

THE PERFORMATIVITY OF INDIGENOUS PROTEST: VERNON BELLECOURT AND  
THE *FIRST ENCOUNTERS EXHIBITION*

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Under the Supervision of Professors Jennifer Johung and David Pacifico

At the Science Museum in St. Paul, Minnesota, Vernon Bellecourt of the American Indian Movement came to protest the arrival of the *First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States: 1492-1570*. To Bellecourt, the false narrative of Indigenous peoples represented the reality of the Columbus narrative that all indigenous peoples suffer from today. The gestures that Bellecourt engaged in during his protest performed an historic and powerful interconnected narrative. Bellecourt meant to perform an Indigenous cultural narrative of his own over that established Columbian narrative.

This paper will locate *First Encounters* within a long tradition of interrelated Native protests and performances which took place on the Quincentennial of Columbus's arrival in Native land where I will explore the aspects of the historical narrative that had been a part of Native American culture since the arrival of Columbus in 1492.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
<i>First Encounters</i> and the Protest by Bellecourt in Saint Paul .....	1
Contemporary Performances: Protest and Criticism .....	4
Blood, Memory, Trauma and The Performative Element .....	6
Blood as Body: Bloodletting as a Messenger .....	8
Bloodwork: Colonial and Historic Trauma .....	10
Concepts of Native American Performance in the <i>First Encounters Protest</i> .....	11
The Symbolic Nature of Columbus: Of Boundaries, Performers and Natives .....	16
<i>First Encounters</i> Case study: The Continued Narrative Performance on Native America .....	17
Conclusion: The American Indian, A Complex Narrative .....	24
Bibliography .....	31

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## Introduction

**“America does not know how to think or talk about Indians...the different narratives of museum presentation come into conflict with the narrative of art history...clashing with a narrative of the cultural present.”-David W. Penny curator of Native American Art at the Detroit Institute of Arts.<sup>1</sup>**

It is difficult to begin a conversation about contemporary Native American performance given the complex nature of its life and culture. Researchers often encounter difficulty in understanding it while trying to find a common thread or framework that will link Native American performance in an all-encompassing assemblage.<sup>2</sup>

To foster understanding of Native protest as art form within the scope of indigenous dissent and protest methodologies, this paper on Vernon Bellecourt’s protest of the *First Encounters* exhibition in 1992 will explore Native traditional and modern performance. I will establish *First Encounters* within a long tradition of interrelated Native protests, performances, and art with a focus on the materiality of blood. The concentration on blood will explain Bellecourt’s declaration to the audience at *First Encounters* and fully contextualize his performance by connecting its performative value to the world of performance art.

### ***First Encounters* and the Protest by Bellecourt in Saint Paul**

Vernon Bellecourt arrived at the museum in Saint Paul for the opening ceremony of the exhibit and proceeded to hold a news conference at the foot of the Nina replica. Vernon spoke,

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<sup>1</sup> Richard W. West, “A New Idea of Ourselves: The Changing Presentation of the American Indian,” in *Museums and Native Cultures*, ed. Richard W. West (Washington D.C. and New York: University of Washington Press), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Gérard Selbach, “Arts and American Minorities: An Identity Iconography? Contemporary American Indian Art: Three Portraits of Native Artists without Masks.” *Revue Lisa E-Journal* 2, no. 6 (2004): 47. <https://journals.openedition.org/lisa/1175?lang=en>. Currently there are 573 tribal nations in the United States. This can be especially true given the lack of education or knowledge on the subject.

facing the crowd of people standing near the exhibit with explaining the deceitful nature of the exhibition. In his hands he clutched handouts of an AIM press release as he spoke, while in his pocket was a small ticket for his entry to the show. Vernon then calmly proceeded to pick up a cloth covering a small jar. He turned sternly looking out to the crowd, he said a few more words to the group, walked up onto the deck of the Niña, took out a glass jar and hurled the contents towards the sail of the ship, splashing the sail dead center on the Spanish cross covering it in its entirety. (figure 1) As Bellecourt finished emptying the jar, the crowd around him erupted into applause while the television crews and newspaper photographers hurriedly captured the scene. In a final spur of the moment act, Vernon seized the statue of Columbus, and tossed it over the side of the ship, shattering it on the ground.<sup>3</sup>

The protest was regarded by many as a spontaneous action by someone just seeking notoriety. Many others believed this completely callous act by Bellecourt to be rash and felt the “destruction” of property was an act of terrorism.<sup>4</sup> In an interview held weeks after the event when questioned about the planning stages for the protest, Vernon replied that he and other members of AIM, such as William (Bill) A. Means and his brother Clyde Bellecourt, participated in the planning of the protest. Everyone involved felt that something special, something theatrical was needed to get a hold of people’s attention. AIM wanted something that would to push people to re-evaluate Columbus for the greater narrative. AIM wanted the text of the

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<sup>3</sup> Pheifer, “A Bitter Historical Debate in St. Paul,” *Star Tribune* (St. Paul, MN), May 30, 1992. During a meeting with Daniel Swan in June of 2018 he recalled that when Vernon tossed the statue off the ship part of the body sailed towards another museum member who caught it. Various reports from the sources I have read either have said that the statue was tossed off the ship, tossed off the ship and shattered or was not even mentioned in the protest. Of all these reports we can say that this event was significant enough to indelibly imprint itself on everyone there in some way shape or form.

<sup>4</sup> Science Museum of Minnesota, *Viewer’s Guide for Journey: Museums and Community Collaboration* (Science Museum of Minnesota: St. Paul, 1997).

exhibition displays changed and have the counter exhibition *Native Views* expanded nationally.<sup>5</sup>

When the Science Museum saw what was occurring to the *First Encounters* exhibition, they took an opportunity to create a wonderful and unique counterbalance to address the elements that were wrong the exhibition. The resulting show by the museum, *From the Heart of Turtle Island: Native Views 1992* was to provide an open forum on other points of view of the Columbian legacy that was not present in the *First Encounters* exhibition. This was meant to openly address the controversies of *First Encounters*. The show had three goals in mind: the first was to demonstrate the irrepressible nature of Native cultures of the Americas; secondly, to challenge patrons to revisit their viewpoints and attitudes on Native peoples; thirdly, to provide visitors with alternate historical narratives.<sup>6</sup>

However, the members of the group were quite nervous and felt that the situation at the museum was almost too unwieldy for what they had planned. Vernon said that they fully supported that portion of the show created by the staff at the Science Museum. But they also felt that if they did not exercise their First Amendment rights in protest of the show, that it might appear that AIM and the local Indian communities supported the Columbus narrative of *First Encounters*.<sup>7</sup> The group had concerns that their protest was going to be misunderstood as an

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Vernon Bellecourt, 1992; Saint Paul: Telstar News, 1992, VHS.

