

Reclaiming *Travesti* Histories

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1 Colonial ordinances and assumptions

If any Indian male dresses in female Indian clothes or any Indian female in male Indian clothes, the ... Mayor should arrest them. The first time they should be given one hundred lashes and have their hair cut in public. The second time they should be tied for six hours to a pole at the market in full view of all. The third time they should be sent to the sheriff of the valley or to the Mayor of the Villa de Santiago de Miraflores, to have justice done to them in conformity with the law. (Gregório Gonzales de Cuenca *Ordenanzas de los Indios* [Ordinances of the Indians], 1556)

This ordinance, passed 450 years ago by the Spanish colonial government, was the first legal proscription of *travestism* in Peru. Its origins lie in the Bible: 'The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment ...' (Deuteronomy Ch. 22, verse 5), and 'Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given to her for a covering' (1 Corinthians Ch. 12, verses 14–15).¹ Bonnie and Vern Bullough observe that since 'simulated sex-change was often a part of the fertility cults of the time, the biblical writers were probably much more hostile to cross-dressing at this time than were later commentators' (Bullough and Bullough 1993: 40). They underestimated later levels of hostility.

Nearly 500 years ago, the Spanish colonisers came to Latin America to assume control of the Inca Empire (c. XIII–1538 AD). Their desire for the rumoured unlimited gold was a large part of the reason for their subjugation of the continent, along with the prestige of Empire and a cheap labour force. Judge Gonzales de Cuenca presented the *Ordenanzas de los Indios* as the genesis of a new order. This departed from the *encomienda* system, where indigenous localities were assigned to settlers to manage, and moved to the *reductions* system, where indigenous localities were converted to

Christianity and then returned to their former Indian administrators. The Crown expected to recuperate the control of production by integrating Indian administrators into the colonial scheme of power. This new organisation also claimed, at least on paper, to preserve parts of native cultures. The requirement of Christian conversion and the prioritisation of production implied the opposite, and led to suppression of some indigenous identities.

Travestis, a term that has survived into contemporary times and is used in Latin America to describe those who cross genders, cross-sex and cross-dress, came from one of these suppressed identities. The very concept of *travesti* (literally, 'cross-dressing') was born out of the colonisers' fixation with gender binaries including the imperative to dress according to one's place within a rigid gender dichotomy, in which there were two clearly defined sexes and two genders premised on these sexes.² Pre-Hispanic gender was read through this lens; *travestism* became, within this schema, dressing across the binary.

While *travesti* was originally a pejorative adjective, it has been reworked into a political noun by Argentinean and Peruvian *travesti* activists, renaming the 'duality as power', which androgyny and hermaphroditism meant in ancient cultures of both East and West. In this article, I trace the pre-Hispanic history of *travestis* in Peru. I explore what recovering the valorisation given to the role of the *travesti* in indigenous culture has to offer the struggles of *travestis* for rights and recognition in contemporary Peru.

2 The pre-Hispanic gender continuum and colonial reaction

In pre-Hispanic times, gender was not limited to only masculine or feminine. Principles of non-binary thinking remain apparent in the design of the traditional Andean woven Aymara bag, which is formed through repeated paired bands of different colours in a way that each has its pair on the opposite half of the bag (Cereceda 1986). The total

Figure 1 Ink roller printing from the original Moche culture *huaco* (pottery), in Arboleda (1981)



number of bands is always odd so one of them always remains without a pair, acting as the central axis (*Chhima*), separator as well as nexus of these two halves. This concept of 'one amongst paired things but without a pair' (*Chhullu*), can be used to re-interpret the persons depicted as below by Spanish chroniclers throughout Colonial America:

... generally among the Andean and Yungas, the demon has placed this vice beneath a sort of sanctity, so that every temple or major worshipping place has a man or two, or more, depending on the idol, who dress as women ever since they were children, and talk as such, imitating women in their manners, dress and everything else. On holidays and religious festivals, the masters and nobles have carnal and indecent intercourse with these people. This I know because I have punished two of them: one of them an Indian of the Andes, in a temple that they call Guaca, from the province of Conchucos, border of the city of Huanuco; the other one was from the province of Chincha. I talked to them about this wicked thing they committed, and aggravating the indecency of this sin, they answered that it was not their fault, because ever since their childhood they have been put there by their chiefs for this wicked and abominable vice, and to be priests and guard the temples of their idols. (Pedro Cieza de León 1553, *La Crónica del Perú* [The Chronicles of Peru, author's translation])

