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We, the Colonized Ones: Peruvian Artist Kukuli Speaks about Her Art and Experience

EDITED BY IVOR MILLER

"We, the Colonized Ones" is a series of clay sculptures, made by Kukuli Velarde Barrionuevo in New York City 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 in the Americas. Some of the works relate specifically to Kukuli's experience in her native Peru. The goal of these sculptures 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 cohabit on this continent. These works are used by Kukuli in performance with song, dance, and candlelight 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 don't say I'm a Western individual, because I didn't 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

Ivor Miller recently received his Ph. D. from Northwestern University. His field of study was the practice of African-derived religions in revolutionary Cuba.

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 don't 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'm coming 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 I must acknowledge my mixed race, to acknowledge that I'm not Indian and that I'm not white; I have both heritages. I feel hurt when I see what colonization has made of the people I come from. That doesn't mean I have an ambiguity, but that I have a new identity: the identity of a colonized individual.

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.[2] We come from different parts of Peru. In Peru people have always belonged to one clan or nation or confederation, but now that we have been mixing for five hundred years, how can you really know if you are coming from one specific group?

I don't speak Quechua because my father never taught it to us;[3] 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 us Indian legends from different places in Peru. My family has always been extremely proud of our Indian ancestors. I thank them very much for this.

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. I liked Peruvian music, but to go with my mother to ask how these artists made this mask, 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 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 don't exist anymore. Now I am reevaluating my memories. My mother forced me to learn things that now are helping me a lot.

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 still exists and survives in our societies, even if Westernized in some ways. Colonization has been so successful that what we call

Indian communities are people who are Westernized in some degree. When the Spaniards came, they forbade the Indian population to use their own clothes; they made them use Spanish clothes. At that time, four hundred to five hundred 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 today, you can find clothing styles used in certain regions of Spain three hundred to four hundred 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 or birds, a wonderful mixture, usually with a black background. And the style changes from town to town. These dresses illustrate how indigenous aesthetics survive even within Spanish forms.

Everything made sense to me when I came to the U.S. and started working in clay for the first time. I have been painting all my life, and technically I'm a good painter, but my painting didn't have a connection to my soul.[4] 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 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 for trying to understand a world that was denied to me. I was pretty much lost until I got into the ceramic studio while doing my B.F.A. at Hunter College. When I got into the studio, I remembered the red clay that I've often seen—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 optical 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 her voice! While tossing the clay I remembered a Chankay doll (Chankay is one of the several cultures in Peru). They didn't use red clay but white, clear clay, but I remembered the form of the head, and I began building a doll. This first piece was a loyal translation of my memory. The only way I painted it was with engobe (earthy colors). From then on I thought to use engobes because they are the coloring that native peoples from the Americas used and still use. That was the first contact I had with clay and my way of thinking. I decided I was not going to use any glaze, because glaze was a creation brought by the conquistadors.

"UNLIVED LIVES"

On the sculpture is written a piece by Eduardo Galeano.[5] 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 liebre* —dying a life. Fucked, refucked. 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."[6]

When I finished this first piece, I had it standing in front of me, and I still felt no connection between it and me, until I decided to nail it. And I put nails in it. I was putting in nail by nail, and then suddenly it was more me. A friend of mine was working next to me, and after I put in a few nails, he said, "That's enough!" But I thought, "No, it's not enough," and I put more nails in. Once I was finished, I felt I was saying exactly what I wanted to say. It was not

Unlived Lives

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 NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY GHOST, I COLONIZE YOU"

In the belly of the sculpture is the white man that lives in every colonized person. I try to make it clear that I don't 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. He is the one who is always repeating that we are white inside, even though we look Black or Indian outside. He is the one who doesn't let us be what we are, because he's eating our self-esteem and always trying to surface 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 live in people's stomachs. The white man is our spiritual parasite, and the snake represents the lies that he says through his mouth. We don't have our own voice, because things that come out of our own mouth are often him, what he thinks, and what he wants us to believe we are. We carry our own colonization inside of us. And that's part of being of mixed race, because we have both heritages. Thinking of a conversation I had with a man from the Dominican Republic, on the back of the sculpture I wrote, "'I am not a 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."[7]

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 off of me. But I don't know if I took them from me or from the people I came from, because in some way we are the same.

Every piece from this series is like a scream. It's emotional work. In the same way that I can talk to you about the issue, they

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I Colonize You

are talking to you. They are talking to you about their pain. That pain is in us. Maybe many of us don't want to see it, and don't want to face it, but it's our reality. It is horrendous to think how our cultural context has been disturbed by what colonization brought to us, by what we are but don't want to be.