<sup>6</sup> "Museum News," *Encounters: Explorations of Science*, May/June 1992, 5. Members of the Community Planning team included Salvatore Salerno, Shirley Little Bird, Dan Swan, Amy Cordova, Jan Attridge, Armando Gutierrez, Elaine Salinas, Roy McBride, Lori Mollenhoff, Mila Llauger, and Juanita Espinosa. The programming portion of the show still had quite a few kinks that showed up during the course of the counter exhibition programing. Some performers and craft demonstrators felt the programing and area the Native crafts and exhibits were done quite well. Others felt it was a little disorganized and saw that many who visited the museum were not as respectful as they should have been. Others felt they were in a cage at the zoo. Many of the live performances were specifically chosen to give the audience/museum attendee an idea of the scope and importance of Indigenous culture pre-contact. This was done to dispel one of the prevailing myths taught in schools that the Americas were vast empty lands devoid of culture and civilization.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Vernon Bellecourt, 1992; Saint Paul: Telstar News, 1992, VHS.

attack on the Native community members who worked on that *Native Views*.<sup>8</sup> *Native Views*, was an exhibit created by Daniel Swan and the staff at the Science Museum as a counterbalance to *First Encounters*, was also running at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

### **Contemporary Performances: Protest and Criticism**

There were two well-known performance art pieces that occurred during the planning of the 1992 Columbus Quincentennial that challenged the accepted historical narrative of Columbus discovering the Americas. These two examples are: *Artifact Piece* by James Luna, and *The Couple in a Cage: Two Amerindians Visit the West* by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. I want to it to be very clear that these examples are no more and no less significant to their overarching importance to the Indigenous dialogue that surrounds the Columbus narrative. Each of these performances had similar complex goals in mind as well as sharp commentary on museum practices and false Euro-centric narratives of Native peoples.

In *A Savage Performance: Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco's "Couple in the Cage,"* Diana Taylor explores the blurred Columbian narrative performance by using the traveling performance piece *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* by Latino artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Their performance was planned as a mocking response to the Columbus Quincentennial that traveled around the world as a counterbalance to the global festivities. The

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Milbrath email message to Daniel Swan, September 28, 1992. It should be noted that years later her stance on the situation softened. A few years ago, when I contacted her about her remembrances of the show, she was still unclear why Vernon protested the event. It was indicated that she did not understand why Vernon took part because of the geographic location of his tribal nation, and that it never had contact with Columbus. (Susan Milbrath to author April 30, 2018). I do not fault Milbrath for not understanding that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas all feel as one entity. It is a difficult thing for someone from a non-Native culture to understand as Indigenous peoples do not have borders, only those from White culture feel the need to define, delineate and alienate.; Barbara Carlson and Friends "Interview with Vernon Bellecourt," directed/written/performed by Barbara Carlson, aired May-June 1992, on KSTP-AM, N/A.

intent by Gómez-Peña and Fusco in *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* was to place the audience back into a mindset of discovery, where they encouraged and challenged audiences to accept a new understanding of the relationship of Indigenous peoples, museums and the theatricality of colonialism. Both performers wanted to illustrate the themes of discovery and the damaging effects they can have on Indigenous peoples. Elements of which can be seen in Vernon Bellecourt's performance where he incorporated the audience into his world and made them part of the controversial exhibit.<sup>10</sup>

*Two Undiscovered Amerindians* dealt with wide ranging narrative power that museums hold and their ability to not only influence but perpetuate myth and legend instead of fact. Taylor states that in this performance the audience members acknowledged self-awareness where many realized that they were part of a contemporary display of reality and myth.<sup>11</sup> Where Gómez-Peña and Fusco's audience had the choice to not engage with the performers, Bellecourt's audience had very little say to their role in the drama that unfolded in front of them.

We see a similar idea of public theatrical drama between the audience and the performer explored in Jennifer A. González's book *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*. González writes about Native American performance artist James Luna, and his work *Artifact Piece 1988-1990*. González comments that Luna's work often incorporates the stereotypes and fantasy of Native American life and frequently uses parody to dissociate and clarify truth from fact. González remarked that Luna's work had a dualistic nature that could be

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<sup>10</sup> Diana Taylor, "A Savage Performance: Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco's "Couple in the Cage," *TDR*, 42, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 163-165, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146705>.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, "A Savage Performance: 163-165, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146705>.

perceived differently by European and Native audiences as well and have an ability to reveal issues within stereotypes and cultural dichotomy.<sup>12</sup>

Luna himself had noticed that in many museums across the country Native American exhibits were all following a common misconstrued theme of what is Native American. Before Luna created *Artifact Piece* he was being told that his artwork was not Native. His clientele wanted what *they* thought was Native art. He wanted something that would challenge those common misconceptions, myths and stereotypes of the Native American while at the same time urging the museum patron to reconsider these misconceptions. *Artifact Piece* consisted of a relatively simple display. It involved Luna dressed simply in a towel breechcloth, on a museum display table. All of his scars and his personal effects including music cassettes, posters and toys were labeled and placed around his body.<sup>13</sup> Luna was pushing his audience to reexamine how they had perceived the Native American, who to this point had been portrayed in a past tense in the museum: dead, deceased, exhumed, expired. Luna appropriated a museum exhibition case that would be used for Native artifacts and bones and spiced it up with a living Native person and contemporary artifacts. Luna's own appropriation of the colonial narrative of the dead Indian and replaced it with the narrative that Indigenous peoples were alive.

### **Blood, Memory, Trauma and The Performative Element**

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008): 24, 30, 38.

<sup>13</sup> James Luna and Renée Sueppel, "Note on the Process of Performance," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 39, no 4 (2015): 45. Prior to this piece, the nearest example of a Native American being portrayed as a "living specimen" would be at the 1904 World's Fair in Saint Louis. Races from many cultures, including Native Americans were placed in living zoo exhibits with carefully curated examples of the crudeness of those cultures, ultimately used for validation of the technological marvels of European culture. James Luna's piece was not originally conceived as a commentary on Columbus, but it ended up being part of the larger conversation in the 1990's between Indigenous cultures and how the representation they received in museums needed to be changed. Luna created this piece he needed to find way out of the stereotypical confines of what non-Native people wanted to see in Native artwork.

Bellecourt's use of his own blood had a specific meaning to him, but many of the audience members at the museum were unfamiliar with its cultural significance. Blood has been used as a medium that has a unique power to further a message due to its significant role in sustaining human life. In some parts of Indigenous culture, the blood memory is a belief that blood carries history, life experiences and culture within its walls. But it is and has been an Indigenous performative element deeply connected to historic trauma for a long time. One primary example is Mindjimendamonwin (Mind-Jimen-Damonwin)-Blood Memory is an inherent connection we have to our spirituality and ancestors. Blood memory can be described as the emotions we feel when we hear the drum or our language. We use these emotions or blood memories to understand our heritage and our connection to our ancestors. Blood memory makes these connections for us.<sup>14</sup>

These words exemplify exactly why Vernon's blood at the protest is embedded with a strong cultural message. Vernon's blood is the performative tool at the protest. He was making a very physical connection between Indigenous peoples and Columbus. His message was representative of the genocide, the pain and the torment brought on by five hundred years of oppression. That blood that he had thrown onto the sails was both strikingly visual and visceral, acting as an interlocutor for those who could never speak out. But that blood, whether it was understood by his audience or not at that time, was a symbolic messenger and part of a long-standing tradition of Native performance, albeit tweaked for white audiences.

