



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

# Contemporaneity

Vol 7, No 1 (2018) | ISSN 2153-5914 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp/2018.239  
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

## **Gregg Deal's *White Indian* (2016)** The Decolonial Possibilities of Museum Performance

Christiana Molldrem Harkulich

### **Abstract**

Gregg Deal (Pyramid Lake Paiute) is a performance and visual artist whose work deals explicitly in decolonizing the contemporary experience of Indigenous peoples. An analysis of his performance of *White Indian* in 2016 at the Denver Art Museum opens the possibilities of performance as a method for museums to decolonize their spaces and curation.

### **About the Author**

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# Gregg Deal's *White Indian* (2016)

## The Decolonial Possibilities of Museum Performance

Christiana Molldrem Harkulich

On January 29, 2016, Gregg Deal (Pyramid Lake Paiute, born 1975) performed *White Indian* as the culmination of his three-month residency at the Denver Art Museum (DAM). DAM has a substantial collection of art that portrays the ideals of the American west. Indigenous narratives have been mostly told in history and natural history museums, and curation has changed tremendously in the past few decades by incorporating Indigenous community members into the creation of both the narrative and display.<sup>1</sup> In art museums, Euro-

American artistic portrayals of Indigenous people often echo the visuals of the "last of" trope, and they need additional context to dismantle the narrative, which many museums have done.<sup>2</sup> The work of decolonization, the process of undoing the process of colonization and working with Indigenous peoples to move forward, requires that museums engage with telling hard truths about the history of colonization—a push to remember and not forget the darker episodes of American history.<sup>3</sup> Across both visual and performance art, Deal's works focuses on the ways that Indigenous people survive and resist the legacies of colonization that impact Indigenous people in the United States. DAM's invitation to artists like Gregg Deal to perform within the galleries disrupts the colonial gaze inherent in the landscapes of the American west and the cupboarded cultural objects, changing the narrative of the space through the additional context of the performance.<sup>4</sup> Performance, while ephemeral, can be a decolonial act that offers an opportunity to change more than just the content within the exhibit but the very terms of the conversation within the museum space.<sup>5</sup>

*White Indian* is a piece that interrogates Indigenous belonging within U.S. American society. Deal creates *White Indian* as three movements—"The White Indian", "Indian Pop!", and "Indian Pedigree"—that collectively scrutinize the cultural and political representations of Indigenous people. According to Deal, the entire performance leads to the third movement, "Indian Pedigree," which confronts the U.S. policy of Blood Quantum.<sup>6</sup> As Kimberly Tallbear explains in *Native American DNA*, Blood Quantum is a policy founded by the United States in

<sup>1</sup> See case studies in Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, McGill-Queen's/Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 7; Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. First Peoples: New Directions in Indigenous Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); and Bryony Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement*. Routledge Research in Museum Studies (New York: Routledge, 2015), 10.

<sup>2</sup> The trope was initially made fashionable in fiction and drama in the early nineteenth century with works like James Fenimore Cooper's 1826 *The Last of the Mohicans* and actor Edwin Forrest's star role in *Metamora: or, the Last of the Wampanoag*, which he performed from 1829 through the late nineteenth century. The novel's popularity has endured, and it is often taught in literature courses influencing narratives about Indigenous people. It has also been adapted for film and television numerous times.

<sup>3</sup> Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Deal was invited back to DAM in 2017 for a performance in conjunction with their exhibit on the Western.

<sup>5</sup> The idea that decolonizing is process that changes the terms of the conversation comes from Walter Mignolo, who writes about decolonial options as a shift in thinking, or rather, "that it is not enough to change the content; the terms of the conversation must be changed." Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*. Global Futures, Decolonial Options, Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations. (Durham, NC: (Duke University Press, 2011), 122

