We, the Colonized Ones

Kukuli Speaks

edited by Ivor Miller

We, the Colonized Ones is a series of clay sculptures by Kukuli Verlade Barrionuevo, made in New York from 1990 to 1992. Each of the pieces either symbolizes or represents the emotional consequences of European colonization among Native Americans, Africans and their descendants. Some of the works relate specifically to Kukuli's experience in her native Peru. Their goal is to show the point of view of the defeated; those who saw their cultures and societies disrupted by the imposition of another culture. The sculptures embody a communication between the American past and the American present, and the western and non-western cultures that co-habit on this continent. These sculptures are used by Kukuli in performances along with song, dance and candle light to evoke the spirits of colonized ancestors, the spirits of the unborn (whose parents were killed), and the spirit of affirmation and resistance among the living. The following text is based on taped interviews with Kukuli conducted in Central Park and the South Bronx in New York City.1

I am a westernized individual. I do not say I am a western individual, because I did not create this culture — I am a product of colonization, and in this moment I am trying to define things as accurately and clearly for myself as I can. If I say that I am western, I could imply that this world that developed in Europe, and now in the Americas, belongs to me as it does to you. And I do not think that this is true. If there were no discrimination, maybe this relationship to western culture would be much more successful, and I could consider myself 'western'. But I come from what they call a 'Third World', and I think that we are 'third world' because we are colonized. We have to face that reality. To face it is to acknowledge my mixed race, to acknowledge that I am not Indian, and that I am not white. That does not mean I have an ambiguity, but that I have a new identity: the identity of a colonized individual. I feel hurt when I see what colonization has made of the people I come from — the mixed race. I am not an Indian person, I have both heritages.

My images come from indigenous aesthetics. I don't say they are 'pre-Columbian' icons, because what is called 'pre-Columbian' still exists everywhere in the Americas. So-called 'pre-Columbian' is still a part of society that exists and survives. Everybody is westernized in some way. Colonization has been so
successful that what we call Indian communities are people who are westernized to some degree. When the Spaniards came, they forbade the Indian population to wear their own clothes; they had to wear Spanish clothes. At that time, 400-500 years ago, the fashion was very different from now. So the Indians, in many towns in Peru, took the forms, and put in their own colors, changing the Spanish clothes to fit Indian aesthetics. If you go to small towns in Peru, you can find clothing styles that were used in certain regions of Spain 300-400 years ago: the hats, and the big skirts with several layers of underskirts — the difference is mainly in the colors. The colors are strong and bright, with flowers and birds, a wonderful mixture usually with a black background. And the style changes from town to town. The dresses of that time continue to survive, so I would not say that they are totally 'Indian'.

My mother, who is a journalist/anthropologist, often took me on her trips inside Peru. Twice a month, or whenever she can, she goes to small towns very far away from the cities, the places where no other city people go. She sees the festivals, the customs, and hears the legends. She is a hard worker. I liked Peruvian music; but to go with my mother to ask how these artists made this music, or that sculpture — I was not into that at all! I just wanted to enjoy the landscape, or eat an ice cream in the town's park. Yet I think that I gained a lot from those trips. Now I regret that I couldn't enjoy them more, when I had an opportunity to see things that probably no longer exist. Now I am reevaluating my memories. My mother forced me to learn things that now are helping me a lot.

I consider myself and my family mixed race. I do not speak Quechua; my father never taught it to us. I grew up in a middle class urban setting in Lima; but there was always something floating. My mother, instead of telling us tales like Snow White, told Indian legends from different places in Peru. My family has always been very proud of our Indian ancestors. I thank them very much for this.

I was born in Cuzco, and my father's father is from another state called Tacna, and my mother's mother is from Ancash, another state. We come from different parts of Peru. In Peru people always belonged to one clan or nation or confederation, but we have been mixing now for 500 years.

Everything made sense to me when I came to the US and first started working in clay. I have been painting all my life, and technically I am a good painter, but my painting did not have a connection to my soul. I was not able to make a connection with my spirit, my interests, my frustrations, my passions and my work. The native music from Peru, Ecuador or the US that my family played at home was not reflected in my work. Nor were the legends my mother told me, which have been my spiritual support in trying to understand a world that was denied to me. I was pretty much lost until I entered the ceramic studio while doing my BFA at Hunter College. There, I remembered the red clay that I had seen everywhere in Peru, in Mexico, or even in photos. So I thought, why not work in red clay? I like the color, it brings physical and emotional memories to me.

