

# Goodbye, Columbus: A *Taino* Perspective

*New Yorker Shares His Boricuan Heritage*

BY  
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**B**obby Gonzalez settles into a chair in a study room at the American Museum of Natural History in midtown. A few people sit in a semi-circle before him; others are peering into the room and then disappearing outside.

"You never know how many people are going to come," he says, neither nervous nor uncomfortable. "I adjust what I say depending on the group."

Fifteen minutes later, when his session begins, there are about 20 people in the room—a good-sized crowd. Five others arrive late.

Gonzalez then begins his talk, as he has done so many times before, with a story about heritage and culture and with occasional light humor designed to warm the group. "I like to say the Taino people discovered Columbus," he says. For the next hour, he engages those before him—teenagers, parents, a couple of well-dressed men—in a talk about conflict resolution and about how the native Indians had mediated disputes with what these days would be branded "conflict-resolution techniques."

The soft-spoken Gonzalez is often captivating as he spins yarns about different tribes striking a peace treaty to prevent tumult. As the group filters out later, he is

modest in his assessment. "It went well," he says. *Well*, to him, means that everyone seemed to participate and to share their thoughts.

Gonzalez is often summoned to museums, libraries, and college campuses across the states—simply to tell stories. The recent visit to the

heritage, but it is through his own research and exploration that he learned so much more about his identity and about the Taino people.

Much of the history is in debate. While schools have often taught about Christopher Columbus' discovery of America in 1492, Gonzalez

and other Taino experts strive to portray the encounter as the beginning of 500 years of genocide initiated by Spanish colonists.

The Taino tribe of Puerto Rico was the first indigenous group of people that explorer Christopher Columbus encountered on Oct. 12, 1492, in the Western hemisphere. They are indigenous to the Caribbean Islands, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, and the Bahamas. Gonzalez maintains that 90 percent of Native Americans live in Latin America, not the United States.

Chief Peter Guanikeyu Torres, a Taino elder who is the founder of the New

Jersey Taino band of Jatibonuco, recently wrote an essay about the "story of the Taino holocaust of the six million tears." The Spaniards, he wrote, took the free Taino indigenous people into bondage and raped the women.

The clash between the two cultures led to the decimation of the Taino population, but not its extinc-



Bobby Gonzalez

museum on Manhattan's Upper West Side was orchestrated to stress the importance of maintaining peaceful relations. But more often, he delivers candid reflections on history from the Taino perspective.

Gonzalez, who lives in the borough of The Bronx in New York City, is of Taino heritage. Growing up, his parents taught him to respect his

tion. Columbus's "discovery" eventually led to the Taino-Boricua homeland's being renamed Puerto Rico. But, he wrote, "We Taino Native Americans never stopped calling it Boricua."

He continued, "The Taino people are neither of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Jamaican, Cuban—not of the present Florida—nationality. We are a separate Native American nationality that has existed for centuries among the Caribbean nations, subject to Spanish, English, and French domination."

The casting of American history to diminish the role and influence and even existence of the Taino greatly troubles Gonzalez.

"Christopher Columbus, for many Native Americans, was America's first serial killer," he says. "For some of us, we view him as a Hitler type of figure. He began the genocide that killed tens of millions of natives."

"European Americans and African Americans and Asian Americans are here to stay, and we have to learn to live together. But before we can live together, we have to look at history honestly, and that includes Columbus and the consequences of 1492."

When Gonzalez, who sports a ponytail and earring, steps into a room—be it a classroom, auditorium, or lecture hall—he wants to share more than stories. His resume brands him a writer, poet, American Indian storyteller, and Taino/Puerto Rican historian. He does not like to be called a *lecturer*; instead, he prefers *storyteller*.

He aims to raise awareness, and hopes that listeners will inevitably question their education, possibly even study the Taino culture.

Jorge Estevez, a program participant at the National Museum of the American Indian, brought Gonzalez to the Museum last September to read some of his poems. "He's very much into research, so he knows what he's talking about," says

Estevez. "He likes to share information, and I appreciate that."

"He's a natural storyteller. He is telling stories to everyone he

to know a little about everything, and he reads a lot, so when just about any topic comes up, he'll have something to say about it, and

Consider the titles of some of his seminars: "Columbus Day: Reflection on the Tragic Consequences of 1492;" "The Real Story behind Columbus;" "Tales from the American Holocaust;" and "Thanksgiving: A Bittersweet Holiday for Native Americans."

When he visited the University of Michigan in Flint last fall, close to 300 students, faculty, and staff members attended a session entitled "The Legacy of Columbus: 500 Years of Racism and Resistance." The audience remained hushed while Gonzalez spoke.

