You Go, I Stay

Ellen Fernandez-Sacco

James Luna (1950–2018)

James Luna (Payómkawichum, Ipi, Mexican-American, 1950–2018) was an internationally respected performance and multimedia artist and a resident of the La Jolla Indian Reservation in Pauma Valley in Southern California. He received his BFA from University of California Irvine and a Masters in Counseling from San Diego State University, and he worked as an academic counselor at Palomar College in San Marcos, California. Among the many venues that presented his work are the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Santa Monica Museum of Art; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Hood Museum at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire; Getty Museum, Los Angeles; SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico; and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Luna was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2017. He died in 2018, while attending a Joan Mitchell Foundation Residency in New Orleans.

Artist Joanna Bigfeather shared a post on Facebook in February 2019, entitled "Luna has left the building." My heart ached, looking at a constellation of images of his studio, on the cusp of every photograph the realization that he would not be returning. According to Bigfeather, Luna loved to hear "James Luna has left the building" over an announcement system at the end of a residency.[1] Now many of us are busy keeping him alive in our memories, remembering the presence and voice of an artist that spoke against the daily tide of appropriation that extends from First Contact to feral late capitalism.

I went to Luna's website, where on the landing page you could once find an introductory video of him sing-speaking a song full of wry observations accompanied by drums and bass. The beat was somewhere

1 — Joanna Bigfeather, "Luna has left the building," *Facebook.com*, February 2019.

between rock and blues, and Luna's spoken word epitomized his deadpan style. By turns, he questioned and confronted the listener with a string of questions and truths delivered between chords: "How come the Western world's always gotta be right?" Now the site features his name in giant letters and announces its availability at a four-figure price.

Laughter was key to understanding James Luna. It takes a long time to get to a place where one can respond in this way, given the legacies of genocide and the larger context of settler colonialism. But humor, whether deadpan irony or overt parody, is a tool of survival that Luna worked with, and it provided relief from the machine that threatens to crush us all. That pleasure of recognition, particularly for Native people, was something Luna delivered in his performances, whether he was carefully unveiling a block of Spam or, after taking sips from a cold beer, checking his glucose level and giving himself insulin shots. All his performative gestures were grounded in a shared reality that put Indigenous experiences at its center, from the humble to the sophisticated. As the artist put it, "My appeal for humor in my work comes from Indian culture where humor can be a form of knowledge, critical thought, and perhaps just used to ease the pain. I think we Indians live in worlds filled with it and I want to relate that in my works."[2]

James Luna, *The Artifact Piece*, 1987. Installation view, San Diego Museum of Man. Courtesy of Ellen Fernandez-Sacco.

Membership and Boundaries

In the early 2000s, Luna wanted to spark a discussion of his work beyond his well-known project, *The Artifact Piece* (1987–90). He partly managed that while participating on a panel that I organized at the 2003 College Art Association (CAA) conference in New York City. Standing onstage, he tore up his membership card, in response to the constant ID checking he and a group

2 — Steven Durland, "Call Me in '93: An Interview with James Luna," *High Performance* (Winter 1991), 34–39.

James Luna, *James as Marcello*, 2001. Mixed media, 12 × 16 ft. Courtesy of Ellen Fernandez-Sacco.

of other Native artists experienced as they tried to attend different events at the conference.[3] At this time, Luna was experimenting with a series of collaged photographs and a new performance, *Petroglyphs in Motion* (2000), which he performed at SITE Santa Fe, in New Mexico.