Native symbolism in performance art can always be cluttered with misconceptions from decades of misunderstanding or unfitting interpretations. In *Playing Indian*, Phillip J. Deloria

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<sup>14</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, ed. By Susan Sleeper-Smith (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 333.

deals with those elements from our history of the reality of Native American identity and that of the play-acted versions presented by Caucasians since the Revolutionary War.<sup>15</sup> Indigenous culture has constantly been hindered by this concocted narrative and in turn has complicated the identity of Native Americans. Very simply stated a Native individual is held to a preconceived visual and cultural standard that is no longer applicable.<sup>16</sup> If we apply this to Bellecourt's protest, we can see the interesting pageantry develop in the museum space where we see the public drama between audience and performance evolve.<sup>17</sup>

### **Blood as Body: Bloodletting as a Messenger**

Historically speaking there are relevant examples of performative blood use in Indigenous cultures in North America. For example, blood was thought of as a way of removing bad elements from the body as a way of purifying one's body. In some tribal groups, private bloodletting ceremonies were meant specifically for purification of the body, and to some extent letting out the bad blood assisted in being able to calm the spirit of the individual for adulthood.<sup>18</sup> The concept of purification also extended to larger ceremonial events such as the Sun Dance. Select dancers would be connected to a pole via piercings through the skin of their chests. The

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<sup>15</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998): 6.

<sup>16</sup> Maria Brave Heart, "Wakiksuyapi: Carrying the Historical Trauma of the Lakota." *Tulane Studies in Social Welfare* 21, (2000): 247, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284944715\\_Wakiksuyapi\\_Carrying\\_the\\_historical\\_trauma\\_of\\_the\\_Lakota](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284944715_Wakiksuyapi_Carrying_the_historical_trauma_of_the_Lakota)

\_ This is true as Native people are dealing with effects of colonization from survivor guilt, fixating on colonizer trauma, reparatory illusions, and efforts to undo past tragedies as Bellecourt did at the First Encounters.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *Symbol and Conquest: Public Ritual and Drama in Santa Fe, New Mexico*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1976): 192.

<sup>18</sup> Jules Blumensohn, "The Fast Among North American Indians," *American Anthropologist* 35, (1933): 452-453. Some of the bloodletting elements of ceremonial or purification are more widespread. However, this will have to be researched at a later date.

dancers then would dance until exhaustion set in or the skin tore. The purpose of the dancer was to take on the sufferings of the tribe and ensure prosperity for the tribe.<sup>19</sup>

If we look at the purification aspect alone, blood is an extremely important ceremonial element. Not only is it used as an instrument for transmission of bad elements out of the body, it also purifies the body. In essence transmission and purification act in concert with one another to assist in the healing ceremony. From that it can be argued that by tossing his blood onto the sails of the Niña, Vernon Bellecourt was creating his own purification ritual by tossing that substance directly onto a symbol of colonialism. However, it is debatable if Bellecourt believed that he was acting for all Native Americans via his body and blood, or that his blood was acting as a purifying substance. It does not matter if he believed that this was true or not, Bellecourt was using his own blood as a way of purifying and cleansing the Columbian narrative by substituting an Indigenous narrative. This is not unlike what would occur during the Sun Dance or other bloodletting rituals. Blood can be considered a visual manifestation of a textual metaphor, changing into a tangible element we can all see, touch or taste. Vernon's blood was a visual and visceral representation of real-life suffering. His use of blood for the protest was significant due to the way it applied to the genocide of indigenous peoples. There was the understanding by Vernon that his blood was to undertake the role of representation was to represent Indigenous lives that have been lost.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jules Blumensohn, "The Fast Among North American Indians," *American Anthropologist* 35, (1933): 455-458. This ceremony in most respects is very similar to the Christian Eucharist where Christ absolves the sins of a much larger group by relatively minor sacrifices involving flesh and blood.

<sup>20</sup> American Indian Movement, "Press Statement-American Indian Movement, May 29, 1992 7:00pm." The situation Bellecourt placed himself in as the intercessory recalls elements from the Christian Eucharist. We could argue in this paper that Bellecourt was acting as a Christlike figure, but that would be placing too heavy a burden on one individual. To create a simpler narrative, Bellecourt was continuing the framework of Indigenous conversation, tweaked for modern times.

Vernon's use of blood is not what makes his actions at the museum completely unique from other performance artists. It is also the reality that the blood used was Indigenous. The blood that he used in the performance was his own and not a substitute element. But when it hit the sail of the Niña it changed from a simple biological element to a messenger that was used as a direct response to the myth of Columbus.

### **Bloodwork: Colonial and Historic Trauma**

To be able to understand the cultural implications of Vernon's protest, we turn our eyes to the symbolic elements of Native American performance. Vernon was working with a heavy cultural baggage at the protest of *First Encounters* that is specific to Indigenous culture. By example, Indigenous culture must continuously deal with effects of colonization such as: survivor guilt, fixating on colonizer trauma, reparatory illusions, and efforts to undo past tragedies that often go unresolved.<sup>21</sup> When you witness a performance in Indigenous culture such as Bellecourt's, you are seeing a process that is dealing with elements of colonialism. For many in Native American communities even when a small amount of trauma is dealt with acknowledgement, it is akin to healing. Performance for Native Americans is needed to deal with trauma associated with colonialism where life has been a constant struggle for survival. That includes not only having had dealt with Holocaust levels of death, loss of land and culture, but often epidemic levels of disease and alcoholism in almost every community. All these wounds to Native American communities can be legitimately traced back to the beginning with Columbus'

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<sup>21</sup> Maria Brave Heart, "Wakiksuyapi: Carrying the Historical Trauma of the Lakota." *Tulane Studies in Social Welfare* 21, (2000): 247, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284944715\\_Wakiksuyapi\\_Carrying\\_the\\_historical\\_trauma\\_of\\_the\\_Lakota](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284944715_Wakiksuyapi_Carrying_the_historical_trauma_of_the_Lakota) Bellecourt's performance was working in that capacity at *First Encounters*.

arrival and becomes a part of the decision-making process that went through Bellecourt's mind before the protest at the Science Museum.<sup>22</sup>

### **Concepts of Native American Performance in the *First Encounters* Protest**

What are we talking about when we talk about contemporary Native Performance? As an example, we need to discuss the basics of what that is. Performativity is about reference and restatement, and not necessarily about actions needing to be seen, but rather iterative and collective properties. Performativity is the extent to which actions are meant to be seen and convey symbolic meaning to the viewer. The unpacking of the relationship between art and social context can occur by analyzing the performance of different domains of behavior: ritual, ceremony, and protest. All forms of art can act as a form social interaction where the artist has found a way to share his message with others. As an example, Bellecourts has incorporated elements from his culture by using an archive of historic resolutions in his performance to relay