I got the red clay and I began working; it was like magic, it was amazing! I felt like a mute who suddenly found their voice! While tossing the clay I remembered a Chankay doll (Chankay is one of the several cultures in Peru). They did not use red clay, but clear, white clay, but I remember the form of the head, and I began building a doll. This was my first piece that was a loyal translation of my thoughts and ideas. I painted it with engobe (earth colors); and from then on I decided to use engobes because they are the coloring that native peoples from the Americas used and still use. I decided not to use any glaze, because glaze was a creation brought by the conquistadors. That was the first contact I had with clay and my way of thinking.

On the sculpture is written a piece by Eduardo Galeano.² It says,

The no ones. The sons of no one. The owners of nothing. The no ones. The not ones. These treated as if they were not one. Corriendo la lente — dying a life. Fucked, refurred. Those who are not even if they are. Those who do not speak languages, but dialects. Those who do not have religions, but superstitions. Those who do not do art, but handicrafts. Those who do not practice culture, but folklore. Those who are not human beings, but human resources. The no ones. Those who cost less than the bullet that kills them.

When I finished this first piece, I had it standing in front of me, and I still felt that there was no connection between it and me until I decided to nail it. After I had put in a few nails, a friend who was working next to me said "That's enough!" But I thought, "No, it's not enough", and I put in more nails. Once I finished I felt I was saying exactly what I wanted to say. It was not the form, the color, or the angle: it was the nails that had the final meaning. I was thinking about this, and I immediately did the next one, the one with the snakes. That one came by itself.

In the belly of the sculpture is the white man that lives in every colonized person. I try to make it clear that I do not have anything against 'white people', because one thing is white people outside of my body, and another thing is the white man who is inside my body, who is telling me that he is superior to me. The white man that I am against is the one that lives inside us, even though we look black and Indian inside. He is the one who does not let us be what we are, because he is eating our self esteem, and always tries to come up when we fight to hold on to our own reality.

The snake goes from the mouth of the colonizer to the mouth of the colonized. It is like those parasites that people have in their stomachs. The white man is our spiritual parasite, and the snake represents the lies that he says through his mouth. We do not have our own voice, because things that come out of our own mouth are often times his, what he thinks, and what he wants us to believe we are. We carry our own colonization inside of us. On the back, I wrote:

"I am not black", he says, as if he were warding off a curse. His right hand waves nervously in front of his face, scaring away the ghost of some inopportune ancestor. Drums and castanets undertake a funeral song. Racial pride and cultural roots have been killed for the sake of assimilation. We the colonized ones have a tiny armed conqueror stabbing melanin like crazy. There amidst our dignity in our inner selves. We masters and slaves, black and white Indians, all at once, we are a paradox.

Someone told me that my sculptures are an exorcism, are trying to expel demons, and they were right. These two pieces in particular are like tumors that I took out of me. But I don’t know if I took them from me or the people I came from, because in some way we are the same.

a friend of mine told me that I had finally got my voice, and I like that. The way I think, the way I feel, are reproduced with fidelity in this work. I feel that they are alive, because I put a lot of life into them. They represent millions of people, and it is true that the spirits exist, some of those millions of people who create those sculptures. They are like a summoning of those ancestors I don’t know, whose languages I don’t speak.

All my work is related to these issues, and to the fact that I am a woman, and living in New York. I am working on another series that has to do with the right for my life, as a woman. It deals with abortion. I have made a ceramic belly with a newborn child, but only the belly is framed, and the child is already out. Its head is the head of a baby and the head of a dog. The dog is biting the womb. It deals with the rights of the fetus over the rights of the womb, and how much some in this society are crying for the unborn children, when they have people living like animals on the streets, and won’t give a dime for them. This society is very much in love with ideals, but not with realities. It prefers the ideal of an unborn baby that is a promise for the future rather than the responsibility towards what they already have. Because, after all, a child that is not yet born, is not a responsibility of yours, it is a responsibility of the womb. This is a very unfair society for women who want to do something in their lives other than pay forever the punishment of having an unwanted child.

There are three categories in the ‘We, the Colonized Ones’ series: installations, ceramic pieces and performances. The three are related because the installations include ceramic pieces and the performances include my babies.

I have different performances of two to three minutes each. I always have a baby which I carry with me. In one performance I cover the baby with Peruvian fabric, and then put flowers on it. I come out humming, and walk zig-zag through a line of yellow candles, yellow for Oshun (you always have to be respectful of everybody else). I have a ceramic cross placed in the middle of the candles, and I sing a song that talks about how people are dying because of the war between the army and the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso). The song says that “the people’s blood has a beautiful smell, it smells like violets, geraniums, roses and sunflowers, it smells like dynamite and gunpowder, carajo!” I first heard it at home in Peru. I like the poetic combination of first blood, then flowers, gunpowder and dynamite. Then I approach the cross with my baby, and I’m praying, very low at first, and then louder and louder, until I try with my voice to cover the song, but I can never do it. I stop at the moment of the line with flowers and blood, then I sing it with the cassette. And I put my baby as an offering to the cross. And that’s it. I am performing as myself, myself not only as an individual, but as a product of culture and history.

