



Art and Politics

Identity and the Art of Unbecoming a Colony BY MARISTELLA SVAMPA

THROUGHOUT LATIN AMERICA, THEATRE, ART and music are springing up as forms of cultural activism linked closely with new social movements. Bolivia is no exception. Nevertheless, the strong presence of large social organizations, many of them ethnic in nature, makes the social and political role of cultural collectives and organizations somewhat invisible. Yet, these groups play an important role in the creation of new political understandings and in the reproduction and expansion of social struggles.

The cities of El Alto and La Paz are host to a variety of artistic expressions, cultural collectives and artistic organizations that are permeated by a strong narrative about decolonization. Some of these groups are already quite firmly established thanks to funds from non-profit organizations and international cooperation. Teatro Trono, founded in 1989 in El Alto, is an example of one such long-term and innovative project that stimulates collective work through experiences in the daily lives of youth, probing social themes such as gender equity, poverty and globalization. Most of Teatro Trono's founders were street children.

Likewise, the Casa de las Culturas

Wayna Tambo (Wayna Tambo Youth Cultures House), which in Aymara means "meeting of youth," was received positively when it emerged in 1995 as an alternative cultural space combining a focus on the Andean Aymara with a strengthening of cultural diversity. Another example of this type of cultural activism is Mujeres Creando (Women Creating), a very creative and provocative anarchist and feminist collective that uses graffiti to make the streets its principal stage. These women, considered "street agitators," openly defend sexual diversity ("indias, putas y lesbianas, juntas, revueltas y hermanadas"—"Indian women, whores and lesbians, together, entangled and in eternal sisterhood"). Two of its founders, María Galindo and Julieta Paredes, have been widely recognized internationally.

The relationship between art and politics developed significant nuances after the so-called Black October massacre in 2003, which took more than 80 lives in the city of El Alto. The massacre led to the resignation of then President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and enshrined the city of El Alto as a symbol of resistance. These events demonstrated the need to rethink history in the context of the

intensification of social struggles, particularly in regards to the city's Aymara ethnic identity. The arts took on the role of evoking the victims of the massacre and demanding justice and reparations. Examples abound of the emergence of new cultural and political activism, with theatre works such as "Pacto Telúrico" ("Telluric Pact") in which various groups of artists and musicians got together, or records like "Canto Encuentro" that pay homage to the victims of El Alto, produced by Radio Wayna Tambo and Radio Pachamama (which operates from the Gregoria Apaza Cultural Center), or the cultural actions of the Federation of Neighborhood Boards of El Alto, known by its Spanish acronym as FEJUVE. (Federación de Juntas Vecinales de El Alto). In all these cases, the protagonists sought to build bridges between the long memory of indigenous struggles and the memory of more recent events (the water and gas wars), establishing El Alto as the great symbolic city of resistance.

Different forms of cultural activism have highlighted the fact that El Alto is a city that hides several worlds; perhaps most importantly, it hosts a new urban youth culture which, because of its hy-



brid and plebeian nature, may find it difficult to assimilate the concept of an Aymara-centric culture. Radio Wayna Tambo reflects this diversity of interests clearly—since its creation in 2002, it has provided a space of encounter for several youth groups—with their cultural and expressive styles—and to feminist collectives, which often are relegated to the back burner because of ideas about collective rights or “complementary” relations, a view fomented by the traditional, government-promoted indigenous cosmivision. The first expressions of Aymara rap, hip hop, which in its Bolivian form manages to mix the sound of *pututus* (bull’s horns) with flutes and Andean drums and to rhyme Spanish with Aymara, were originally heard there. One of the great representatives of this genre, Abraham Bojórquez, and his *Ukamau y ké* (Así es y qué/That’s the Deal and So What?), died tragically in 2009. His songs reflected the search for a remake of Aymara identity in the context of the new social and political process.

But in the last few years, as the researcher Johana Kunin reminds us, the rap of the altiplano in its different variations has tended to become institutional-

ized through the involvement of international financing and non-governmental agencies (NGOs), as well as official support. For example, the Wayna Tambo rappers have participated in many government activities such as the celebration of the nationalization of the hydrocarbon industry, while other groups in La Paz have made video clips to educate citizens about traffic rules and noise pollution, with financing from the city and some NGOs.

It is not only for the rappers of El Alto that music is a starting point for the reconstruction of identity. Another example is that of the Afro-Bolivian associations, which are recuperating the traditional *Saya* from their African heritage to reconstruct an ethnic identity that had been rendered invisible. *Saya*, which incorporates elements of music and dance, became the letter of introduction of the Afro-Bolivians (some 30,000 Bolivians) to the rest of Bolivian society, and their presence was affirmed in 2008 with recognition in the New Political Constitution for a Plurinational State.

To conclude, in spite of all this activity, a paradoxical situation has developed under the government of Evo Morales. Political art is taking off in two parallel

Theater, art and music are blooming in El Alto and La Paz as a form of cultural activism. Above, top: a musical group performs *Saya*; all other images are of Teatro Trono.

lines. Art in support of the open constitutional reform process in 2006 was indeed visible. But there has been a lack of public policies in the area of culture, as well as a lack of will on the part of the government to promote a more anti-hegemonic historical-political narrative. And several cultural groups and organizations consider that the discourse of decolonization espoused by the government is supported by a folkloric version of ethnicity and with a merely instrumental concept of culture.

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