



Colonial Encounters

Prologue

It is impossible to think about “colonial encounters” without confronting the idea of colonization, a word that can easily be understood as a euphemism for conquest. The last five centuries have seen the world transformed and, in many respects, devastated by the expansion of European interests through colonization. Our own country was born from a conquest that began with the establishment of thirteen small colonies. One of them, Jamestown, was the settlement that gave rise to the state of Virginia.

However, it is also worth considering those things that could be perceived as positive exchanges or cross-pollinations resulting from these cultural collisions. Jazz— a music born of African Americans using European instruments— comes readily to mind and, of course, much of the food we eat reflects the palates of many cultures. In fact, great numbers of us wear faces whose shapes and complexions are clear evidence of the mixing of peoples who’d had virtually no contact before the colonizers arrived.

English, itself, was changed by the many non-English speakers who encountered it. By employing this European tongue to describe the complexities of their experience, each culture added new words and gestures to this language, making English more agile, musical, and intricately meaningful. Eventually, from among the subjugated, came those who mastered the words, who used English as a vehicle for transformation. They told the stories and wrote the poems that helped to decolonize the minds of the subjugated, that also helped to open the eyes of those who had enjoyed the privileges of power.

In every age, human beings find themselves constrained by social imperatives that no longer make good enough sense. In present-day America, many assumptions concerning race, religion, sexuality, gender, and our so-called “classless” society are under siege. No matter what their background, American writers— faced with a variety of troubles— use their words to challenge what they see and to assert what they believe is missing from the national discussion. Perhaps, at this point in history, we have all been colonized, blinded by the status quo, numbed to our own marvelous potentials. Perhaps our reluctance to read and think beyond the perspectives we are given daily by mass media is proof of our sleepy-headed complacency. It is my hope that, through our encounters with the authors featured in this year’s literary festival, some significant aspect of our own wakefulness will be re-energized.

~ **Tim Seibles, Literary Festival Director**