In 2001, I wrote an article, titled "Check Your Baggage: Resisting 'Whiteness' in Art History," and Luna submitted several images of recent work to accompany its publication in CAA's *Art Journal*.[4] In this series of collages, which Luna made by hand, the artist inserts himself into scenes of pop culture, often with hilarious results. In one collage (*James and Jack*), he hangs with Jack Kerouac, sharing a smoke. In another collage, he invokes the energy of fire from a burning guitar as Jimi Hendrix (*James as Jimmy*). (Did Luna know he was embodying an Afro-Native brother? Hendrix's great grandmothers were Afro-Cherokee). In another, he appropriates the most iconic frame of Federico Fellini's film *8 ½* (1963): placing his own likeness on actor Marcello Mastroanni's shoulders like a giant Olmec head (*James as Marcello*).[5] Unfortunately, CAA declined to reproduce these works because they were not in accordance with *Art Journal*'s copyright rules at the time, so these pre-Photoshop juxtapositions were not published. But versions of them were later

3 — The 2003 CAA Panel was called "Performance in the Wake of 2001: Institutional Critique, Response & Strategies." Participants were Ellen Fernandez-Sacco, Chair; James Luna, "Son of a Bush!"; Mario Ontiveros, "Dependent on Social Relations: An Aesthetics of Activist Art Practice"; Linda Pollack, "My Daily Constitution: A Project"; and John Leanos, "Perpetual War: Strategies of Art Activism." College Art Association 91st Annual Meeting, New York City, February 21, 2003.

4 — Ellen Fernandez-Sacco, "Check Your Baggage: Resisting 'Whiteness' in Art History," *Art Journal* 60:4 (Winter 2001), 59–61.

5 — Erica R Hendry, "Jimi Hendrix Wore a Coat of Many Colors," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 10, 2010, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/jimi-hendrix-wore-a-coat-of-many-colors-127496724/.

exhibited as part of his multimedia installations such as *All Indian All The Time* (2005), in which he referenced the absence of Native representations in contemporary art forms such as rock n' roll.

Luna always insisted that being Native also incorporates popular culture, and he worked against that "denial of coevalness" that catapulted Indian consumers out of the audiences for art, music, and film.[6] He accomplished his critique by including everything from his physical body to objects and clothing that referenced aspects of popular culture, including music and film. He explained, "The serious point that I am making in this multimedia art work is for the audience to consider the absence of Indian presence in the world of rock and roll and other art forms. There is no denying that there have been and are performers that are Indian or of Indian ancestry but they are far and few between that are identifiable in appearance, are culturally Indian and are not making western movies."[7] By pointing to how Indigenous performers have been channeled into discrete categories in the past, he also sought to open up perceptions of the audiences that consume popular culture, in order to make Native peoples visible on both sides of the screen and stage. Passing was never an option for Luna. His literal insertions of his body into the frames of famous films and images of iconic artists and musicians points to a fuller, more equitable world of representation despite the wild inequalities that Native communities deal with on a daily basis. Included in his multimedia photography installation, *All Indian All the Time*, is the cover of a fictitious album of a decade ago, *James Luna with the High Cheekbones*. Featured are "the hit singles" "Everything Is Sick and Wrong" and "Why Couldn't I be Rich Instead of So Damn Good Looking." Luna invites us to laugh as he casts shade on the terms of a dominant culture's expectations for a Native recording star, just as he provides a space for acknowledging the complexity of Indigenous identity and survival.

Insights, Community, and Restorative Practice

Finding a larger framework and context for examining Luna's work as Indigenous practice requires drawing on memory, community, restorative practice, and the daily navigation of the debris, insights, and opportunities left in the wake of settler colonialism. This context is an experience shared by many Indigenous communities. The visceral specificity of Luna's work, which was grounded in performance, was ultimately a restorative project. It aimed to replace the empty forms of Indians that circulate in popular culture with narratives of what really happened, often while providing a critical mirror to the culture at large. His work confronts an older exhibition model that stereotypes Native peoples as "the Indian," an "out of time" image that is then funneled into objects for consumption.[8] Yet Luna's performance practice tapped into a fundamental fact of continuity: Indigenous people still exist in

6 — "Denial of coevalness" refers to the spatial and temporal distancing of Indigenous peoples in past anthropological practice. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

7 — James Luna, *All Indian All the Time*, artist's statement, October 2005.