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<sup>22</sup> "Childhood stress leaves lasting mark on genes," (July 17, 2018) *News Media* <https://news.wisc.edu/childhood-stress-leaves-lasting-mark-on-genes/>. The ethnicity of the individuals was not released in the report, nor was the kind of stresses exposed to the children. As I have mentioned, there are views that successive traumatic experiences can cause that memory of the traumatic event to be literally and figuratively carried to each successive generation. There have been two reports dealing this very idea of a traumatic event being so severe that it written into the code of a person's DNA. The first report is from the University of Wisconsin-Madison that studied the effects of stressful situations and environments on 22 children ranging in ages from 9 years to 12 years old. The genetic samples from these children were examined for the presence of changes in the methyl group of molecules which are susceptible to environmental conditions. It was found that over 122 genes where the process of methylation was significantly different than children who were not part of a high stress environment. Expression of the genes, where those changed levels of methylation regulate genes development was found to have occurred over 1,400 gene sequences. It was found that ten years after the initial research it was found that many of the individuals from the test were still exhibiting genetic markers for stress. Much of the language for this is quite remarkable as it does prove to a point that our genes provide a historic memory. This information also can be used to back up belief of blood memory can theoretically exist and that the effects of holocaust events can linger longer than a single generation, or just prevail the same as a long-term memory. What this signifies, along with the previous findings from the stress research is that legitimate realization that to a point memory are stored within us from one generation to the next. And if we link this with physiology research on historic trauma, we create a sort of nightmare perpetual motion machine where an entire culture is unable to escape from the holocaust level events started by the arrival of the Spanish and Columbus in 1492. Proving without doubt that the horrors of Columbus and the subsequent colonialization of the Americas was reason enough for Vernon Bellecourt and AIM to protest the Columbus-centric First Encounters exhibition.

his message to his audience.<sup>23</sup> In this, what is being expressed at the protest at the Science Museum is a direct confrontation of one culture rebelling against the false narration of European colonialism.

Elements of performance have long been part of Native American culture to communicate information regarding trade or cultural exchanges. By example, the usage of non-verbal messages has historically been used during various ceremonies and assemblies such as at powwows or the covenant chain meetings of the Haudenosaunee. What is easily overlooked during artistic discussions about Indigenous culture is the context and content of information and understanding that comes from viewing cultural ceremony and protest. Performance is a language that easily crosses linguistic and cultural barriers, which makes Columbus' own actions in 1492 very significant in the context of colonialization. Performance is a system where the messages resulting from cultural contact begin to shift the aboriginal, colonizer, and colonial cultural contexts. This means that Bellecourts performance had to find a new way of interaction with a modern audience.<sup>24</sup> If he had utilized older versions of "traditional" inter-tribal visual forms of performance, they would no longer work as an effective means to communicate. In this instance Bellecourt may not have considered himself an artist when he stepped onto the deck of the Niña, but he was indeed acting as one in this instance when he delivered his message to the audience at the Science Museum.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> J.J., Brody, "Retrospection, Memory and Imagination in the Study of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Native American Art History," *Museum Anthropology* 24, (2001): 19.

<sup>24</sup> Clare Carolin, "After the Digital We Rematerialise: Distance and Violence in the Work of Regina José Galindo," *Third Text*, 25, no. 2 (March 2011): 215. <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>.

<sup>25</sup> Clyde Bellecourt and Jon Lurie. *The Thunder Before the Storm: The Autobiography of Clyde Bellecourt as Told to Jon Lurie* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, MN 2016): 90. Vernon's occupation before joining A.I.M. was as a hairdresser with a French name and personality.

The messages that were being delivered were specifically constructed for a multi-cultural audience that attended the Science Museum. Messages such as those from Bellecourt's performance are nothing new in the arena of cultural performance art. As a case in point, in *Symbol and Conquest: Public Ritual and Drama in Santa Fe, New Mexico* by Ronald L. Grimes gives us an example of the unique system of communication that arise when multiple cultures are in close proximity to one another. When this occurs, such as in this instance where the audience and performer are one and the same, a complex relationship where a cultural hybrid or hybridity can develop when those cultures are in close proximity to one another. At the Science Museum Bellecourt had to figure out what elements he needed to take that would be understood by a non-Native audience. Bellecourt had lived in white culture for almost twenty years after leaving the reservation and had become quite successful in a number of jobs. He understood what made the white world tick and was apt at aping its habits and social customs.<sup>26</sup> Bellecourt was able to take social cues and apply that to the planning stages of the protest. He knew that subtly would not work, he needed something dynamic that would open people's eyes.

Grimes understood the hybrid culture that took shape is a natural element that will occur when two or more cultures are confined and cohabitate with one another. Even if those societies initially refuse to mold together in a cohesive way, there will still be a bleeding over of unique visual cultural elements over time. Each society borrows from one another other in order to form some sort of universal communication to coexist. For Bellecourt it turned out that he needed to utilize an understanding of what visual cues would be understood by his audience.

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Ballard, "Penthouse Interview: Vernon Bellecourt. He is the Symbol of the Most Militant Indian Group Since Geronimo," *Penthouse International Magazine for Men*, July 1973, 60-62.

Grimes' study partially focuses on the tangible visual element of clothing with what he calls the syncretistic or syncretic quality of the costuming worn during the fiesta. What Grimes is trying to explain here is that the syncretistic value of that clothing can be viewed as a symbol of ethnicity that sends a symbolic message, separate from the music played throughout the city. That clothing is a physical and tangible representation of the hybridity that is easily discernable by the participants of the festival. The music is simply another layer of that hybridity that adds to what is already being "said" by the colorful clothing. Simply put, if the music announces, "This is an *Hispanic* city, the attire announces, "This is an *Hispanic city*."<sup>27</sup> A similar circumstance was occurring at Bellecourt's performance at the Science Museum where the layered narratives of both Indigenous and colonizer were colliding.

What questions can we ask about Bellecourt's protest? The first question that should be asked is, can it be considered a traditional Indigenous performance? Or was this protest by Bellecourt a hybrid similar to that of the Pueblo ceremony in Santa Fe? To orientate this in the Native American way of thinking, traditional elements are done within a Native cultural framework. In Native American culture, there are specific steps that are taken during ceremonies, during the construction of ceremonial pipes and drums that have never changed since their inception. The materials may have changed, the words may have changed, but the intent and overall purpose has not. The fact that you are still acting within that framework is what counts in Indigenous culture.

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<sup>27</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *Symbol and Conquest: Public Ritual and Drama in Santa Fe, New Mexico* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1976): 192, 198.

What do we mean when we say something is traditional?<sup>28</sup> As far as what is considered the meaning of traditional can be up for debate here depending on who you ask. Do we fit the elements of the protest into the confines of a strict definition of traditional where something never changes? But even then, certain elements of the performances and rituals had to be changed for them to be understood by the non-Indigenous audience, such as English colonists. Some people could argue that once something has changed from its original form it is can no longer be considered traditional. Just as we can say that Bellecourt's performance at the museum was not traditional. To clarify he did not use the same meeting tactics that someone from his tribe would have used 150 years ago. From a Native point of view, the concept of what constitutes as traditional performance is much different than what is expected by an European/American audience because it is constantly evolving and adapting.

