



SHUTTING DOWN THE PAST TO OPEN UP THE FUTURE: RETRACING LA PAZ'S FOOTSTEPS

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La Paz - Chukiyawumarka

For me, images are an allegory for seeing the silence and half-truths of a society. In Bolivia, like in Mexico and as said by Octavio Paz over half a century ago, "words aren't used to designate reality, but rather to conceal it." In the 1990s I did a visual essay that was revised into several versions encompassing everything from the hasty fever of modernisation that existed at the time, to the current mining predation in the northeast cocoa bean regions of La Paz. These photographs, the same in every version, express the destruction of one of the most beautiful streets on the West side of my city, where I used to escape the tedium of my office to have a saxra lunch hour with my father.

Words were never capable of bringing to light the horror and paradoxical beauty of this destruction.

To (re)trace is to retake the beaten path and face the memory. I do not mean to compose a nostalgic elegy to a past that once was. In the spirit of reflection, the photos were a slow, mournful walk down an important street for my great-great grandparents.

I am not a photographer nor am I an artist. I used these images as a means of expressing myself through my own eyes, with my chuyma and my way of thinking. We are in an upside down world, where words have become a devalued currency, and understanding is guarded in bank vaults, compounds which in the North are regarded as libraries, where knowledge is disinfected and distanced from anything related to action.

We are in a world that prefers to erect monuments to the past and not to stop the destruction of the present. An aporetic world that pays schizophrenic homage to material artifacts of modernity, and yet through these joins old ideas. I will show a few images that give an account of this path.



Once, filled with the Anti-Postal spirit, I took this photo of the tutelary hill of my city: the achachila Illimani. Symbols and "traditions" have become magical, empty, and devalued words through their use and their desire to become part of the knowledge market of global modernization. The patrimonialist stance of the government leaders of my city is paradoxical.

These are the masons and builders, a centuries-old guild, which was re-founded as a union in 1924, under the anarchist wing of FOL (Local Workers Federation of La Paz). One of their inspirations, also a mason, said: "We are not afraid of ruins. We the workers have built mansions and palaces: we can destroy them and rebuild them with our fury. The fury that now grows while you watch..."





Jaime Saenz, my city's poet, remembered the games he would play in the twists and turns of an old *Chukiyawumarka* home. He and his friends supposedly moved large stones to discover ant hills, which, in his eyes, were underground cities. "Bolivia was the fourth courtyard," he wrote in *The Lodestone*.

Furthermore, the destruction of the archaic city, along with the neglect of those traces consumed by the past, transforms this into an aesthetic ornament of the present—and collective memory into a pile of rubble.

I would like to reverse this story, so I looked at the old Illampu houses during the phase of democracy, when they stopped being home to the colonial old caciquial elite and mercantile Aymara. In the first half of the 20th century, they filled with new tenants.





The landowners of the elite abandoned the houses, leaving the space for various occupants who shared only one source of water for cooking, but in the mornings were the first to break bread.

Here there lived artisans, hardworking mechanics and weavers, anarchist agitators, and even a shoplifter who dressed like a gentleman and rode a bicycle while helping organise riots. People who shut their doors at night after heated meetings, opened them for parties, to celebrate saints and demons, and to reconcile with time and the rebellious memory of the city.





But I must conclude this essay. In contradiction with the logic of my Aymara great-great-grandparents who always recommended *qhip nayr untasis sarnaqapxanani*: I must turn my back on the past and look ahead to the future of the city. And I ask myself: Has modernity reached Illampu Street?



CLOSING DOWN THE PAST TO OPEN UP THE FUTURE.

In the visual essay I just summarised¹, I attempted to take charge of the confusing forms of Bolivian multi-temporal homogeneity, seen through photography over the course of ten years, and the destruction of an old street in my hometown. During the written process of this essay I had to resist the tendencies toward nostalgia and aestheticism I sometimes embarked on, and establish a critical analysis, beginning in that same nostalgia, of the processes of urban modernisation we lived through under neoliberalism. Since the seventies, in order to modernise Illampu Street, the mansions and *tambos* erected by the Indigenous commercial elite and “*cholas*” of the 18th and 19th centuries were demolished. These imposing three and four courtyard buildings, made of thick adobe and tile by Indigenous masons, who adapted colonial techniques to their ancestral knowledge, were levelled in the interest of a deranged urban project that turned Illampu into a tunnel of ordinary concrete cubes that are “modernist”, imitative, and a caricature of aesthetic taste.