Some artists worry about giving themselves to their work; they keep a little detached. But I think that the work and you are the same thing. That is why I don’t think of myself as a political artist; I would not be able to talk about the problems people are having in my art, even though I know about it, and it is the same difference when you hear that a woman was killed two blocks from your house, and when you hear that your own mother was killed. I am talking about my own forefathers being killed, not somebody else’s. I think that both issues are equally important, and equally deserve to be talked about, but I have the mission to talk about what I saw, what I felt, and what I am going through, because colonization has not ended. I cannot talk about landscapes that I don’t know, faces I have never seen. Yet I can talk to you with passion about Victoria, the maid in my house, who is almost like a mother to me, and who has never been allowed to sit on our sofa.

When I do my pieces, nothing else is important but this personal conversation between me and my work, although I know that probably other people are not going to be able to like it. For example, I am now creating a cross that will be shown in a window near Columbus Circle. Definitely I am thinking about what the audience is going to say, because the audience are going to be those who gather this October (1992) for celebrating the discovery of the ignorance of the Europeans. I call it many things – the invasion, the beginning of colonization. Many of the pieces were created when thinking about the 5th centennial, and they are going to say what colonization is for us, or what it is for them.

This one is the Indian giver, who gave everything for nothing. I use the phrase ‘Indian giver’ because I know the connotation that it has in this society, of an Indian who gives and then wants it back. So he is talking to the ‘white taker’, because if he is the ‘Indian giver’, you are the ‘white taker’. I don’t mean to say ‘he’, because all my pieces have two sexes, they are neither male nor female, they are not just one – they are a society, a group of people. On it, I wrote:

I gave you the gold and silver from my rivers and my mountains. The humble potato which saved many from starvation. The tomato, my corn, even the popcorn, I gave you that batata, the yam, the passion fruit, the mango, the guava. I gave you more. Everything my life produced. The buffalo, the wikitika, where are they? I gave you my moral values, my laws, so you could create yours. I finally gave you my land, my freedom, my hands. Me the Indian giver, you the white taker. I gave you the tools for you to develop. you took my life.

I have another piece of the man impaled on the cross. The cross was an instrument of colonization. Some people who see this cross make the sign of the cross in front of them; they seem to feel that it is offensive. This being has three mouths that are screaming, because his own mouth cannot scream, because he has the cross going through. On its back is a quote from Fray Valverde, who came with Francisco Pizarro, and delivered it to the Inca Atahualpa (the king). It reads:

If you refuse, know that you will be constrained with fire, and the sword, and all your idols shall be overthrown and we shall oblige you by the sword to pay tribute to our emperor and deliver him your kingdom. You are assured that God will suffer that you and all your Indians shall be destroyed by our arms.

You know where the word mulato comes from? A mule. So this sculpture is saying ‘don’t call me mulato, I am not a human mule’. Many people don’t realize that definitions must be reviewed and erased if necessary. I don’t think that it is nice to be called a mule. Because the white man thinks of himself as a horse, and a black woman as a donkey — whatever she gets from that union must be a mulato. The main implication of the comparison with animals is that one is noble and the other just a resource, a beast. It is a very negative way to call people. The sculpture has the mask of a mule, and it is trying to pull it off. It is the mask imposed on him. I don’t know what he wants to call himself, but I know that it would be patronizing to tell him what he should be called. The checkers on his back represent the black and white that’s in him, but this mixture doesn’t blend. It is as if he were separate pieces put together.

The babies that I make are for my performances. This is the first baby that I made.

4 Oshun is a Yoruba deity of love, pregnancy and ceremonies.
It says on his head: “I was not born, I was not even conceived. My parents never could meet at all. My father died in a mine, working from day to day with no rest. My mother was raped by one of them, then killed herself.” You might find this writing melodramatic, but it was many times, in fact, reality. On its belly it says: “I am a spirit with no body. I am a soul with no embraces, I am a life never lived, I am an illusion never dreamed. I ask you: Why?”

This sculpture says: “I am a benefit of western culture”. Some birds, when they cannot fit all the baby birds in the nest, let one die. So that chick, as the others, is always waiting for its food with its beak open, but food never comes. It eats air, and it dies with air in its belly. It says here: “Chosen by you not to survive. Don’t say my death was worth your civilization. If so I would have to say my new survival is worth your death. Your pollution, and corruption, and TV are not worth my life.” And here it says, “I’m scared”.

