Native American and Latino Voices

David Mura Moderates a Conversation with Emmanuel Ortiz, Rhiana Yazzie, R. Vincent Moniz, Jr., and Teresa Ortiz at The Loft Literary Center on October 19, 2015

Section 1: Introduction

David Mura: Now, about this class I'm going to be doing: There's going to be a formal class on the first Wednesday of every month, and then this sort of more independent on the second Wednesday. Our aim is to get as many people to come to this class as possible. And the ways we're going to deal with the class depends on how many people show up. But the idea is it's going to be free. And one of the things I want to be able to do with this class is not only teach people about creative writing, but also teach people about the issues about writing about race, and then also to see if there's ways that writers of color in this community can begin to connect more.

I remember when one of—I teach at VONA, which is a writers conference for writers of color. And one of our faculty, Matt Johnson, talked about how when he was in grad school, one of the things that he felt was most important for the black writers when he was at the Columbia MFA program was people getting together and people supporting each other. And he said almost everybody out of our group went on to become successful.

So what I'm hoping comes out of this class is not only the class and the education that will be part of it, but trying to organize people into support groups, to support each other, and to really think about ways that we can connect more as writers of color. So please show up. And tell your friends about it, OK?

I'm very pleased to have these wonderful artists here, Rhiana Yazzie, Emmanuel Ortiz, R. Vincent Moniz, and Teresa Ortiz, for this conversation dealing with Native American and Latino American voices. The work of Native American artists challenges America's present day conception of itself as a nation, as well as America's history. At the same time, these artists give voice to a complexity of concerns within their own lives and communities.

Latino American artists are the fastest growing segment of the artistic world and are becoming an increasingly visible presence in Minnesota in recent years. Issues facing the Latino community remain in the forefront, unfortunately in certain ways, of presidential policies, and in the challenges to Latino American studies in Arizona, as that indicates, also in the education in the arts.

So the way we're going to run this is I asked each of the panelists to give me a question that they particularly wanted to answer. So I'll have each of them do an individual question. And then I'll begin to open it up to questions for the panel as a whole. And then after about an hour, we'll open it up to questions from the audience. So hopefully when I ask for questions of the audience, you should have an hour to prepare, there won't be people sort of looking down, and that you'll raise your hand and have questions, OK?

I want to thank the Loft for hosting this, and all the staff from the Loft that made this possible, including obviously my good friend Bao Phi. Mark Tang is videotaping these. And we're putting these up on YouTube. The first three conversations are already up on YouTube. I want to thank Paul Mairet for transcribing them. And once I get my stuff together, I'm going to be putting up some of the transcripts on my website. OK, that's all the information.

Oh, I'm supposed to say this: This activity is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the Arts and Cultural Heritage.

Audience: Yes.

[APPLAUSE]

David Mura: Rhiana Yazzie is a Navajo playwright, producer, director, and actor based in Minnesota. She is a two-time Playwrights' Center Jerome Fellow and was a Playwrights' Center Core Member for three years. She was a playwright in residence at the William Inge Center in Independence, Kansas. Her most recent projects include a joint commission from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Public Theater. She has been a resident at the biennial Bonderman National Theatre for Youth Symposium and The Kennedy Center's New Visions/New Voices. She created New Native Theatre in 2009, a company based in the Twin Cities; it is a new way of thinking about, and staging Native American stories. She is also creating a 13 episode podcast, a comedy-drama series called "Little Apple, Big Apple," about the highs and lows of being Native American living in the Twin Cities. I should also say that New Native Theatre just got its 501(c)(3).

Rhiana Yazzie: Yes.

[APPLAUSE]

David Mura: So people can now begin contributing to New Native Theatre, OK?

Emmanuel Ortiz, here, is a Chicano/Puerto Rican/Irish-American community organizer and poet. He believes art must be an integral part of the struggle for liberation and social change. He is a founding member of the Minnesota-based Latina/o writers/poets collective Palabristas: Latin@ Word Slingers, founded in 2002. He has written two

chapbooks, "The Word is a Machete: Post-Pocho/Puerto Rican Poems of the Personal and Political," and "Brown unLike Me: Poems From The Second Layer of Our Skin."

R. Vincent Moniz has been a part of the Twin Cities artistic community for over two decades as an actor and only recently has begun to share his poetry. He has performed at The Loft EQ Series, Revolver Magazine's Revolver at the Ritz. His work can be seen on the walls of the MIA as a part of the new exhibit “Arriving at Fresh Water: Contemporary Native Artists from Our Great Lakes” He was selected as a 2012 Jerome Fellow, a 2013 Beyond the Pure Fellow, a 2014 Verve Fellow, and a 2015 Loft Literary Center Spoken Word Immersion Fellow. So he's got some awards. He's got some heat, OK?

[LAUGHTER]

David Mura: Teresa Ortiz is a native of Mexico and an immigrant to Minnesota. She is a poet, writer, spoken word artist. She writes in Spanish and English because she wants to honor the language of her ancestors and the language of her children. She is also a member of Palabristas Latino Spoken Word Collective. Her poems in English and Spanish have been published in several chapbooks, and she has performed in many other outlets in the Twin Cities. She's authored a book of testimonials of indigenous Maya women of southern Mexico, "Never Again a World Without Us: Voices of Mayan Women in Chiapas, Mexico." So thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

David Mura: So at some of these, we've had a poem open up. So I'm going to ask Rhiana to read a poem by Joy Harjo.

