The Question of Genocide in the Pequot War

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The Question of Genocide in the Pequot War and the Struggle for Narrative in American Indian Historiography

“Many were burnt in the fort, both men, women, children. Others forced out, and came in troops to the Indians, twenty and thirty at a time, which our soldiers received and entertained with the point of the sword. Down fell men, women, children; those that scaped us, fell into the hands of the Indians that were in the rear of us. It is reported by themselves, that there were about four hundred souls in this fort, and not about five of them escaped out of our hands. Great and doleful was the bloody sight to the view of young soldiers that never had been in war, to see so many souls lie gasping on the ground, so thick, in some places, that you could hardly pass along. It may be demanded, Why should you be so furious? (as some have said) Should not Christians have some compassion? But I would refer you to David’s war. When a people is grown to such a height of blood, and sin against God and man... Sometimes the Scripture declareth, women and children must perish with their parents; but we will not dispute it now. We have sufficient light from the word of God for our proceedings.”

In the fall of 1637, an English and Narragansett allied forces led by Captain Underhill and Captain Mason surrounded the Mystic River Pequot settlement, set the east

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1Charles Orr, ed., *History of the Pequot War* (Cleveland: Helman-Taylor Co, 1897), 81.
and west entrances on fire and killed men, women, and children as they fled their flaming homes. According to Capt. John Mason, only five Pequots survived the attack. This massacre destroyed the territorial power base of the Pequot Nation and precipitated an exile from ancestral lands that was to last more than three hundred years. As the defeated Pequot’s fled their ancestral lands, many of the men were killed or taken hostage by the neighboring tribes loyal to the Puritans. In 1638, the sad remnants of the Pequot Nation appeared before a colonial assembly in Connecticut to face English justice and were formally declared an extinct nation and dispossessed of their lands in the Treaty of Hartford, “The Peaquots shall...no more be called the Peaquots but Narragansetts and Mohegans...and shall not suffer them for to live in the country that was formerly theirs but is now the English’s by conquest.”

This conflict is used to exemplify the genocidal nature of all American Indian and colonist conflicts that were to follow by American Indian groups, comparative genocide studies scholars and historians.

The question posed by Underhill, “Why should you be so furious?” is an important question to ask ourselves, as its answer can help us understand why and how the unprecedented violence of the Pequot War is used to frame all future European Native American relations as genocidal from the first Indian Wars to modernity by American Indian groups and scholars in an attempt to alter the historic narrative of early colonial America by identifying a defining moment that marked the beginning of colonial

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3 Orr, 81.
genocidal oppression. This moment provides a beginning from which American Indian groups may assert their self identity in contrast to a legacy of oppression.

This attempt to alter the early colonial narrative of America had its beginnings in 1970’s American Indian Movement and peaked with the reemergence of the Pequot Nation in the 1980’s, which was dramatic because this tribe was formally declared a distinct nation by the Puritans in 1638. This effort has not only failed to bring meaningful change to the narrative but supports its basic assumptions about American Indians as helpless and the Puritans as the only aggressors in the conflict while ignoring the complex relations between European and indigenous nations in 17th century New England. Many of the inconsistencies and tensions surrounding the issue of the American Indian Movement (AIM) using the Pequot War as the defining moment of genocidal oppression in the Americas lies in the assumptions of a spirited exchange between Steven Katz and Michael Freeman in The New England Quarterly that occurred during the 1990’s when the Pequot nation was reemerging. In this exchange, Steven Katz argues that the Puritans did not commit genocide in the Pequot War while Michael Freeman asserts that they did. Both scholars only speak of the genocidal guilt or innocence of the Puritans while a more careful reading of the sources shows that genocide was potentially committed by all parties involved in the Pequot War if the actions of all parties involved in the conflict are equally weighed. The assertion that the Puritans committed genocide in the Pequot War is thus based on unequal application of the term to the parties involved in the conflict. The only way to have a balanced and enquiry into the matter that does not suggest that the American Indians were only acted
upon in this conflict is to apply the term genocide to all parties involved in the conflict. With this in mind, the question of genocidal guilt may become a question of relative guilt. As such, this conflict does not provide an appropriate defining moment of oppression as the question of guilt is unclear.