<sup>6</sup> Gregg Deal. "Indian Pedigree." GreggDeal.com. January 2016, accessed February 2, 2018; <http://greggdeal.com/Indian-Pedigree-1>

order to delineate property and treaty rights during the Dawes Act of 1877, but that as populations intermarried the legal designation of quantifiable blood (from full to smaller percentages) that defined membership within tribal nations would become a complicated designation of belonging.<sup>7</sup> From the government's perspective, the quantification of blood limits the financial obligation the United States government has to each member of a tribal nation according to the different treaties and laws that congress had passed. When this law was passed, the U.S. government subscribed to a belief that intermarriage would eventually dilute Blood Quantum until no one met the requirements and financial obligations would therefore conclude. Consequently, there is a capital gain to be had in marking and quantifying people, until they eventually disappear on paper, if not in reality. This legal policy, combined with the boarding school movement, was designed to make "last of" trope a reality, or as Tallbear writes to "deTribalize" Indigenous nations.<sup>8</sup> As Deal points out in his performance, Blood Quantum is a federal policy that polices Indigenous belonging and dehumanizes through a legal quantifiable definition of racial identity. Importantly, no ethnic group except Native Americans within the United States must still prove racial identity through blood.<sup>9</sup> The flip side of this policy has meant that different tribal groups have had a language to establish citizenship and sovereignty for their nations. Instead of erasing these nations, the policy in contemporary times makes a direct line of citizenship and belonging visible.

Deal strategically negotiates his narrative to confront both cultural myths about Indigeneity and the legal reality in order to tell the truth about the trauma of erasure. Blood Quantum is tied to the history of colonization and land-grabs within the United States, when borders of treaty territory were unceremoniously shifted to favor the U.S. government. As Amy Lonetree writes in *Decolonizing Museums*, truth-telling is one of the tenets of the decolonizing process, and when museums do not reckon with the historical trauma of the past they perpetuate the trauma for Indigenous patrons.<sup>10</sup> It is impossible to heal from a trauma that is purposefully forgotten, and museums can be a space that actively engages with those hard truths. Performance, specifically in a museum, offers an opportunity for the museum to differentiate representation and create new meanings in its educational space. A decolonial act challenges accepted narratives that are based on colonial logics, repositions Indigenous narratives at the center of their own stories, and forges paths into the future. As Lonetree articulates that change needs to be more than just an act of survivance.<sup>11</sup> Survivance stresses the importance of the continuation of stories that "create a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihilism, and victimry. Indigenous survivance is an active sense of presence in historical absence, the dominance of cultural simulations, and manifest manners."<sup>12</sup> While acts of survivance are important and necessary steps for Indigenous cultures, the process of decolonization requires a foundational shift in the way narratives and relationships are formed, a change to the terms of the conversation and not just a change in the content. Performance can help an audience imagine and understand that different way of being and recontextualize the entirety of the space around the performance. It is not just the performer but also the objects around the performer that gain new meaning. Deal's performance demonstrates how it can be a vital tool in decolonizing museum spaces and

<sup>7</sup> For a full delineation of Blood Quantum history and critique, see Kimberly Tallbear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 55–61.

<sup>8</sup> Tallbear, *Native American DNA*, 47.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that, as different tribes embraced self-governance in the late twentieth century, the details of blood quantum have shifted with some tribes to direct descent. There is a wide variance in how membership is passed among the many different Indigenous nations. See Kim Tallbear, *Native DNA* "Chapter 1. Racial Science, Blood, and DNA" for further information about tribal membership and the evolution from blood to DNA has shifted in recent decades.

<sup>10</sup> Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ernest Stromberg, ed. *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance: Word Medicine, Word Magic*. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); Gerald Vizenor, *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Vizenor, *Native Liberty*, 1.

creating space for truth telling. Deal's work is explicitly decolonial in the way that it grapples with historical traumas and pushes past acts of survivance. His performance of *White Indian* is a vehicle for the truth-telling that Lonetree calls for in *Decolonizing Museums*.



**Figure 1**

Gregg Deal, *White Indian*. January 29, 2016. Denver Museum of Art, Denver, CO. Photos by Kelsey Huffer. Courtesy of Gregg Deal.