When elements of a performance or ritual are executed for a non-Indigenous audience, element of that performance must be changed for the audience to understand those messages. In the case of Bellecourt's protest those elements had to be simplified from a more complex Indigenous oral tradition for the performance to be understood by its non-indigenous audience. When Vernon took the stage, he was implementing his collective knowledge and history of all Indigenous peoples of the Americas and continuing the story in a hybrid visual performance.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Coco Fusco, email message to author, October 1, 2019. To understand the idea of traditional in a better light, I contacted performance artist, author, and co-creator of *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* visit the West Coco Fusco on her thoughts on this matter. I asked since she had been aware of the performance, as a photo of the protest was included in her book *English is Broken Here* from 1995. I also asked if she felt that his actions were to a point delivering a similar message to the public as in *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* had. Especially since that performance was asking the public that the rethink their involvement with the continuation of the false narratives of Columbus and museum treatment of Indigenous peoples. While she could not recall a specific memory of the event or what she thought at the time, she remembered enough that the protest might not fit within the confines of what a "traditional" cultural performance was.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Peacock and Marlene Wisuri, *Ojibwe Waasa Inaabidaa: We look in All Directions* (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002), 15-16, 18. Structurally they are quite similar to folk stories from Japan, China and Tibet with anthropomorphic characters and human figures learning and teaching from one another, passing the collective knowledge to others. Some oral stories are meant as morality tales, and others are meant as explanations about how the world was created, or how the beaver has a flat tail.

## **The Symbolic Nature of Columbus: Of Boundaries, Performers and Natives**

Bellecourt's performance was ultimately a response to the original theatrical recited play by Columbus in 1492. His arrival was no more than an intricately performance layered narrative within a narrative describing his arrival in the Americas. Columbus' entrance was one part of an expansive theatrical play that explorers and conquerors the world over have utilized to send messages of authority and superiority. When his assemblage of Spaniards, dressed in all their finery, flags and standards beckoning, were able to create a visual hammer exemplifying the power of the Spanish crown. Columbus' arrival was one part of a theatrical play, whereby setting foot upon the shores of Lucayos with a retinue of Spanish royal banners, soldiers and priests, places indigenous peoples as part of an unwitting audience Even the process of planting the Spanish flag into the earth was meant as a specific visual message to the concealed Taino. Whether or not the Taino were sufficiently awestruck as intended, we might never know the full truth.<sup>30</sup> The Spanish knew that engaging in theatrics such as they did, the power of the crown would culturally overwrite the Indigenous storyline of the New World. More to the point his theatrical performance created a false power narrative for the Taino. It visually legitimized the documentation Columbus and his son sent back to the home audience in Spain by layering untruthful narration of Taino primitivism, thereby removing the humanity, and sophistication

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Often the symbolism in performance art can be cluttered with misconceptions from decades of misunderstanding and incorrect perceptions. The misinterpretation of Native American identity has hindered their ability to be understood. Historically speaking there has been a great deal of miscommunication between European and Indigenous culture as mentioned previously. Therefore, it is not surprising that it was so difficult for many witnesses at the protest, and others, to understand Bellecourt's actions that day.

<sup>30</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2003), 57. Columbus' theatrics were the same as Admiral Perry's when his black fleet set foot on the shores of Japan. Simple subjugation by pomp and circumstance. The Spanish were also well practiced with theatrical tactics during the Reconquista. Although much of the visual message was lost in translation as the visual forms of communication that the Spanish were using were completely alien to the peoples of the Americas.

from Indigenous peoples.<sup>31</sup> That narrative continued onto the *First Encounters* exhibition. There the same false story continued to adhere to the same version first laid out by Columbus in 1492.<sup>32</sup>

### **First Encounters Case study: The Continued Narrative Performance on Native America**

To what purpose did Bellecourt's protest hope to serve? Was his performance at the museum meant to reclaim Native agency and identity from the darkness of Europeanization? To a point we can say yes. But that answer is too simple in this instance and we must dive deeper into what *First Encounters* enacted, both to the Columbian Quincentennial and to Vernon Bellecourt.

The *First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States, 1492-1570* was originally fashioned as a part of the huge worldwide Quincentennial celebration of discovering new worlds and the excitement of earlier European exploration. However, due to the Columbus-centric nature of the exhibition and concerns about its lack of Indigenous context, protests met the show immediately a mere six weeks into its planned multi-year run. On November 24, 1989 fellow AIM member and founder Russell Means of the Denver branch of AIM, led a group to the steps of the Florida Museum of Natural History to condemn the show. This was due to the growing concerns surrounding the show. Many in the Indigenous community, including Rosebud Sioux author and scholar Joseph Marshall III, were afraid that

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<sup>31</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press 2003): 56-59. Taylor, as detailed her explanations are, was not able to describe this scenario from an indigenous perspective. This is not to say she could not understand performance from a Native perspective, but it would be more about a general lack of comprehension of the social context of a work. That type of work can often take decades of interaction and research to be able to generate that understanding from an indigenous viewpoint. Only through assembling an adequate account of Native cultural performance and symbolism can we start to explain the "dialogue" between Columbus and Bellecourt.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*: 56-59. Writing down the event and recording with a sole European voice for narration creates a forced perception of the Native peoples of the new world. This narration when read or spoken to others it also perpetuates the myth that Columbus himself constructed. In his official "report" to the Spanish crown, he constructed a false narrative world by proclaiming the Natives looked upon them as celestial gods, as innocent as children and empty vessels ready for the wonderment of God, and in time would be able to speak.

the Quincentennial celebrations would be a start to another round of detrimental policies and ethnocentrism against them.<sup>33</sup> Sadly this is exactly what the *First Encounters* exhibition's narrative accomplished.

At this point the creators of the exhibition should have made the decision to address the concerns of many people in the academic and Native communities had about *First Encounters*. This was unfortunately not the state of affairs as both co-curators dug their heels further to defend their Columbus narrative. Two years later in *Museum News* Milbrath and Milanich appeared non-plussed to the negativity levied towards the show. They felt that in the show and its message wholly incorporated the negative impact Columbus had on the Native community. They appeared seemingly saddened that “a small number of people perceived our exhibit as a celebration of Columbus.” Both authors believed that the small group who did not like the show should strike out on their own and create their own exhibits and express their concerns in the public arena. This was of course completely discounting the prolific reach of a multi-million dollar show vs. that of a much smaller show by that “small number of people.”<sup>34</sup>

This brings us to why was *First Encounters* created in the first place for the Quincentennial year of Columbus' arrival to the Americas? To understand this, we must go back to the 1976 Bicentennial in the United States. It was noted by many government officials that during the Bicentennial, many Americans were completely unaware of their own history and, how the country came into existence. While it was noted by academics at the time that the

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<sup>33</sup> Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices* (Lanham, MD: AltMira Press, 2008), 109-110. At this point AIM had splintered into two separate camps: the Denver, Colorado AIM chapter with Russell and William (Bill) A. Means, and the original headquarters in the Twin Cities, MN with Vernon and Clyde Bellecourt.