The Mystic River massacre is described as the definitive and galvanizing defining moment steeped in fury by the American Indian Movement at a time when it needed such a moment of oppression from which to define themselves. In his book *For This Land*, Vine Deloria writes about the ideological failure of AIM after the failure of the Trail of Broken Treaties march and 2nd Wounded Knee occupation. Vine predicted that a major event originating in Indian country such as the dramatic reemergence of the Pequot Nation would give AIM new ideological momentum because, “Ideologies are so much up for grabs right now that any Indian faction that is able to interpret that event in a way that makes sense out of the present confusion may well determine how Indian people will view themselves for decades to come.”¹⁴ A recent example of such media event infusing AIM with ideological momentum is the occupation of Alcatraz Island by AIM activists in order to reassign the national holiday of thanksgiving as day of mourning for the 17th century Pequot Nation and more generally the American Indians that were destroyed and dispossessed in the ‘American Holocaust’⁵.

The effort to declare Thanksgiving as a national day of mourning was repeated annually since the 1968 AIM occupation of Alcatraz Island but lacked a definitive

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¹⁴Vine Deloria, *For This Land* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 43.
addressable moment of oppression from which to define itself until the experience of the 17th century Pequot Nation was introduced with that nation’s dramatic reemergence. The original occupation of Alcatraz Island was grounded in the issue of American Indian relationships to the land impacted by the European concept land as a commodity. According to Deloria, the message of this movement failed because it did not forge an understanding between cultures as the land question was simply unaddressable to the strongly held core values of private property that are indivisible from personal liberty in America.6 Captain Underhill’s question, “Why should you be so furious?” expresses a certain pathos that proved to be more palatable to the consensus than the land based question because it draws on common ground between cultures by making an emotional appeal drawing pity for the experience of the American Indian. Steven Katz refers to this common ground as a moral sense of outrage at the plight of the 17th Century Indian.7 AIM activist Vernon Bellecourt and his supporters utilized this furious common ground between cultures in his efforts to assign the day of thanksgiving declared by Governor Winthrop after the Mystic River Massacre as the defining moment of American Indian oppression in order to change the meaning of the national holiday of Thanksgiving and also the historic narrative of early colonial America.

In an interview with Tucker Carlson on MSNBC about the 2005 AIM occupation of Alcatraz Island to reassign thanksgiving as a national day of mourning, Vernon Bellecourt stated that the truth of the holiday as follows, “After the 1637 fort Mystic

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6Deloria, 32.
massacre, the governor of Massachusetts colony declared a day of thanksgiving, which has been celebrated every year since then”. 8 A careful reading of the sources shows that the day of thanksgiving declared by Governor Winthrop was merely a day of thanks for the defeat of an enemy, having little or nothing to do with the modern concept of the Thanksgiving holiday. The day of thanks in honor of the defeat of the Pequot Nation is best described by Vincent in his account of the war, “A day of thanksgiving was solemnly celebrated for this happy success; the Pequetans now seeming nothing but a name.” 9 Bellecourt states that Thanksgiving ought to be a day of mourning for the 16 million American Indians that perished in the longest war in what he characterizes the longest war in US history or the “American holocaust”. 10 Bellecourt’s contribution to the argument for changing the meaning of Thanksgiving is connecting it to the memory of the fort Mystic massacre in order to show that all interactions between colonists and American Indians were essentially genocidal. Connecting the collective memory of the Nazi holocaust to the American Indian experience is the product of the American Indian Movement’s efforts to change the narrative of American early colonial history influenced by the reemergence of the Pequot Nation from the 1986 to 1993. Utilizing the plight of the Pequot Nation during the First Indian War by AIM helped to span the gulf between cultures by finding some middle ground that was addressable to define the beginning of colonial oppression. The concept of genocide in the Pequot War as the defining moment of American Indian oppression has in this manner sharpened AIM ideology and changed

9Orr, 107.
10Ibid.
the narrative of early colonial America. This shift of narrative and ideology developed with AIM but lacked such an addressable defining moment until the Pequot Nation reemergence. The dramatic reemergence of the Pequot Nation from 1986-1992 gave AIM an addressable defining moment of oppression from which to define themselves in contrast to a legacy of oppression.

