

MoMA

The Survival of Afro-Indigenous Symbols: A Story of Secrets

How have symbols embodied the resilience of Afro-Indigenous cultures for centuries?

Margarita Lila Rosa
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The title of the newly opened Gallery 208: *500 Years* at MoMA refers to the span between the year 1492—when Christopher Columbus and his three Spanish ships happened upon the shores of Caribbean islands—and 1992, when K'iche' Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The gallery gathers work by a generation of artists confronting legacies of colonialism in the Americas between the 1990s and 2010s. Their creative interventions embody a sentiment that artist Jaune Quick-to-see-Smith has used to describe her practice: “It’s about networking, trading intellectual ideas, bringing people together, being a catalyst to make things happen.”¹

Recently, we asked scholar and curator Dr. Margarita Lila Rosa to reflect on the hemispheric impact of Columbus’s arrival and consider how, centuries later, artists responded to its aftermath.

—Oriana E. Gonzales, Associate Educator, Department of Learning and Engagement, and DaeQuan Collier, Content Producer, Creative Team

I am currently visiting the island of Borikén, also known as Puerto Rico. At the top of a hill in the rainforest, I swing on a *hamaka*, a hammock, while smoking sacred tobacco. I can hear the *coquí*s all around me, the small frogs singing *coquí, coquí, coquí, coquí*. It is not a coincidence that I, an Afro-Indigenous woman, am here, taking part in these native practices. Native Taino rituals, words, and material history have survived within me.

I was born in a region the Taino people of the Caribbean called Cybao, the north of the Dominican Republic. I would not be here, writing this, were it not for the Tainos. I would not be here without my African ancestors, either. They were enslaved in these islands by my European ancestors. And somehow, after all the pillaging, destruction, and enslavement, we have survived.

Black and Indigenous histories in the Americas are intimately connected. After all, the arrival of Columbus had a hemispheric impact: Europeans exploited the so-called New World for mineral and agricultural wealth, and exploited Black and Indigenous people for all they had. Black and

Indigenous histories are tethered to each other, tied together by a legacy of premature death and miraculous survival.

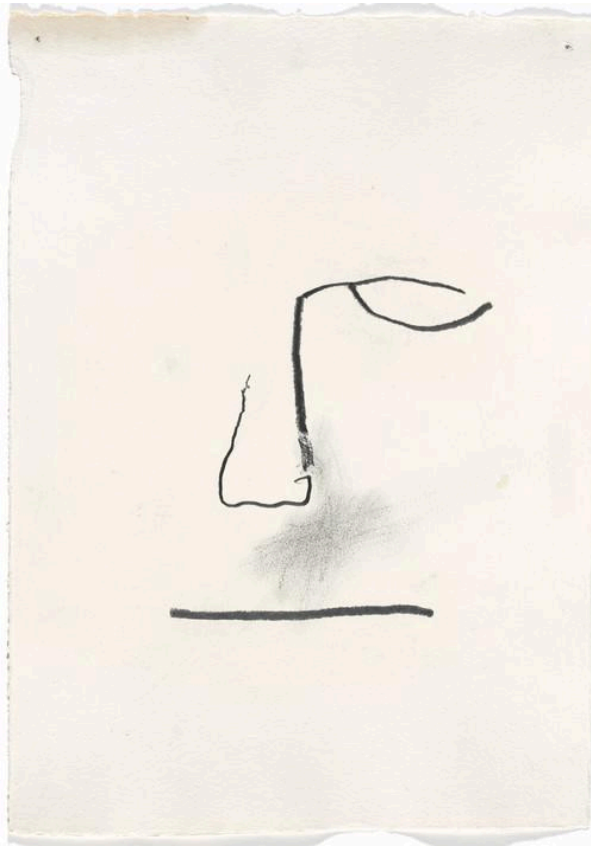
In the Caribbean, Indigenous lineages survived as natives mixed with the maroons, the Black self-emancipated rebels. The maroons fled far from Spanish settlements and towns into the mountains, mixing with the Indigenous communities. Yet, Black communities are often represented as though it were impossible for us to carry Indigenous lineages and traditions. As I consider *500 Years*, and as I consider my own body as the result of three peoples meeting in the eye of the hurricane, I must tether their histories once again.

Belkis Ayón, the Afro-Cuban artist who opened the realm of fantasy and Afro-spirituality with her signature woodcuts and collagraphs, gestures to the role of secrecy in cultural preservation. Scaled figures camouflage into negative space across Ayón's body of work. Her *Resurrection*, from 1998, a grayscale collagraph on nine sheets of paper, depicts a group of black-and-white subjects emerging from a pitch-black opening. Whether they are emerging from a mountain, a cave, or from inside a river, they have emerged from obscurity into visibility. Ayón's *Resurrection* evokes one of the first true Afro-Indigenous concepts: the evolution of the Arawak word *símara*.

Símara, which means both "arrow" and "a rebel," is the origin of "maroon." If one considers how arrows were related to early Indigenous rebellion, the duality of the word makes more sense. The Arawak-language *símara* became the Spanish word *cimarrón*, which later became the English word "maroon." Just like a Black self-emancipated rebel or an Indigenous warrior, the arrow camouflages into the mountain, darting toward its target at an unexpected moment. The Indigenous *símara* came to define the first 400 years of Black self-emancipation in the Americas. In Ayón's *Resurrection*, the camouflaged maroon emerges from opacity, but not enough to be recognizable.