Rhiana Yazzie: "Eagle Poem?"

David Mura: Yeah, the one on the right.

Rhiana Yazzie: "Transformations?"

David Mura: Left, yeah. Yeah, that one. No, that one. Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Bao Phi: And everyone, when you speak, could you use a microphone?

Rhiana Yazzie: Is this—

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: Oh, that's loud.

Rhiana Yazzie: Is this thing on? I'll be here all week. All right.

"Transformations"

This poem is a letter to tell you that I have smelled the hatred you have tried to find me with; you would like to destroy me. Bone splintered in the eye of one you choose to name your enemy won't make it better for you to see. It could take a thousand years if you name it that way, but then, to see after all that time, never could anything be so clear. Memory has many forms. When I think of early winter I think of a blackbird laughing in the frozen air; guards a piece of light. (I saw the whole world caught in that sound, the sun stopped for a moment because of tough belief.) I don't know what that has to do with what I am trying to tell you except that I know you can turn a poem into something else. This poem could be a bear treading the far northern tundra, smelling the air for sweet alive meat. Or a piece of seaweed stumbling in the sea. Or a blackbird, laughing. What I mean is that hatred can be turned into something else, if you have the right words, the right meanings, buried in that tender place in your heart where the most precious animals live. Down the street an ambulance has come to rescue an old man who is slowly losing his life. Not many can see that he is already becoming the backyard tree he has tended for years, before he moves on. He is not sad, but compassionate for the fears moving around him.

That's what I mean to tell you. On the other side of the place you live stands a dark woman. She has been trying to talk to you for years. You have called the same name in the middle of a nightmare, from the center of miracles. She is beautiful.
This is your hatred back. She loves you.

[APPLAUSE]

Section 2: Rhiana Yazzie on Worldviews, Teresa Ortiz on Being a Latina Artist

David Mura: OK, so the first question that I'm going to ask Rhiana is what for you are the most important needs and/or concerns of Native American and the Native American experience that even other people of color still don't understand or have to deal with?

Rhiana Yazzie: Ah.

David Mura: This was your question.

Rhiana Yazzie: I don't think that was my question. That wasn't my question.

David Mura: But I asked you, what do you want—OK.

Rhiana Yazzie: It was one of the—OK.

David Mura: OK. And the other part of the question: How much does this involve the differences in worldview between Native Americans and other Judeo-Christian cultures?

Rhiana Yazzie: Yeah, that's kind of where my wheelhouse has been in the last few years. I as a playwright have striven to take on this idea of trying to explain what worldview difference is. And I think even for myself, my whole life I have always known there was a difference between the way I looked at the world as a native woman and the way that everybody else looked at me, and the way that everyone else looked at the same world I was looking at.

And really, I was only able to articulate this difference. For years it was just a feeling that I didn't know how to explain. And suddenly it was explainable by saying it's a worldview difference, which I'll go a little bit deeper into. And I wanted to know, OK, well, what does that really, really mean if you are looking at worldview difference from an indigenous perspective butted up against that Western Judeo-Christian Cartesian experience?

And so I was writing a play. I was commissioned to write a play about a pivotal moment in American history. And so I thought the best place that I could start would be at that initial misunderstanding. And I think that for native people, we grow up with that question, like what the heck? What happened? What did our—how did this happen?

And I think that people in mainstream dominant Western society thinking really think that it was all their doing and expertise and intelligence that sort of shifted the tide. So as I went deeper into that, I started to see how indigenous people organize their world differently. We have a basically different organizing principle than what European Western Cartesian Judeo-Christian world views their organizing principle as. And that comes down to their relationship to their closest relationship and their relationship with the spirit world.

So for Western society, the basic relationship, the basic unit of a family, is a man and a woman married, which is under the hierarchy of one being that created everything. That's the basis of that entire way of looking at the world. And that's not the same as indigenous worldview. Our basic family unit is a mother and a child.

So if you think about how everything is oriented around that concept, then you look at how we are related to the spirit world. Well, in so many of our stories, we helped create the world. And that's why we are responsible to the world. And that's why we put relationship first. And that's why a mother and a child is the most important unit of a society. And that's why we didn't have hang-ups about sex. That's why we didn't have patriarchal societies, in general.

So when I think about what is it as native people, as writers, as artists, what do we need to do, and for the mainstream, what do they need to learn from us, I would like to go deeper into this worldview concept and explain it more and let it really live more in story, let it be apparent. Because I think this is still a very hidden concept.

So for about five years, I've been struggling with a play to try to demonstrate these things. And so sort of going back to the question, which I feel is so— that's where I come from as an artist. And that's where I see indigenous art being able to be more clear to the rest of society. Because I think if we can understand our basic understanding of how we organize our thoughts, and therefore organize our relationships to each other, and beyond that, organize our society and what we value in relationships and material objects, I think that is the root of how you can de-colonize a lot of these systemic problems that we have. And I like doing that through art. I love doing that through theater. And that's what I'm passionate about. So I hope I answered my own question.

David Mura: Great, thank you. Thank you. OK, the next question is to Teresa. [AUDIO OUT] woman or a Latino American in the United States?

Teresa Ortiz: I brought some notes.

David Mura: Yeah.