<sup>34</sup> Cooper, *Spirited Encounters*, 111, 113. The show was in fact outright cancelled at many locations before it landed at the Science Museum of Minnesota. The *First Encounters* exhibition ran from 1989 to 1993 a full five years.

Bicentennial was an extremely profitable year, it was not an educational one for the average American. When it came time to celebrate the Quincentennial of Columbus arrival in the Americas, many historians at the time wanted to seize the moment of the Columbian Encounter to educate. This was especially true given the poor state of education in the United States. The thought behind the *First Encounters* celebration was to rid the event of all verbal baggage normally associated with Columbus arrival. This would allow for a clean slate, where even the most novice in matters of history could learn and understand. That ended up not occurring as the narrative of the events in the exhibition ended up being completely Euro-centric in measure. Native involvement in almost every event during this year was minimal, and the contemporary Native voice was nonexistent. Very few Native scholars were consulted in the various projects during the preparation for the Quincentennial celebration.<sup>35</sup>

During the development of *First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States, 1492-1570* the lack of an Indigenous narrative was as silent as the dead of the Taino. In the accompanying book by the same name, creators of the exhibition Jerald T. Milanich and Susan Milbrath at the time are noted as saying, “It is a horrible irony that although the de Soto and other early Spanish expeditions provide our only views of some native cultures at the time of European contact.”<sup>36</sup> This was a sentiment that was also repeated in newspaper

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<sup>35</sup> James Axtell, “Columbian Encounters: Beyond 1992,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (April, 1992): 335-337, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2947276>. According to officials, many people at the time of the Bicentennial could not name a founding father or had a poor understanding of the founding of the United States. So, simply put not much has changed at all since then.

<sup>36</sup> Jerald T. Milanich and Susan Milbrath, “Another World.” In *First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States, 1492-1570* edited by Jerald T. Milanich and Susan Milbrath (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991), 23. This just illustrates the lack of effort to find sources either ancient or contemporary. A final act of erasure had occurred to the millions of lives lost from the Spanish conquest.

articles prior to the opening of the exhibition at the Science Museum in Saint Paul, Minnesota where it was admitted that the show was written from a European viewpoint.<sup>37</sup>

The European viewpoint highlights one of the main problems where *First Encounters* failed in incorporating Indigenous viewpoints of the conquest and beyond. Considering that this exhibition was a multi-million dollar exercise funded by the National Endowment of the Humanities, the lack of research into both sides of the Columbus story is astonishing. As mentioned, it was noted that there was a lack of Native scholarship on the time period that the exhibition had focused on. There was supposedly very little material that could be used for telling the account of Columbus' arrival *in written form*. I highlight those words because from a European viewpoint, the only scholarship that matters is the written word. I feel that the researchers for the exhibition either did not have access to or did not take enough time to properly tell the story of the meeting of two vastly different worlds. Milbrath and Milanich defended their viewpoint again by saying that it was the public that was the cause of the content of the writing for the exhibit. Because the public had become used to a certain point of view and version of the truth that was provided for exhibitions by the museum community.<sup>38</sup>

So, what is the reason the creators for *First Encounters* did not ask for more input from the Indigenous community? There is something that I can suggest as a rationale for this. In a Eurocentric dominated world, Indigenous cultures fall under the principle of power politics. They are considered inferior as many other subjugated minorities are. This is where colonial powers would rather describe their surroundings that will best illustrate their ideas of superiority

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<sup>37</sup> Pat Price, "A Columbus Counterpoint: Indians Help Create Companion Exhibit at Science Museum," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), May 20, 1992.

<sup>38</sup> Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices* (Lanham, MD: AltMira Press, 2008), 114.

for their own interests. More to the point this is where they are able create their own narrative as Columbus once did, and in effect erases the power of the minority. The writing for *First Encounters*, including the wall texts, the exhibition catalogue and all the media associated with the show, all falls under the pretext and malicious instrument of the colonizing process. This in the end is just the further legitimizing of the colonization of Indigenous peoples under the hegemonic soliloquy of conquest and cultural subjugation.<sup>39</sup>

Why was Columbus singled out as *the* person to blame for the Indigenous holocaust from every other conquistador who came to the New World? Why is he portrayed by Native America as a vagabond and pillaging pirate who should have been thrown back into the sea?<sup>40</sup> Ultimately it comes down to the legacy of *how* information about Columbus has been disseminated. It is how he has been taught in our school systems, and it is how his iconography and narrative have been handled, coaxed and massaged into a brilliant propagandized Madison Avenue ad campaign. Since the early 1500's Columbus' image was fashioned as heroic and noble. Some of the earliest textual narratives made, one by his son Hernando, carefully polished his words by blindly ignoring the atrocities committed in the name of the Spanish Empire. The polished heroic image sits as a polar opposite from the real history experienced by Native peoples in the Americas.<sup>41</sup>

The creators of *First Encounters* may have been readily influenced by Columbus' own words and flowery language from his journals and took his words and his son's recollections of

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<sup>39</sup> James Axtell, "Columbian Encounters: Beyond 1992," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (April, 1992): 355, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2947276>. While it is very true that the massive loss of life from disease and war took its toll on the Indigenous peoples of the region, there were plentiful accounts that were still accessible via oral and pictorial histories. One example of this would be in the Florentine Codex where a recollection of the events was provided in both pictorially and in Nahuatl the written form of the language of the Aztec.

<sup>40</sup> William A. Means Executive Director IITC and WaBun-Inini (Vernon Bellecourt), "Press Statement-American Indian Movement" (press release, Minneapolis Minnesota, 1992), page number (2).

<sup>41</sup> Edward Wilson-Lee, *The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books* (New York: Scribner, 2019), 136.

the New World to be true. More to the point in what he did express, Columbus and his son Hernando created a mystical view of the New World with Columbus being the sole voice of creation, being the first European to leave out the Native voice all together.<sup>42</sup>

The wording that peppered the exhibition may not have had the intention of glorification of Columbus and of colonialism, but the pure vanilla tone of the text, in part meant to not place blame unfortunately took that route of glorification. The intent of the writing might have been to take a politically correct tone, but in doing so it stripped away the truth of the atrocities committed by the Spanish. The language describing the hardships endured by the Native peoples was imbued with seem almost trivial. I will provide three examples of the tricky wordplay that ensued with *First Encounters* as it appeared throughout the exhibition and catalogue that accompanied the show.

