

Pajeh Osoowemoouk (Till it is, Shall be Changed)

Nkéke Harris

For time immemorial, my people have existed in this place. My nation of dawnland people dwelled here and cherished this land. The mighty Narragansett opened their arms to the rest of the world. First nation people have changed the world and contributed so much to history. However, even with such a significant role in American history, Indigenous people have been made fictitious and invisible through oppressive and dehumanizing stereotypes in popular culture. Rhode Island specifically has a large Narragansett community with a vibrant culture, that when not totally overlooked, is falsely presumed to match stereotypes of tipis, horses, and savageness. Even though Rhode island has been making strides to represent the people indigenous to this place, Indigenous peoples continue to be ignored within popular culture, the arts, and in our history classrooms. Through acknowledgement and representation, indigenous people will become humanized and made visible, bringing justice and equality not only to Rhode Island, but our greater world.

A great deal of culture lives within the infinite realm of art. The Narragansett people traditionally embellished nearly all of their belongings; from baskets to clothes. Art has been a keystone in the structure of our culture. Rhode Island has been amazing in representing Indigenous people in the arts. Including having a Narragansett Member On the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (RISCA), and a Narragansett youth on the RISCA Teen Arts Assembly. RISCA's Atrium gallery has been home to countless pieces of native art from various native artists over the years. Other organizations like the Avenue Concept and their mural of Narragansetts; Lynsea Montanari and Princess Redwing, create accurate depictions of indigenous people and counteract the dehumanization brought about by stereotypical depictions.

Each story has a beginning, an integral piece of Rhode Island history is the role the Narragansett people have played and continue to play. Although indigenous history is not currently required in common core curriculum, there have been numerous cultural learning opportunities for the public to partake in. In a powerful TEDx talk and cultural experience, at the University of Rhode Island, Sherenté Harris confronted Indigenous invisibility, homophobia, and hatred through song and dance; not only did this performance come from within their own community, however It extended to the outside world through the greater outreach of the TEDx organization (TEDx URI).

Education is also integrated into the wider community through educational tours at the Rhode Island State House focusing on Narragansett history with featured Narragansett educators from the Tomaquag museum in 2018 as part of the Finding Roger campaign and through the Royal Charter Museum. These programs introduce both children and adults to information that has not been earned in the classroom.

Another way Rhode Island has brought about indigenous visibility is through the continuation of Narragansett names and places throughout Rhode Island. Places like Miantonomi park, Quonochontaug, and Mashapaug pond to name a few. These seemingly small things work to show that we, the Narragansett, still exist. Through the continued usage of traditional place names, Rhode Island has honored the indigenous people of Rhode Island, while also preserving important cultural knowledge.

Although there are already great efforts and significant works in place to bring about a greater visible of the indigenous people of Rhode Island, there is still a lot of growth needed as a community. The inequalities in the art community is not an issue of diversity, rather an issue of representation; there are thousands of native artists right in our backyards, however they are not

being showcased. There needs to be more representation of native artist in public arts projects, not only providing visibility for indigenous people but also giving jobs to underserved communities and with “Percent for Art” Ordinances in place, art is required in the building of most public buildings in Rhode Island today.

Education is the key to growth and a lack of education on Indigenous history contributes to indigenous erasure and invisibility. Narragansett history and culture needs to be a required part of the standard education curriculum in RI. Not being educated leads people to creating fictitious and harmful caricatures of Native American people. Through teaching and immersing children into the different cultures of the indigenous people of their communities, a child is less likely to form harmful stereotypes of indigenous people.

The mighty Narragansett tribe has existed in this sacred place for time immemorial. My people peacefully greeted Roger Williams and the settlers in 1636. The Narragansett were prepared for change. Change is what keeps culture alive, vibrant, and devine; without evolution, culture would not have room to grow and would subsequently die. This is why the changes in place now and the changes yet to come are so important, so necessary. Even though Rhode island has been making strides to represent the people indigenous to this place, Indigenous peoples continue to be ignored within popular culture, the arts, and in our history classrooms. Through acknowledgement and representation indigenous people will be humanized and made visible, bringing justice and equality not only to Rhode Island, but to our greater world.

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