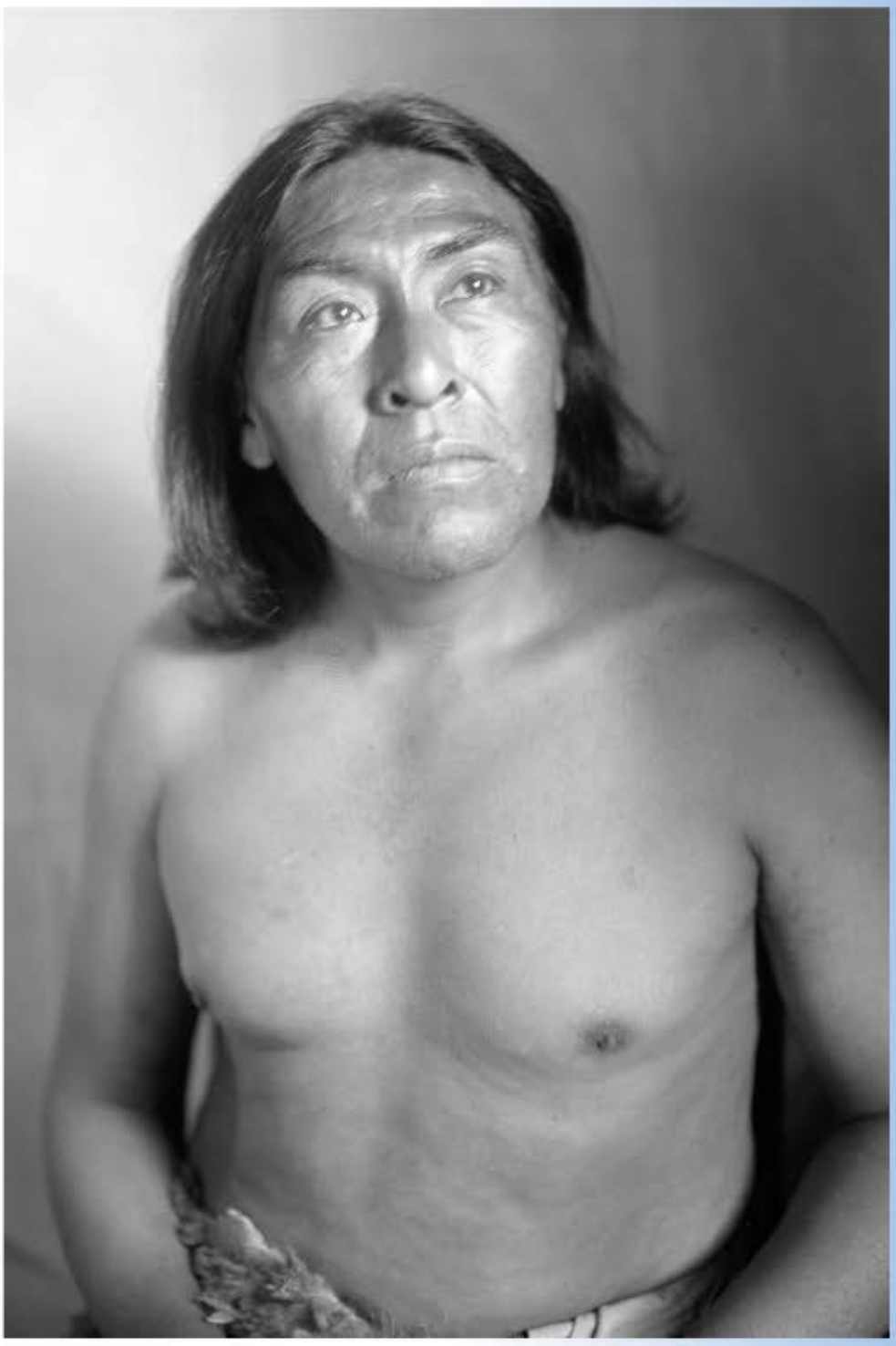
8 — Many museum displays in the United States during the late eighteenth century represented Indigenous peoples as "out of time," as part of the natural world. ""The Indian' refers to an abbreviated, metonymic stereotype circulated in print culture, performed in circuses and plays, and staged in waxworks and displays of the early national period. . . . What is evoked by this are incommensurable differences that conflated nature, the undomesticated and the sublime. . . . These worked to reinforce relations between self, nation and other." A key strategy for many Indigenous artists is to make this incommensurability visible and counter it with references to humor, resilience, and survival. See Ellen Fernandez-Sacco, "Framing 'the Indian': The Visual Culture of Conquest in the Museums of Pierre Eugene Du Simitiere and Charles Willson Peale, 1779–96," *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 8, no. 4 (2002), 571–618, 571–72.

