THE WATER IN BETWEEN: WHERE I AM AND WHERE I COME FROM

Carolina Aranibar-Fernandez

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

© The Author

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/4267

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
THE WATER IN BETWEEN: WHERE I AM AND WHERE I COME FROM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

Carolina Aranibar-Fernandez

Master of Fine Arts, Painting and Printmaking, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 2016
Bachelors of Fine Arts, Painting, Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, MO 2013

Thesis Advisor: Peter Baldes, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking Department
Committee: Peter Baldes, Hope Ginsburg, Arnold Kemp, and Holly Morrison

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA
May, 2016
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my lovely parents Beatriz and Alvaro--my grandmother Ivonne--my brothers Carlos Alberto and Alvaro for their unconditional love and support, thank you.

Special thanks to my wonderful committee, who challenged and inspired me every day: Peter Baldes, Hope Ginsburg, Arnold Kemp, and Holly Morrison

To Fawn Krieger and Gregory Volk for being incredibly supportive, forever thank you!

To Laura Alfonso, Fernanda Sanchez, and Emilia Hernandez, thank you for being my family and for everything!

To all my amazing peers and friends, many thanks for being a huge inspiration!

To Devin Harclerode--my dear friend, these two years would not have been the same without you 💕 forever bonded.

Thank you Megan Goldfarb, Owen Duffy, and everyone who supported me and made things possible!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.................................................................................................................iv

Introduction........................................................................................................... 1

Anqas Korahua....................................................................................................... 5

THE WATER IN BETWEEN: Where I am and Where I come From… 7

Agua...................................................................................................................... 11

Invisible Labor....................................................................................................... 16

Woven Stories From Niño Korin........................................................................... 21

Monedas ................................................................................................................ 31

Conclusion............................................................................................................ 36

Bibliography........................................................................................................ 37
ABSTRACT

THE WATER IN BETWEEN: WHERE I AM AND WHERE I COME FROM
By Carolina Aranibar-Fernandez, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016.

Thesis Advisor: Peter Baldes, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking Department

The following thesis and project is comprised of a conceptual interwoven practice that addresses exploitation of land and labor, historically from the Spanish colonization and contemporarily through imperialism and global capital. It emphasizes oral storytelling and mythologies from the Andes. It explores socio-cultural events of gender, race, and socio economic issues, particularly in decolonial regions.
INTRODUCTION

My studio research and practice weaves together thoughts, concerns, and questions about Bolivia and its people into a physical space while considering these subjects’ relationship to the operations of global capitalism. In addition to history, cultural memory, and other people’s experiences, the driving force of this work comes from my everyday existence as a woman and a Latina. This document examines this practice. In what follows, I will address the development of my work over the past few years, as well as the subject matter that informs it. This thesis is generated from a perspective that privileges oral communication, rather than solely relying on statistics and academic sources. As such, this thesis is substantially informed by personal conversations, encounters, and experiences, which dovetail with the nature of my work.

I was born and raised in La Paz, one of Bolivia’s two high-altitude capitals in the Andes region. Growing up in La Paz exposed me to a disappearing form of history: the oral storytelling of Andean peoples. For generations, ancestors have passed down these traditions and continue to use today as non-hierarchical ways of making and disseminating meaning. In contrast, many written histories of so-called “third world” countries are mostly authored by individuals from the West. “Following the mapping of what only some say that matters—what is passed through generations and what is erased and forgotten.”¹ The result of these imperial histories is a state of cultural

¹ Francoise Verges. *Like a Riot: The Politics of Forgetfulness, Relearning the South, and the Island of Dr. Moreau*
amnesia that can lead to murder, destruction, and the will to power.\textsuperscript{2} My work originates from an autobiographical place: growing up in Bolivia, a “third world” country where local traditions compete with colonizing forces. However, I want to be clear: the term third world is itself problematic. It creates a hierarchy by proposing that there is not one world, but three, each at varying stages of “progress.”

At nineteen years old, I moved to the United States to go to art school. Living in a place that defines imperialism pushed me to pay attention to the fact that we continue to live in a decolonial period rather than an era of post colonialism. As Ama Ata Aidoo remarks, the “post” in postcolonial implies that colonization is over and this is simply not true.\textsuperscript{3} Although official “colonialism” ended in the twentieth century, it still is perpetuated ideologically through western imperialism and globalization. Developing regions and women, in particular, are subject to the processes of decolonialism. Without the position of privilege enjoyed by the Euro-American patriarchy, these bodies exist in a decolonial world that experiences imperialist domination, which infiltrates political, economic, and cultural arenas. To address imperialist domination in the twenty-first century, Aidoo proposes the term “bourgeois nations” to characterize first world countries. The grinding poverty and hardship experienced by people who live in emerging economic regions is perpetuated by the oppression of a bourgeois nation. From the top floors of air-conditioned skyscrapers in the world’s metropolis, select groups of special interest

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{2} Verge, Like a Riot: The Politics of Forgetfulness, Relearning the South, and the Island of Dr. Moreau
\textsuperscript{3} Ketu H.Katrak Politics of the Female Body Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third world. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006), xii}
groups and corporations from bourgeois nations confect and deploy policies that affect the powerless economies of the decolonial “third world.” These decisions result in different forms of oppression, such as the abuse of the female bodies and the exploitation of labor and resources.

