

Murder, Psychedelics & The Primal Anarchist

Steve Kirk

a review of

The Cull of Personality: Ayahuasca, Colonialism, and the Death of a Healer by Kevin Tucker. Black and Green Press, Blackandgreenpress.org, 2019

For those familiar with Kevin Tucker's essay writing since the start of *Black and Green Review*, now *Wild Resistance*, there is a familiar structure to the book, reading much like an expanded essay that might appear in those journals. Divided into six sections, *Cull* delivers colonial history through the lens of its contemporary manifestations.

Delving deep into the historical record, Tucker, who identifies as a primal anarchist, traces the antecedents to the tragic death of Olivia Arvalo, a Peruvian indigenous healer in April 2018. Arvalo was murdered by Sebastian Woodroffe, a white Canadian man who ostensibly went to Peru to "retain some of their [the indigenous population's] treasure," primarily through ingesting and investigating ayahuasca use (a potent psychedelic concoction), for himself and his family. In doing so, Woodroffe joined a growing number of white westerners traveling to the region to participate in ayahuasca retreats, part of a growing trend in cultural and psychedelic tourism which rarely profits local communities.

The end result of his journey was the death of Arvalo and Woodroffe's subsequent killing at the hands of the Shipibo Konibo community, one he apparently saw only as a tool for his own personal and familial development.

Tucker uses this incident to interrogate the roots and manifestations of colonialism through time, but also to question a fundamental psychedelic truism: ritualized ayahuasca use is an ancient "pure" medicine, having acute powers which can be harnessed by ambitious white Westerners. As Tucker declares in his opening, "A shocking amount of history can fit into a shallow grave."

In tackling these complex topics, Tucker annihilates the unsupported notion that ayahuasca use is a timeless and naturally developed ritual, itself somehow disassociated from colonial reality. He shows without a doubt that most ayahuasca use comes out of colonial devastation and cultural changes brought on as its consequence.

In addition to dispelling the myth of ayahuasca's timelessness, Tucker takes on many other misconceptions surrounding colonialism, dealing even-handedly with topics such as warfare, resistance, turmoil, death, and brutality. All of these serving as cultural memory that shapes the use of ayahuasca today, a use that may only go back a few hundred years.

The story of Arvalo's death is often compared to earlier colonial exploits in the book, showing the continuity in motives and actions from Pizarro, the 16th century conquistador, to the present.

Tucker reveals the internal logic of colonial agents, including Woodroffe, showing that their guiding principle is entitlement with a seemingly well-meaning outward intent. Tucker summarizes this logic often in the book by echoing the internal and written rationalizations of the colonizer: "For me and my family."

In drawing these parallels through time, Tucker also explores and ties in his own long-running critique of civilization. This includes an appeal to the primal anarchy he often mentions, but it seems like a minor turn from his formerly held anarcho-primitivism, amounting to a semantic shift rather than any clearly distinct or necessary redefining of perspective. If there's one obvious critique of Tucker's writing, it is that it is often not concise and seems to pre-judge its topic for the reader prior to even presenting an argument.

For instance, it only takes a few pages for Tucker to make clear his perception of intoxicating experiences, describing ayahuasca thusly: "...all forms are prone to violent and unpleasant after effects. Its consumption is followed by nausea and vomiting. Painful and discomfoting, there's little about experiencing death that should give any indication of being enjoyable."

Tucker previously equated intoxication with inevitable addiction in his essay, "Hooked on a Feeling," appearing in *Black and Green Review* No. 3, going so far as to implicate the supposed narcotic-like effects of grains as the very reason for persistent settlements in the early history of domestication. It is fortunate that, while it echoes some of those previous arguments, *Cull* doesn't depend upon them.

Tucker's overall point about drug use is largely correct.

Widespread intoxication is likely symptomatic of something wrong in a given culture and the prevalence of addiction may correlate to the need to escape from daily life, an attempt at meeting human needs through intoxicative substances. But it is rather a leap from there to draw an objective opinion about individual experiences of intoxication.

In other words, the topic is clearly nuanced and non-linear. Fortunately, the framing of *Cull* puts the emphasis on colonialism and not intoxication and this gives the book much more weight. Tucker has made an important point abundantly clear. The ayahuasca industry stems from a fundamentally erroneous understanding of indigenous use and, moreover, is a complete and total reflection of colonial logic. This industry must be rejected and the analysis of the always persisting and constantly re-articulating colonial reality is deeply enhanced by the book.

The writing has a strong narrative voice and Tucker isn't afraid to tell you exactly and explicitly how any piece of research makes him feel. In this way, the book reads a bit like a co-revealing, the reader is on a journey with the author through the research and Tucker presents his feelings and reactions while processing the death and brutality he chronicles. This approach is, however, not without its disadvantages and at times the writing can feel muddled by personal reflection, no matter how visceral. There are times when repulsion cannot be well described in words. Tucker's style of declarative sentences, often appearing as their own paragraph is interesting for those already convinced of his general analysis and serves the purposes of a polemic, but it is ill-fitted for a book of this scope.

Often Tucker's voice is overbearing in the writing, particularly in the first and last sections of the book. Some readers may identify with the narrative voice, though I suspect others will find it difficult to separate the message from the messenger, if only in part because Tucker includes glimpses of many arguments within this text. He argues against colonialism, domestication, addiction culture, resource extraction, missionaries, and I'm no doubt missing a few more.

At the same time, he is making a positive argument for primal anarchy and attempting to even reconcile the impact of the Incan empire before and during early colonialism. Tucker attempts to summarize 600 years of history in 166 pages, not counting endnotes, all the while covering the details of a contemporary tragedy and somehow managing to relate this all back to a project for primal anarchy (which necessitates even longer historical purview). While all of these topics are undoubtedly connected, it is perhaps impractical to push them all together.

Nevertheless, *Cull of Personality* represents an important turning point for one of anarcho-primitivism's primary and loudest advocates. Tucker shows he can distill a large amount of information into a digestible narrative that holds the readers attention and concentrates on a few central theses.

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