Tucked into the trees just beyond the lapping blue waves of a tropical sea, imagine a naked shaman pausing to gently pull a cock out of his puckered mouth and let out a long and portentous sigh. He’s just sighted, cresting a distant horizon, the first masts of strange ships. Though unknown to him, they’re Spanish caravels captured by Christopher Columbus.

The first people who met Columbus, the friendly and peaceful Lukku-Cairi or Lucayans of the Bahamas, first contacted in 1492, were to the last child murdered or enslaved by 1520, when the final 11 of an estimated 40,000 were cleared from their homeland by Spanish soldiers.

Pre-Columbian: whole civilisations over millennia reduced to the arrival of a single cruel, greedy and altogether psychopathic Genoese sailor. Pioneering the enslavement and conversion of two continents seems to grant Columbus naming rights to at least one country, Colombia, along with the civilisations he helped destroy. After conquering their own diverse peninsula, the Spanish applied those lessons in advanced warfare, religious intolerance and torture to conquering any other random civilisation they bumped into by accident.

Wiped out entirely, absorbed or kept as an underclass for centuries, between the conqueror and the conquered a circuit is formed, the scars of the whip and the shame of the torturer get carried into the future, woven into ancestry and borne through traditions, the violence responds with violence, a body that attacks itself. All Americans share in that legacy.

What happened to the peoples now painfully dubbed pre-Columbian is just one arcing history that includes almost countless individual stories within it, and with all its tragedy, still only just one of many such histories. And across racial, sexual, gender, ethnic and religious boundaries, oppressed peoples can and have found common cause. Jean Genet, writer, poet, criminal and homosexual, came to America for three months to lecture at the invitation of the Black Panthers, and later that year spent six months in Palestinian refugee camps. Both of these groups, like him, were criminalised for their impulse towards freedom.

Peering back on history, looking out from his homeland of Colombia and into the nature of his own desires, artist Carlos Motta has found in his multivalent, multimedia artwork this common cause. An illicit archivist of criminalised longing, chronicler of the conquered and abused, desirous dreamer, Motta makes work that explicitly engages with political history, as he writes, ‘to create counter narratives that recognize suppressed histories, communities, and identities’. The speeches of assassinated Colombian leftist political candidates yearning for peace are uttered again, the history of homosexual repression in Ukraine gets clearly written (incidentally part of the artist’s winning entry for the 2014 Future Generation Prize in Kiev), the struggles of Latin American immigrants in the ‘model’ country of Sweden are carefully documented: these things add up, and he makes them into public declamations in street performances and bus posters, online repositories and real-life gatherings. Though often distinctly informational, they can also be dreamy, and when artefacts do not exist, they are imagined: an archive of views from the windows of colonial prisons, documentation of fantastical pre-Columbian statues in sultry homosexual congress or the smushing of all the nations in Latin America with seemingly intractable political problems into a single weirdly shaped Pangaea (one way perhaps that North Americans lump together their neighbours). Though Motta takes great care in his historical reexaminations, the collapsing of struggles, the uniting of causes with bodies and desires, is what titillates the mind.
this page, from top  Stills from Nefandus, 2013, 25 min 4 sec, HD 16:9, video, colour, sound;
and Naufsregio, 2013, 12 min 31 sec, HD 16:9, video, colour, sound.
Both courtesy Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon; Instituto de Visión, Bogotá; and Mor Charpentier, Paris

facing page  Hasta una historiografía homólicica #7, 2013, pencil and watercolour on paper
(drawn by Gata Suba and Carlos Motta), 23 x 30 cm. Courtesy Instituto de Visión, Bogotá
With videos and conferences, sculptures and activism, Motta fingers the underbelly of the conqueror’s histories, the humans crushed beneath the wheel of one winner or another that refuses all other ways of being other than their own. His project, the Nefandus Trilogy, began at Galería Filomena Soares in Lisbon in 2013 and expanded through numerous iterations and additions. The Latin word nefandus is a kind of catchall used in Colonial America for the impious, abominable or unnamable (it is also unsurprisingly the name of a satanic Swedish black metal band). Central to this unfolding project is the film Nefandus (2013). Motta in Spanish and his collaborator Arregoces Coronado in Kogi (the language, according to Wikipedia, of the only uncolonized Andean civilization) discuss on a boat trip along the placid brown waters of the Don Diego river in Colombia sexual practices of the peoples of America before contact. Linger in dry language on some wet subjects, the possibility of homoerotic love in the Americas and the punishing dictates of Catholic morality on the male body (for example, “the anus became the locus of male vulnerability”). The lush green of the still-wild jungles and the calm flow of the water become witnesses not only to this discussion but to all that have passed through it over the centuries. The landscape, the physical, is what unites the indigenous and their colonisers, as well as Carlos Motta, a native son of a country long at war with itself and still, in its conservatism, not the easiest place to be a gay man, another group struggling under active suppression.