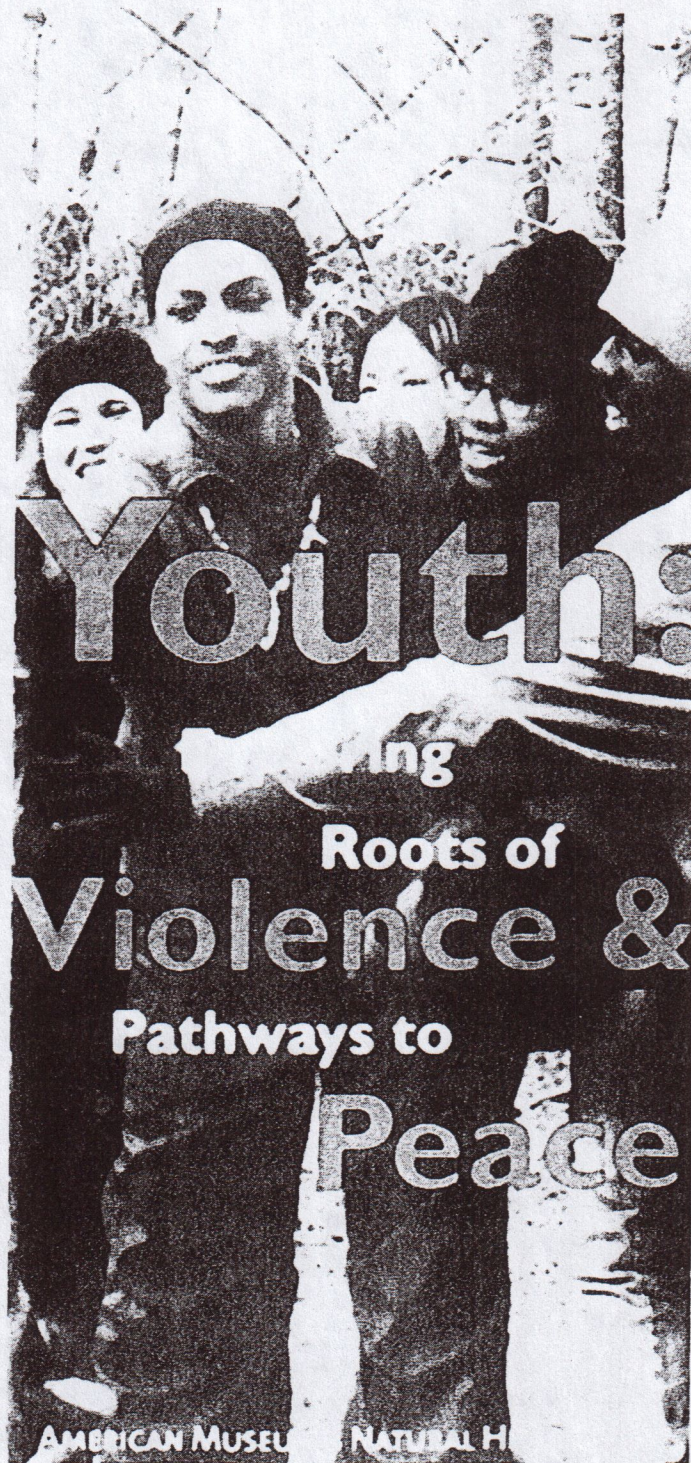
"People didn't expect to listen to an indigenous person with a strong New York accent," says Catherine Davids, the cultural and diversity specialist at the 6,500-student college. "That was the first misconception about indigenous people he blew out of the water."

Davids calls Gonzalez an "impeccable researcher" who "doesn't try to sugar coat to be polite."

"At first I thought people were quiet because they were interested, but then I realized they were sort of shocked. They had not heard these truths before—the fact that Columbus was not an invited visitor or a guest but a serial killer," Davids says. "One of our Mexican American community members stood up and said that for the first time in his life, he felt he could admit to being an indigenous person instead of Spanish."

Gonzalez, reflecting on that visit, says, "I like to impress upon people that we should look upon the past, but we have to look forward as well."

Gonzalez grew up in a traditional Taino household. Born in Manhattan, his parents shuttled him and his two brothers to the Bronx, where he spent his formative years. He credits his parents with instilling in him a deep appreciation of his heritage. They often recounted stories about their Indian ancestry.



meets," says Estevez, who is of Taino descent and from the Dominican Republic. "He's very inquisitive, very curious. He seems

he'll surprise you with something you don't know."

He savors courting spirited discussion whenever he speaks.

Thanksgiving was a time, he says, to read and reflect, not to watch football on television. "They told us what happened in 1492, and the encounter with the Spaniards," says Gonzalez, "and they told me that many of our people, in order to survive, denied that they were Indian, and after several generations, many of our people forgot that they were Indian. That was a common experience throughout the Americas."