For the past seven years, I have been going back and forth between the U.S. and Bolivia. This has helped reveal to me the decolonial process taking place in Latin America. Witnessing how power is deployed from the outside helped me better understand contemporary issues, such as the exploitation of resources, including quinoa, coca leaves for the production of cocaine, privatization of water, and mining of lithium. These issues specific to Bolivia raise concerns about different forms of oppression and exploitation that happen across the globe, which I think about critically through my artistic practice. In particular, I am concerned with the concomitant oppression of women, which is manifested via labor exploitation, harassment, and rape.

Each time I return to Bolivia, I see incremental changes in the homogenization of cultures. For instance, when I was growing up in La Paz, I remember that there were very few imported products (such as Pop tarts and Snickers) and these were very expensive in relation to local products. As a concrete example of the decolonial condition, imported products such as microwavable rice and frozen foods have recently been filling up the aisles of supermarkets. Imported foods, packaged in plastic, are everywhere now. This would have been unthinkable when I was a child.

When I was younger, the majority of Bolivians wore more colorful traditional clothes, but new generations increasingly wear western fashion. What we reference as

---

4 Katrak, *Politics of the Female Body Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third world*. xiii
the “traditional” clothing of native Andeans went through a filter when the Spanish arrived in the region hundreds of years ago. Natives were not allowed to wear their traditional clothes, so traditional clothing today is a combination of Spanish and indigenous fashion.

Presently, Bolivians wear traditional clothes less and less. I want to clarify that I do not lament these changes. I believe that the interweaving of cultures is important and necessary. However, the way in which these products and ideals penetrate societies is problematic. In Bolivia and elsewhere, people see places like the U.S and Europe as “better,” so locals adopt colonialist mindset: if we look and act like them, we are “better.” But are we?

5 The first image is traditional Bolivian Quechua clothing, barely worn today – the entire outfit is woven. Second image is how women had to wear during Spanish colonization – the sombrero (hat) has changed and the pollera (skirt) is made from different fabric. Third image is how most of indigenous women dress today in La Paz, Bolivia.

6 We see them as better, because we have always been compared to and seen as inferior to western regions, which “teach” us how to live a better life.
These issues of labor, homogenization, and gender are important for the process behind my practice, and they inform how I perceive the world we live in.

--

ANQAS KORAHUA

Since I started making art, mythology and light have been two very important inspirations. My interest in light stems from Andean myths told to me when I was growing up. Two light deities, the Moon and Sun, are present in most Andean belief systems in the surrounding regions. These deities are recorded and referenced in textiles, pottery, and metal-work through symbols. They also continue to be praised in rituals today, and their attendant stories are passed from one generation to the next. I view my work as participating in this tradition by making work in which mythologies are essential. Oral storytelling, is fascinating because it gathers people together, strengthens communities, and is a fluid form of expression that is inclusive to all generations. This form of expression is passed on via each region’s native tongue.

My candidacy work Anqas Korahua functions as a confluence, weaving together multiple interests that until now have existed separately. In this work, I combined my interest in space and place, developing this piece with an awareness of its installed location: a former tobacco warehouse in Richmond, Virginia. Even though the history of Peru or Bolivia is very different than that of the United States, when I first stepped into
this vast and empty space, I thought about how there are similar historical patterns that resonate wherever there has been a type of colonization, past or present.

In Anqas Korahua, my concerns about cultural homogenization due to the expansion of global capitalism are expressed through color. The use of color exists as an act of reclamation of color that was lost and hidden after colonization. I painted each pillar in the space up to my height, capping each pattern with a passage of blue to represent water. The patterns on the pillars reference two textiles from the Tiwanaku era in the Andes, Tiwanaku dates to 15,000 BC. The pools of water are a representation

7 Anqas Korahua installation shot. Photo by: Christian Gregory. Richmond, VA.
of space in between lands that separate countries and continents. The water reflected
the viewer's movement as they traversed the space.

---

THE WATER IN BETWEEN: WHERE I AM AND WHERE I COME FROM

The Water in Between: Where I am and Where I Come From is an immersive
multimedia installation within a three hundred and twenty square foot room.