The reemergence of the Pequot Nation from 1986-1992 gave AIM a defining moment of American Indian oppression at a time when it was needed. However, in order to discuss the influence of the reemergence of the Pequot Nation to chosen defining moment of oppression chosen by AIM, some context in the development and loss of momentum of the movement is needed. For this, we turn to Deloria’s description of AIM from his book *For This Land*.

AIM was officially started by a group of Chippewa activists in Minneapolis in 1968 without a defining moment of oppression. In the following year, the American Indian Movement took the action of occupying Alcatraz Island in order to highlight the problems of broken treaties as a basis for land ownership. The occupation lasted for 19 months and did not end with the US government giving title for the surplus lands not in use as per an earlier treaty with the Lakota. The occupation ultimately failed but was followed by other occupations of federal surplus property. The occupation of Alcatraz Island was followed by the trail of broken treaties march and wounded knee occupation.

The Trail of Broken Treaties march resulted in the occupation and destruction of much of the paperwork in the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington. The next large scale media event to affect a change the popular conception of the American Indian was
the Wounded Knee occupation that was also based on broken treaty land relations in a more general sense but maintained the defining moment of oppression based on land dispossession as the broken terms of the 1868 treaty of Fort Laramie.

The 1868 Fort Laramie, which was used as the defining moment of oppression by AIM, with the Sioux guaranteed that Sioux lands could only thereafter be sold or taken with 2/3 of the tribal adult male approval\textsuperscript{11}. The terms of this treaty were broken after rumors of gold and riches were broken up by General Custer. In 1876, under duress a new treaty ceding the Black Hills to the US government and an occupying army of squatters and miners was signed by less than the 2/3 majority needed to make it valid. Thus, the taking of the Black Hills by the US government and subsequent defacing of Dakota sacred center of the universe with the faces of 4 US presidents represented a sore point for the Dakota and a difficult position for the US government. In 1973 on the Pine Ridge reservation, the American Indian Movement occupied the Wounded Knee site for several months with large media coverage highlighting the problems of federal ownership of the Black Hills and the socioeconomic problems of the Indian community in general using the broken 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty as their moment of dispossession and oppression. The supreme court eventually did admit that the US did not legally own the Black Hills based on the 1868 treaty provisions, but did not offer a status quo ante solution, instead offering a cash settlement which is ironic because to date it still has not been accepted by a 2/3 majority of the Lakota, this highlights the tensions and

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
unaddressability of the land based question that arises when the definitive moment of oppression against American Indians is a broken treaty.

In 1980, the Sioux won a settlement of 17.1 million dollars from the Supreme Court for the illegal loss of the Black Hills but have to date refused it. The courts admission that the 1876 treaty was invalid did not result in status quo ante, which highlights the centrality of the land issue to American Indian Movement and also the tension of the US governments position. Deloria states that after the Wounded Knee occupation, the American Indian Movement started to lose momentum but predicted that a major media event would work to transform Indian identity in order to mobilize a meaningful change in the historical narrative.\textsuperscript{12} The development of comparative genocide studies as a distinct sociological and historical discipline in the 1970’s and the re-emergence of the Pequot Nation from 1983-1992 informed this change.

While AIM struggled for narrative in 1970’s, the discipline of comparative genocide studies became a distinct historical and sociological discipline. The early conceptualizing of genocide as a product of history that is as old as humanity itself was articulated in Jean Paul Sartre’s 1969 essay ‘On Genocide’, “The thing itself is as old as humanity and there has never been a society whose structure has preserved it from committing this crime. All genocide is a product of history and it always carries the signs of the society from which it springs.”\textsuperscript{13} In this essay, Sartre asks the important question, is the US guilty of genocide in the Vietnam War? The connection of the term genocide with

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 43.
the imperialism of the US and French example of Algeria helped to bridge the terminology of genocide to the American Indian land based question.