North America, despite colonization, and their contemporary existence produces contemporary culture that, in turn, reinforces the visibility and complexity of Native community and identity. Despite all the pressures to destabilize the existence of people of color in the United States, storytelling serves to ground narratives in history and set a boundary for the respect of traditions. This runs counter to the stereotypes pervasive in American culture and to their manifestations in a material culture that replicates negative narratives and consumes those concepts through the things we watch and buy.

Unlike the dominant culture, which fixes colonized cultures in the past while constantly appropriating and recycling tropes, Luna embraced the passage of time. He drew heavily on his past experiences and those of his community in his performances and installations. In *The Artifact Piece*, Luna brought his own Indigenous body into dialogue with cultural artifacts in a museum narrative that falsely fixed these objects' cultural uses in the past. His action tells a story about erasure that extends beyond the exhibition to the reservation, offering a counter-narrative about Indians that is borne out in another tradition—that of museums' collecting practices. Thus, *The Artifact Piece* is an indictment of the larger institution in which he displayed himself. By exhibiting himself as a living object, he challenged static understandings born from multiple histories of isolationism, dispossession, and dysfunction.

James Luna rehearsing *Emendatio* for the 2005 Venice Biennale, January 28, 2005, Rasmuson Theater, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC. Courtesy of National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (012805KFmall298). Photo: Katherine Fogden.

The lives of two California Indians who survived the brutality of settler colonialism bridge his later works: *Emendatio* (2005), based on the life of the nineteenth-century missionary Pablo Tac, and *Ishi: The Archive Performance* (2015–17), which explores the life of a Yahi man who lived at the Museum of Anthropology at University of California Berkeley, under the care of anthropologist Theodore Kroeber.



James Luna, *Sometimes I Get So Lonely*, circa 2011. Series of nine photographs. Digital inkjet prints, 11 ½ × 7 ½ in. each. Courtesy of the James Luna Estate. Left: Image# 317047, American Museum of Natural History Library. Right: Photo by Mark Velasquez.

Luna paid tribute to Pablo Tac (Luiseño, 1822–1841) in *Emendatio*, which premiered at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Luna was the first Native American artist to present work at the Biennale. Just as Tac went to Europe to serve God at the heart of the Catholic missionary empire, Luna went to an institution at the heart of the art empire to pay homage to Tac through a series of three installations. The title resonates through the multiple meanings of the Latin term *emendatio*: correction, amendment, improvement, and amends. These words create a circle of intention and mindful action. Despite Tac's brief life (he was twenty-one when he died in Rome of smallpox), he left an account and drawings of his people. In *The Chapel for Pablo Tac*, Luna completed a set of images that honor and question Tac's role as predecessor and ancestor. Creating a crèche of objects dedicated to Tac, Luna combines his own contemporary Luiseño heritage with objects that Tac might have encountered as an early nineteenth-century novitiate. Videos pairing images of living Luiseño people with archival photos of their ancestors and a painted portrait of the Luna as Tac completed the sense that Tac's historical legacy was vibrantly engaged with the present.[9]

Ishi: The Archive Performance was Luna's last performance cycle. He first presented the work at M:ST Performative Art Festival, Calgary, Canada, in October 2016 with guest performer Sheila Tishla Skinner, and it too honors an ancestor for his resilience. The work is based on the life of Ishi (circa 1861–1916), a Yahi man who has been the subject of a number of books and films. Ishi was a survivor of the California Genocide of the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, and he is another ancestor who traveled between worlds. Luna's performance gave voice to this silent-film-era ancestor, and he presented the piece at the site of the university where Ishi lived the remainder of his life. "You go, I stay" were Ishi's words of farewell.

