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VISUAL ESSAY

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VISUAL ESSAY

# AESTHETICS OF POVERTY<sup>1</sup>: CHALLENGING THE FICTITIOUS SEPARATION BETWEEN INDIGENEITY AND MODERNITY

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## Abstract

Indigeneity is usually framed as modernity's Other. It is a narrative that confines Indigenous peoples to a place of deprived marginality or exotic romanticism. This perception is especially prevalent in mainstream visual representation of Indigenous people. In this photographic series, I seek to challenge the dichotomy between tradition and modernity by overlapping seemingly disparate elements such as traditional textiles and modern architecture. I started this exploration by mimicking early 19th century ethnological photography and current neoliberal multiculturalist imagery. In both cases, I use my own body, as an Indigenous woman of Aymara origin, to explore the mechanisms through which historical heritage operates simultaneously as emancipatory resistance and neo-colonial oppression.

Keywords: Indigenous representation, Modernity's other, Andean textiles, Indigenous women, Neo-colonial oppression

## INTRODUCTION

As a woman of Aymara heritage, this photographic series reflects a long-standing preoccupation of mine: how to go beyond preconceptions and stereotypes of indigeneity in photographs. Very often, I feel that the complexity I want to capture and share about a given individual or family is largely eclipsed, if not completely ignored, by perceptions on their racialised bodies. Complexity is replaced by the stereotypes attached to indigeneity. It is as if people are interested in finding their pre-conceived images rather than appreciating the particularities of a photograph. In my personal experience presenting my work at exhibition openings and seminars,<sup>2</sup> I observed how people's first perception of my photographs of Indigenous families evokes an impression of poverty. Tellingly, this is the case even when the photograph depicts a wealthy family as their Indigenous clothing appears to be enough to situate them in a place of marginality. Alternatively, others that do recognise their better-off economic status usually strip them from their indigeneity. In such instances, a wealthy Indigenous person becomes a "fake Indigenous", signalling that poverty – or at least a subordinated position – is constitutive of indigeneity.<sup>3</sup> These stereotypes resonate with a broader narrative that situates indigeneity at the antipodes of modernity. Following the perspectives of Mignolo and Vazquez, who regard aesthetics as an integral component of the colonial power structure, this photographic series was created with the explicit aim of challenging these narratives and related aesthetics, hence its chosen title.<sup>4</sup>

In trying to reflect on this, I started by looking at the history of visual representation of Indigenous people, particularly in Latin America. The age of the Enlightenment brought the development of modern physiognomy and with it the elaboration of theories of racial difference. Under the idea of phenotypic variation of the body as a signifier of race, an apparatus of segregation was created. Assumptions derived from Scientific Racism that all races evolve differently as a result of genetic combinations and other factors, helped to reinforce this apparatus. As Anibal Quijano explains, European colonial power used race as a social classification to justify imperialist expansion and legitimise oppression.<sup>5</sup> These pseudoscientific beliefs were a bit abstract at that time and so it needed more concrete and visual imagery. Colonized people were therefore depicted as objects of anthropological and ethnographic studies, usually naked, subjugated and living in precarious conditions.<sup>6</sup> The photographic works produced by individuals like the German Lehmann-Nitsche in the Argentinian Chaco or by the French expedition Créqui-Montfort in Bolivia were widely disseminated as supposed evidence of Indigenous people's placement at a lower stage in the so-called human evolutionary hierarchy.<sup>7</sup>

Current representations of indigeneity, however, have taken a different celebratory tone. Largely attributed to the influence of "neoliberal multiculturalism,"<sup>8</sup> photographic works such as "Genesis" by Sebastian Salgado<sup>9</sup> or "Before They Pass Away" by Jimmy Nelson<sup>10</sup> often present idealized images that celebrate the cultural distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples while attaching certain essentialist attributes



