8</sup> A term employed by Native American theorist Gerald Vizenor to approach the “Native real” and discuss issues of cultural survival and endurance beyond the usual “literatures of dominance (Vizenor 1994:13).

<sup>9</sup> Today Klose-kur-beh is more often spelled Gluskap. John “Bear” Mitchell, a Penobscot storyteller and director of the Wabanaki Center at the University of Maine, describes him as the first man, a magical person who was sent to the people to teach them how to survive.

<sup>10</sup> The above passage is from a xeroxed copy of *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man* (1893) that is available in the museum gift shop. The book’s Penobscot author, Joseph Nicolar, was chosen 18 times to serve as representative to legislature and was a gifted orator and writer. The introduction to the book describes his work. “Unquestionably all were valuable; for no other man in the Penobscot tribe was so well qualified to write out what at one time all of them knew – but no one recorded.”

<sup>11</sup> “Penobscot: The People and Their River” was produced by Acadia Film Video, a collaboration of Penobscot Film Makers and Westphal and Hansen.

It is available for sale with an informational pamphlet at the Penobscot Nation Museum.

<sup>12</sup> The Penobscot River Restoration Project works with the U.S. Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service, the State of Maine, and the Lincoln Pulp and Paper Mill Corporation, as well as the dam's owners to restore the Penobscot River. It is composed of such organizations as the Penobscot Nation, Maine Audubon, Trout Unlimited, the Natural Resources Council of Maine, and the Atlantic Salmon Federation ( Penobscot Partners 2004: np). It is a common topic of conversation in the Penobscot Nation Museum.

<sup>13</sup> As quoted in the Canoe Hullabaloo Flyer. Learn more at [www.canoehullabaloo.com](http://www.canoehullabaloo.com).

<sup>14</sup> Stanley Neptune is James' brother.

<sup>15</sup> . Permanent exhibits at the Hudson Museum consist of everything from a Penobscot language center to over 400 Maine Indians objects: including the largest public collection of Penobscot basketmaking tools. The Hudson Museum also houses a collection of over 8,000 ethnographic and archaeological objects including 2,828 Pre-Columbian ceramics, lithics and gold work dating from 2000 BC to the time of the Spanish Conquest in large, red carpeted rooms. The collection also houses Native American objects from across the United States: holdings include historic Pueblo pottery, Hopi kachinas, Navajo textiles, Pima and Havasupai basketry, Navajo and Zuni silverwork and contemporary art. Arctic holdings feature ethnographic clothing, tools and weapons (Available <http://www.umaine.edu/hudsonmuseum>).

<sup>16</sup> At the Abbe Museum, on the other hand, authentication may come in the form of an archaeology report or age of an object. This can lead to very different displays.

<sup>17</sup> Kennebunk is a small coastal town in southern Maine only 70 miles away from Boston. In many ways it was and still is considered a vacation town for people in the Boston area and beyond.

<sup>18</sup> This US Indian Band was formed at the request of Vice President Charles Curtis. It was a small group who performed in their traditional Indian dress. Molly was one of the dancers.

<sup>19</sup> In her recent book, *The Penobscot Dance of Resistance: History in the Tradition of a People* (2002), anthropologist Pauleena Macdougall analyzes the recent history of Penobscot pan-Indian experiences. She argues that there is a division between those Penobscot who labeled themselves "traditionalists" and rejected Catholicism, and those who did not. In the 1970s "traditionalists," she argues, began to practice Shamanism and re-invigorated the alliances of the Wabanaki Federation. They participated in protests, including one at Baxter State Park in Maine, and asked for the land to be returned to them. But Macdougall's interpretation is categorical. She argues that traditionalists want everyone to know they are 'Indian' even if it means becoming the kind of 'Indian' portrayed on the television or in movies

(Macdougall 2002:16). James' White Buffalo is more about the paths of his life than a category of being pan-Indian.