In the essay I attempt to retrace the footsteps of the past encased within the adobe walls of Illampu. In reality these are a number of pasts which range from the stately to the Indigenous, and I try to project these onto the street’s future (a tangible urban failure). I also wanted to imagine the revitalisation inherent in the background of the seemingly modern spaces that are there today. According to Álvaro Pinaya (2012), before their demolition, the houses and *tambos*² of Illampu had been democratised by the force of their deterioration: they became tenements, whose occupants could not be helped on a legal level. Their owners proceeded to sell them as a last resort to push out their occupants—artisans, merchants, travellers, and nomads—who had recreated vital urban communities of intersectionality in the economy and social struggles of the city. The existence of these chaotically subdivided spaces served as a patrimonialist point—and capitalist reason—for destroying the houses³. What is paradoxical is that this destruction served only to obliterate the democratic phase of the inhabitation of the tenements. With this, there was a resurgence in distant colonial concepts, such as servile work and exoticisation. Today, Illampu Street is full of tourist agencies offering adventure trips into the jungle or salt basins to see nature or experience the inhospitable. Hotels have been established on mid-level floors for every budget. Meanwhile, on the upper levels, departments have been built for the upper-middle classes, who mark their distinction through their conspicuous consumption, and the concept of the “maid” or household worker, subsequently allocated a “half a room, for half a person”. The modernity of the façade hides the revival of old principles, which weighs like a guilty cultural conscience, and where inhabitants often dance in striking Indigenous costumes in “folkloric processions” that pass through that street towards the city centre.

¹ (Re)Tracing Steps Down Illampu Street, performative visual essay whose first version accounted for 44 photographs. This essay was presented as a performance on a number of occasions (New York 2002, La Paz, 2003-2016, Quito 2010 and many more). In every version, either textual or performance, it was slightly modified with attention to the geo-historical and political contexts of its audience.

² *Tambos* were situated on Pre-Hispanic roads where travellers could rest and exchange products and knowledge. They were incorporated into the colonial system of free services by *Ayllus*, to make long-distance commercial dealings easier. In La Paz, *tambos* were large scale constructions that served as housing and markets for the population and Andean communities who brought their products to the cities. Some of them became the private property of colonial chiefs or *mallkus* (ethnic authorities), such as in the case of Tambo Kirkinchu, today the historical heritage of the City of La Paz. See Álvaro Pinaya’s dissertation thesis, *De Tambos a Hoteles en la calle Illampu* (2012).

³ See article by journalist Álvaro Q. Pinaya (2015), “*De tambos a hoteles en la calle Illampu*”, *Los Tiempos*. Cochabamba (19/07/2015).

How many paradoxes these stories or social allegories reveal! Archaic ideas sink into the subconscious and only come to light in bursts (festivals or rebellious acts) which call into question the intelligibility of reality. It is thought that by isolating, segregating, or spectacularising social anachronisms, their effects/affections have been avoided, but this is not the case. The destruction of the Cholo-Indigenous commercial modernity in the city of the past—ch'ixi modernity—has given way to a modernity pastiche and to a *pä chuyma*, trapped in a double bind⁴ situation. Domestic market flows that influenced this have seen a kind of symbolic colonial extractivism, which feeds global circuits of predation and unequal exchange. In the background of this process of modernisation—economic, aesthetic, and urban—society is undergoing a regression. The popular/democratic phase of the past and its protagonists have given into global circuits—or try to penetrate them—without being able to dismantle the mechanisms that drove the reactivation of being under the colonial yoke. This situation, plagued with uncertainties and inconsistencies, is the one I attempt to address by characterising the Indigenous as modern, and the ch'ixi world as an epistemology capable of nourishing itself with the *aporiae* of history instead of swallowing or denying them, thus echoing the politics of forgetting.