Teresa Ortiz: For the question—

David Mura: Vince, can you—

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: Do you want the mic?

David Mura: Yeah.

Teresa Ortiz: OK. What does it mean to be a Latino artist in Minnesota? First of all, what does it mean to be a Latina? That in itself is a long discussion that I would cover over long territory and a long time. So I'll talk about it another time.

[LAUGHTER]

Teresa Ortiz: I came to Minnesota directly from Mexico, like thousands upon thousands of people that have come to Minnesota from their home countries. I was privileged in my coming to Minnesota as compared to many new immigrants, who go through difficult journeys in order to make it here.

I partly gave up my first language and started writing in English, something that felt like I abandoned part of my culture. It is for this reason that I continue writing in Spanish and in English, because I do not want to abandon this part of my culture. Also, because I know that a huge segment of our Latino audience prefers to listen to literature, poetry, storytelling, and music in Spanish, their first and many times only language.

I brought with me, as most other immigrants bring with them, a rich cultural tradition of art and literature, of oral tradition and storytelling, of popular music with African American rhythms and Native American poetry, and the collected memories and histories of our people, histories of struggle and rebellion and resistance against colonialization and against imperialism throughout the American continent.

What I encountered here when I came were these same stories, these same artistic traditions, reflected as mirrors of our own reality, and by our own people in the United States, people who came before me, and instead of assimilated, recreated our own identity in a new way, no longer only as Mexican, Ecuadorian, Puerto Rican, Columbian, but as Latino, as Chicano, as native people from the Americas, as primarily—and what unites us all— as Mestizos.

Most of these stories were told in English, a language that was not mine, that was not our own language as we learned it as children. But they had been converted into our own language, with the cadences and intonations and the African native rhythms, and by the tradition of storytelling of the Latino people. These stories as they were told here were also stories of struggle and rebellion and resistance against colonization and imperialism, here in the heart of the beast.

And in the arts, these stories reflected the same traditions, cultural history, and experiences that I thought I had left behind. I learned here that being a Latina was—and it has been before, as it always has been—primarily being a Mestiza, a Native American and an immigrant at the same time, which is something I already knew, but I hadn't truly analyzed or explored or truly understood of my identity and my art.

My identity as a Latina was no longer only a nationality, although it also is, because I will always be Mexican. But it is to be a member of an entire continent, an American Mestiza. It means as well being an inhabitant of two different worlds, and at the very first, similar to me, Latin America and the United States.

The questions which I ask myself and that I pose to you now are how do we incorporate these two dissimilar worlds into our art? How do we honor the many different cultural traditions of our people, as well as the traditions of those who came before us into this land and of those who have always been here and are the true owners of this land? And how do we honor our own abuelitos', our grandparents' histories, as well as honor the lives of our children, who are living and will be living in a very different world from the world we know? How do we create and recreate art that is truly Latino, that is Mestizo, art that is new and exciting and yet traditional and meaningful at the same time?

These are questions to be contemplated and answered by the Latino artist community as a whole. For my part, I can say that to do this, we only need to look at what has been done before us, here and in the Americas. We need to learn from our history here and in the Americas. And we need to learn from those artists who came before us, and to pull from our own personal and collective stories.

In Minnesota specifically, being a Latino artist has its own particular challenges. First of all, because Minnesota is not one of the areas in the country that has a long and vast history of Latino and Chicano presence, except for a few exceptions in some areas of the state, people outside of the state might argue that Minnesota is not a place that readily comes to mind when we think of Latinos. But we are Latinos. And we live in these states. And we are part of these states. And we are Minnesotanos.

As we say in the immigration discourse, we are here because are from here and because we are members of this society and of this state. Minnesota Latino artists are bringing forward and looking at the tradition of this land and making art from inherited stories, and from our own personal stories. We are creating Latino art that is meaningful and traditional and that follows our histories of struggle and resistance.

The other challenge of being a Latina artist in Minnesota is actually an exciting challenge, the fact that the Latino community in Minnesota is constantly changing with new arrivals, new immigrants from a larger continent, people who come anew with their own cultural tradition and with their own personal and collective stories of struggle and resistance in the larger continent. These new immigrants are also creating with their mere presence in Minnesota, with their lives as newcomers, new stories of struggle and resistance in this country.

And as artists, as Latino artists, we need to tap into these stories. We need to listen to the abuelitos, the grandparents who were here before us and left a legacy of art and culture. We need to listen to the new immigrants, listen to their stories of struggle. And we need to both listen and share stories with the youth, listen to their stories, to their struggles, and share with them our own personal and collective stories. And in order to do this, we need to listen to ourselves, and pull from ourselves all of these stories that we heard as children, here in the North and in our home countries. This is the only way that we can be involved in this continual loop, this circle of life, this circle of Latino art that we are trying to build in Minnesota.

David Mura: Thank you, Teresa.

[APPLAUSE]

Section 3: R. Vincent Moniz, Jr. and Emmanuel Ortiz on Stereotypes and Cultural Appropriation

David Mura: It turned out that Vince and Manny actually both asked roughly the same question. I'm going to start with Vince, and then Manny. So just last Saturday, there was a demonstration—or Sunday—against the use of Native Americans and symbols associated with Native Americans at the Vikings-Kansas City game. So Vince, what aspect of Native American appropriation are you currently fixated on?

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: That is a great question.