During the performance, a projected black-and-white slide offers the pictures of two men side by side: the first recorded image of Ishi and, next to him, a photograph of James Luna. Ishi first came into this "modern" world at about fifty years of age. He was in mourning, his hair burned off, the bones of his chest visible from between the lapels of an old coat, frightened as to what would come next, now that he was called the last Yahi. Thus he came to navigate the world that annihilated his family, his band, and those of other Californian Indian peoples literally hunted down for some six decades. This history was just beyond the frame of how Ishi's picture arrived into this world of mass-produced images in 1911. While there are recordings of Ishi captured on fragile wax cylinders, his voice was technologically split from his body. In the performance, Ishi speaks through James Luna. Here, the practice of performance is restorative, and Ishi's humanity is made visible and audible.

Juxtaposed next to Ishi's image, Luna embodies Ishi's stance and expression, and overlapping histories are folded deeply into each man. In contrast to Ishi's worn and misbuttoned coat, Luna wears an oversized T-shirt emblazoned with "Fuck You" in bold caps over a loincloth. Now the frame is changed, a result of the artist having control over the camera lens. Luna again makes the point that Native people are not out of time but are themselves creators and carriers of popular culture. This thread runs through his

9 — Lisbeth Haas, *Pablo Tac, Indigenous Scholar: Writing on Luiseno Language and Colonial History, c. 1840* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), xiv.

installations and performances, to eventually blend into the larger political realities for people of color beyond the boundaries of nation or state.

Near the end of the performance, a series of images describe the final arc of Ishi's life. Luna touches on this shared experience of defining and refining who we are, as our bodies age, falter, pass through illness, and then depart this world. Among the slides is an image of Luna in a wheelchair alongside a bed and clustered items that create a liminal hospital space full of transformations, departures, and hopefully, healing.

Luna, like some other Indigenous artists, makes the colonial framework visible through multiple forms of storytelling. This has its cost, as Luna wasn't immune to feelings of anger and humiliation that came up in some performances, as in *Take a Picture With a Real Indian* (1991–93).

James Luna performing *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, Christopher Columbus statue at Union Station, Washington, DC, Columbus Day, October 11, 2010. Courtesy of National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (20101011_01a_kjf_ps_065). Photo: Katherine Fogden.

Luna presented *Take a Picture* in public spaces, such as the Columbus Monument, New York; Union Station, Washington, DC; and the Ferry Building in San Francisco—all sites of mass gathering and political movement. Standing outdoors, Luna's call to "Take a picture with a real Indian" follows a steady pace, punctuated with poignant observations on the United States' "love" of the Indian and the crass commercialization of peoples and sacred sites appended to car models and logos. As video of the performance documents, people rushed in to take a photograph when Luna wore regalia from different Native traditions, but when he was wearing glasses, chinos, and a polo shirt, few stepped up to take their picture alongside him. The body language in some of the images, which show families leaning away from him, resembles the effect of resistance between two magnets of the same polarity. Luna stands silently, looking beyond the space of the room.

James Luna, *End of the Trail*, 1993. Color photocopy with black-and-white photograph, 12 × 9 in.
© James Luna. Courtesy of the James Luna Estate.

As the performance continues, the artist's complex struggle over the meaning of being Indigenous in these interactions with the public is rendered visible. Still, in one image, an Indian man steps up for the photograph, and they grasp hands in recognition.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes that a lack of awareness about "the colonial framework" is a fundamental problem in understanding the historical presence, survival, and continuity of Native peoples in the United

States. She explains that a "rethinking of the consensual national narrative" requires restoring the visibility of the colonial process, in all its contradictions and deadly acts of violence.[10] Dunbar-Ortiz's words help to contextualize how Luna's practice of performance served to disturb static perceptions of Native identities, whether they existed in reality—like Tac and Ishi—or were his created personas.