The first encounter is with 5 channel ambient sound. These sounds include: bodies of
water; the sound of the production of exploited resources: coca leaves and quinoa.; the
sound of weaving with an alpaca bone tool.

---

8 THE WATER IN BETWEEN: Where I am and Where I Come From, Installation shot
(right side of Installation) at the Anderson Gallery in Richmond, VA. Photo by: Alex Arzt
When entering the room, the viewer encounters a floor covered with hand-crafted silver-leafed “coins” made from quinoa and coca leaves. To the left, five textile pieces hang, each made by a different weaver: Marta Patty, Sofia Quispe, Alejandra Challco, Lucia Quispe and Sofia Ticona.

In the middle of the room there is a païasa, a common Bolivian working-class mattress made from straw acquired from a Virginia farm and a tarp purchased in La Paz, Bolivia. The viewer is invited to sit or lay down on the païsa and put on a pair of

---

9 Woven textiles by Marta Patty, Marta Ticona, Sofia Quispe, Alejandra Challco, Lucia Quispe, these textiles (left side Installation) are presented at the Anderson Gallery in Richmond, VA. Photo by: Hei Hei Heii  
10 The païasa is very common in the rural areas of Bolivia and other Andean countries, and is typically made from straw and a tarp.
headphones. This audio drowns out the ambient sound, to isolate and comfort the viewer with lullabies that are common to South and Central America. These lullabies are combined with the sound of horns from the Kantus of Niño Korin. Lullabies are a form of healing, particularly when younger women go through a violent or traumatic moment. The mother will sing lullabies to her daughter, putting her very close to her chest so that the daughter can feel the mother's heartbeat. While on the paisa, the viewer watches videos projected onto cardboard boxes. I used cardboard boxes such as these to reference boxes used to transport manufactured products—the very products that circulate as new forms of colonization, the products that increasingly appear in Bolivia whenever I return. The boxes are installed in the shape of a wall with a video projection of water that is intermittently interrupted by smaller videos that show the process of resource exploitation: stepping on coca leaves for hours to get the product to make cocaine, the fields of quinoa during production, and Marta weaving. It is in the space that I weave together disparate elements, such as concerns of homogenization of culture, export practices, invisible labor, and hierarchies that oppress women. Moreover, I think of the space created as simultaneously an indoor bedroom—a site of privacy and intimacy—and an exterior, outdoor space, a confluence of various flows of nature and global capital.
11 THE WATER IN BETWEEN: Where I am and Where I Come From, Installation shot of the video projection of Atlantic ocean water, projected into cardboard boxes at the Anderson Gallery in Richmond, VA. Photo by: Alex Arzt
AGUA

Agua is the Spanish word for water. I have always been fascinated by the phenomenological aspects of water: how I visually perceive the substance from a distance as a reflective mirror of the sky, and once I get closer, how I feel its movement and see through it to what is beneath it. I am intrigued by ancient mythologies that address water as a site of creation. For instance, Viracocha, the creator deity of pre-Incan and Incan mythology, had two daughters, Mama Killa\textsuperscript{12} and Pachamama,\textsuperscript{13} and a son, Inti.\textsuperscript{14} Viracocha eliminated the population around Lake Titicaca, which straddles the border between Bolivia and Peru, with an enormous flood called Unu Pacha Kuti. Viracocha spared two humans to rebuild civilization and populate the rest of the world. These two people were Mama Uqlu, “mother fertility” and Manco Capac, who would eventually give birth to the Inka civilization. Viracocha eventually disappeared across the Pacific Ocean. He left by walking on water, leaving behind Pachamama, Mama Killa and Inti to bring us food and illuminate our days and nights. I am interested in exploring intersectional spaces between ancient cultures.

\textsuperscript{12} Mama Killa is a Quechua word. Mama means mother and Killa means moon, in Inca mythology, she is the goddess of menstrual cycle, and considered a defender of women.

\textsuperscript{13} The Pachamama is a goddess revered by Andean people. She is also known as the earth mother. In Inca mythology is a fertility goddess who embodies mountains and takes care of planting and harvesting and most importantly she sustains life on this earth.

