DECOLONIAL SCULPTURE: UNPACKING SUGAR

Joe Joe Orangias

In this report, I discuss how contemporary sculpture might be developed to challenge the colonial project. Building on critical scholarship, I first introduce the practices of colonisation and decolonisation. Then, focusing on one of the most commonly consumed foods today, I describe the relationship between sugar and colonialism. Contemporary artists like Kara Walker use sugar as a sculptural material to challenge colonial practice as it exists in the production and substance of sugar. After establishing a critique of sugar, I then visually analyse the mass-produced sugar lollies called Pascall Eskimos, which misrepresent indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Proposing a method of removing such colonial misrepresentations from visual culture and transforming them into critical sculptures, I outline my method of realising what I call 'decolonial sculpture.' Ultimately, I argue that contemporary sculpture produces knowledge about, deconstructs, and transforms colonial practice, advocating for a more equitable visual culture.

PROCEEDING THROUGH A COLONISING WORLD

The history of colonisation shows how non-indigenous peoples have systematically imposed political power and privilege on indigenous peoples around the globe. Since the initial colonial voyages, settlers and their descendants have developed practices to cement themselves and their ideologies in distant lands. This process has been overtly manifested through warfare, the introduction of infectious diseases and the dislocation of communities. These and numerous other practices of colonisation have and continue to disenfranchise indigenous peoples from their culture, knowledge, lands, resources and tribal practices.[1] Non-indigenous people continue to profit from the dominance of historical and present-day practices of colonisation.

Indigenous scholars have developed the project of decolonisation, involving action and theory that contributes to realising indigenous rights. These scholars have called for action that will more thoroughly realise this project. According to Māori educationalist Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "The intellectual project of decolonising has set out ways to proceed through a colonising world. It needs a radical compassion that reaches out, that seeks collaboration, and that is open to possibilities that can only be imagined as other things fall into place."[2] Thus, while the decolonisation project has a strong foundation, it needs practitioners who will take ongoing action. This must include non-indigenous people acknowledging and taking responsibility for the inequities inflicted by their ancestors, and deconstructing ongoing prosperity gained through colonial practices. This also includes addressing revived and new practices of colonisation.[3]

Visual culture has been used to marginalise, objectify and stereotype indigenous peoples for the purpose of entertainment and profit. This exists in numerous forms. For example, colonial misrepresentations, made by and for non-indigenous people, depict indigenous peoples as exotic, passive and devoid of personal markers. Such objectifications display unjust power relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, and are found anywhere from professional sports arenas to candy shops to museums. Although scholars are increasingly generating awareness of colonial practice within visual culture and the resulting oppressive and inequitable effects, the practice of decolonising visual culture is an extremely complex task that calls for many different approaches.

Communities are taking action against colonial misrepresentations. In Turtle Island, also known as North America (I use indigenous place names where I know of them), some professional sports teams misrepresent indigenous

peoples in their branding. In 2012, in reaction to the Cleveland Indians baseball team logo, fans started a practice called 'de-Chiefing,' removing the misappropriated Chief Wahoo graphic from their fan gear.[4] In 2001 in Denmark, the Lego company sold bionicle toys that misappropriated Māori imagery and language. Lawyer Maui Solomon filed a complaint, adding, "We're trying to put the record straight about the culture and here's a major international company that's out there projecting a different perception and image."[5] As a result, Lego stopped production of these bionicles, and Māori and Lego discussed working together to draft a code of conduct relating to the use of traditional knowledge.[6] As Susan Ballard and Pamela McKinlay outline in their text *Art At Risk*, the widespread use of such branding reveals that colonial practice is deeply embedded in Western copyright law.[7] While communities are tackling inequities in visual culture, it is vital that specialists in this field, including artists, designers and scholars, continue to develop responsive actions of their own.

ADDRESSING COLONIAL HISTORY

The history of sugar production provides a powerful lens with which to examine colonialism. Although sugar is used on every human inhabited landmass on the globe, it originated in the Pacific Islands. Several islands record a variation of a story about the first woman and man sprouting from sugarcane, a couple who founded the human race through their offspring.[8] Sugarcane was first domesticated as a crop in New Guinea and possibly Indonesia. The plant later reached India and China, where Buddhists commended its healing properties. From the sixth to tenth centuries, travelers spread the plant around Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Until the advent of sugar in the twelth to fifteenth centuries, Europeans used honey to sweeten drinks, foods and medicines. Sugarcane was then transplanted to Cēmānāhuac (the Americas) at the onset of the European colonial era in the late sixteenth century.[9]

Requiring a constant water supply and a warm climate, today sugar is mainly produced in Brazil, India, China, Thailand, Pakistan and Mexico. Approximately 1.83 billion tons of sugar was produced in 2012. From originating in the South Pacific, sugar now spans the globe and sugarcane has become the world's largest crop by production quantity.[10]