Ukhamapuniskiw. That's just what it is. The wilted spirit of Illampu street and the dynamic spirit of our ancestral gods coexist in a single, binding entity, that of the *aka pacha* of *Chukiyawumarka*, feeding us with *ch'allas*, *akhullis*, and with drive for modern *jiwasa*. This spirit is growing, here and now, while our love and fury are ignited.

⁴ In the glossary of my book *Sociología de la imagen. Miradas ch'ixi desde la historia andina*, defines the idea thus: "Double bind is a term coined by anthropologist Gregory Bateson to refer to an unsustainable situation of "double constraints" or "conflicting mandates". This occurs when "there are two conflicting demands, neither of which can be ignored, leaving the victim in an unsolvable dilemma where compliance with either of the demands negates the possibility of complying with the other". Here we use the Aymara translation *pä chuyma* to refer to a "divided soul", literally "double involvement" (*chuyma*). If we relieve this expression of its moralistic tones, we would have a double bind situation. The recognition of this "duplicité" and the ability to creatively live this experience is called "ch'ixi epistemology" that promotes living the contradiction without succumbing to a collective schizophrenia. It is almost like the way Gayatri Spivak defines double bind: "an elliptical coming and going between two individual positions in which at least one of those—or generally both—contradict each other and at the same time ensure each other". According to her, this would allow us "to learn to live between contradictory mandates".

GLOSSARY OF AYMARISMS

Aka pacha. One of the four spheres of the cosmos: here and now.

Achachila. Aymara, lit. grandfather. Refers to Andean deities incarnated in the mountains of the Andes.

Akhullikar, akhulli. Hispanicisation of the Aymara verb *akhulliña*. To gently suck on coca leaves inside the cheek, mixing them with *llipta* (ashes of various plants) bleach or other alkaline substance. It is not “chewed” even though in Spanish it is translated as “chewing coca”. *Akhulli* is the act of doing it, but also the meetings that take place to share the coca leaves between friends, family, or companions.

Ch'alla. Ritual which consist of sprinkling with alcohol and coca in order to ask permission or blessing of the earth.

Ch'ixi. Aymara lit. Grey. Color made of juxtaposed and interlaced black and white dots. Metaphor for a type of melting pot that incorporates and recognizes the Euro-Indian polarity as a potentially decolonizing contradiction

Chiflera. Seller of ritual items used to make offerings to Andean gods: ceremonies, *sullus* (llama foetus) and an endless number of sweets and symbolic objects provided by the *wajt 'as* or Andean ceremonies popular in cities and rural areas of Bolivia. In La Paz, *chifleras* are found around *Illampu* Street, between *Sagárnaga*, *Linares*, and *Santa Cruz*.

Chukiyawumarka. Aymara ancestral name of La Paz.

Chuyma. Lit. Entrailles supérieures; souvent traduit comme cœur, bien qu'en réalité le terme comprenne également les poumons et le foie. Le *chuyma* abrite une manière de penser associée à la mémoire.

Jiwasa. Aymara. Fourth-person singular. Lit. Refers to ‘we’ understood as singular speaking subject.

Q'ara. Aymara, lit. naked, bare. Refers to the Europeanised and whitewashed sectors of Bolivian society, whose economic and political power was founded in the expropriation and illegitimate usufruct of work, land, and resources of “those below”.

Qhipnayr uñtasis sarnaqapxañani. Aymara Aphorism which can be roughly translated by: one needs to walk in the present looking at both future and past.

Saxra hora. Time of the devil, time of laziness. Refers to snacks which happen between meals (specific meals in the Andin region).

Ukhamapuniskiw. Lit. Juste et tel qu'il est toujours.

INTERNATIONAL AWARD “UCLG - MEXICO CITY - CULTURE 21”

The objective of the “International Award UCLG - MEXICO City - Culture 21” is to recognise leading cities and people that have distinguished themselves through their contribution to culture as a dimension of sustainable development. On 19-20 May 2016, the jury composed by Eduardo Vázquez Martín, María Victoria Alcaraz, Emmanuel Kouéla, Leônidas de Oliveira, and Farida Shaheed held its last meeting for deliberating on the designation of a city among the 83 candidates and a winning personality. The Jury decided that the “Individual Award” be shared ex-aequo by Jon Hawkes and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. The Award ceremony took place in Mexico City (Mexico) on 27th October 2016.

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