<sup>20</sup> Art historian W. Jackson Rushing relates how dozens of portraits from early student work at the Institute of the American Indian in Santa Fe had “blurred, indistinct and/or fragmented facial features...These were self-portraits of young artists who knew that neither were they enfranchised as members of American society, nor were they living the reality of their ancestors (as they perceived it through representation). Realizing their marginality, relative to ‘mainstream’ culture, and experiencing simultaneously a sense that they were not leading authentic Indian lives, they portrayed themselves in “a liminal identity” (Rushing 1991:17). Alfred Young Man of the Cree Nation explains,

I love to paint and I was exploring new ways of painting, and at the same time I didn't want to put a face on any of my figures because I felt we were being treated, essentially, as faceless individuals anyway. Up to that point I just never felt that Indian people had a face, that's all. I didn't have an urge to paint a face on anything...When I went to London, where I was treated with a bit more respect as a human being, I put faces on my works (Abbot 1996:np).

<sup>21</sup> Over the summer, James and I attempted many of the smaller projects he had mentioned on the first day. I had the feeling that we were working to fill a hole in James, perhaps caused by his dreams and his memories. Although we never got to making a Penobscot primer or flashcards, or even organizing his piles of things, we did complete a new brochure and a calendar. James and I worked on the brochure together. We took pictures of objects into the museum and I helped James load them onto the computer. We took photographs off the walls to scan them. James pointed out which photographs he wanted, and I did the computer work of formatting and inserting the images. At one point, we set up three old Penobscot baskets on a blue ribbon cloth and took digital photographs. When it was finished, James sent me off with gas money to go bring the new brochures to various locations around Maine: the Visitor's Center in Bangor, the Children's Museum, the Abbe Museum, the Hudson Museum. Our creation traveled. But it is the creation of the Basketmaker's Calendar, James' idea to honor the basketmakers and to show their faces and baskets, that we are most proud of. It is currently on sale for fifteen dollars at the gift shop.

<sup>22</sup> According to James, the Green Corn Ceremony occurred once a year at the time of the first corn harvest. The Green Corn Dance is available to watch on a video entitled “Our Dances” made by the Indian Island School. The soundtrack was done by the students. John “Bear” Mitchell directed music and past Chief Barry Dana aided in dancing.

<sup>23</sup> When I asked George, he explained that fee lands are the lands owned by the Penobscot but that are taxable by the government. This is in comparison to trust lands which don't have any taxes.

<sup>24</sup> Every year the Penobscot put on several huge High Stake Bingo games in their huge Bingo Hall on Indian Island. On the day of a Bingo game, hundreds of busses can be seen in the island's parking lots and even up and down Maine's turnpike, route 95.

<sup>25</sup> I say "apparent contradictions" because being Christian and being Penobscot are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>26</sup> As has been mentioned, by the 1700s, the Abenaki, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac had formed into what is known as the Wabanaki Confederacy. Through the French and Indian and later the American Revolution, treaties signed by the Confederacy and the individual tribes were not honored. Despite this, a number of Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet and Micmac fought for the Americans during the American Revolution only to be returned to a position of weakness and broken treaties after the war (Maine Indian Program 1989:A10).

<sup>27</sup> The Carlisle School was founded by Richard Henry Pratt in 1879 and lasted until 1918.

<sup>28</sup> Director of the Department of Historical and Cultural Preservation, 8/24/04

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Lass, in his article, "From Memory to History: The Events of November 17 Dis/membered" (1994), poses a distinction between recollection bringing the past into the present as lived and the mental act of remembering which he characterizes by a certain distance required by thinkability. He writes, "Recollection is a personalized act that involves the presence of the past. Yet it also may be 'placed in memory' and not mean anything in order to be remembered....Memory commits violence on recollection and 'rescues thought from self.'" Yet Lass's final argument is even more interesting. He writes, "in the movement from memory to history, an aesthetic move appears to divert the final product into another kind of object."

<sup>30</sup> As I have suggested, these "moving orientators" orient but do not define Penobscot bodies in time and space.

<sup>31</sup> Passamaquoddy and Penobscot languages are closely related, both members of the Algonquin family, and similar as a result of intermarriage between the two Nations.

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