ACOLONIAL THINGS

In 2015, the city fathers of Chiclayo, a city on the North Coast, authorized construction of a new public park or "open-air museum," the Paseo Yortuque, filled with murals and sculptures inspired by Moche art.[1] The Paseo is intended to be playful. Huge sculptures,[2] raised on elevated plinths shaped like huacas, mix realistic and fantastic elements in their depictions of Moche deities and lords. But the writer Walther Maradiegue finds the playfulness heavy-handed and the message oppressive and dispiriting.[3] Walking through the Paseo, he encounters "muscular monsters, heavily veined thighs, terrifying creatures, hypermasculine gods," as well as overbearing male rulers who tower over him, carrying scepters, staffs of office, military arms. Ultimately, he deems this intrusion into public space, which juxtaposes images from the "archaeological boom" of the last decades with the biopolitics of Peruvian neoliberalism, to be an "ambrosial phallic fantasy" whose pleasures are definitely not for him (Maradiegue 2020).

These kinds of weaponized versions of the Indigenous Peruvian past—hypermasculine and heteropatriarchal, a fitting antecedent to the authoritarian modern state[4]—are what provoked the subversive response by the queer artist Giuseppe Campuzano that was introduced in chapter 1. His bright pink Moche lord, caught in an act of gay sex, is the first in a series of iconic males from Peruvian history that Campuzano burlesqued in his Museo Travesti del Perú—a mobile museum that "travestied" the gender politics on display in public spaces like the Paseo Yortuque.

Campuzano's irreverent pastiche is only distantly related to the Indigenous past, which he accesses through quotes and illustrations from scholarly publications written by other men. In contrast, the Peruvian ceramic artist Kukulí Velarde jolts us with a decolonizing energy that comes directly from the source. Her work puts her in an intimate bodily dialogue with the ancient pots, cutting through the miasma of copies that hypnotizes

Campuzano and engaging her—and her audience—in her own irreverent form of "playing with things."

In a body of work called *Plunder Me, Baby*, Velarde created an installation of ceramic pieces that she describes as "reminiscent of pre-Columbian art on shelves. They are awakened and they are aware of being watched."[5] Stylistically and formally, these brilliant works of art pay homage to the ancient Indigenous artists who came before her—while also possessing a raunchy, wicked sense of humor about contemporary life. Each sculpture is modeled after a specific work of ancient art, such as the Mama Cocha (fig. 6.1), but the artist has given them all her own expressive face, twisted into expressions of defiance, rebelliousness, or "attitude." Her ceramics often show us their vulvas, just like the ancient pots[6]—but with a cheeky insouciance that shows they know this kind of behavior is no longer encouraged.

The humor in these figures is a response to the liveliness of the originals, which are too often treated with a solemnity that belies their emotional range. But Velarde is out to make new mischief, too, as in the pots' mocking labels, which mix racist and misogynist slurs in Quechua, Spanish, and English. "Each is titled with pejorative names," she explains, "the same ones . . . you and I have endured because of our indigenous ancestry." The labels accuse the pots of being insubordinate, as though they were servants, and of sexual promiscuity; the title for her version of the cocha, for example, includes the words "Chuchumeca" and "La Ofrecida" ("Indigenous whore" and "loose woman").[7] Another figurine based on a Moche original, the "Cholitranca," shows a monstrous woman convulsed with rage; the title includes a chillingly racist put-down that is all too common in Andean Spanish: "Se le salió el indio" (The Indian in her came out).[8]

Velarde explains the self-portraits by saying that she "had to become each of them to reclaim ownership and to take the name calling with defiance. They show in their attitudes and gestures the rebellious spirit that should never abandon our hearts." This claim to righteous anger is reminiscent of the transfeminist author Susan Stryker (2006), and even more so of the great Chicanx writer Gloria Anzaldúa (2007). Both of these authors responded to sexism and transphobia by embracing an image of monstrosity: Stryker, by comparing her surgically altered body to Frankenstein's monster; Anzaldúa, by adopting the fearsome Aztec goddess Coatlicue as her own—she of the serpent head, necklace of human hearts, skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet (2007, 21).

Anzaldúa's writings sparked an outpouring of inventive reimaginings of Coatlicue by queer, Chicanx, and Latinx artists: tattoos, murals, and online graphics in which the goddess is constantly morphing into new forms.