[LAUGHTER]

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: It's very—I mean—

David Mura: And I'm going to add a little bit.

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: Really well worded.

David Mura: What for you is the difference between appropriation and appreciation?

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: Well, appreciation is, "oh, that looks nice, that's great for you guys," not "I'm going to put that on." That's the difference for me. I can totally appreciate that culture from over here, and not have to order a headdress from China or wear brown flannel and put weird fringe on it, you know, all the stuff that we do in secret. I'm kidding. I'm kidding.

[LAUGHTER]

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: Oh, man. That's going to live forever now. I think for me right now, I think what I most think about is the foundations of our positive and negative stereotypes. Where do they come from? And so that's really what I'm looking at these days. Where are these things coming from? And what are they grounded in?

Because for me, I am inundated with decapitated heads of Indian males every time I step out of the house. I mean, there is a subservient Indian butter maiden in every grocery store right now, you know? So my negative stereotypes are always there. And we are in the season of wearing my skin. So this right now is even—it's almost an anxiety, right?

Because I moved to a new neighborhood, and I'm like, man, I don't know anybody here. I hope no Indians come to the door on Halloween. So these are the things that I think about. So really what I'm pushing myself into is the very base of it. All of the children of our nation, what are they learning about Indians? And where are these things coming from? Where are these stereotypes coming from?

And for me, I mean, all I have to do is put on a Disney movie, quite honestly. All I have to do is pick up a comic book. And I make this specific analogy about comic books because Marvel Comics just came out with their All-New, All-Different. But a part of that All-New, All-Different was to bring back a Wild West character called Red Wolf. And Red Wolf looks like the Washington Slur Skins. He looks exactly like that.

And their hustle about him is, no, Vince, he's different. We got an Indian guy to draw him. So he's different now. And I'm like, but there's a Korean Hulk right now. And there's

a new Muslim superhero. That's All-New, All-Different. I mean, [INAUDIBLE] totally mirrors Bruce—I should shut up about that.

[LAUGHTER]

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: But so listen. The thing is that I want my All-New, All-Different as well. I don't want my same-old, same-old. I don't want you to pull fakey Indian out of your pantheon of fakey Indians. Because quite frankly, I'm tired of it. I want some All-New, All-Different. And that's what I look into. Why are these things a constant? Why are these things a solid everywhere?

I mean, how many times am I going to hear about a side argument that "you know, we should really be having an Indian lady playing Tiger Lily?" And I'm like, I just don't understand the idea of "we should really be putting brown people in our stereotypes that we want to see." And I just don't understand it. I don't.

But you know, there's this idea of us as an ending, right? There's a university, Winona State as a matter of fact. Well, Winona, that's made up. They made up an Indian. I mean, I can't get over this. From the very first time I took the stage to right now, I still can't wrap myself around a whole city going, "You know what? Let's just make one up. Let's just make one up." And if you go and you ask them about the history of it, it's just Hiawatha. It's just the Minnehaha/Hiawatha story. But it's ingrained in them, right? There's even a club right next to their jail and judges place. It's called the Redneck Club.

And on campus, they have that—oh, god, they have that stupid "End of the Trail" sculpture, right? So even thought that guy has nothing to do with any of the people in this region, there's this slumped over Indian man right in the center of Winona State University. And I lived there for a year. It was an odd place. They wear Confederate flag stuff. And it's deeply ingrained. And so that's what I've currently been fixated from. Where are these from? And why are these? And why do these continue?

Because man, I can't get over the argument of "black face is bad, but red face is for the football game." I mean, I don't understand that. So for my own work, that's really what I'm doing, right? I want to know all of the foundations of our positive and negative stereotypes, because man, I want to go hard on it, right? I want to respond to it. Because quite frankly, I'm the All-New, All-Different that we're ever going to get, right? And Rhiana is that. And all the writers that I've met with in the last three and a half years, this is our All-New and All-Different. And until we get to say what our characters are, we're your leather and feather stereotype, until you devour us whole, right? Like Sherman Alexie says. But I digress.

[APPLAUSE]

David Mura: So Emmanuel, with the rising interest in indigenous and Latina art, culture, iconography, and/or spirituality from outside indigenous and Latina communities, such as the rise in popularity of Day of the Dead and native jewelry, what are the risks and

dangers of cultural appropriation? And how do we combat it? And I'd also ask you, for you, the same difference between what's appropriation and what's appreciation.

Emmanuel Ortiz: Well, I think, as Vince said, appreciation is, hey, that's great for you. And appropriation is, hey, that's great for me. And I want you have, for some odd reason that I don't really understand. It's theft. Cultural appropriation is theft. And it's this creator-consumer dichotomy in which I don't think we're always aware that we live. And it happens. It's alarming how much it happens.

And I think it happens by individuals and institutions, and by individuals and institutions who I think mean well. However, impact really trumps intent. I guess basically, if you are a consumer of something that you don't have an organic relationship historically, individually, culturally, etc., and you come from a position of privilege where your culture, your race, your history, your gender, is privileged and dominant, then you're looking at cultural appropriation.

Specifically to I think Latinos, I think of the reference to Day of the Dead. Day of the Dead has become a very popular holiday, both amongst Latinos as well as non-Latinos. And we see it celebrated so often, I think, in art circles. And Day of the Dead, really it is a worldview. It's a spiritual practice that preceded European invaders in Mesoamerica. It was something that indigenous people practiced. And the painting of the skeletal designs, the artistically created skeletal designs, was an indigenous practice.