\textsuperscript{14} Inti is the Sun God for Andean people.
Water embodies interesting paradoxes. It is often referred to as a peaceful place to meditate, but it is also a place where armies meet for battle, a site that unleashes death and destruction. Water is an important channel through which we become interconnected, yet it also creates borders that divide. I often contemplate an anecdote that has been stuck in my memory forever: when I was a child I thought that water was the one resource people could have for free. When I was ten years old, there was a conflict in Bolivia over the privatization of water rights by the Bechtel Corporation (headquartered in San Francisco). This contract was signed by Hugo Banzer, a former dictator. The contract privatized the supply of water for Cochabamba, the third largest city in Bolivia. Even at a young age, upon hearing this, I thought to myself in disbelief, “We need water to live, and everyone should be able to have it.” I was shocked to learn how the right to freely drink water was taken away from the people of Cochabamba, for whom the cost of water skyrocketed by over fifty percent. Even more shocking, however, was learning that people were not allowed to even catch rainwater because it was owned by this same corporation. This was a defining moment in my early years. In 2000, this event resulted in “The War on Water”. This conflict involved riots, protests, and police who injured over one hundred-seventy protesters. At that time, of course, none of this made any sense to me. It still does not, but now, at least, I understand how our capitalist world functions.
Bodies of water, constantly in flux, are where the importation and exportation of commodities occur. Raw resources and labor that have been converted into products can be moved from one port to the other side of the world with relative ease. The marks of abusive and exploitative labor, essential for the production of these goods, are washed away once these commodities leave their port of call.

When we speak colloquially about globalization and the benefits of global interconnections, economic implications frequently go unmentioned. Globality\textsuperscript{16} would be a better term to use today. We live in a post-globalization moment that is not

\textsuperscript{15} Photo from the 2000 War on Water Strikes. Photo by: Thomas Kruse
\textsuperscript{16} Globality is the end-state of globalization – a hypothetical condition in which the process of globalization is complete or nearly so, barriers have fallen, and "a new global reality" is emerging.
necessarily focused on interweaving cultures and geographies. Instead, it is mostly concerned with economic policies that benefit only certain regions and specific groups of people. The ocean exists as an intersecting web of trade that moves the colonial European hydrarchy through history, which exists today under the banner of the dominant nations of the so-called “West.”

Traveling across water is how European peoples arrived to “discover” “new” lands and colonize them, initiating a process of linguistic and cultural hybridization. For non-western regions, the ocean continues to import policies and products from the West. This infiltration is a form of imperialism. Edward Said writes: “At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about settling on, controlling land that you do not posses, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others.”17 Imperialism and colonization go in hand and currently they continue to erase native cultures, including those that once thrived in Bolivia. Water is the substance that lubricates the mechanisms of containerized shipping—a crucial agent of imperialism—that transport packages of manufactured goods from one world to other for capitalist consumption.

---

17 Edward W. Said Culture and Imperialism. (New York: Knopf. 1993) 7
I use actual water, to represent specific bodies of water in my work, (as I did in *Anqas Korahua*) or rely on sound and video. *The Water in Between: Where I am to Where I Come From* the large video projection shows a view of the Atlantic Ocean, shot in Norfolk, Virginia. This site aids and abets the operations of global capital in the area I currently live. One of the sound channels in this piece also comes from this port: the sound of machines and cranes that handle imports and exports, loading and unloading limitless commodity and often we do not know how these were produced.

---

18 Still from video in the piece “THE WATER IN BETWEEN: Where I am and Where I come From” Displaying the Atlantic Ocean.
INVISIBLE LABOR

I am concerned with different forms of invisible labor. In many decolonial regions, women’s labor is “invisible labor.” Anonymous domestic labor—cooking, cleaning, and child rearing—happens all day, every day, unnoticed. As such, “domestic workers remain unrecognized under the Industrial Relations Act: unpaid domestic work is officially work, but paid domestic workers are not officially workers.”¹⁹

It is sunrise. I am walking in the streets of La Paz at 13,000 feet. I am in the city’s downtown surrounded by colonial buildings and snow-capped mountains. The colorful layers of polleras²⁰ and mantas²¹ catch my eyes, sharply contrasting with the ubiquitous gray concrete and drab paving stones. The filled awayus²² are crowded in the streets, the wawas²³ are crying because they want to sleep. I am observing and listening to the city’s early morning activity. Even though it is only 6:00AM there is already traffic, creating a cacophony of honks, beeps, and horns. About eighty percent of the people I see are women and children on their way to work. During my walk I met Andrea, who was heading to her job as a servant. She said:

I wake up at 4:00AM every day to get ready, cook, and clean the house. I get all the children dressed and ready. I serve breakfast, and we all leave the house, and walk to catch the bus. Joselito and Anita are going to school. Joselito just turned three and