Much of the language in the exhibition text became steadily more insipid and shied away from placing blame. On page 18 of the catalogue “the Spanish colonies were “plagued by...a lack of Indian support.” This not only appeared to make the Native population seem lazy and uncooperative, but also does not acknowledge Spanish treatment of local tribes despite their cooperation to the contrary. Our second example describes the issue of labor in greater content on page 22 of the catalogue. “Gold mining in Hispaniola began in 1494. When Native labor became scarce, colonists began importing African slaves.” These words not only disavow the true reasons why Indigenous labor became scarce, but also labels African slaves as a commodity. The final example is the most troubling where Milbrath and Milanich disavow an important historic voice for the Native peoples at the time, Bartolomé Las Casas. On page 53 of the

catalogue Milbrath and Milanich deny the validity of Las Casas' word by saying "The accuracy of his descriptions remains a subject of scholarly debate."<sup>43</sup> It is completely astonishing that the first-person account by Bartolomé would have been disavowed so easily by academics. His records come from his travels to the New World with Columbus' son Hernando. In his travels he witnessed firsthand the horrific treatment by the Spaniards there, and personally equated Columbus as the beginning of the end for Indigenous cultures there.<sup>44</sup>

This is a dangerous precedent that was thrown out there by the creators of the *First Encounters* exhibit. By disavowing and devaluing a figure who wrote several books on his records of the New World they have effectively silenced the Native voice. They created their own version of the truth that hundreds of thousands of people would take as the truth. Many in the Native community and in the academic world were outraged by this appalling purification of Columbus' legacy amongst the stereotypical Indigenous imagery. The creators of *First Encounters* perpetuated the misconceptions by unconsciously turning cultural items into simple

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<sup>43</sup> Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices* (Lanham, MD: AltMira Press, 2008), 112. The catalogue where these references come from is painfully lacking in any semblance of blame towards the Spanish. The Indigenous voice is silent until page 70 of the 72-page booklet. Even then the language describing the horrific treatment of the Natives by the Spanish is dulled and subdued by soft language. On page 71 following a stylized engraving of Natives being thrown to the dogs by the Spaniards by de Bry in the book *Americæ* (1595), the text discusses how de Soto would use his attack dogs to "intimidate" the Natives. Using the word intimidate removes the bloody aspect of the truth. De Soto would use his dogs to tear people apart for an intimidating effect. So, by default Milbrath and Milanich are having their cake and eating it as well. By placing the Native voice at the end of the book has the feel of an afterthought, and a hasty one at that.

<sup>44</sup> Anton Treuer, *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask* (Saint Paul: Borealis Books, 2012), 29. In a very horrifying writing, of which is one of the many that are rejected by Milbrath and Milanich, starts out: "The Spaniards made bets as to who would split a man in two, or cut off his head at one blow; or they opened up his bowels. They tore babies from their mother's breast by their feet and dashed their heads against the rocks. They speared the bodies of other babes, together with their mothers and all who were before them, on their swords... They hanged Indians, and by thirteens, in honor and reverence for our Redeemer and the 12 apostles, and, with fire, they burned the Indians alive... I saw all the above things... All these did my own eyes witness."

display objects inside the gallery space. Here along with the lack of information became a hindrance.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

### The American Indian: A Complex Narrative

It can be very problematic for any museum to deal with displaying traditional Native culture or understanding the complexities of Indigenous narratives versus modern perspectives and viewpoints. Questions arise such as: What are the messages? Who is this performance really for, and why should Native performance be studied? How should it be displayed? This is not because this subject matter has never been discussed in an academic or scholarly sense, but because Euro-American perspectives on Indigenous culture are viewed with a different set of rules and because Euro-American categories for things like blood, performance, and protest are not necessarily equal. This can be a frustrating element because European and American cultures have lagged on their ability to understand Indigenous culture. Was this part of what Bellecourt was trying to accomplish at the museum, by pushing for some sort of dialogue between two cultures as with the Pueblo ceremony in Santa Fe?

Understanding historically what was happening to Indigenous culture in the United States during the early years of Native scholarship can help understand the importance of this period of change in the perception of Native art and culture. But this research only provides a partial

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<sup>45</sup> Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991): no page number provided. <https://books.google.com/books?id=c55fBgAAQBAJ&lpg=PP1&dq=Exhibiting%20cultures%3A%20the%20Poetics%20and%20Politics%20of%20Museum%20display&pg=PT35#v=onepage&q&f=true>. Historically, museums have had a huge learning curve when dealing with anything dealing with Native American culture. This issue runs across the board from artwork, pottery, sacred religious items and human remains. When creating an exhibit there are certain parameters that must be addressed, that need to be dealt with before Native content for traveling or permanent exhibits are done. There are cultural and historic elements that need to be addressed for Native exhibitions that Vernon had addressed at his protest that you would not need to accomplish for contemporary shows about Italian art or Pop art.

answer to the complexity of Indigenous art and performance. Both performance art and Native American performance work by retelling a history and a story, where we see patterns and a cultural framework that helps understand what is occurring in the present such as with Bellecourt's use of blood as a messenger.<sup>46</sup>

But today it is not an impossible task to understand how performance works within a culture to understand how societies interact with new situations. As Joseph Roach states in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, the key to understanding how a performance works inside a culture is recognizing that certain fixed aspects do not exist except in a fictional state. The answer is to understand civilizations when confronted with unique events never existed previously, have reinvented themselves by carrying out their history in the company of their audience.<sup>47</sup>

Artists from every culture and way of life have had to find new ways of passing along their messages to audiences. Especially those who may not be familiar with their performance milieu. When we consider Bellecourt's performance at the museum was in front of mixed audience, we can now understand the issues he faced trying to get his messages across. We can

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<sup>46</sup> Catherine Wood, *Performance in Contemporary Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2018) 9. Here we would bring up the convoluted relationship between the United States and the Native American nations in the Americas. Forced removal, denial of citizenship till the 1920's lack of religious freedom, active extermination policies and the Dawes Act are all elements that need acknowledgement when we write scholarship on this subject. ; Janet Catherine Berlo provides an excellent overview of the state of early scholarship from roughly 1860 to 1920. Berlo states that scholarship at the time was split on two different pathways. Some scholars were expertly trained in art method and theory, while others had no formal training, such as Warburg. Berlo suggested that it was not until after an exhibition of Native American art at the Museum of Modern Art in the early 1940s, that scholarship and perceptions of what Native American art was changed for the better. There was more of an emphasis regarding the rich cultural history and a focus on individual Native artists for the first time, rather than massing all Native artists as one uniform group. Janet Catherine Berlo, ed., *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992): 13-15.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 5.

now also comprehend the reasons why the public was unable to go past the surface of what they witnessed. In this setting messages literally get lost in translation, or in the lack thereof.<sup>48</sup>

No matter what the reasons were that the audience did not understand the performance, Bellecourt was occupying a space normally reserved for reflection of the past and turning it into a presentation of the present, just as James Luna, Coco Fusco and Gómez-Peña, worked to force those museum attendees from a state of passiveness to that of active participants. Bellecourt's protest in part was a strongly performed message voicing Native American frustrations to the status quo of within these systems.

Native culture has been continually locked into a visual past of paintings, illustrations and written descriptions by European explorers and artists. Today this entrapping visual culture still extends far and wide in the Indigenous community. We need to bring this element of the conversation to the forefront of this paper because this is part of the social historical problems that Bellecourt fought against that were present throughout all of First *Encounters*' exhibition narrative are still with us.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*: 21.