As the term genocide became more applicable to the American Indian experience, it became part of the ideology of the American Indian Movement in a general way that initially lacked an addressable defining moment to form its beginning as the 1972 occupation of wounded knee was ideologically grounded in issues of false land ownership. Deloria states that it was the inapproachability of the land question that doomed the definitive moment of oppression against the American Indian as the broken 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. The media event of reemergence of the Pequot Nation reminded AIM leaders of their plight during the first of the Indian wars and interpreted this as an approachable moment of oppression. As such, the reemergence of the Pequot Nation will be discussed in some detail.

After the 1638 Treaty of Hartford diffused the Pequot Nation, outlawed its name, and dispossessed them from their ancestral lands. This dispossession and routing out of a tribal entity is best described in Captain Mason's account of the war, “They were ere while a terror to all that were round about them, who resolved to Destroy all the English and Rout their Name out of this Country.”

The Puritans did not succeed in routing out the name Pequot from New England as a small group Pequots reformed and were granted a small reservation in 1651 and at Mashantucket in 1666. The Pequot population dwindled and they reduced to a 151

14 Orr, 35.
members by 1774. In the 1970’s, a group of Pequots returned to their original Mashantucket lands and sued the land owners and state of Connecticut for illegal sale of those lands. In 1983, the Pequots won their suit, got federal tribal recognition by the BIA, and were granted a 1250 acre reservation. The Pequots followed with several economic initiatives, but most noteworthy of these were their 1986 bingo hall and 1992 Foxwoods Resort and Casino. In 1993, construction of Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center was begun. Out of this period came an exchange between Steven Katz and Michael Freeman that reveals many of the tensions and contradictions that are built into the use of the Mystic Massacre and the Pequot War experience as the definitive moment of genocidal oppression in the Americas.

The usage of the term genocide to describe the actions of the Puritans in the Pequot War and the change of narrative that it entailed was dismissed by Steven Katz in his 1991 article ‘The Pequot War Reconsidered’ in the New England Quarterly on the grounds that it was borne of pathos and moral outrage instead of a careful reading of the sources. Michael Freeman responded to Katz’s article in his ‘Puritans and Pequots: The Question of Genocide’. The tensions and contradictions within the framing of the exchange between Katz and Freeman are representative of the tensions within the application of the term genocide to the Pequot War and using that mold to cast all American Indian colonist relations as essentially the same. As such, their exchange will be discussed and this will result in the formation of a new enquiry that will show that

15 http://www.pequotmuseum.org/TribalHistory/TribalHistoryOverview/TribalHistoryOverview.htm (accessed 03/14/2011).
16 Ibid.
using the term genocide to describe the actions of the Puritans in the Pequot War and in turn using that as the defining moment of genocidal oppression against American Indians ultimately supports a view of American Indians as helpless and acted upon and does not meaningfully change the historic narrative.

Many of the important reasons for posing the question of genocide in the Pequot War, the problems of bias that they entail, and the atmosphere of shared fury that produced the question are encapsulated in the debate between Michael Freeman and Steven Katz in 3 articles published in the 1990’s in the New England Quarterly. The introduction to Michael Freeman’s ‘The Question of Genocide’ states that the reason for posing the question of genocide in the Pequot War must be clear before the enquiry can begin. Freeman follows this by raising the problem of, “ethnocentric bias”, inherent in the question but not in its formation. Freeman solely discusses problems of ethnocentric bias raised by the adoption of the Puritan point of view which casts the American Indian as the antagonistic other. Freeman however does not discuss the implications of his argument that only the Puritans committed genocide in the war, which suggests that the 17th century Pequot Nation was essentially helpless in the conflict.