The series entitled "We the Colonized Ones" are all sculptures. After seeing them, a friend of mine told me that I finally got my voice, and I like that. The way I think, the way I feel, is reproduced with fidelity in this work. I feel that they are alive, because there is a lot of life that I put into them. They represent millions of people, and if it's true that spirits exist, some of those millions of people might inhabit these sculptures. They are like a summoning of those ancestors I don't know, whose languages I don't speak.

My work is related to these issues and to the fact that I'm a woman and living here in New York. I'm working on another series that has to do with the right for my life, as a woman. It deals with abortion. I've 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 it is 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 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 more than the reality of the responsibility of what they already have. Because, after all, a child that is not yet born is not a responsibility of theirs; it is a responsibility of the womb. This is a very unfair society for women who want to do something about their lives other than to be paying forever the punishment of having a child that they didn't want.

There are three categories in the "We the Colonized" series: installations, ceramic pieces, and performances. The three of them are related, because the installations have ceramic pieces as part of them. I also do performances with my babies.[8]

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 zigzag through a line of yellow candles, yellow for Oshún (you always have to be respectful of everybody else).[9] So I use Oshún's candles. I place a ceramic cross

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 aroma, 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. As I approach the cross with my baby, 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. The moment I stop comes the line with flowers and blood, and I sing it with the cassette. I then put my baby as an offering to the cross, and walk away.

I am performing as myself, myself not only as an individual, but as a cultural and historical result.

Some artists worry about giving themselves to their work; they keep a little detachment between them and their work. But I think that the work and I are the same thing. That's why I don't think of myself as a political artist: I cannot talk about racism in South Africa, even though I know about it, and it's terrible. It's the same as when you hear that a woman was killed two blocks from your house and when you hear that your own mother was killed. I'm 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 see, what I feel, and what I'm going through, because colonization has not ended. I cannot talk about landscapes that I don't know, faces I've never seen. Yet I can talk to you with passion about Victoria, the maid in my house, who is almost like a mother for me and who has never been allowed to sit on our sofa.

When I do my pieces, nothing else is important but the personal conversation between me and my work. I don't care what other people think about it, because I know that probably they will not like it. For example, I'm now creating a cross that will be shown in a window near Columbus Circle. Definitely I'm thinking about what the audience is going to say, because the audience will be those who gather this October (1992) to celebrate the discovery of the ignorance of the Europeans. I call it many things—the invasion, the beginning of colonization. Many of my works were created when thinking about this fifth centennial. My purpose is to talk about what I think about colonization, and that's what my works are doing. They are going to stand by themselves and they

are going to say what is colonization for us, or what it is for them. My cross is going to hang in the window, and all those who parade by Broadway near Columbus Circle will see it. My pieces are going to talk about what they have to say with the people they are supposed to talk with.[10]

"THE INDIAN GIVER"

This one is the "Indian giver," who gave everything for nothing.[11] I use the phrase *Indian giver* because I know the connotation that it has in this society, of an Indian who gives something 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 the *batata*, the *yam*, the passion fruit, the *mango*, the *guayaba*, I gave much more. Everything my life produced. The buffalo, the *wikuña*, 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 the tools for you to develop; you took my life."

"THE IMPALED"

This piece depicts a human 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 this is offensive. This being has three mouths that are screaming. Its own mouth cannot scream, because the cross is going through it. On its back is a quote from Fray Valverde, who came with Francisco Pizarro and delivered it to the Inca Atahuallpa (the king). It reads, "If you refuse, know that you will be constrained with war, fire, and the sword, and all your idols shall be overthrown and we shall oblige you by the sword to abandon your false religion and to receive willy-nilly our Catholic faith and pay tribute to our emperor and deliver him your kingdom. If you seek . . . to resist, you may rest assured that God will suffer that you and all your Indians shall be destroyed by our arms. . . ."[12]

The Indian Giver

The Impaled

"THE HUMAN MULE"

In Peru, where probably 80 percent of the population is predominantly mixed Native American, the word *Indian* is used only in a derogatory way. As Peruvians, we prefer to call ourselves *Trigueño, Mestizo, Moreno,* or *Blanco*.[13] Anything except the truth. I think that our definitions must be reviewed and erased, if necessary.

You know where the word *mulatto* comes from? A mule.[14] So this sculpture is saying, "Don't call me *mulatto*, I'm not a human mule." I don't think that it's 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 mulatto. The main implication of the comparison with animals is that one is noble and beautiful and the other is just a resource, a beast. It's a very negative way to call people. The sculpture has the mask of a mule, and it's trying to pull it off. It's 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's as if he were separate pieces put together.