So for me, for example, when I see white folks painting the skeletons on their face, as Vince said, it's akin to blackface. I don't think most people in this room would put on war paint, what they see as war paint stereotypically, and go to a Halloween costume party. I mean, maybe some people would. It happens. They sell them in stores. But hopefully people in this room would not.

[LAUGHTER]

Emmanuel Ortiz: But I do think that people in this room would think that they're showing their affinity or their solidarity or something with Latino people by partaking in this cultural activity, which is a spiritual activity, which is an indigenous practice which is hundreds and hundreds of years old, and is more than just the music that folks dance to and the tamales that they eat and all of these kinds of things. So I think that a lot of what I see as cultural appropriation really flies under the radar. And people aren't aware that they're doing it.

I think that if you're wanting to learn more about a people's culture, if you're wanting to appreciate a people's culture, you can do that grounded in your own worldview and your own culture. And you can do that by amplifying the voices of people of those cultures without trying to take credit or put yourself in the limelight in doing so. And I mean, that's just speaking from a Latino perspective around one issue. It's the music, the food. They love everything but us, you know? And then sometimes they love us a little too much.

[LAUGHTER]

Emmanuel Ortiz: And I don't understand that fascination. I really don't. I think a lot of times what happens is folks feel like they don't connect with their own. They don't know. I remember doing a class in St. Cloud at St. Cloud State one time. And this young woman, a student, a white women, said that she was envious of us because we have culture, as if she doesn't have a culture, that somehow she has been deprived or robbed, or it never existed, you know?

And I remember a line from a song by a band, a punk band called Propagandhi which just said, "exactly what is white culture anyway? Is it hockey games and sitcoms?" That's what's been lost. And I feel bad for people who have lost that. But it's not my responsibility to try to give you something to replace that, you know? Find your own culture. I guess that's the bottom line.

David Mura: Thanks.

[APPLAUSE]

Section 4: Why Are Stereotypes and Cultural Appropriation Appealing?

David Mura: If you go and look at the introduction to James Baldwin's *The Price of the Ticket*, he talks about the issue of Italian American, Irish American. At a certain point, they weren't considered white. And then there are actually court cases where then they became white. But part of the price of becoming white was becoming white, and everything that goes with becoming white, which was to lose your history, which was to lose your culture, and which was to assent to a system of racial hierarchies and supremacy. So to me, that's part of the thing that goes on.

I just want to throw it open to everybody. I mean, Vince asked why. Manny asked why. Why are these stereotypes? I wonder if any of you want to answer that question any way you want.

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: I mean, really, I like what Manny said. I think the why is exactly what Manny said. There's a want to unmelt yourself, right? There's a desire to go back to where you were full in your ethnic culture, right? And to see us or to see indigenous people living a variation of our contemporary selves, or our historic selves, I think is really inviting, I have to say. I mean, there is such a blandness to our national culture as Americans, very much. Well, what is white culture, hockey games, and TV sitcoms?

But for me, living as an urban Indian, there is so much more, right? There is an incredible amount of our contemporary and historic selves all over the city. And it is maybe a bit of

our responsibility to continually fight against the melting of ourselves, right? Because once we do that, then for us, if we're no longer Indians, if we're just brown Americans, then the US government no longer has to adhere—like they adhere anyway.

[LAUGHTER]

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: But they no longer have to adhere to our treaty rights, right? And that's a very important thing, right? We are the stewards of this land, right? We are the people, right? This is our place, before you swindled it away 150 years ago, right? But these are our things. And our history goes well before our interactions with the Spanish, the French, and the English, right? The history of us is in the water that we come from, and our ancestors in the sky. I mean, these are our places.

My Grandmother [?Blanche?] and my mom, they always talk about everybody's from somewhere. But for us, we can go to the exact place where we come from. And that's an important thing. And I tend to overwrite about that, because I feel lucky to be indigenous. I feel lucky. Even though we are constantly being devoured and stuff like that, I am 100%. What were we saying, single race Indians? That's me, right? My dad's from South Dakota and my mom's from North Dakota.

I really feel like there is a want and a desire to reach out beyond your melt. That's that what I feel. I really feel there's—because, you know, there's all those feathers and stuff. And that's why we talk [?over?] birds and there's all this really cool stuff that you guys do. So there's that. That's what I feel like it is, if I could stop talking.

Teresa Ortiz: There is a fear. There is a fear of talking about racism. There is a fear of putting it on yourself and saying, "OK, it's me." So it's always this thing of saying, "this is not me, it's not personally," and feeling hurt and that kind of stuff. So people don't even want to talk about what does it mean to be white or what does it mean to be American or a US person, because there is that thing. You know, it's like we were saying. Either you are this, or you are that. Either you are a native person, or you are an immigrant from someplace else.

But the majority of people here, they cannot get their roots to where they belong. They cannot say, oh, you know, my ancestors came from such and such a place. And even if they do, they don't want to talk about it. So I think it is that kind of not wanting to think about it. So it's much easier to—like what Manny was saying. Oh, I'm going to take this person and I'm going to be like the Latinos and enjoy their cultural events and things like this, instead of really saying, OK, where is it that I come from, and who am I, and where am I going? I think that that's one of the places where it comes from.