¹⁹ Nancy A. Naples, Manisha Desai Women’s Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Global Politics. 161
²⁰ A pollera is a Spanish term for a big one-piece skirt worn by indigenous women who live in urban regions.
²¹ A manta is a Spanish word for a textile worn to cover the back.
²² Awayus are woven textiles worn by indigenous women. These textiles are to carry things on the back. Women carry their children or clothes, food, etc.
²³ Quechuan is a Native American language family spoken primarily in the Andes region of South America. It is perhaps most widely known for being the main language of the Inca Empire.
Anita is five years old. Clarita is going to work, she is sixteen and works as a servant with the Suarez family. Our home is about a thirty minute walk to the bus, and I have to arrive at work before 7:00AM. Once I get to work I prepare breakfast for the Morales family, then clean the kitchen, mop the floor, wash the dishes. I clean four rooms, three bathrooms, and I start making lunch at 11:00. I serve lunch at 1:30. Today lunch will be peanut soup and aji de pollo.\(^24\) I then clean the dishes from lunch, vacuum the house, the second and third floor are all carpet. I wash the clothes and iron them, and I hand wash delicate clothes like wool and silk. When I finish everything and it is about 6:30PM, I leave the Morales house, go home, and arrive at around 8:00PM. If I am not lucky, sometimes I cannot find space on the buses that are too full, so I have to wait a long time. Once I get home I cook dinner and take care of the wawas, my children go home at 4:00PM. Clarita picks them up from school and brings the home. After dinner, I help Joselito and Anita with school work and get them ready for bed, finish with all the house work and go to bed, four hours of sleep and wake up again. Clarita is like a mother to the children, she takes care of them when I am not there.

Andrea is a mother and a hard worker, both at home and outside. She is sleep deprived and one of the millions of women who toil every day of the year and whose labor is never recognized.

Hilary Klein, in her book Compañeras,\(^25\) writes the untold stories of women from Mexico that are part of the Zapatista communities.\(^26\) Klein has spent several years studying different Zapatistas communities. Klein writes the stories from indigenous Zapatista women that are very similar to the stories of indigenous women in Bolivia.

El Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional is an organization that began as a militant group in Chiapas. It is comprised mostly of indigenous people. Its objective is to

\(^24\) Aji de Pollo is a typical Bolivian food made with chicken, rice, and aji which is a spice.
\(^26\) “El Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional” (EZLN) named after Emiliano Zapata is a Mexican organization that began as a military effort. Whom political inspiration includes el zapatismo, marxismo, and socialismo libertario and its military structure is guerilla. This group was first formed in 1983 and uprisen in January 1st of 1994 for the first time in Chiapas Mexico.
fight for labor, land, homes, food, education, freedom, peace, and justice. The Zapatista communities in the past twenty years have done so much to protect their people and they continue to fight, their work over the past two decades has transformed practices, and stopped some of the physical abuse and labor.

Klein writes stories told to her by Zapatistas, their experiences before the EZLN rose, “Abuse from the landowners and extreme poverty were not all that women had to endure.” Maria, a Zapatista women says:

I wanted to go to school, but my father wouldn’t let me. He didn’t send me because I was a girl. He said there was no reason for me to study because men

27 Zapatista women at the Comandata Ramona Women’s Gathering (photograph by: Tim Russo)
have more rights. My mother didn’t want me to go either. They only wanted me to be in the kitchen and tending to the sheep.²⁸

While domestic labor is one form of labor that is not recognized because it is often considered an obligation for women, invisible labor is also integral to the production of commodities in places such as Bolivia. These similarities also exist in the everyday lives of indigenous women across the globe, and occur with greater frequency to women in less developed countries and to women of color. All of this happens on top of a situation of exploited labor, which is barely paid or not at all. In addition, women experience an extraordinary level of violence and discrimination; thus limiting their control over their own bodies. Domestic violence is generally considered normal and acceptable behavior. This is a pervasive underreported problem, according to the CIDEM in Bolivia, which reports 70% of women suffer from this form of abuse.²⁹

According to Klein these issues of machismo began with the Spanish colonists when they sought control over land, resources, and indigenous labor. They treated the local populace as slaves and subjected them to severe punishments and abuse. ³⁰

Maria, illustrates the ways in which many women also suffered at the hands of their own fathers and husbands:

My mother was always sick because she had so many children. She had fevers, headaches, her whole body would hurt...back then they had a custom of listening to your pulse when you were sick. They would take your hand, listen to your pulse, and then give your advice. When my grandmother listened to her pulse

²⁹ CIDEM is Centro de Información y Desarrollo de la mujer. (Center of information and women development)
she said it was my father’s fault because he hit my mother so much. He hit me too when I tried to help my mother, when I tried to defend her because I didn’t want him to hit her. My mother would be bathed in blood.31

Through all of these stories and facts we can witness the lasting effects of the colonialism in the decolonial era.

Indigenous communities disappear each year, and those that have not yet are getting smaller and smaller by the day. People are leaving their communities and traditions to enter a new type of bondage in the service of international corporations. By migrating to bigger cities or privatized farms, these workers labor for an extremely low salary. This issue has become increasingly problematic in the past decade. The indigenous cultures that have been in the Americas for so many thousands of years are being dissolved by a pervasive homogenization.