## The Performance

The first movement of Deal's piece, "White Indian," is a cuttingly humorous taxonomy of the stereotypes and appropriation of Indian-ness performed by white men (Figure 1). With PowerPoint-like images projected behind him, Deal identifies the people who define Indian-ness through stereotypical ideals, white men performing Indian, such as the "The Great White Hope Indian (Kevin Costner)" and "The Quirky and Probably Crazy White Indian (Johnny Depp)."<sup>13</sup> In the piece, Deal references and critiques the "last of" trope directly with visuals from the 1992 adaptation of *The Last of the Mohicans* starring Daniel Day-Lewis. Deal describes this specimen within his taxonomy of "white Indians" as "the fervent self-assured white Indian," that is, the white man who is better at being an Indian than an actual Indigenous person.<sup>14</sup> This critique from a living Indigenous man troubles the trauma of the stereotype, and challenges representation.

<sup>13</sup> Gregg Deal, "The White Indian Text," GreggDeal.com. Accessed January 2016, <http://greggdeal.com/The-White-Indian-Text>.

<sup>14</sup> Gregg Deal. "Indian Pop!- Text." GreggDeal.com. January 2016, accessed October 3, 2016; <http://greggdeal.com/Indian-POP-Text>.



**Figure 2**

Gregg Deal, *White Indian*. January 29, 2016. Denver Museum of Art, Denver, CO. Photos by Kelsey Huffer. Courtesy of Gregg Deal.



**Figure 3**

Gregg Deal, *White Indian*. January 29, 2016. Denver Museum of Art, Denver, CO. Photos by Kelsey Huffer. Courtesy of Gregg Deal.

From this send-up and critique of white performance, Deal moves to "Indian POP!" a piece that critiques the continual appropriation of Indigenous people and cultural symbols into consumable products, Halloween costumes, and mascots. His critique is not just about cultural appropriation, but also concerns the way that the United States of America consumes indigeneity without regard for those who are consumed. Deal finishes this piece with the assertion that "We all know honor is had through blond hair, blue-eyed, sexy white women in headdresses, and men of all color tackling each other in tights./This is Indian POP."<sup>15</sup> In part, the first and second movement of *White Indian* uses the traditional means of classification that museums have historically utilized for display as the dramaturgy and method of his performance; the critique is in form as well as in performance.



**Figure 4**

Gregg Deal, *White Indian*, January 29, 2016. Denver Museum of Art, Denver, CO. Photos by Kelsey Huffer. Courtesy of Gregg Deal.

In the final piece, "Indian Pedigree", Deal confronts the realities of living with the legacy of reservations, broken treaties, and Blood Quantum policy while getting a tattoo of his own Blood Quantum designation (Figures 3 and 4). His decision to mark his body while speaking of the marking of Blood Quantum is a powerful action, a performance of what Deal calls his "critical thought and theory" that is not meant to be about identity but rather about what makes someone "Indian enough."<sup>16</sup> Toward the beginning of "Indian Pedigree," Deal speaks the following:

And while this white man presses ink into my arm with the use of a needle, you may be saying to yourself that this is a bit dramatic

Get over it

Let it go

That was the past

But the weight and measure of being Indigenous is a real thing.

<sup>15</sup> Gregg Deal. "Indian Pop!- Text." GreggDeal.com. January 2016, accessed October 3, 2016; <http://greggdeal.com/Indian-POP-Text>.

<sup>16</sup> Deal, "Indian Pedigree."

Two planes flew into two buildings 15 years ago.  
 Never forget.  
 But you, get over it  
 Loss of land  
 Loss of life  
 Loss of language  
 Loss of culture  
 And now the loss of blood  
 Because the weight and measure of an Indigenous person is a thing.<sup>17</sup>

Deal calls up the national trauma of 9/11 to shock and to measure the continual trauma and treatment of Indigenous lives. The theme of measurement, the thingification of human beings through racial classification, is explicit throughout the piece. Deal's decision to mark his body with his own Blood Quantum designation makes visible the trauma of slowly losing status as a citizen of an Indigenous tribal nation. The tattoo makes the attempt at erasure visible and permanent.