Rhiana Yazzie: I think that consumer culture is not satisfying. And as Americans, we are led to believe that it is about material objects. And I think that people know that they don't have a soul, that you can't find yourself through objects. You can't find yourself through relationship with inanimate products that you purchased. And the way that our society is ordered around money and consumerism—there's got to be something else.

And I think that the humanity part in every person knows that there are essential elements to being alive, to being human, that need to be met. And when you are disconnected from your ancestors and your understanding of how you came to be in the world, yeah, you are going to look around and try to figure that out. And if you don't have a system for appreciation and understanding or a personal concept of true honor, yeah, maybe you'll steal some shit.

And you'll steal things that speak to your soul in some way, but you don't understand. But you don't actually want to try to investigate that. And I think that looking at how to undo that is an important piece to stop cultural appropriation and start cultural appreciation. Then you can find the things in your culture and lineage that enliven you and make you human again.

And again, I think of our worlds divided through this worldview concept. And with the majority of mainstream American being socialized through a very strict concept of Christianity, which cuts your head off from your body. Obviously your biology is revolting against that. Your sense for wanting to connect physically, to connect in relationship, those things are calling deeply in every cell of your body. And if you don't have that ability to stop and self-evaluate, know why are these longings, where are they coming from, then yeah, you will make very unfortunate choices that end up having such terrible repercussions on people who don't have the privilege to be able to control their image in the way that the dominant society is able to subjugate and control others.

Section 5: Art's Role in Shaping History

David Mura: Great. Rhiana, you were talking about spirituality. Another word that kept coming up is just "stealing."

Rhiana Yazzie: Hm?

David Mura: The stealing. Stealing in relationship to a certain type of spirituality, or a lack of spirituality, and also moral boundaries. So I want to connect this discussion of stereotypes to a question of history. Recently, Gwen Westerman, who's Dakota and a professor of humanities at Minnesota State University with a specialty in Dakota languages, questioned whether the newly renovated state capitol, the Minnesota State Capitol, should have century-old art on the walls which she said inaccurately portrays Native American life and historical events.

The paintings she said depicted Native Americans as, in her word, "a faceless menace," a phrase which echoes a phrase in the Declaration of Independence which calls the native population "merciless savages." I read about this. And the same day I read an article on the deportation on Mexicans and Mexicans Americans in the 1930's anti-immigrant campaign. Until recently, I was unaware that tens of thousands, possibly more than

400,000 Mexican Americans were pressured through raids and job denials to leave the USA. Many, mostly children, were US citizens.

Little has been written about this exodus, often called The Repatriation, which involved government raids to scare Mexicans and Mexican Americans, withholding of jobs, and forced departures. So my question is what is the relationship of the arts to these histories? Why do these histories matter? And what do you say to those who go—as often frequently people say—"well, that was a long time ago, we should let the past stay in the past, aren't we over it now?"

[LAUGHTER]

Teresa Ortiz: First of all, of course it's not. They matter very much. They are our histories. They are our stories. They are the history of our people. So we cannot say that they don't matter. We need to tell those stories to our children, to our grandchildren. We need to tell those stories to our students. And we need to share those stories, because yes, they matter.

And the fact that it's history—well, history is circular, first of all. It happens constantly. It happens all the time. Whatever happens today is happening in the past. And whatever is happening in the past is happening today, and it will happen tomorrow. That's our beliefs, you know? It's a belief system that history is circular.

And so when we say that this is in the past, this is not in the past. This is happening right now. It's happening throughout the continent. It's not even happening only in the United States. People are being killed all over the place for being indigenous, for being African American, for being Latinos. They are being killed for these reasons. So it's not something that happened in the past.

And the whole thing about racism and discrimination—it's not something that happened in the past, because we live it every day. I mean, we see it every day. And the other thing that I think is very important is that when I say that we need to tell these stories to the people, to our people, I think that one of the reasons for that is because it's very difficult for many people, for many young people, to understand what is happening, to make those connections with the past, because there is no past. It is not only our responsibility, it's our duty to let the people, the young people, or the people that are coming to this country from other places know what has happened in the United States before you came.

I showed a movie to my students on the Chicano movement in the '60s. And it was just incredible, their response. They couldn't believe it. They were immersed in it. They had questions. They were just so fascinated with the whole thing. And so the next question from me was well, how do we continue this struggle? You know? What are you doing? And then it was again another thing, like talking about immigration. I mean, it's not something that is in the past. It is in our lives. It's in the lives of the young people. It's in the lives of the old people as well.

And what does that relate to art? From my point of view, I think that most of us came into the arts because of these type of things, because we learned that there was just no way to make sense of these unless we write about it, we paint about it, we make theater on it, we do iconography. I mean, it is part of the tradition that this is how we make sense of these horrible things. But it's also the way that we share these things with other people, both with our people—mostly with our people. I think that's the responsibility that we have for it—but even to the world at large. Because otherwise, if we don't tell the story, who else is going to tell the story?

Rhiana Yazzie: I'm having such a problem with this. The thing about arts is that they vision for us our future. It tells us the story of who we are. So if we are glorifying inaccurate portrayals of the founding of this country, that's very problematic. Because at that moment when that painter was making that image, it was as powerful as contemporary artists writing plays with redface and making inaccurate and stereotypical depictions of native people. And again, it's that appropriation, not appreciation.