I am interested in addressing forms of labor. My process emphasizes repetitive forms of physical labor. In my thesis installation there the 12,000 coins, handmade through a procedure involving a type of labor that mimics mass production physical and monotonous work. Once the paste made from quinoa and coca leaves dries, each coin is individually hand-silver leafed. The Water in Between: Where I am and Where I come From also presents another form of labor; the hand-woven textile The process of making these textiles is tedious and takes about two months of weaving, several hours a day, to complete. Ultimately, these forms of labor are presented in The Water in Between: Where I am and Where I come From as the actual physical objects themselves.

31 Hilary Klein. Compañeras: Zapatista Women Stories. 19
WOVEN STORIES FROM NINO KORIN

In December of 2015 I visited Niño Korin, a community located in a valley in northwest Bolivia. This region is where the last Kallawayas communities live. The Kallawayas are Bolivia’s smallest ethnic group, and they inhabit six villages in the upper Charazani valley. The Kallawayas\(^{32}\) are a group of traditional healers and are direct descendants of the Tiwanaku culture, which can be traced to pre-Incan period. The Kallawayas women are weavers; they still practice this pre-Incan tradition passed down from mothers to the next generation of women.

\[\text{Kallawayas Women, photo by:Yoshi Shimizu}\]

\(^{32}\) The Kallawayas performed brain surgery as early as 700 CE and they also helped to save thousands of lives during the construction of the Panama Canal.

\(^{33}\) Kallawayas Women, photo by:Yoshi Shimizu
This journey of visiting this community was both magical and shocking. To get to Niño Korin from my hometown it is a ten-hour drive on a dirt road and extremely dangerous. For the entire trip I thought I was going to fall off a cliff at any moment. The road is a switchback that runs between towering mountains, with potholes every few feet. However, the view is breathtaking for the most part, and the bright blue sky touches the peaks of the Andes. I passed next to the peaks of snowy mountains and terraces from the Incas, while trying to catch my breath at very high altitude. My heartbeat was beating so fast from the height and the adrenaline that pumped into my bloodstream because I was on such a precarious road.

34 Photo of the Valley taken from The Road near Niño Korin
Once I arrived to Charazani, the “biggest” village in the Bautista Saavedra province, I could see Nino Korin across the mountains. Thirty little houses made from adobe, materialized before me. Marta, a Kallawayaya weaver from Niño Korin met me in Charazani to lead the way to Niño Korin. As we crossed down the valley and a river, she mentioned how important water was for the community. “This river is the most important vein of the Pachamama in this region, it keeps me alive, while keeping us alive. Thanks to water and the mother earth we have food and we can grow our crops and stay hydrated.”

Weaving in the Andes is a predominately female practice. My interest in a collaboration project with the weavers of Niño Korin was fostered by concerns about exploitation of female labor, an unrecognized and invisible labor that denies basic rights. I was deeply troubled by this in a time of the decoloniality, when “new forms of exploitation and colonization [coexist] with old forms.”\textsuperscript{35} The process of this ancient practice is important for indigenous communities. It establishes a connection between the weaver and the Mother Earth, the moon goddess, and the cosmos.

Even today, Quechuan histories are primarily passed from generation to generation via oral storytelling. The Quechua language has been written using Roman alphabet since the Spanish conquest and over time has been adapted to writing. Written

\textsuperscript{35} Verges, Francoise. Like a Riot: The Politics of Forgetfulness, Relearning the South, and the Island of Dr. Moreau
Quechua is not used much by the Quechua-speaking people. Before the transliteration of Quechua into written word everything was recorded in the form of symbols, which weavers continue to use today. The metaphor of weaving—an art traditionally associated with women and antiquity that combines heterogeneous parts into a greater whole—involves storytelling and mythmaking. Political and historic wisdom is created and disseminated in a domestic space. But most importantly, these textiles are created by people and are about people.


37 Vania Weaving at her yard in Niño Korin
she was executing small weaving projects, such as belts. Still honing her skills, she said: "I am still learning from my mother. The process is very complicated and we need to memorize how to make each symbol." The symbols in the textiles are passed from mother to daughter, and each weaver uses the symbols that she learned from her mother. The symbol of the “Sun,” for instance, is completely unique to the weaver of each textile. The entire process is enacted by the weaver’s hands. “It will take me years to have my mother’s hands,” Vania noted.

The process of weaving begins with carding fur from alpacas, llamas and vicuñas.\textsuperscript{39} Once the wool is gathered, it is spun on a wooden tool handmade for the drop spinning. In this part of the process wool is essentially rubbed between two hands to make it into a thread. The more practice a weaver has, the thinner and more

\textsuperscript{38} Details from textiles made by the Niño Korin Weavers. On the left: symbol of the sun Right: symbol of condors, are typical birds from the Andes, and mostly live around the Valley where Niño Korin is located.