To perform these pieces in a museum surrounded by works of art, some of which, like Edward S. Curtis's photograph *The Vanishing Race*, depict the disappearing Indian trope, challenges culturally accepted notions of what it means to be Indigenous in contemporary society. Objects, both cultural and artistic, are curated within a museum to perform particular narratives. The ephemeral nature of *White Indian* means that it cannot be contained within a case and displayed. Indeed, it is not reproducible, as Deal cannot get the tattoo a second time in the same place. However, performance art can be filmed (as Deal has done), so that it can reach a wider audience. In both content and form, Deal's unreproducible performance is in many ways a rejection of Western colonial influence on his identity and being. As a live action, it asserts that, as a Pyramid Lake Paiute man, he is still here, without having to explicitly say as much. His critique of American culture's consumption and representation of Indigenous identities within the walls of the museum, a site of cultural authority, accrues that critique greater authority. The cultural authority that museums often possess can dictate what counts as culture, and the large amount of foot-traffic—from school-children through senior citizens—means that what they choose to display can have a wide-reaching effect. While Deal does the work of decolonizing the audience's perspective through his performance, that the Denver Art Museum embraces and supports his art ultimately changes the terms of the conversation about who owns cultural authority within museum spaces.

In 1990, the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed into United States Law, requiring museums and other institutions to return cultural items (ranging from human remains to sacred objects) to lineal descendants and culturally affiliated tribal nations. NAGPRA caused many institutions to begin to reassess their curation while initiating the process of returning parts of their collections to their proper homes. As museums continue to grapple with the effects of NAGPRA, it is useful to look to the Denver Art Museum and Deal's performances in it to think about what role the museum plays in telling the stories of Indigenous people and how they can make space for Indigenous people to tell their own stories. It takes a large influx of financial support to make large changes to curation in permanent exhibits, and as scholars like Ruth B. Phillips and Amy Lonetree have demonstrated, beyond financial strains, decolonizing museum curation involves developing trust and providing space for members of Indigenous communities to shape their own narratives.

As a longtime Pittsburgh resident, I am reminded of Alcoa Hall in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History (CMNH) in Pittsburgh, and the contained nature of the displays when thinking of Gregg Deal's practice. While Alcoa Hall in the Carnegie Museum does make an effort to

<sup>17</sup> Gregg Deal, "Indian Pedigree-Text," [Greggdeal.com](http://greggdeal.com), October 31, 2016; <http://greggdeal.com/Indian-Pedigree-Text>

continue a narrative of Indigenous people's lives into the present, it has not been updated since its major reinstallation in the 1990s. Pennsylvania is a state that does not contain any reservations, and the Pittsburgh area, which borders with Ohio and West Virginia, also contains no sovereign Indigenous land. Since the early 1970s, an association of Indigenous peoples, many from the Seneca nation whose ancestors cared for land in the Pittsburgh area, have come together as the Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center. They have held an annual pow-wow in the Pittsburgh area as part of their purpose "to maintain a sense of Indian-ness, recapture roots and become more conscious of their rights as Native Americans."<sup>18</sup> Outside of the pow-wow, for most people in the Pittsburgh area who encounter Alcoa Hall, the museum is a major point of contact for representation of Indigenous Americans. The visitor encounters glass cabinets filled with sacred objects and dioramas, separated by regions. There are a few areas where the visitor can sit and listen to different prerecorded disembodied Indigenous stories. Due to the museum's prominence, the narrative the museum presents is a critical form of representation that Indigenous people have, and that representation effects many aspects of Indigenous life, from cultural production and citizenship to policy. Though Alcoa Hall could be updated, a more immediate intervention could be performances by Indigenous artists. The hall contains several spaces that are ripe for performance that could begin to change the terms of the conversation, build strategic partnerships, and decolonize the display.

The impact of performance means that the museum can begin to build partnerships with Indigenous community members and begin to tell the "hard truths" that are both essential and difficult in the history of the Americas.<sup>19</sup> Performance offers a way to change the terms of the space by privileging the voice and impact of the performer. For a museum like the Carnegie in Pittsburgh, it is easier to remember the narrative of the land as place where George Washington surveyed and Lewis and Clark began their adventure. The museum—through performance—could begin to reshape that narrative and remind visitors of the history that is easy to forget, to remind visitors that they are standing on Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois) and the Osage land. It is perhaps even more important in museums located far from recognized Indigenous centers to actively engage in decolonizing their museum spaces through performance art.



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<sup>18</sup> Council of Three Rivers American Indian, "Home," August 2016, accessed August 10, 2018; <http://www.cotraic.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> Onciul, *Museums*, 195.