And if you take a look at that time period, it was artists and painters and drawers that were taking what they felt were stories from the Americas back to Europe. So take a look at "The Tempest," Shakespeare's play. There's Caliban, that first depiction of what people were like in the New World. And essentially, it was a monster.

But at the same time, Europe started to change because of their contact with people in the Americas. Europe started to change for the better. Societies started to change for the better, because they actually finally saw true societies, true egalitarian societies, and for the first time saw women in power, for the first time saw gay people in power and revered, just saw a completely different view of the world.

I mean, for instance, if we take a look at even the founding of this country, so many of the basic philosophies that we have were the appropriation of native philosophies. And one of the facts that I just love sort of throwing out there is the fact that I'm the only person talking right now in this whole room. That's an indigenous concept that Europeans did not have before they came to the Americas.

And when they were setting up Congress, they were trying to figure out, well, will it be like the Parliament back in England? And Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, they said, no, no, there's this great idea that these native people, each person is allowed to speak their full thought. And then others respond to it. I think we should do that. So talk about appropriation, and this appropriation. So yeah, we need to address those historical moments, where we think we know the story, but we don't. We need to reexamine them.

Emmanuel Ortiz: I'll touch on just a couple of things. One is the deportation of the Mexicans and Mexican Americans. I think it's important to note that there were people who were US citizens who were deported—

David Mura: Yeah, yeah.

Emmanuel Ortiz: —who had never lived in Mexico.

David Mura: Many of them were children.

Emmanuel Ortiz: Yes, who were deported to Mexico.

David Mura: They were born here.

Emmanuel Ortiz: Yes, that's true. And it's the 1930s. What else do we know about the 1930s? It's the Great Depression, a time when jobs are scarce, resources are scarce. Land is at a prime value. These people are deported because they are seen as a threat to, or they occupy these jobs, this land, etc. So get them out of here. Deport them. Prior to that, they were encouraged to come.

And this isn't the first time. You know The Chinese Exclusion Act and other periods of history where a particular nationality or ethnicity is no longer wanted because they become—there's just too many of them. And they're taking our jobs or our land or whomever, whatever.

And so in terms of art, I think art has to respond to these. You know, history repeats itself. Because we just saw another great recession, at a time when you see Arizona's notoriously bad racist laws and the deportation. And Alabama and Indiana had copycat laws. And people were leaving the country because of these racist laws that were going into place. And so there was another wave of migration south that had a tremendous impact, particularly in small rural communities, where schools were only half-filled and poultry plants were not able to hire enough people to work all the shifts, etc.

So we learn, I think, a lot of times through the stories that art tells us about history. You know, that's one of the reasons I got into writing, was because I had been going to these protests and these meetings. And they were just boring. And they same all the time, and the same people there. And art I saw as offering a louder, clearer, more creative voice that reached different audiences.

And I think the challenge now, for me at least, as a writer, is to figure out how we can move beyond just our artistic spaces, just our poetry rooms and etc. and really integrate art into these political struggles against forced exportation or the police brutality that we're experiencing, the theft of culture, all of these things that we're combating, and all of these things that we need to affirm about ourselves.

You know, it has to be part affirmation as well. Art offers an opportunity to do that. I'm reminded of a quote by Ahrundhati Roy in which she basically says that we have to use our art to topple the empire, you know? We have to tell our stories in ways that the corporate media won't tell it. And in doing so, we have to make the revolution irresistible. And I think that that's the role that we artists, and I as an artist, am striving to achieve. And I think that we as artists, that's our highest plateau that we can reach, is that our art

can be impactful in creating positive change for humanity through this upheaval of empire.

Rhiana Yazzie: The Civil Rights couldn't have happened without all the amazing black artists and musicians. I mean, it couldn't have happened.

Section 6: History and Power

David Mura: OK, I just have one comment. I'm reminded that Walter Benjamin, the German critic said, "history is the tale of the victors," which implies, I always thought, therefore the people who were defeated, or lose history, their tales aren't told. But I've been thinking about it here today, thinking, but if you change the history, do you change the power? If you change the history, do the losers become the victors?

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: Or is that just a scary idea? That's what I think of, right? I think about this with respect to Lake Calhoun, right?

David Mura: Yeah.

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: Bde Maka Ska, is that right? [INAUDIBLE]. Anyway, I digress. But these are the things, right? So this was a place. And it had it's own name. And this is what the people called it. And then it was changed to a super racist guy. And so then the indigenous Dakota, the indigenous people from this region, they were like, well, you know, we'd like you to change it back. And then there's all this weird tape that they have to go through to change it back, right? And they're not going to ever change it, right? They're just going to put both names up and be like, OK, now just shut up.

[LAUGHTER]

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: But I think about, like I said, the foundations of all this. And I go back to what Gwen Westerman was saying, who is an incredible poet. The amount of indigenous language that she puts into her poetry is just incredible. I think about the foundations of this.

And they have been lying about what Indian is since they first came over, right? The fantastic stories of who we are, since the first boats pulled up. And so I think about that with respect to those Parks and Rec paintings pretty much over at the capitol.

[LAUGHTER]

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: And I think that's making us exotic in our own lands. And I think about that constantly, like this is where—because children go and visit the capitol. And then they see the scary monster Indians, right? Or they go through the history. Or I even

think about, why is there a statue of Columbus in St. Paul? That guy didn't even come here.