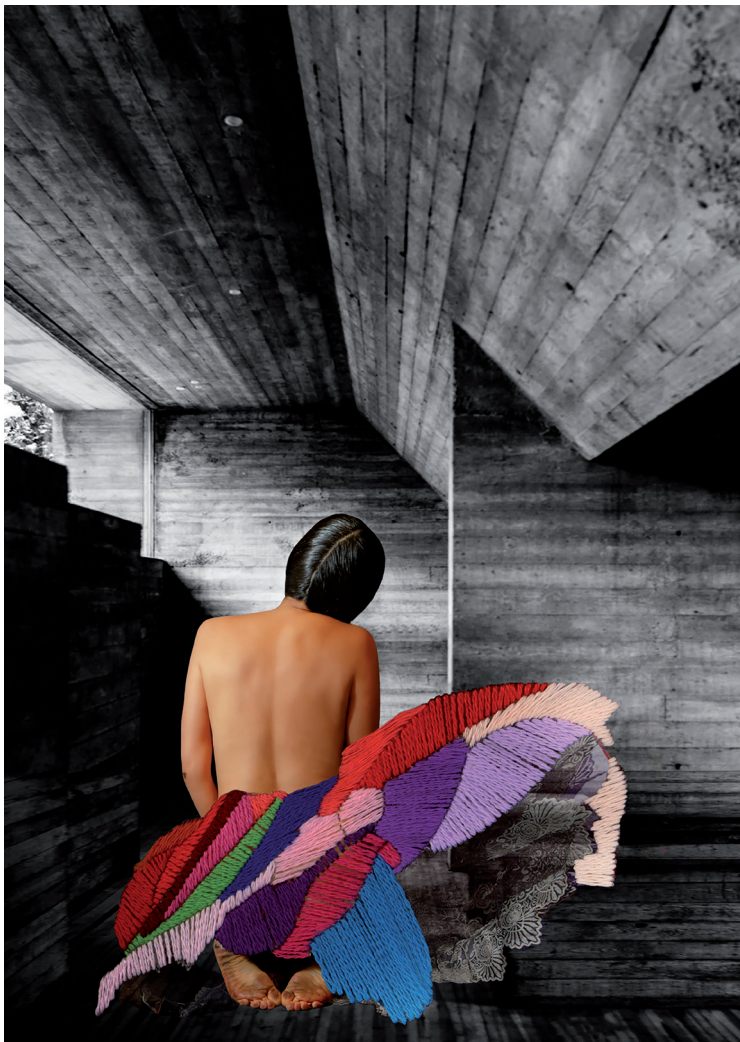
to them. Following Siebert, “multicultural democracies reduce indigeneity to culture, and as a result obscures the colonial status of Indigenous nations.”<sup>11</sup> An Indigenous person is expected to live in harmony with nature, and to represent an alternative to capitalist modernity. This could be a new form of colonialism in as much as it relegates them to subordinate spaces, distant rural territories, and impoverished livelihoods. Multiculturalist visions of indigeneity replaced the naked body by dressing it in colourful clothing and exotic artefacts. Indigenous fabrics and textiles have become an iconic representation of indigeneity, more so than in the past.

With these insights, I decided to look at the Aymara traditional textiles and skirts called *aguayos* and *polleras*, respectively. Both are still very common in the Andean region. *Aguayos* are used to carry various objects on the back and, more emblematically, babies. It is a practice heavily gendered though and it has been argued that its celebration hides the historic oppression and extra burden delegated to Aymara women.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, *polleras* are symbols of female indigeneity and have been historically associated with the process of racialization. To some extent, wearing these clothes, especially in contexts of racism and discrimination, have also been claimed as a symbol of resistance in emancipatory identity politics.<sup>13</sup> Following the discourse of neoliberal multiculturalism, however, photographers and anthropologists have romanticised the usage of these fabrics and skirts to reproduce common stereotypes. To engage with the latter, I decided to focus on the notion of indigeneity as modernity's other. I wanted to challenge the narrative that portrays Aymara people as separate from the experience of modernity. I find that very simplistic, not least because the fabrics themselves are nowadays been manufactured in the main centres of the global garment industry.<sup>14</sup>

My process of creation involved research into 18th-century representations of Indigenous people in Latin America. I used three pictures taken by the German anthropologist Lehmann-Nitsche, who forced two teenagers, Tsháiek and Nróik,<sup>15</sup> to pose naked next to a measuring stick in front, side, and back positions. I mimicked this procedure with my own body, both to experiment with the feeling and the photographs. Following neoliberal multiculturalist ideas that romanticise indigeneity, I covered my nakedness using two different strategies that were evolving throughout the process of this project.<sup>16</sup> The first strategy centred around embroidery, a technique I used to modify and cover the nakedness portrayed in the photographs. This served as a means to render visible the hidden labour of Indigenous people within a capitalist system. The second one employed actual Indigenous fabrics and skirt *polleras* that covered my body.