"THE NOT BORN"

"BABY I"

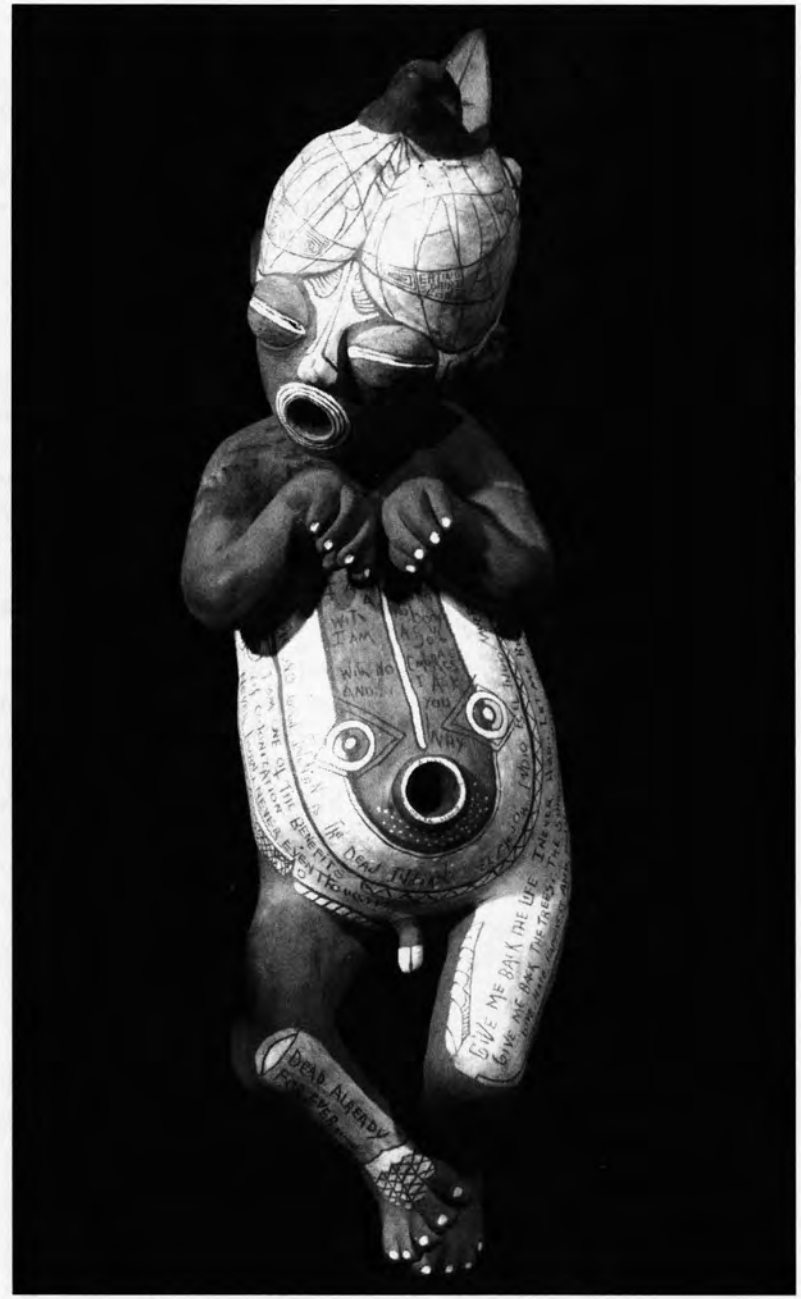
The babies that I make are for my performances. This is the first baby that I made. I wrote on his head, "I was not born, I was not even conceived. My parents never could meet at all. My father died in a mine, working from day to day with no rest. My mother was raped by one of them, then killed herself." 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?"

"BABY III"

This sculpture says, "I am a benefit of Western culture." Some birds, when they cannot fit all their babies in the nest, let one die. That chick, like the others, is always waiting for its food with its beak open, but food never comes through. It swallows air and dies

THE HUMAN MULE

Baby I



Baby III

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.

"MALINCHE'S CURSE"

Malinche was the lover of Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico. Because she helped Cortés and his invaders, she is regarded by many in Mexico as a traitor to her people.[15] When a person shows contempt for her or his racial background, some Mexicans call this "Malinche's Curse," because they follow Malinche's steps by betraying their own kind. This piece refers not to the woman Malinche, because everyone has the right to love whom they want, but to the concept of betrayal she embodies.