It was a different, often puzzling, experience in the classroom. Teachers, all of whom were white and none of whom were Native American, would portray Columbus in heroic terms. "I was very confused," he says, and eventually "very angry." Yet, he didn't challenge authority.

That is, until he attended Manhattan College in the Bronx, where Gonzalez says he met teachers of color and heard a variety of perspectives on history. A friend invited Gonzalez to a pow-wow, and there he met Native American Indians from North and South America. Their stories dazzled him—and triggered an awareness.

"Many people my family knew, friends, were Native Americans but did not have a consciousness of being so. They called themselves Mexican or Cuban or Bolivian, but they either weren't very conscious or possibly suppressed their Taino identities," he says.

Concerned more about future financial security, Gonzalez had attended college as a marketing major. That soon changed once he began to delve into his history and culture. "I realized how empty the history of the Taino people was. The pursuit of the so-called American dream had nothing to do with me," he says.

So he opted to discover himself and dropped out of college. He attended pow-wows as often as possible, traveled the country with Native Americans, took odd jobs to survive. His family didn't question

his direction, and instead, was proudly supportive. "I began to see that the accumulation of money didn't mean happiness. I realized that it's a contradiction to be Indian and to be rich. In the old days, you didn't have wealthy Indian people because everyone shared. You didn't have homelessness, and you didn't have poverty, and no one starved."

Instead of listening to instructors in the classroom, Gonzalez

it's an event saturated in traditional dance, arts and crafts, music, and food. In his sessions, he spins folktales that relate the value system of the Native Americans from North and South America.

"I want to dispel stereotypes of Native Americans," he says. "You may have seen *Dances With Wolves* or *Last of the Mohicans*, but you very rarely see films or books about natives of Latin America."

conclusions. That tact reflects his heritage because the Taino people respected everyone's beliefs and did not try to convert anyone, he says.

"I know they are not aware on a conscious level of the seeds that are planted in their heads about native culture," he says. "I hope they remember a man telling them about Native Americans. They are hearing a story, enjoying themselves, having a good time, but they are also learning about the native peoples."

There are messages infused in each program. The relationship between Mother Earth and the Taino. The spiritual beliefs about respect and peace, that violence is counterproductive. That Taino words—400 of them, such as hurricane, canoe, tobacco, iguana and barbecue—are common today, as are Taino foods such as pineapple, peanuts and sweet potatoes.

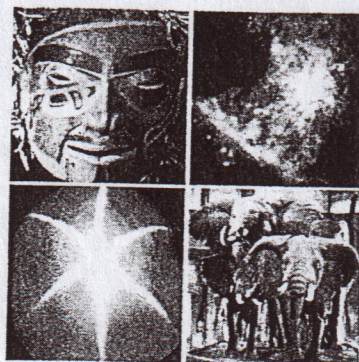
The reactions to his words can often be strong. Occasionally, there are heated exchanges as listeners challenge his way of thinking. But Gonzalez says he has never lost his cool.


"I tell people to listen. The truth for me may not be the truth for you. We've had different cultural and historical experiences, and we have to respect that. I don't try to impose my perspective on anyone, and it's important that we listen to one another."

His calendar these days is busier than ever. The visit to the Museum comes just before he returns to the campus in Flint, Michigan, to again meet with students. There are 200 speaking engagements already this year, and he doesn't desire a respite, even a brief one.

"For me, it's an adventure," he says. "It's like reading a book that never ends. I turn the page, and I never know what the next page will contain. I never plan anything. I go where the page takes me."

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AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY 

then became the teacher. He assumed the role of storyteller and poet, and founded the Taino Del Norte group to bring Native Americans together and celebrate the culture. He began to pen monthly columns in the now-defunct *Latino Village Press*, published *The Puerto Rican Indian Wars: Part II*, and is listed in *Who's Who in Native America*.

Gonzalez has since curated a Native American Poetry Festival and has served on New York City's Native American Heritage Committee, which sponsors educational programs. And each September, he organizes a giant pow-wow in the Bronx to build bridges between Native Americans and non-natives;

He doesn't target any specific group in his sessions. In fact, the visit to the Museum involved listeners both young and old. In any given week, he is meeting with a civic group, a collection of middle grade students, and even younger children. Recently, he spoke to kids aged 18 months old to four years.

"I used hand puppets and stuffed animals," he says. "When I speak to young students, I don't dwell on the genocide or the Holocaust of Native Americans. I focus on the positive aspects of the culture and the contributions of Native Americans."

He tells students not to believe everything they read, to conduct their own research, and to reach their own