All my babies are dead. They were never born. They represent babies that never had the opportunity to come to life because of history.

Baby III, 1992, ceramic.
We the colonized ones. I'm afraid about my life. What did you give me, Europe? In 1992 let's celebrate our genocide.

She does not look exactly like me, but she has similar features, as if she were a sister.

This is my self portrait. It says:

If I do not criticize, if I do not burn a flag, if I do not have an abortion, I can consider myself a free individual. If I do reply with a nice smile when I'm called 'sweetie' by a stranger, if I deny where I come from, which language I speak, if I do not look at a beggar in the street, at the blacks segregated in the restaurants, at my people assimilated, alienated, if I play the game, woman and Latina here in New York, nice and quiet, harmless and obedient, subordinated and ignorant, I can consider myself a free individual.

Hans Rikken
A Neoprimivist Hybridity

Santo di Monte

Neoprimivism, which emerged as a recognisable trend in art during the '80s, reawakened the West's interest in non-western art, and yet it raised more problems than it was capable of solving. A number of factors precipitated this interest, not least of which has been the West's search for new representations by which to suture its disintegrating sense of coherence—the belief in its ethical and intellectual superiority threatened on the outside by the struggle for independence by its former colonies or small nations with opposing ideologies, and from within by the resistance to marginalisation and the assertion of self-representation from those metropolitan communities who do not 'fit' the mythic national identities and hierarchies promoted by the dominant power structure. The continuing migrations of peoples around the world, and the incorporation of the poorer countries into the West's tourist economy have led to an increase in the global traffic of cultural signs: fascination and necessity have moved them in both directions, thus as western culture has incorporated the signs of the non-western in part through the desire for the spiritual that could be conveyed through being 'in touch' with natural materials, so non-western artists have adopted the strategies of western aesthetic procedures, in part through its own fascination with western material culture and the need to recycle and reinvent with limited economic resources.

The consequence has not however led to an improved understanding of the objectives and ideologies of non-western cultures, nor to an acceptance of their cultural productions as having equal intellectual weight to that of the West: we still have a situation in which a western artist can freely appropriate the signs of other cultures, whilst a non-western artist, if he or she uses their own cultural symbology, remains trapped in the category of the 'exotic' or 'primitive', or, if drawing on western aesthetic codes, is accused of betraying the 'authenticity' of their own culture and becoming second-rate modernists. Thus, for example, José Bedia can gain status and value as an international artist through manipulating the signs of Lakota ledger book drawings, Afro-Cuban palo monte or Australian Aboriginal dot paintings in a way that a Lakota or Afro-Cuban or Australian artist cannot—at least, not without being labelled 'ethnic' rather than 'international'. Or again, Lothar Baumgarten can assume the role of
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To nominate something as a 'contamination' is usually to attribute a negative quality, to imply that its presence somehow de-values another entity which would otherwise possess some 'pure' or 'authentic' state of existence. This attribution depends on the perspective from which such an observation is made and involves a value-laden judgement.

The intention here is quite different: it is to begin from the premise that we cannot know what an 'authentic' state of existence is. I am thinking, among other things, of Marcel Duchamp's speculations that a two-dimensional object is the shadow of a third, which is the shadow of a fourth, which is the shadow of a fifth, and so on into infinity. If we live thus in a world of shadows and hence cannot know things in their entirety, then we cannot know their 'true' state of existence.

In terms of cultural phenomena, we tend in our immediate past or 'historical' time. And yet, in the overall scheme of life and humankind's cultural development, 1000 years, for instance, is a short duration, and it is not difficult to cite examples of communities of people in which cultural changes established through contact with others long ago still resonate in their cognitive processes, to be found in turn embedded in their cultural productions and uses of language. It is towards acknowledging the already 'contaminated' complexity of these latter that these thoughts are ultimately directed.¹

In part, the trajectory of this enquiry has been prompted by two related 'holes' in the debates on cultural identity and 'multiculturalism' as they relate to the visual arts, both of which lead back to a question of the nature of art itself. The first involves the general inability, or perhaps refusal, of mainstream art criticism to consider art of the non-Euroamerican artist outside the narrow frame of Eurocentric aesthetic theories and their hierarchical value systems. A case in point was the posthumous retrospective of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica at the Witte de With in Rotterdam in 1992. There, a European art critic was overheard commenting that Oiticica's work was 'not art'—a surprising statement if only considering the neo-Duchampian, constructivist gestures of the late 60s and 70s, which at the very least posed a question concerning the nature of art. Other critics did indeed recognise Oiticica's gestures, but dismissed them as 'inauthentic': his practice was incoherent ultimately directed.¹

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