In some Andean communities in Peru, when an adult brings irrevocable shame to their family, the mother might curse them. She does this by holding her breasts in her hands, squeezing them, and saying, "Cursed be the day when I gave you life through the milk of my breasts." In this piece, Malinche is our mother and has cursed us for generations with self-hatred, because we betray ourselves daily by wanting to be what we are not. In the sculpture, Malinche has the face of a bitch, because she is considered as such. She's licking a white liquid on her face, which symbolizes the whiteness of the white man and the whiteness of his sperm.

"ALIENAMEX: HISPANIC CULTURE. MADE IN MEXICO"

"Dream, because reality is too awful to face, too overwhelming to challenge. ESCAPE."

This cupid represents what alienation is for us: a tool of colonization. In Mexico the governmental offices end in the suffix *Mex*. Petroleum companies are called "Petromex." Mexican popular literature are comic books that deal with love, sex, and the mafia. In the installation room where cupid will hang,

Malinche's Curse

Alienamex

a love ballad will be played, those that Mexico exports to Latin America and Spain. There will be two TVs running soap operas from Mexico. Comics, ballads, and TV: Those are the three most important instruments of alienation, or colonization, which is the same. They make us think about things that are not important, a reality that doesn't exist. They keep us from understanding our own realities. Today's media share with religion the task of taming human beings and taking from us any possible desire to question or demand. This cupid is a dead cupid. I wrote on it, "I don't worry about my misery, my discrimination, or poverty. A *guapo y rico*, a handsome and rich man will take me out someday as in the soap operas. Someday, someday, I will be rich, I will be beautiful, I will be white. We the colonized ones. We blond, blue eyes, tall, and wealthy. We TV dreamers, trained to be content to be what we are not, what we will never be." Only when we acknowledge how deeply colonization is internalized in our communities and how much the media reinforce this situation will we then be able to take control of our destiny. In the meantime, in its hands our blindness rests.

"SYNCRETISM"

This virgin is about syncretism, about the many deities living in the same form. The Spaniards imposed their virgin, but for the peoples I come from, the virgin was the mother earth. That's why her belly is ceramic. I wrote on her, "You are not virgin, neither Mary, you are the fertile land, the ocean, our beginning and our end." Because she was many things. In the big procession for *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) in Corpus Cristi, Cuzco State, when the people carry one figure after the other, what they really carry are their old gods and goddesses. My mother met a man there who was preparing one of the virgins to leave the church. She asked him which virgin this was, and he told her, "It's the Virgin *de la Candelaria*, but it's not really the Virgin *de la Candelaria*, it's our female deity for potatoes." He told her that the people of this area see her as the indigenous deity, and no one knows this but them. My mother then wanted to know about the other figures, and he said, "You should be happy knowing that, but I'm not going to tell you anything else." When the figure left the church, there were potatoes underneath her, and you can see them in photographs. They were the offerings that people left to their deity, not to the virgin.

"THE MAID"

She has no name. I created her for a performance that deals with the maids in Latin American houses who sit on the floor while the landlords sit on the sofa to watch TV. In the performance I dress like her, but then I put a wig on, I cover my shirt with a black sweater, and I wear high heels. While the music plays I start taking off the Western clothes until my braids come out to resemble the sculpture. Around her face reads, "We the colonized ones. I'm afraid about my life. What did you give me, Europe? 1992 let's celebrate our genocide." She doesn't look exactly like me but has similar features, as if she were a sister.

"SELF PORTRAIT"

This is my self portrait. I wrote on it, "If I do not criticize, if I do not burn a flag, if I do not have an abortion, I can consider

Syncretism

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."

The Maid

Self Portrait

Kukuli holding Baby I

NOTES

1. Interviews conducted in June 1992 by Ivor Miller. The author thanks Jill Cutler for her help in organizing this material. All photographs were taken by David Dilley.
2. Kukuli was born on 29 November 1962.
3. Quechua is a language native to Peru.
4. For examples of Kukuli's drawings at age ten, see Alfonsina Barrionuevo, *El Muki y otros personajes fabulosos* (Lima, Peru: 1974). Her mother is the author.

5. Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano wrote *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review, 1973).

6. Eduardo Galeano, *El libro de los abrazos* (Montevideo: Ediciones de Chanchito, 1989), 59 [translated by Kukuli]. The phrase *Corriendo la liebre* alludes to those who are "dying a life," that is, working with no security and for a subsistence income. *Corriendo* = running; *liebre* = a type of wild hare that runs in a high-speed zigzag. The phrase is literally translated as "chasing a wild hare which can never be caught."