Colonialists intervened in First Nations around the globe to enslave cheap labourers and steal fertile lands. For example, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the production of sugar and molasses on plantations in the Caribbean was facilitated by the transatlantic slave trade. These products were sent to Europe and New England, and sold or used to manufacture goods such as rum, which were in turn shipped to West Africa and bartered for slaves. The slaves were taken to the Caribbean and Turtle Island, where they were forced to work on plantations.[11] As part of the movement to abolish slavery in the nineteenth century, the British enacted a forced labour legal system that replaced the slave trade with contracted and low-waged 'indentured labourers' from India and Southeast Asia.[12] Similarly, between 1863 and 1900, the British colonies of Queensland and New South Wales recruited over 60,000 Pacific Islanders to work on sugar plantations in Australia.[13] Under the Pacific Island Labourers Act (1901), the nearly 10,000 labourers remaining in 1901 were mandatorily deported.

More recently, in 2006, companies and politicians in Cambodia evicted people from their land for sugar production. This caused severe economic and social hardship for hundreds of families, who filed lawsuits with various bodies including the Cambodian courts, the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the US government.[14] Such practices generate settler profit by enslaving and underpaying workers, dislocating communities, and stealing indigenous lands and altering their use.

Sugar is one of the most commonly consumed foods, and is added to innumerable products from candy to flavoured water to yogurt. According to the 2005-10 US National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, the average American eats approximately 98.6 grams of sugar a day, while the recommended intake is between 29.6 and 44.4 grams depending on body type.[15] A study by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention showed that added sugar causes higher risks of cavities, obesity, diabetes, dyslipidemia, hypertension and cardiovascular disease.[16] Furthermore, sugarcane workers are highly susceptible to these and other diseases (including chronic kidney

diseases) due to harsh working conditions, long hours, low wages and insufficient access to clean water, healthcare, housing, and nutrition.[17] [18] The production and consumption of sugar has serious social and health implications that have a major impact on the lives and wellbeing of people around the world.

In the current global capitalist economy, a handful of corporations enjoy a monopoly over the refining and distribution of sugar. One major player is American Sugar Refining Inc., which markets sugar under the names Domino, C&H, Florida Crystals and Redpath. In 1856, this corporation erected the Domino Sugar Refinery building on land belonging to the Lenape Nation in Brooklyn, and by 1870 this refinery was processing more than half of the sugar used in the conterminous US.[19] In 2000, this refinery was the site of one of New York City's (NYC) longest labour strikes, with over 250 workers protesting working conditions for 12 months.[20] In 2004, the refinery was shut down, with its 225 employees losing their jobs, and the site is set to be converted into high-rise towers containing apartments, offices and retail spaces. While Domino sugar is no longer refined in Brooklyn, the removal of the sugar works has accelerated the gentrification process in the area and generated further inequities for the local community.

Kara Walker's installation *A Subtlety*, set up in the former Domino Sugar Refinery, not only demonstrates the value of sugar in the colonial project, but also, more substantially, exemplifies its value to the decolonial project[21] Walker's monumental nude African-American female sphinx sculpture is made almost entirely of massive sugar blocks and surrounded by molasses-covered child-sized figures holding unrefined sugar baskets. Creative Capital, a NYC non-profit that provides grants and advisory assistance to artists, commissioned the installation, while Domino donated the 40 tons of sugar used. The installation was on view from May to July 2014 and was accompanied by the statement: "*A Subtlety,* or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant." *A Subtlety* refers to elaborate treats called sugar subtleties that European royalty ate between meals in medieval times.[22] Walker's representation is a monumental 'subtlety' that reflects on the deep contradictions inherent in sugar.

As we have seen, sugar production continues to generate significant inequities amongst indigenous and non-indigenous communities around the globe. *A Subtlety* acknowledges and comments on these inequities. Its site-specific character, in the soon-to-be demolished historic refinery, embodies the element of destruction. Perhaps the temporality of this sculpture and its immediate environment is a metaphor for the destruction wrought by ongoing colonial practice – highlighting something that is over-practiced, over-consumed, and therefore over-tolerated today.[23] While the pleasure of viewing this sculpture was short-lived, its message will continue in the minds and practices of viewers for a long time to come.

COLONIAL MOULDS IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CULTURE

> *In my memories, those oversized lollipops are metaphors for the contradictory meanings of sugar as it transformed the world.*
>
> Elizabeth Abbott [24]

I turn now to a sugary treat, available in Aotearoa (New Zealand) called "Eskimos", made by Pascall, as a means of analysing colonialism within contemporary visual culture. This confectionery embodies unjust and misperceived relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Many contest the term 'Eskimo' as a colonial category in itself. Regardless of this, these mass-produced lollies not only unify a diverse group of peoples into a single stereotypical candy mould, but also normalise the action of eating objectified peoples in a confection made of animal carcasses (see below). These lollies explicitly perpetuate colonial practice.