This is one of my favorite examples of how to play with things—and how to play with Indigenous history—by artists who are defiantly eager to "let out the Indian" in their work.

"Playing with Things" is what happened in my interactions with the Mama Cocha, when I grappled with her unwieldy form.[9] It is also what happened in a photograph taken at a Philadelphia art gallery in 2018, where a young man in a hoodie holds a big ceramic baby in his arms, looking every bit as afraid of dropping her as I was when I held the ancient cocha.[10] The baby is a sculpture by Velarde, and this reaction is exactly what she was hoping for. In staging this showing of her most recent work, Velarde refused to put her clay sculptures on pedestals; instead, they were carried around the gallery by "carers" who handed them to unsuspecting visitors to hold. The fragile clay babies of this project, *A Mi Vida*, respond fully to the sensorial and relational potential of the ancient pots. By unexpectedly putting fragile clay babies in peoples' arms, Velarde seeks to startle us into a physical awareness of our responsibility to care for every vulnerable young body, including those of migrant children detained at the border. As with *Plunder Me, Baby*, the sculptures are closely modeled after ancient Peruvian works of art by Moche and other artists, but in this new series, the faces of the clay children are not modeled on Velarde's own face, but on that of her daughter, Vida.

This difference between looking at a sculpture on a pedestal and holding it in your arms reminds me of the distinction that Donald Winnicott (2012) made between fantasying and playing. In fantasying, he says, we remain isolated in an interior world that absorbs our energy and distracts us from taking action. Playing is different: it creates a shared space in which we interact with something or someone else. The presence of another actor makes playing unpredictable, and takes it somewhat out of our control—like a ceramic that could fall to the floor, depending on how we hold it. He also says that play happens in real time, whereas fantasying is trapped within the endlessly repeating temporality of dissociation. What happens in fantasying, says Winnicott (2012, 27), "does not happen at all."

This is an apt description of what happens when we look at art on a pedestal or under glass: we are invited to imagine and admire, but not to play. I love going to the Art Institute of Chicago, where incredible works of art from every continent are displayed in cool, clean, spacious galleries filled with light, and the Moche pots occupy a place of honor among other works from the Indigenous Americas (in a hall that is no longer derogatorily titled "Primitive Art"). Still, Winnicott's description rings true: the artifacts are immobilized, action is suppressed, and time "does not happen at all."

When I took a group of freshman college students to the museum, they were disappointed by the Moche art. They found the rows of incommunicative objects to be nothing like the ones I had lectured about, and I had to agree with them. Isolated from one another and from us, accessible only through a distanced visuality, the pots are unable to feed, intoxicate, or mock us.

These kinds of experiences make it easy to see why viewers loved the museum scene in the movie *Black Panther* where Killmonger breaks the glass and grabs an African war hammer, which shakes off its dust and suddenly glows with life. This is what Velarde wants to do with her ceramics: to free ancient Indigenous works of art from the constraints of the museum and give them back their ability to play. Unlike what happens in the movie, though, Velarde doesn't steal the art or poison the curator. Instead, she does what an artist does: she makes new things that call the ancient pots back to life in new form.

Velarde's sculptures and the proliferation of twenty-first-century Coatlicues show us just how lively the ancient Indigenous past is today. As the British archaeologist Gavin Lucas says, the idea that the past is "closed and therefore determined . . . is simply wrong": it is not closed at all, but "open to the present" (2004, 55–56).[11] When I visit the pots in the museum, I no longer see them as the students did, small and mute. Instead, I think of them as more like Sun Ra in the 1974 movie *Space Is the Place*. Dressed in futuristic garb from ancient Egypt, Sun Ra announces to a group of skeptical Black teens that he is "a present sent to you by your ancestors" (Kenny 2018). This progenitor of Afrofuturism called himself "a dream that the black man dreams long ago"—a potential that is latent in the pots. They, too, can appear as a dream from an acolonial past, still present with us in our own colonial/decolonizing times.

I call them "acolonial things" because to call them anything else would be to diminish them. Their resistant vitality resembles that of other colonized Indigenous bodies, constrained and diminished but still alive; but the words "colonized" and "decolonial" fit them badly. They were made centuries before European settler colonialism, and in their mineral longevity, they may well be here long after us, in a future when coloniality no longer exists. What they offer us is their material presence, as things that are in, but not entirely of, our own time. Decoloniality itself is still part of the thing it struggles against; the pots let us dream about becoming something else.