7. Excerpted from Kukuli Velarde, "Whiteness in Color: A Short Essay about Colonization," *Estudios Latinoamericanos* 2:1 (Hunter College) (Spring 1991): 56–60.

8. "We the Colonized" was exhibited at the Hunter College Art Galleries and the State University of New York, New Paltz, in 1992; the Carla Stellweg Gallery (New York); the Mary & Leigh Block Gallery at Northwestern University (Illinois) in 1993; and in the Bronx Museum in 1994. See *Remerica ! America: 1492–1992* (New York: Hunter College, 1992); "Kukuli Velarde at Carla Stellweg," *Art In America* (March 1994): 103–104; Carla Stellweg, *Uncommon Ground: 23 Latin American Artists* (New Paltz, NY: SUNY College Art Gallery, 1992), 19, 35; Melinda Henneberger, "Redefining 'Immigrant' in the Bronx," *New York Times*, 20 February 1994. For more recent work, see Ana Indich, "Kukuli Velarde: Six Works," *Sulfur* 36 (Eastern Michigan University) (Spring 1995): 172–77; *Dialogues de Paiz/Dialogues of Peace* (Association Française d'Action Artistique, 1995), 146–47.

9. Oshún is a riverine deity associated with love, sweetness, and pregnancy. Worship of Oshún was brought by enslaved Yoruba people of Nigeria to Cuba and Brazil, where she is still popular. Recent Cuban immigration, as well as the initiation of U.S. citizens in Cuba, has brought Oshún worship to the United States.

10. This installation, entitled "Underdevelopment in Progress: 500 Years," was created by Kukuli Velarde and Ana Ferrer. It was banned by the New York Institute of Technology the day before its opening at Columbus Circle in Manhattan. The administration told Kukuli her work was "too political." See Sonia Reyes, "College in Chris-Cross: Dean Bans Art with Genocide Theme," *Daily News* (Urban Gazette), 8 October 1992; and Robert Atkins, "Omisión Quinto Centenario" *Village Voice* (Art Section), 3 November 1992.

11. This title is inspired in part by Jack Weatherford, *Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1988).

12. "The Discourse Delivered by Fray Vicente de Valverde before Atahuallpa," in Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru Part Two*, trans. Harold V. Livermore (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 680–81.

13. *Trigueño* (wheat brown); *mestizo* (mixed-blood); *moreno* (dark brown); *blanco* (white). Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 123, 163, 268.

14. Here Kukuli refers to a popular usage of the term *mulato* found throughout the Caribbean and the Americas, originating from a tendency among some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century "Portuguese writers to equate *mulato* with only the progeny of a she-donkey and a male horse (rather than the much more common product of the union of the mare and with the male donkey)." Scholar Jack Forbes writes that "the first definite use of the form *mulato* as applied to humans seems to occur in a proclamation of the king of Portugal dated 1528." Forbes traces the origin of *mulato* to the Arabic *muwallad*, meaning "hybrid" or "half-caste." He also shows that in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Peru, *mulato* usually referred to children of Africans and Native Americans, with *mestizo* used for children of Spaniards and Native Americans. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans*.

15. Doña Marina/ Malintzin/ La Malinche was the translator for Cortés during his negotiations with Montezuma. She was bilingual in Nahuatl and Chontal Mayan. Frances E. Karttunen, *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 2.

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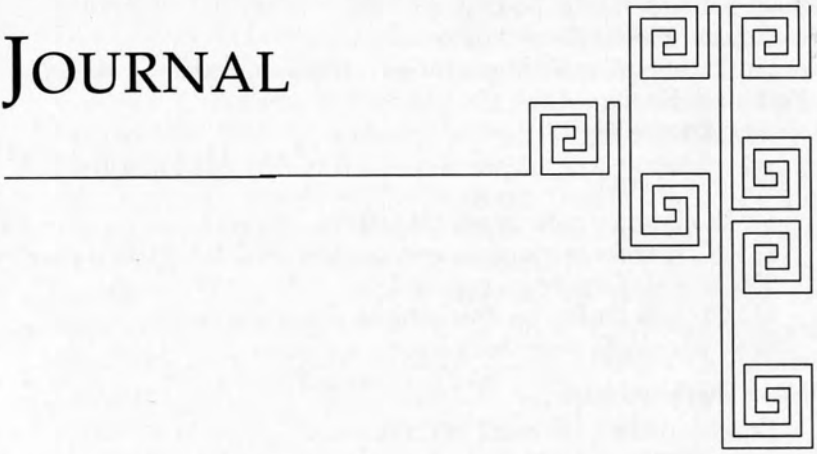

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