The term Eskimo refers to a large group of indigenous peoples from the Arctic, including those from Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) and Alaska, Canada, and Siberia. This group comprises peoples who identify as Inuit, Iñupiat,

Figure 1. Cadbury's Pascall Eskimos. Photograph by the author.

Inuvialuit, Kalaallit, Nunavut, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut, Yupik, Alutiiq, Central Alaskan Yup'ik and Siberian Yupik. The term Eskimo has two etymologies. The first is derived from an Ojibwa (a First Nation living further south in Turtle Island) word meaning "to net snowshoes." The second etymology is derived from non-indigenous people using the word to mean "eaters of raw meat," giving the word a foreign-assigned, offensive meaning.[25] As a result, many of the indigenous peoples involved oppose the use of the term Eskimo.[26] Thus, while 'Eskimo' may describe a diverse group of peoples not fully encompassed by other terms, the derogatory stereotype it embodies has compromised its use.

Cadbury is a British-founded confectionery corporation with factories and partners spanning the globe. The sugar source used by Cadbury Australia, producer of Pascall Eskimos, is yet to be publicly disclosed. These lollies misrepresent indigenous peoples of the Arctic as an undifferentiated passive figure wrapped in a thick coat and fur hood (Figure 1). Further detail is added on one version of the packaging, which depicts an igloo. Comprised of sugar, glucose syrup from wheat or corn, invert sugar, gelatine, and artificial flavours and colours [122, 102, 133], this finger-sized candy is moulded into green, white and pink lollies. The gelatine used in the product is made from collagen protein derived from cooked animal scraps such as rind and bones.[27] These lollies are also used as ingredients in Eskimo Lolly Cake in Australia and Aotearoa. In addition, the Nestlé and Tip Top companies sell chocolate-coated ice cream bars called Eskimo Pie, invented by Danish-American Charles Nelson, in Australia, Aotearoa, and Turtle Island.

In 2006, Philip Morris International (PMI), a global tobacco company based in Turtle Island, marketed a brand of cigarettes in Israel called 'Maori Mix.' Te Reo Mārama (TRM), a Māori tobacco resistance advocacy group, confronted the company over their use of Māori imagery and branding, and in response PMI removed their product from the shelves. According to TRM Director Shane Kawenata Bradbrook, "This product called Maori Mix was an absolute affront to my people. Your company's misappropriation and exploitation of our culture to sell your product of death and illness to Israelis was at a minimum culturally insensitive – and at worse another form of oppression and abuse that indigenous peoples have faced for decades."[28] Subsequently, TRM was nominated for a Business Ethics Network Award in Turtle Island.

Pascall Eskimos should receive no less criticism. They are produced in Australia and sold only in Aotearoa, far from the peoples they misrepresent and exploit. Further, in reference to the health issues discussed in the previous section, epidemiologists have shown that sugar-related diseases, like obesity and diabetes, are serious health problems amongst indigenous peoples of the Arctic.[29] [30] That sugar is the primary ingredient of this confection demonstrates further disrespect. Pascall Eskimos are active signifiers of colonisation not only in their production, but also through their distribution into candy shops and the stomachs of innumerable consumers.

These lollies suggest a social hierarchy in which indigenous peoples are misrepresented as objects to purchase, own, play with, consume and digest. In 2009, Seeka Lee Veevee Parsons, an Inuit from the Nunavet Territory, lodged a complaint with Cadbury during a visit to Aotearoa. She stated that 'Eskimo' is "a term that shouldn't be used anymore, especially on a candy. Is it right to go around eating shapes of people of another culture?"[31] Cadbury spokesperson Daniel Ellis responded, explaining that the iconic lollies had been a New Zealand tradition for 54 years, and that in 2008 the company had "produced almost 19 million individual Eskimos," suggesting that the candy was not offensive to the large number of people consuming them.[32] Like Parsons, indigenous media have published articles advocating respect for indigenous cultures and that consumers not purchase these lollies.[33] Despite this strong opposition, the continuing production and consumption of Pascall Eskimos actively reinforces the colonial project.

Figure 2. Joe Joe Orangias, *Torch of Confectionery* (2014), Pascall Eskimos (sugar, glucose syrup from wheat or corn, invert sugar, gelatine, flavours, colours [122, 102, 133]), aluminium, 26 × 18 × 18 mm. Photograph by the author.