The ideas contained in their discussion unfold into objects d’art in a cracked model of Columbus’s sunk Santa Maria, colonial torture devices rendered in floor vinyls and a series of drawings of pre-Columbian artefacts reimagined for lusty homosexual purposes. In Hacia una histiorografía homoerótica (Towards Homoerotic Historiography), #1-5 (2015), the placid faces of stylised ancient Americans get stuffed with erect cocks. The sculpturally elegant figures pull each other into acrobatic sexual positions and dozens-deep ass-fucking trains. While Motta’s work can sometimes disappear into the causes he champions, here the ancient figures caught in flagrante have a bit of that physical joy that comes with fucking, deeply individual and which never makes much sense based anywhere but in an individual body, the most intimate site of agency. Motta’s theoretical constructs are crystalline, but the work shimmers when clearly sited in bodies. Idea becomes engorged form in a carved stone cock (Untitled, date unknown), almost punishing in its phallic force, to be used in the imagined sex rituals of a disappeared civilisation.

In his more directly archival works, though distinctly less lascivious, the ideas are still activated by individuals. When, in The Good Life (2005–8), he asks over 360 people in the streets of 12 Latin American cities about the United States’ interventions into the politics of their region, each has their own perspective, ranging from the horrified and aggrieved to the confused and unaware. The effects of ideology and political policy can be easily discussed in abstraction, but here its real legacy can be found in the citizens of the affected countries.

Motta rarely does this alone. To him, these objects are not things separate from people or their histories, and this attitude makes collaboration normal. Even as that history gets carefully listed on a blackboard in Brief History of Us Interventions (2006), this obvious didactic tool is unstruck. Alongside the carefully handwritten interventions on the board, the artist includes chalk and erasers for the audience to question, assert, add and erase. Teacherly authority can and will always be adulterated by our individual interpretations, the fluxing, subjective nature of history. As the board gets layered with amendments and flattened by erasures, the mess of chalk is as easy to read as the history that it attempts to understand.

While this work hinges on an exhibition object, Motta’s work as an artist deals less with things and more with people, not only (as already mentioned) in documented interviews, but often as an organiser of conferences, a collaborator with other artists as well as choreographers, historians and ordinary people who find themselves witnesses and victims of oppression. From May 2012 to November 2013, Motta spearheaded four conferences, We Who Feel Differently: A Symposium at the New Museum, New York; Gender Talents: A Special Address at Tate Modern, London; Godfall: Shape Shifting God as Queer at the IARSJ, Union Theological Seminary, New York; and ritual of queer rituals at Witte de With, Rotterdam. These various symposia are each underlain with ‘difference’ as a central tenet, whether the vast and fluid spectrum of gender identification, the invocation of the term ‘queer’ as a stand against assimilation or the physical space of exchange for sexual and gender inclusion created in the first floor of the New Museum (along with that symposium and a rather robust online resource). Nixing equality as synonym for sameness, Motta expresses his philosophical position and social activities as a way not to simply rewrite past histories but also as an attempt to amend history’s first draft towards an inclusive celebration of difference (or the more adjectival ‘differently’). Rather than flipping the table of history, Motta seeks in his poetic objects and social actions a redemption for all our stories, united by our differences too often erased by a dominant culture.

No matter how delightful an act the pre-Columbian blowjob might imaginably be, knowledge of homoeroticism in the Americas almost entirely disappeared with its possible practitioners in the Spanish Conquest. Carlos Motta though doesn’t have to look far to find their legacy. It is within him, within the bodies and stories, actions and art of all Americans, each an ancestor to the oppressed and the oppressors.