\textsuperscript{39} The vicuña is one of two wild South American camelids that live in the high alpine areas of the Andes. It is a relative of the llama. Vicuña’s wool is very soft and warm.
consistent size the thread is. After the wool is spun once, it is colored with natural dyes made from plants, flowers, and earth. The dying process happens in large metal or ceramic containers. Dye and water are boiled with lemon used as a fixative. Once dyed, the wool is spun once again to make it more consistent in size and shape.

Each weaver has her own loom built from tree branches, this loom is typically located on the floor, allowing the weaver sit down and work. Weavers say they are connected with their loom and the loom is, in turn, attached to the earth. The threads are placed in the loom in multiple layers, often with six different layers of lines of thread almost touching each other. In the case of Nino Korin (it depends on the region), the

40 Process of making natural dyes--smashing flowers to extract the pigment.
weavers then attach white thread, which is inserted between layers to create each symbol. This weaving is done horizontally, line by line. After one line is done an alpaca bone is used to tightly compress the threads. The process of weaving is often a communal practice— weavers gather to weave. Weaving has played an important role in the lives of Andean women for thousands of years; these women have perfected the complex process of weaving, which involves a lot of thinking, time, and experience.
These textiles have become very popular around the world for their unique and colorful patterns and symbols, as well as the exacting and arduous production process. These textiles are sold internationally for prices ranging from three-hundred to one-thousand dollars. However, the key issue that concerns me is that the weavers make the least profit. When I visited the community one of the weavers said: “We make up to forty dollars per textile, it is a lot of work, we really enjoy doing it and is very important for us to make this in our communities, most of our clothes are made through weaving, but, it is currently a practice that does not sustain us, and we are starting to use synthetic wool because it is faster, but it is not the same, it is not as warm, and we need to be very warm because at night because it gets very cold.” In the past couple of decades, more and more synthetic wool has entered weaving communities. Using imported cheap wool, weavers make textiles that are increasingly alienated from the rich traditions of Andean culture. For reasons such as this, weaving as it was once known is disappearing. In order to earn a living, weavers elect instead to toil in factories with poor working conditions that mass produce goods for global markets. This type of exploitation is integral to the capitalist world we live in today, and something I would like to change. Five textiles woven by weavers from Nino Korin are presented in my thesis project. The project’s aim is to sell these textiles and deliver the earnings back to the weavers so the mothers and daughter can continue to weave, sustain themselves, and support to their communities.

When I was growing up, a very high percentage of indigenous women still wove. I knew this practice was disappearing, but, I did not know to what extent it actually was. Because there are so few communities that continue this practice, it was very difficult to
contact one. For several weeks, I tried to get in touch with people I knew from La Paz who lived in weaving communities. After several emails and many phone calls, I got in touch with Petrona, who was involved with Bolivia’s textiles museum. After speaking with her, only then I began to realize the multiplicity of factors contributing to the rapid dissolution of this practice.

One such factor is Bolivia’s drug trade. Bolivia is one of the top three producers of cocaine in the world. The cocaleros\(^42\) need more hands to cultivate and harvest their crops, and cartels infiltrate these communities to use their coca leaves to produce the drug. The international news does not often show the narcotráfico happening in this region of the Andes. One of the reasons for this is that Bolivia’s current president was a cocalero. In 2015, an un-regulated airport—the largest airport in the country—was built in the Chapare, which is the heart of Bolivia’s coca leaf-growing region.

The government claims that the leaves are for the internal consumption of the country. Let me make this clear: coca leaves have been considered sacred and medicinal for thousands of years. It is true that this leaf has beneficial properties for humans. It is good for altitude sickness, stomach aches, and since ancient times it has been used in important rituals performed by indigenous Bolivians. But, 80% of the leaves are cultivated solely for the production of cocaine. Production is controlled by international cartels, and majority of cocaine is exported to the United States and Europe. The current exportation of this product destroys communities and their way of life while also leading to the abuse of women and children.

\(^{42}\) Cocaleros are the coca leaf growers of Peru and Bolivia.
The exportation of products like quinoa has also been a significant factor in the dissolution of communities and traditions. There has been substantial debate about the controversial production practices of this grain. Some might say that it helps the people and the economy. Yes, it does create income. However, like cocaine, most of this income does not go to the people who are employed as labor. Instead, it only feeds massive capitalist corporations. Furthermore, quinoa is an incredibly important food for the people who live in the rural areas of the highland Andes. It is a superfood that balances the nutrition of people in this area, as most protein is hard to cultivate. This ancient grain’s price has increased 300% in the past decade, it has made it no longer affordable for the locals.