The reason behind posing the question of genocide in the Pequot war is also briefly discussed in ‘The Pequot War Reconsidered’. According to this source, the traditional analysis of the Pequot war as a puritan defensive pre-emptive act has been

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18Ibid.
19Ibid. 278-280.
challenged by modern revisionists. Katz's revisionists claim that the Puritans utilized sparse aggressive Pequot acts to justify annihilation and the Pequot war is in this way characteristic of all colonial-native relations during the invasion of America. Katz claims that the revisionist re-analysis of the Pequot war utilizing the label genocide is borne of, “legitimate moral outrage at the treatment of the Indians.” and is based on a careless sorting of the available evidence. However, before sorting the evidence more carefully, Katz does not fully discuss the basic assumption in his question either and thus assumes the same things about Puritans and American Indians that Freeman does.

The question, “Was the Pequot War genocide?” contains a basic assumption about American Indian historic agency that needs to be addressed. The wording of the above question is vague but has been assigned a different meaning by Katz and Freeman. The alternate meaning given to the above question by the above parties is, did the Puritans commit genocide during the Pequot War? Freeman poses the question of genocide somewhat differently than Katz. Freeman claims that, “A more impartial formulation is if we ask whether or not the conflict between the Puritans and the Pequots culminated in genocide.” The basic assumption of both of the questions is that the Puritans were the sole perpetrators of genocide during the Pequot War. The assumption of singular genocidal guilt makes the Pequot’s the unfortunate innocent victims of Puritan genocide and oversimplifies the complex interrelationships of trade and military alliance between

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid, 206.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid, 278.
first nations and European powers in 17th century New England. Characterizing the Puritans as genocidal conquerors shows the influence of an atmosphere of moral outrage over the treatment of the Indians in the Pequot War and more generally to the plight of dispossessed destroyed American Indians.\(^\text{25}\)

The selective application of the term genocide exclusively to the actions of the Puritans in the Pequot war shows such a bias and shows how deeply embedded Katz’s ‘atmosphere of moral outrage’ is to his exchange with Freeman.\(^\text{26}\) One of Freeman’s reasons for the importance of the Pequot War is that it is the first example of violence between colonists and Indians.\(^\text{27}\) As has been noted in ‘The Pequot War Reconsidered’, the Pequot war was not a white versus red conflict.\(^\text{28}\) The Puritans enlisted the help of the Narragansets, Mohegans, Mohawks, and other tribes in their struggle against the Pequots. Though it seems self evident that the Puritans would stand accused of genocide alongside their Indian allies, the scholarly debate has not been framed that way. In order to leave behind the ‘atmosphere of moral outrage’ hinted at by Katz, the suspicion of genocide must be equally applied to all parties involved in the Pequot War.\(^\text{29}\)

Now that some of the assumptions and bias underlying the question of genocide in the Pequot War have been addressed, an enquiry based on careful reading of select primary sources assuming nothing about the agency of all parties involved in the conflict may begin. The question of Puritan, Pequot, Mohegan, Narragansett, and Mohawk

\(^{25}\) Steven Katz, 206-209.
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Michael Freeman, 278.
\(^{28}\) Steven Katz 207.
\(^{29}\) Katz 206.
genocidal guilt in the Pequot war will be considered given both the restrictive definition used by Katz and the more inclusive definition used by Freeman.

Katz defines genocide in his *The Pequot War Reconsidered* as:

“To mean an intentional action aimed at the complete physical eradication of a people.”

This definition is sufficiently restrictive so as to deny the usage of the term genocide to describe Puritan acts in the Pequot War. However, the problem with using this simplified definition to deny genocide in the Pequot War is to be found in its author's own work where he coined the term. In his source, the restrictive terminology cited by Katz is introduced as a, “New word coined by the author to describe an old practice in its modern development.”