[LAUGHING]

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: I think about this.

Rhiana Yazzie: The one with Leif Erickson.

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: Oh.

Rhiana Yazzie: That's another one.

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: Yeah. I don't understand it. But there's this constant changing of us. There's this constant wanting us to be this stereotype and just beyond all odds just melt. We're not even melting. We are being molded into what they want us to be, which is just this stoic monster who is always around corner, asking for a handout. Losers? Treaties are made between two people that want it to stop, right? That's what treaties are.

I am not a loser at all. I am a survivor of their displacement. And so I think about those things, you know what I mean? And I think about what Gwen Westerman is saying. It's like this is not a thing that's, oh, let's just put this in the back. Well, I would to. Can you all paint over that? Please, model me. I would love to be on the wall in the capitol. Come on, make a statue of me.

Audience: Yeah.

[APPLAUSE]

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: I would love that. Or you know, any of the incredible poets that I like. Let me be the first. I would love to be on a dollar coin, like Sacagawea. But I'm saying is that there's this constant idea to change us. And Rhiana was talking about that, right? I come specifically from a matrilineal descent, right? And so my leaders were the people that made life, right?

And so here comes the Indian Reorganization Act, right? And they change it and put it so that all the males are in charge. And then immediately, we lose our balance, right? Immediately we lose the idea of we are going together, right? This is us together. And we lose that idea, right? And we get changed into whatever they want us to be.

And that's the problem that I see with that, with saying something like—and I was at Augsburg College. And the very first class I took was a women's history class. And in the books provided, both books said their very first chapters were American Indian women. That's what it said. But we jumped right over those chapters. And for the life of me, I couldn't figure out the why of it. And I know it. Because it's hard to honor us.

Because if you honor us, then you are acknowledging what you have been doing to us since you first got here, you know? And so I am an indigenous person colonized by English speakers. And my brethren are indigenous people decimated by Spanish speakers. And we are just trying to make our way. And I would love it if we could get past that history. But it is not ever going to go away until we all go together, right? That's the balance of us, right? We have to change it.

My tribe is working on moving away from the IRA government. And that's an important step. To be able to move back to our traditional ways of leadership I think is an important step. And to be able to take as many pictures of those fakey Indians on the walls, great. But why don't you go ahead and put those in the museum of history, right there with Little Crow's bones. And just go ahead and bury those deep. And honor us as we are.

Because more times than not, this is what's being fed to everybody. I mean, I think about those images. And then I think about that flag of that town in New York, right? And there's a white guy. And then there's an Indian guy, right? And the Indian guy is getting choked out. He's getting murdered, right? And instead going "yeah, we should probably get rid of that, that's awful," they're like, "no, they're just wrestling." I can't imagine what the idea for keeping us as this faceless monster, or this exotic thing, other than this is what they want us to be. This is what they are trying to get us to be since they decided who we were, you know what I mean?

And I don't know how many times I got to hear "Last of the Mohicans." That's a poorly written buy a white guy thing. But that movie, it's gotten rebooted like ten times. I don't understand it. But you know, that's what I think about that stuff, you know, this idea of who they want us to be. And who they want us to be is that sweet delicious stereotype. And sometimes I get tired of it.

[APPLAUSE]

David Mura: I think that's also one of the reasons, Vince, when you said, why don't they have contemporary native comic book heroes, right? It's because it really relates to the whole issue of if you have living Indians, living Native Americans, then you have to deal with the whole history.

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: That's very true. I mean, to make us into something that the national culture wants to devour, that's the thing, right? That's the marketing, right? Let's paint us ourselves up like skulls and pretend to be something we are not, right? That is the want and desire to eat us whole. But not only that. Forget who were are.

Because it's never how it was, right? Indigenous identity was who you lived around, who you spoke like, and the cultural traditions that you followed, right? So anybody could have been that, right? But there's this idea that we have to fit a mold. And man, it's hard to get in there. I'm really fat.

[LAUGHTER]

R. Vincent Moniz, Jr.: You know, I am not a stoic warrior. I mean, I like to talk nonstop sometimes. I should shut up now as a matter of fact. But what I'm saying is that there's this ideal of who we are. And it is only approachable if you don't know exactly who you are. I mean, that's the thing that I think about.

You know, every fall there's new students coming to the city. And maybe they have a degree of understanding of who we are. But then they're inundated with everything that we're not. There's Indians on paint. Man, there's Indians on tow trucks. It's really weird here in this town. And so that's what they think, right?

And I think about that through the neighborhood that I grew up in, Phillips. The Blackhawks are the champs. Those are the winners. So those are Indians. So all the kids in my neighborhood—and I don't want to generalize all the kids, but a good portion of them are wearing our stereotype on their chest. We were eating ourselves, as it were. And it just—I mean, sometimes I wouldn't want to leave the house. It's just that's the way it is, you know?

Emmanuel Ortiz: I think too as much as history is written by the victors, the idea of what victory is has been written by the victors, you know? If we see that as winning, if we see what they have done as winning, we have lost. So I think we have to take that back and re-envision what winning is, you know?

I don't think we're losing, you know? If I thought we were losing, I don't think any of us would be here. I think we are waging a different campaign with a different goal. And that's our vision of winning.

[APPLAUSE]

Section 7: Q&A