Woven Stories aims to create an exchange and dialogue with women from the Niño Korin community and create an alternative economy in which their labor is recognized, and to support the ancient practice of weaving that is being lost as a sustainable form of living.

--
MONEDAS

Monedas is the Spanish word for coins. I am interested in addressing the flooding of the global market with manufactured goods from non-western regions that are produced through the subjugation of indigenous populations. To this day, I believe our collective memories are impaired by an amnesia of history. As we consume mass-produced goods, produced anonymously in other lands, we are simply re-experiencing and re-making the “eighteenth-century shift when slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean gave European powers economic hegemony, all thanks to the silver extracted in colonial mines and to the production by slaves of coffee, sugar, and cotton.”

My research relates to this “forgotten history,” which includes genocide and the rape of women, and helps me realize the stigmas that are perpetuated in our contemporary world. Forgotten histories of our present moment become particularly real when I speak with women in my hometown of La Paz who are constantly abused, sometimes by their own husbands, to the point where they do not even realize that they are being abused.

The “coins” that appear in my installation are made from quinoa and coca leaves—two exploited resources that also exploit the labor of indigenous populations. These fake “coins” mimic the silver coins made from the silver found in the city of

---

43 Verges, Like a Riot: The Politics of Forgetfulness, Relearning the South, and the Island of Dr. Moreau
44 Verges, Like a Riot: The Politics of Forgetfulness, Relearning the South, and the Island of Dr. Moreau
Potosí, (from “El Cerro Rico” or the wealthy mountain), then located in alto Peru, in what is now Bolivia. These coins were made from early sixteenth to the late nineteenth century. According to legend, it is said that the amount of silver extracted from this mountain was enough to build a bridge from Bolivia to Spain. The silver from this mine fueled the economy of colonial Spain.

These coins became the official currency of colonial Spain and signified the inception of capitalism and an economy of power. The extraction of silver of during Spanish colonization is one aspect of history that is not often critically examined. This has had an incredibly strong impact in the economy of Europe and a negative impact in Potosí, which once was one of the richest and important cities in the world. Klein writes, “The Spanish colonial elite sought to control land and indigenous labor in the Americas, and created multiple systems of labor and exploitation to do so.” 45 These systems have been maintained and continue to be used through labor, and this goes in hand with the hierarchies that were created to make these systems possible, including gendered oppression.

45 Klein, Compañeras: Zapatista Women Stories. 7
The “coins” in *The Water in Between: Where I am and Where I Come From* are hand-made and individually silver leafed. They are symbols of the exploitative history that occurred during Spanish colonization. The same objects contain the resources—coca leaves and quinoa—that are today exploited in Bolivia and the surrounding regions. These resources are cultivated by people in the Andes region, including women and children.

46 The coins made for the piece THE WATER IN BETWEEN: Where I am and Where I Come From. 12,000 hand-made coins, made with coca and quinoa leaves, and individually silver leafed.
The coins are made through a repetitive production process creating the same object, over and over, for several weeks. They are then individually silver leafed, a gesture that gilds the resources with the silver of the past—a precious metal of exchange. These coins are placed in the floor in the installation *The Water in Between*. These are walked on once the viewer enters the space, and I am interested in the idea that the coins reject their monetary value as ephemeral objects.

---

47 Shoot of the coins and reflection of water projection installed in the piece THE WATER IN BETWEEN: Where I am and Where I Come From. Photo by: Alex Artz
Examining quinoa and coca leaves as exploited resources also occurs in the video and sound of *The Water in Between: Where I am and Where I Come From*. The sound of coca leaves and water being stepped on by workers for around eight hours to extract the juice from the leaf, to produce cocaine. The fifth channel plays sound from the quinoa fields where the production of this grain has increased so much so that farmers are now forcing the process unnaturally.

---

48 Coins made with Coca Leaves and Quinoa before being silver leafed
CONCLUSION

My work is a reaction to socio-cultural events that I have closely observed and experienced. Issues of gender, race, and social economic injustices inspire me to reveal and propose change. The work I make is inspired by personal experience, research, and from other artists such as Tanya Bruguera, and Joan Jonas.

The most recent body of work has been focused on my native country of Bolivia. However, the conversation around my practice is not limited only to Bolivia, rather it can exist within a much broader discourse of the global issues of capitalism, labor, and the lingering history of colonialism. This work engages the global discourse of contemporary art in a trans-cultural conversation that resonates differently in different parts of the world. The words of Tom Trever speak well to what I am trying to accomplish:

“Contemporary art provides a platform for self-critical questioning and reflection. It is a space to examine how experience is translated and re-presented in the wider world and, as such, inherently political concerned with social justice.”

---

49 Tom Trever, Port City on mobility and Exchange. 2007
BIBLIOGRAPHY