The later works of this author even include a history of genocide with examples from the Carthage of antiquity to colonial Latin America. Nonetheless, if we are to only use Katz’s simplified definition of the term genocide, none of the parties involved have committed this act because none of the groups were completely destroyed in this war. In his 1995 article ‘Puritans and Pequots: the Question of Genocide’, Freeman insisted that genocide did occur in the Pequot War and used a more inclusive definition of the term to back his claim. Although Freeman insists on the usage of a more inclusive definition of the term genocide, he assumes the same oversimplified view of the American Indian groups and Puritans involved in the conflict. As such, the definition of the term genocide used by Freeman as it applies to the Pequot War will be used assuming nothing about the agency of the parties involved in the conflict. For the purposes of this

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30 Ibid, 213.
enquiry, articles one and two of the UN General Assembly’s 1948 convention will be used.

**Article 1**

The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish.

**Article 2**

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.  

Ninantic actions in the Pequot War could be considered genocidal given the above definition. According to the 1632 account of Captain John Mason, the Massachusetts colonial assembly sent a military contingent to deal with the murder of 2 English traders by their Ninantic guides so that, “they might clothe their bloody flesh with their (the traders) bloody garments.”  

The affront of the murders of the English traders was certainly a case of, “the blood of the innocent calling out for justice.,” but the English response to the attack was expected.  

When the English arrived on Block Island to heed the call of innocent bloodshed, they found a largely empty settlement. The colonial forces fired a few wigwams and killed one Block Islander in the exchange that followed. According to Mason, the Ninantic peoples of Block Island were, “Not native Pequots but

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34 Orr, 50.
35 Ibid.
had frequent recourse with them.”

Although the Ninantic were a subject tribe to the Narragansett, the Pequots were called out to answer for the deaths of the English traders by a small military contingent. This exchange ended with the death of Captain Stone and his company. By the time Captain Mason and his larger company made it to the area, the deaths of both the English traders and those of Captain Stone and company were attributed to the Pequots. This separate attack resulting from misunderstanding about the status of the Ninantic tribe is detailed in Mason, “Pequots having slain one Captain Norton, and Captain Stone with seven of their company.”

Article one of the UN definition of genocide clearly states that acts committed to destroy a group in whole or in part by killing members of that group is genocide and the destruction in part of a group was arguably done by the Pequots, Puritans, and Ninantic peoples in the lead up to the Pequot War.

Although the murder Captain Stone, Captain Norton and company that brought on the Puritan reprisal resulting in one death could also be considered genocidal given the above definition of the term, it could be argued that the above parties were not seeking to destroy a group with their hostilities. The Pequot murders of the English could have been motivated by an inability to differentiate between the English and the Dutch. At the time of the exchange with Captain Stone and company, the memory of the murder of the previous Sachem at the hands of an unscrupulous Dutch trader was still fresh in the minds of the Pequots, after the Pequot Sachem was taken aboard the Dutch trading vessel, a large ransom was demanded. When the ransom was paid, the Dutch trader,

36 Orr, 17.
37 Orr, 55.
“Sent him ashore, but first killed him. This much exasperated our spirits, and made us vow revenge.”\footnote{Orr, 57.} In this way, it appears that the Pequots also may have been heeding the call of innocent blood spilled calling out for vengeance. This being said, whether the murders of Captain Norton and Company was motivated by self defense or vengeance, neither seem to include a desire to eradicate the European presence in the south east United States and the Puritan reprisal could be viewed as an armed skirmish that resulted from the failed attempt to gain justice from other means. The council of Massachusetts sent an armed contingent to the Pequot’s only after trying diplomacy first. The following excerpt from Orr’s account is explicit on this point, “The council of Massachusetts…sent to speak with the Pequot’s, and had some treaties with them; but being unsatisfied therewith, sent forth Captain Underhill…”\footnote{Orr, 81.}