In all the photographs of this project, I also wanted to address a crucial theme: challenging the artificial division between indigeneity and modernity often perpetuated in visual representations of Indigenous people. To do this, I collected images classified as “modern” architecture and used them as backgrounds. I then inserted images of sculptures featuring my own naked body covered with Aymara textiles and skirt *polleras*. With these photographs, I aimed to emphasize the fictitious nature of the separation between indigeneity and modernity. But beyond this, I also

sought to capture the reality that our incorporation into capitalist modernity has occurred on exploitative and disadvantageous terms. This is represented in the shapes of the bodies and gestures within the photographs. These aspects reflect the complexities of Indigenous identity within the context of a capitalist modern world, highlighting the exploitation and disadvantages that often accompany this integration.



































## IMAGE CAPTIONS

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- 1 In 2022, apart of this project was featured in the 'The World Seen by Latin American Women' exhibition at 59 Rivoli in Paris.
- 2 For instance, take my project "Marks and Looks," a series of portraits featuring a diverse array of individuals residing in the American Chaco Region that covers four countries. My intention was to showcase the rich heterogeneity within this group of people. However, I observed that the predominant response from viewers often fixated on their perceived poverty and sorrow. This reaction puzzled me, especially considering that the format of these photographs consisted of close-up shots and the subjects' expressions were rather neutral.
- 3 An emblematic example of this issue is evident in how the media portrayed Evo Morales, Bolivia's first Indigenous president, during his overthrow. White/mestizo elites and certain Indigenous leaders who opposed his leadership repeatedly labelled him as a "Fake Indigenous." Their argument centred on Morales supposedly indulging in luxuries such as dining at expensive restaurants or having a small jacuzzi in his apartment.
- 4 Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," [https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/decolonial-aestheSis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aestheSis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/).
- 5 Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (1 March 2007): 4.
- 6 Philippa Levine, "States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination," *Victorian Studies* 50, no. 2 (2008): 189–219.
- 7 Lena Dávila Da Rosa, "Los Atlas Antropológicos de R. Lehmann-Nitsche," XI Congreso Argentino de Antropología Social, 2014 ; Alejandro Raúl Martínez, "Imágenes fotográficas sobre pueblos indígenas," PhD diss., Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 2011. <http://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/handle/10915/5051>; Gabriela Zamorano, "Traitorous Physiognomy: Photography and the Racialization of Bolivian Indians by the Créqui-Montfort Expedition (1903)," *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2011): 425–455.
- 8 Peter Wade, "The Presence and Absence of Race," *Patterns of Prejudice* (29 January 2010): 54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220903507628>
- 9 Sebastião Salgado and Lélia Wanick Salgado, *Genesis* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2013).
- 10 Jimmy Nelson and Mark Blaisse, *Before They Pass Away* (Kempen: teNeues Verlag, 2013).
- 11 Monika Siebert, *Indians Playing Indian: Multiculturalism and Contemporary Indigenous Art in North America* (University of Alabama Press, 2015), 25.
- 12 Rossana Barragán, "Entre polleras, lliqllas y ñañacas. Los mestizos y la emergencia de la tercera república," *Etnicidad, economía y simbolismo en los Andes: II congreso internacional de etnohistoria* (2014): 85–127.
- 13 Huascar Rodríguez García, "Género, mestizaje y estereotipos culturales: el caso de las cholas bolivianas," *Maguaré*, no. 24 (2010): 37–67.
- 14 This type of imagery not only objectifies Indigenous people but also exacerbates their marginalization, effectively concealing the harsh realities of labour exploitation that they frequently face. Idealized depictions of indigeneity additionally create a gap between these individuals and the products of their labour. This complex situation presents a compelling and vital opportunity for further investigations.
- 15 In 1899, a group of 24 Toba Takshik were brought from the Chaco region to Buenos Aires. The Uruguayan Jose Podesta tried to exhibit this group as part of the "Live Displays of Colonized Peoples" at The Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris.
- 16 This photographic series is composed from 45 photographs, from which I am presenting a selection of 12 in the present visual essay.