<sup>49</sup> Evan M. Maurer, "Presenting the American Indian: From Europe to America," *In National Museum of the American Indian. The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures*, edited by Richard West (Washington, D.C., Seattle: National Museum of the American Indian; In Association with University of Washington Press, 2000), 15-17. It is important to note that when Dutch artist Albert Eckhout via a commission by Count Johan Maurits of Nassau to provide accurate representations of Native Brazilians this was rejected by popular European taste which preferred the illustrations depicting the "noble savage." We bring this up due to bring notice to the long history of commodification of non-white races. The history of this type of propagandistic imagery goes much farther back to the beginning of European contact in the Americas. As early as 1505 in the German publication *The People of the Islands Recently Discovered*, there were early woodcut images of indigenous peoples in feathered headdresses, skirts made of leaves sitting around fires boiling human body parts in stews. Further portrayals of Native Americans are portrayed as primitive and exotic. In 1591 further books such as *America by Theodore de Bry*, included second hand referenced illustrations of the types peoples that could be seen in the Americas, and many of those images were based upon European models from the classical era. These illustrations were out of context and visually incorrect examples of the "noble savage" of the new world. By the time of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century stereotypical illustrations of the Native Americans include bare breasted noble woman in headdresses and cloaks, picking fruit from trees in a paradise style landscape.

One of the most problematic elements of *First Encounters* for Indigenous peoples was being constantly portrayed as something from the past and stripped of identity as human beings. *First Encounters* was a literal interpretation of history being written by the victors that ignored many social and historic elements in which Native Americans must live with each and every day of their lives. This was one of the many reasons the exhibition was problematic for many Native Americans.<sup>50</sup>

Museums have had issues trying to properly conduct exhibitions with Native Americans. Sometimes they work and sometimes they do not. In the case of the *First Encounters Exhibition* many mistakes were made. But why did this problem exist in the first place? To begin with much of the narrative presented at *First Encounters* was a false narrative. To Bellecourt, the *First Encounters* exhibition narrative was a horrific continuation of the fictional discovery of the Americas and Indigenous peoples by Columbus. Vernon's physical presence at the museum became the part of the discourse that represented the reality of the Columbus narrative that all indigenous peoples suffer from today. The gestures that Bellecourt engaged in during his protest, performed an historic and powerful interconnected narrative that he meant to the established narratives of Columbus, historic museum treatment of Native Americans and art historical classifications of Native art and culture.

This lack of understanding is paramount in explaining the many reasons why *First Encounters* was such a colossal failure due to its ignorance in properly engaging and presenting Native American history and culture in the correct manner. By Milbrath's own admittance in 1992, the exhibition was "intellectually elitist" and contained "institutional racism." The

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<sup>50</sup> Pauline Turner Strong, "Exclusive Labels: Indexing the National "We" in Commemorative and Oppositional Exhibitions," *Museum Anthropology* 21, no.1 (1997): 48. Many European Americans are used to the image of Native peoples behind glass museum cases, and therefore have a certain image that comes to mind when Indigenous exhibits are held. Native Americans have never seen or thought of themselves as the exotic or in the past."

exhibition also ignored Native voices and stories due to the lack of written records. A serious omission for both a world-wide show partially funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.<sup>51</sup>

These institutions have worked hard to convey the message that contemporary Native America has survived and is present, and most have taken important steps to properly represent this. Apache scholar Nancy Mithlo has questioned the general failure from museums to properly engage what has been truly lost over the centuries from Native culture. But more importantly Mithlo wants the discussion started to *why* this has been lost. Professors Waziyatawin Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird have also suggested that we should move even further into a proper engagement of the destruction caused by colonial hegemony. This would be the first step in reversing colonization, questioning its legitimacy and promote healing in the Indigenous community.<sup>52</sup>

The most difficult aspect to realizing this goal is the complexity of how this can be achieved. For example, there are two separate narratives that a museum must deal with. In the Americas' historic colonization is an incomplete narrative without the inclusion of colonial genocide. Merging the common historical narrative with the Indigenous narrative element is a difficult one to create as a museum must figure out what is to be included, and what can be excluded from a new integrated narrative. However, many of the risks should be considered worth it to many in the Indigenous communities. Each step, no matter how difficult the potential,

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<sup>51</sup> Ian Trontz "A Columbus Counterpoint: Indians Help Create Companion Exhibit at Science Museum." *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis-Saint Paul, MN), May 20, 1992. From my studies in these issues in creating a narrative that all will be happy with is a problem that is not easily solved. To be able to find a common ground will greatly differ from on Tribal Nation to another, and this will continue to be an issue for generations to come.

<sup>52</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 119-120.

must foster better understanding with each generation and assist with the gradual decolonization of the historic narrative in North America.<sup>53</sup>

Vernon Bellecourt's protest was an important milestone of performance art and indigenous culture. It was part of a natural progression of two movements, performance art and the American Indian Movement, that developed side by side during the tumultuous times of the late 1960's and early 1970's in the United States. Performance art was born out of a need to push the known boundaries of the interaction between the artistic space and the audience.<sup>54</sup> The American Indian Movement was born from the specific need for an entire race to be heard and recognized as a relevant culture.

What was presented at the Science Museum of Minnesota in 1992 by Bellecourt was a tremendously deep and layered message about the colonial legacy of Columbus. Vernon Bellecourt's protest created a complex fusion between Native American culture and performance and art while at the same time answering and healing the indignities and pain of Colonialism. The year Vernon took to the Science Museum to protest *First Encounters* was when 1992 was supposed to be the year of an expansive, multi-million-dollar worldwide celebration of Columbus. Yet due to worldwide condemnation of the Columbus events, and Vernon's protest at *First Encounters* the celebration and the exhibition ultimately faltered and disappeared from public view.<sup>55</sup> The significance is that it occurred during a period of renewed cultural treatise regarding Native culture and its relationship, both good and bad, to museum culture. The protest

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<sup>53</sup> Andrew John Wolford, Jeff Benvenuto and Alexander Laban Hinton, *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 151-152. Sadly, there was none of this understanding shown by the creators of *First Encounters*.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2007): 174-5.

<sup>55</sup> Coco Fusco *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*, (New Press: New York City, 1995): 38.

at the exhibition was also one of the last important acts by the American Indian Movement that actively stirred the debate of how Native Americans were to be represented in the museum environment, and by whom. Vernon's protest came only two years after the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed on November 16, 1990, which addressed Native American rights regarding cultural artifacts, skeletal remains, sacred and funerary items and inherited objects. Proper knowledge of the cultural significance of an object can greatly affect how it should or should not be displayed in a museum setting. It was not the intent of Vernon Bellecourt and AIM to facilitate a discourse between the two groups, but it turned into a very important cornerstone in the discussions between Native American groups and museums.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>"National NAGPRA," *NPS.com*, Last modified 2019, Last modified 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/nagpra/>.

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