Belkis Ayón. *Resurrection (Resurrección)*. 1998. Collagraph on nine sheets of paper



Jimmie Durham. *Caliban Codex*. 1992. Pencil on 14 sheets of paper

The Abakúa, an Afro-diasporic spiritual society for men in Cuba, is all about opacity. In folklore, Sikán, the only woman to ever have been initiated into the Abakúa community, was put to death for revealing the community's secrets. Sikán is a central figure in Ayón's works, represented in a myriad of forms. Sometimes she appears as a purely white figure, sometimes a scaled black-and-white one, and sometimes a pitch-black one. To reject representation is to safeguard a community's secrets.

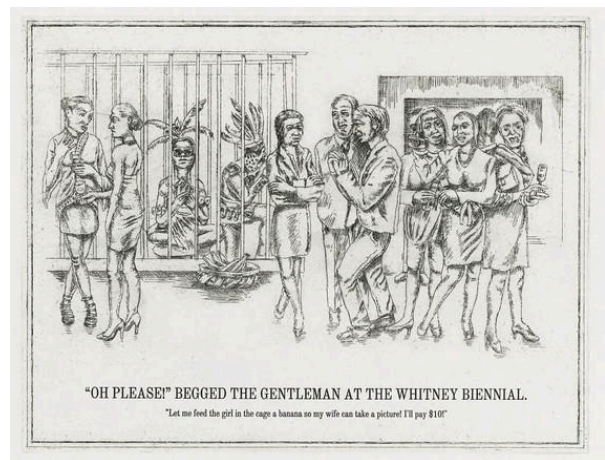
Native people are good at safeguarding secrets. Their survival was dependent on syncretic traditions—traditions that hid native beliefs behind European symbols. Yet, the image and history of the native person is often taken up by those who are mere observers. This leads me to the question: Who gets to represent the native? Is it Jimmie Durham, with his *Caliban Codex* (1992), a part of his controversial native oeuvre? How many simple traces of graphite does it take to create a codex, a history of a people? Who gets to draw—and therefore define—the Caliban's image?

500 Years reflects necessary debates and conversations around Indigeneity. With the collage series "NTV," or Native Television, Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie touches on those discussions by depicting images that she wanted to see on television. Framed by images of a Philco TV set, we see a native woman dressed in regalia, a woman resting over native textiles, and native people exiting high-speed trains, dressed in traditional wear. Tsinhnahjinnie's collage series represents native people as we might want to see ourselves, rather than what an anthropologist, a photographer, or a travel writer might want to see.

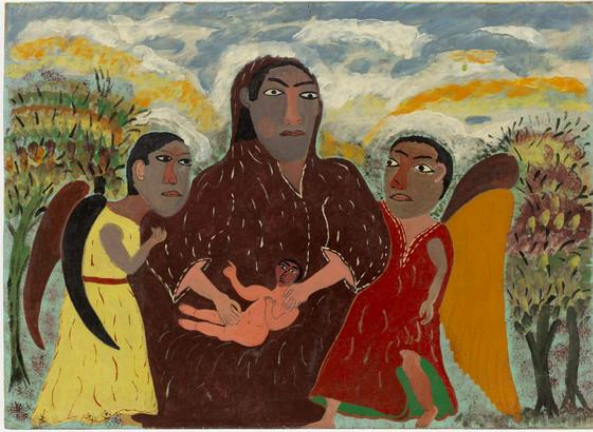


Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie. *Return of the Native*. 1990. Collage of gelatin silver prints, printed and assembled 2023

In Coco Fusco's *The Undiscovered Amerindians* (2012), the past and present are conjoined to explore the perpetual exploitation of Indigenous and Black people. "Let me feed the girl in the cage a banana so my wife can take a picture! I'll pay \$10," says a white man, seeking to bribe the native museum staff, in an engraving that fictionalizes the Whitney Biennial and reflects Fusco's street performance installation in which individuals in supposedly Indigenous garments were placed in a cage. This performance mirrors the actual caging and exhibition of a Black young man named Ota Benga at the Bronx Zoo in 1902. Sequestered from Central Africa and forced to live in the cage with orangutans in the zoo, Benga spent his days being watched by thousands of spectators; he was either in tragically silent or in open rebellion, threatening to strike, bite, and kick the onlookers.



Coco Fusco. *The Undiscovered Amerindians*. 2012. Intaglio on 10 sheets of paper



Hector Hyppolite. *The Congo Queen*. by 1946. Enamel, oil, and pencil on cardboard

500 Years reflects the concerns brought about by a group of Indigenous artists. Yet Indigenous history, which is tethered to Black history, remains obscure. Perhaps the opacity of Afro-Indigenous symbols is how we safeguard our secrets. The Haitian artist Hector Hyppolite instrumentalized both African and Christian symbology in his painting *The Congo Queen* (1946) (featured at the top of this page) to render a Black woman in the likeness of the Virgin Mary. She holds her child over her chest as she is led by two angels. Yet this figure is actually Erzulie Dantor, the Vodoun deity who is often depicted through Christian symbology. The concealment of secrets under Christian art-historical motifs becomes an Afro-Indigenous practice of preservation, or protecting. Just as in Abdias Nascimento's *Facade of a Temple* (1972), African symbols and motifs are meant to be clearly understood, just not by everyone.



Abdias Nascimento. *Facade of a Temple*. 1972. Acrylic on canvas

A selection of the works discussed in this article are currently on view in Gallery 208: *500 Years* at MoMA.

Tresp, Lauren. "New Mexico Women: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith," *Southwest Contemporary*, June 26, 2019.

<https://southwestcontemporary.com/new-mexico-women-jaune-quick-to-see-smith/>.