The Pequot actions following the Puritan Block island reprisal of 1632 seem more likely to be considered genocidal by the given definition of the term. After the Block Island incident Pequot hostilities in Connecticut increased dramatically. In the Weatherfield ambush 9 Puritans died and the two women were captured and many colonists lost their lives at Saybrook.\footnote{Orr, 17.} The Puritan woman that refused to be taken captive at the Weathersfield attack resisted so stoutly that she was bludgeoned to death, “Cruell usage…resisted so stoutly with scratching and biting, that the Indian…cast her downe on the earth and beat her brains out with a hatchet.”\footnote{Edward Johnson, Johnson’s Wonder-working Providence: A History of the English Planting in the Year 1628 to the Year 1652 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 149.} The total number of
colonial deaths from Pequot attacks in Connecticut from 1632-1637 was 30. The number 30 might seem small but compared a total population of about 250, the number was significant. Edward Johnson’s 1654 history of the English planting provides an even more dramatic set of numbers, “The English being but weake in numbers and provision, were unable to manage the war against so numerous a company, being above thirty to one.” The killing of a significant proportion of the colonial population of Connecticut by the Pequot’s following the Puritan attack at Block Island could be considered the destruction in part of a group of people and thus may be considered genocide. Alternately, the Pequot attacks in Connecticut from 1632-1637 could be interpreted as unconnected skirmishes that occurred at the borderland between two opposing groups.

The Puritan and allied Indian forces combined reaction to the Pequot attacks on Connecticut colony from about 1632-1637 could be considered genocidal. In 1637 a colonial meeting was called at Hartford to discuss what actions the colonists were to take in response to the Connecticut attacks. At the Hartford meeting, the colonists decided to embark on an offensive war against the Pequot’s because of their warlike behavior and attempts to incite other tribes against the English. Vincent describes the result of this meeting as, “Two hundred English…were now sent forth to chase the barbarians and utterly root them out.” The first engagement of the war was the Mystic River attack.

The Puritan and allied Indian nation actions at Mystic River could be considered genocidal. Article 1 of the UN resolution states that, “Deliberately inflicting on the group

\[\text{\cite{42} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\cite{43} Johnson, 148.}\]
\[\text{\cite{44} Orr, 106.}\]
conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction” is genocide.\(^{45}\) The purpose of Puritan and allied actions at Mystic River in 1637 seem to have been genocidal given the above excerpt. The Puritan and Narragansett actions at Mystic River are detailed in the account of eyewitness and participant Capt. John Underhill. The following excerpt is from his description of the attack, “Many were burnt in the fort,…others forced out Down fell men, women, and children; those that scaped us, fell into the hands of the Indians that were in the rear of us.”\(^{46}\) The genocidal guilt of the Puritan allied Narragansett tribe seems also to be in question here, as they are the Indians at the rear in Underhill’s account. If the Puritans actions at the Mystic River attack may be considered genocide, then the actions of their allies could also be considered genocide for the same reasons. According to Underhill, the Narragansett’s formed a circle of archers outside the Puritan guns that encircled the Pequot camp. In the Mystic exchange, at least 400 Pequot’s died and as few as 5 escaped.\(^{47}\) The Pequot were to face exodus, slaughter, and captivity in the year that followed the Mystic River attack.

The tribes allied with the Puritans acted in a manner that may be considered genocidal after the Mystic River attack. After the Mystic attack, the Pequot power base in the southeast was broken, and they had little choice but to flee their enemies. As the Pequot’s attempted to flee their homelands, they were captured by neighboring tribes that were allied to the English. Governor Bradford’s history of Plymouth colony describes the last band of fugitive Pequots meeting this fate at the hands of Mohawks.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.  
\(^{47}\) Orr, 81.
"This Sassacouse (ye Pequents cheefe Sachem) being fled to ye Mohakes, they cut off his head, with some other of ye cheefe of them…to satisfy ye English, or rather ye Narragansetts,… or for their own advancement, I know not, but thus this war tooke ende."\(^{48}\)

The 1638 Treaty of Hartford orders the Narragnsett and Mohegan signators to do this very thing,” They or either of them shall as soon as they can either bring the chief Sachem of our late enemies the Peaquets that had the chief hand in killing the English, to the English, or take off their heads.”\(^{49}\) Although it can be argued that the New England tribes brought the English Pequot captives and heads for fear of similar treatment, as we have seen with the Mohawk example we must also say that we know not if we are to attribute them with full historic agency.