Skewering the Trope of the Noble Savage

Luna also outlines the colonial framework through his sustained critique of the work of sculptor James Earle Fraser, whose *End of the Trail* (1915) depicted a stoic, dying "noble savage." First modeled in the 1890s, the sculpture was enlarged to monumental proportions for San Francisco's Panama Pacific Exposition in 1915. In the 18-foot-high bronze, an exhausted Plains Indian sits on his weary horse, with a long lance pointed downward over visitors to the fair. For this billboard for extinction, Fraser was awarded the Exposition's Gold Medal for sculpture.

Fraser's image emerged when the US Indigenous populations had hit a numerical low of 250,000. Luna's *End of the Frail* (1993) is a tableau vivant that tears at the image of the dying Noble Savage. In the collage, a black-and-white photograph of Luna slumped on a wooden sawhorse with an empty liquor bottle dangling from his hand, is layered on top of a color photocopy of a postcard that featured a painting based on James Earle Fraser's sculpture, *End of the Trail*, an image from the "Noble Savage" genre. Luna's drooped and vulnerable form speaks to the weight of expectations while acknowledging a deeper history of circulating iconic imagery that is still disseminated in a multiplicity of forms today—as belt buckles, advertisement, prints, and even signs for new retirement communities. By transposing words and exchanging his body for that of Fraser's monumental work, Luna shifts awareness to the crushing ideological weight of popular expectations and alcohol's self-annihilating effects. Nostalgia, denial, and amnesia make a toxic brew to live on.

In his early performance *In My Dreams: A Surreal, Post-Indian, Subterranean Blues Experience* (1996), Luna brought these narratives back to his audiences, wearing a child's feather headdress and carrying plastic bows and arrows. The wounded warrior, the Marlon Brando fan, the shade-thrower at James Earle Fraser, here pedals a stationary exercise bike, wearing the toy headdress and buckskin before a screen. Behind him plays a loop from the film *The Wild One* (1953), in which Marlon Brando and his Black Rebel Motorcycle Club rule the road. Luna pedals the exercise bike more furiously as they near, and then does pony tricks as the gang seems to catch up. He sips beer, uses crutches decorated with feathers as wings,

10 — Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 2.

and wears sunglasses to deflect his own specificity. *In My Dreams* oscillates between themes of identity, colonialism, and alcoholism, all riding on a cutting edge of humor.

The apparent ease of the performances belies the amount of time Luna spent rehearsing and sharing the stage with other artists. Luna's performances and installations create a space of reflection in which one can begin healing from the aftereffects of exclusion. Works that hold space this way have potential to transform social relations by shifting constrained concepts of Indian as icon, of Indian as mascot, of Indian as people who have not survived. We know this is a lie. We are still here.

Luna's merging with iconic scenes and cultural figures, in forms that ranged from collage to the documentation of ritual, culminates in *Jackson Luna* (2016). Instead of a splattered canvas à la Jackson Pollock, Luna crouches over a spotted cowhide, brush and container in hand, spattering energy onto the skin. Transformation via laughter, as the joke rolls over the question of representation, appropriation, and control to rest at the viewer's feet. As Dunbar-Ortiz notes, survival is dynamic, and "Indigenous survival as peoples is due to centuries of resistance and storytelling passed through generations. Surviving genocide, by whatever means, is resistance: non-Indians must know this in order to more accurately understand the history of the United States."[11] Luna's work is recognized as part of this larger context of storytelling, resistance and continuity in the face of this nation's history.

The year 2016 was a good one for Luna, with another work, a red beaded baseball cap with a shell and feather dangle attached to the crown. The embroidered letters read "Make Amerika Red Again."

James Luna has left the building. You Go, I Stay.

Miss you, d'itao

Ellen Fernandez-Sacco (Boriken Taino) is interested in the interconnections between genealogy, visual and material culture, and social history, as seen through a large framework of colonial relationships. A recovering academic, she lives in Tampa, Florida.

11—— Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, xiii.

James Luna, *In My Dreams: A Surreal, Post-Indian, Subterranean Blues Experience*, 1996. Performance still, La Jolla Indian Tribal Hall, La Jolla Indian Reservation, California. Courtesy of Ellen Fernandez-Sacco.