DECOLONISING VISUAL CULTURE

My method of addressing colonial misrepresentations of this kind consists of removing them from their present context and transforming them into critical sculptures. Thus I acquired numerous bags of Pascall Eskimos from supermarkets across Aotearoa, and then warmed, smushed and carved nearly one hundred individual candies to make the sculpture *Torch of Confectionery* (Figure 2) – a reference to the *Statue of Liberty*'s torch on the east coast of Turtle Island. My torch consists of green and white lollies, while the flame is made from the pink This sculpture is exhibited on a white silk pillow inside a sealed plexiglass box. The process of making this sculpture informs its function, as removing and transforming the lollies changed them from actively colonising to actively decolonising items of visual culture.

To give some background, French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi built the colossal *Statue of Liberty* (Figure 3), given by the French people to the US government as a sign of friendship. In 1886, the statue was dedicated on Liberty Island with the promise to "enlighten the world" with a "universal symbol of freedom and democracy."[34] This small island was formerly rich in oysters, providing food for the Lenape Nation and early European settlers alike. Since settler colonialists arrived, however, the island has been occupied as a smallpox quarantine station, a pest house, refugee housing, and a US

Figure 3. Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, *Statue of Liberty* (1909), bronze, green patina, lost wax cast, 46 m height. Image credit: Dr Adam Jones, *View of Statue of Liberty from Liberty State Park, Jersey City, New Jersey, USA*, available under a Creative Commons Attribution–ShareAlike 2.0 license. https://www.flickr.com/photos/adam_jones/6228755662/in/album-72157621955198436/. Copyright © 2011 Dr Adam Jones.

military fort.[35] In 2000, archaeologist William A. Griswold excavated shell middens dating between c. 783 and 1156, his findings proving of historical significance for First Nations peoples from the area.[36] Ironically, the Statue of Liberty stands facing Europe to light the way for distant settlers. While the statue projects a feminist ethos of freedom and democracy, it dominates indigenous lands without making reference to the genocide of indigenous peoples, actions that have enabled non-indigenous ideals of freedom and democracy to flourish on Turtle Island. This dissimulation has not been lost on indigenous commentators.[37]

Torch of Confectionery is scaled to fit an adult-sized hand as a metaphor for the agency individuals have in shaping and upholding so-called liberty, but here with a focus on recognising indigenous rights and relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples on indigenous lands. On the one hand, the mass-produced sweets disappeared when conjoined, thereby symbolically dismissing the colonial misrepresentation involved. On the other hand, like *A Subtlety,* this oversized lolly questions the production and consumption of universal ideals, particularly those mediated by public monuments like statues. At whose expense do people admire ancient sphinxes and statues? At whose expense is sugar consumed on a daily basis? At whose expense do people practice freedom and democracy? And finally, who has control of and access to that freedom and democracy?

My methodology works to deconstruct offensive and shameful non-indigenous-made objects. *Torch of Confectionery* is part of an ongoing series of sculptures called *Urning Archives*. The other pieces, which also operate on the principles of removal and transformation, include a cigar store Indian; 'Indian Head: Old Fashioned Stone Ground Yellow Corn Meal;' Land O'Lakes butter trays; a Jeep Cherokee; and Washington Redskins fan gear. I specifically transform these objects according to their intended function and economy in order to offer a comprehensive critical analysis. As with the Pascall Eskimos, the process of making these sculptures removes a significant number of colonial misrepresentations from visual culture. Presented in the contemporary art context, they are intended to generate critical dialogue with a diverse audience. I hope that the continuation of this series will be unnecessary in the future. However, until colonial practice is fully exposed and dismantled, its associated inequities will remain, along with the advocacy function of my sculptures.

TRANSFORMATION

In this article, I have outlined how colonial practices continue to exist around the globe. Contemporary artists are increasingly using sugar as a medium to address the historical and contemporary inequities that are the legacy of colonialism. Kara Walker's monumental sculpture posed dynamic questions around the 'subtlety' of sugar, its production and its occupation of physical and cultural space. My analysis of Cadbury's manipulation of sugar into a

mass-produced colonial misrepresentation shows how Pascall Eskimos perpetuate inequitable relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. In response, I removed and transformed this candy into a critical sculpture. My methodology offers a practice to communities, artists, designers and scholars to help them deconstruct colonial practices and to work towards a more equitable visual culture.

My aim in this review has been to call attention to the importance and urgency of addressing both historical and ongoing practices of colonisation within visual culture. This includes examining common colonial misrepresentations of indigenous peoples around the globe, as well as of other minority communities such as gender and sexual minorities. My proposed methodology of research, removal and transformation of colonial misrepresentations is by no means intended to further falsify, erase or hide the colonial histories or practices involved. Rather, it works to revoke the current objectification and stereotyping of indigenous peoples in order to generate critical dialogue and reveal colonial practice and its oppressive and inequitable effects.

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