The tribes that were allied to the English typically killed Pequot men and took Pequot women and children as captives this is a form of forceful transference of children and fits article 2 of the UN definition of genocide. From 1637-1638, the English and their allies engaged in this sort of behavior as well but more egregiously sold some of their captives into the West Indies slave market, Governor Winthrop records this in a letter in which he narrates the final days of the Pequot War, “The prisoners were devided, some to those of ye river, and the rest to us. Of these we send ye male children to Bermuda.”\(^{50}\)

Also, the 1638 Treaty of Hartford stipulates that the Pequot fugitives in custody be given out to the Narragansett and Mohegan tribes and thereafter not be known as Pequots for a

\(^{49}\)Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society, 177.  
\(^{50}\)Winthrop 199.
price, “For every Sanop one fathom of Wampume peage and for every youth half so much—and for every Sanop papoose one hand to be paid at killing time of corn at Connecticut annually.” \(^{51}\) The exchange of annual payment of wampum and corn for fugitive hostages is reminiscent of slavery but it is also the forceful transference of children, which constitutes genocide according to the UN General Assembly.

The actions of the Narragansett’s, Mohegan’s, and Mohawks in the year following the Mystic attack may be considered genocidal because they fit several sections of the UN definition of the term. Most significant of the proposed genocidal actions of the Narragansett’s, Mohegan’s, and Mohawks is their bringing physical destruction unto the Pequot nation and transferring Pequot children against their will. The treaty of Hartford that dealt with the territorial and property implications of the fall of the Pequot nation has some provisions that might also be considered genocidal.

The treaty of Hartford declared the Pequot nation, territory and tribe to be no longer existent. According to Mason, the surviving Pequot’s were divided up among the Mohegan’s, Narragansett’s, Mohawks, and colonists. The 1638 Treaty of Hartford thus effectively ended the Pequot nation causing mental harm to the Pequot’s. The forcible transfer of Pequot children also causing mental harm to the Pequot tribe and the imposition of conditions that could cause physical eradication are just a few of the aspects of the Treaty of Hartford that could be considered genocidal.

A brief discussion into assumptions behind the question of genocide in the Pequot War and the reasons for posing the question reveals the bias of the current discussion...

\(^{51}\) *Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society* 177.
over the question of genocide in the Pequot War based on unequal application of the term to the parties involved in the conflict. The only way to have a balanced and enquiry into the matter that does not cast American Indians as acted upon is to apply the term genocide to all parties involved in the conflict. The results of which have shown that though the Puritans may have committed genocidal acts during the Pequot War, but the other parties involved might have done so as well. The question of genocide in the Pequot War might not be simply a question of Puritan genocidal guilt in the conflict. With this in mind, the question of genocidal guilt becomes a question of guilt relative to the genocidal guilt of the Pequot’s, Mohegan’s, Ninantic’s and Narragansett’s. With this in mind, we can return to Captain Underhill’s question “Why should you be so furious?” with a better understanding of why and how the unprecedented violence of the Pequot War is used to frame all future European Native American relations as genocidal by American Indian groups and scholars and how this effort has failed to alter the historic narrative of early colonial America in a way that respects the historic agency of the American Indian. The use of the Pequot War as the defining moment of genocidal oppression AIM that was addressable because of its shared sense of outrage is based on a depiction of the American Indian essentially helpless and acted upon and thus supports basic assumptions that they are trying to change. For this reason, I think that the sentiments of the Narragansett allies of the Puritans expressed after the Mystic massacre, “Mach it, mach it; that is, It is naught, it is naught, because it is too furious and slays too

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52 Orr, 81.
many men."⁵³, to be a more fitting term than genocide to both give the American Indian a
defining moment of oppression from which to define themselves positively and also
influence the historic narrative in a way that does not reinforce the identity imposed upon
them by the early settlers of America that continues even to this day in the basic
assumptions and tensions in the struggle for narrative in the American Indian
historiography.

⁵³ Orr, 84.
Works Cited


http://www.pequotmuseum.org/TribalHistory/TribalHistoryOverview/TribalHistoryOverview.htm (accessed 03/14/2011)