For the Catholic colonialists, there was no place for alternative gender roles. But why should those who took on such roles have provoked such hatred, condemnation and punishment as described above? To illuminate this question, I turn to Murray Davis:

[A]nything that undermines confidence in the scheme of classification on which people base their lives sickens them as though the very ground on which they stood precipitously dropped away. The vertigo produced by the loss of cognitive orientation is similar to that produced by the loss of physical orientation ... People will regard any phenomenon that produces this disorientation as 'disgusting' or 'dirty'. To be so regarded, however, the phenomenon must threaten to destroy not only one of their fundamental cognitive categories but their whole cognitive system. (Davis 1983, cited in Bornstein 1994: 72)

The practices of these 'priests' were so at odds with the Spanish colonial theocentric and phallogocentric view, that the Spaniards could rationalise that they were saving natives even while they were exploiting them and obliterating elements of their culture. Colonial ordinances ordered the 'Indians', categorising and counting them: a powerful tool to enforce the docility and utility of Indian bodies.

3 Controlling bodies

A pre-Hispanic print (Figure 1), agreed by several anthropologists to be depicting a religious event, shows winged men preparing and offering a brew to a copulating couple, one superhuman and one 'bi-gender', while gods and humans watch and wait, eating human meat as part of the ritual. The *travestied* body appears to mediate between the natural and supernatural worlds.

Let us now move to contemporary Peru, where in some parts of the Andes, *travestis* perform ancestral harvest rituals – now portrayed as 'dance exhibitions', which continue to play an important social role within

communities. They have exchanged *calientito* (an Andean alcoholic beverage) for beer, and low heels for transparent platform shoes, as they successfully transform their ritual into a technical dance show. It is instructive to note that this happens in places where development has not been wholly successful. This does not mean that development constitutes destruction, nor that these societies have remained 'pure'. What I am suggesting is that perhaps the diminished impact of development has permitted the building of a bridge, maybe not too solid or formulated, but enough to allow inclusion through a correlation between two cultures, past and present.

In post-colonial times *travesti* has been interpreted through the identities of 'LGBT' (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). The inclusion of *travesti* within these normative sexual identities shows how alternative genders have become categorised through the lens of sexuality as a result of a lack of historical perspective. The association of *travesti* with sexual – rather than alternative gender – identities has led to them being subject to discrimination and attack on the basis of their assumed sexuality. A report by the Citizens Commission on Human Rights notes that the Peruvian Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) 'tended to view gay men and lesbians as "anti-revolutionary" or as "products of bourgeois decadence" and therefore as a threat to the leftist political project' (ICCHRLA 1996: 19). Chauvin (1991) reports that in 1990 and 1991, more than 40 *travestis* were killed in Lima, Peru, by right-wing groups known as *mata cabros* or 'kill faggots'. By these means, the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report records the MRTA 'aimed to legitimate themselves before the population, encouraging the social preconceptions against homosexuality' (IFCVR 2003: 433).

We see here the results of a tragic misunderstanding: in their revolt against post-colonial sexual freedoms, the anti-colonialists inscribed further the ideology of the colonialists. Here we see biblical ideology being reinforced by the (atheist) extreme left wing. Sexual activists and researchers perpetuate this worsening situation by working within a colonial framework, instead of building development upon pre-colonial discourse.

Gender lost its breadth, depth and elasticity during the colonial exchange of beliefs and ideologies. This has not been recouped in post-colonial times.

However, the Peruvian *travesti* remains as the hinge between pairs, previously connecting the pre-Hispanic worlds of gods and humans and the living and dead, and now, linking past to present. *Travestis* persist in performing mediating roles within society, then as shamans and now as beauticians or witches, therapists that listen and transform – by injecting liquid silicon into the bodies of their peers.³ This contemporary scene powerfully resembles that portrayed in the Moche pottery portrayed above: a group of *travesti* friends warming up with some alcoholic beverage offered by the 'patient', chatting about and planning the non-anaesthesia septic procedure to be realised – that would realise them. The exploration of the self, with its post-modern shifts, remains intact. *Travestis* connect the different sides of beings: spiritual and material, reality and dream. They and their roles have not disappeared. They have mutated.⁴

4 The twenty-first century *travesti*

Modern legal battles around transgender identity recognition are subject to and reproduce gender normativity. Even the most progressive, as in Belgium, Germany, the UK and Spain, fail to validate ambiguous gendered self-expression. While people in these countries have won certain rights to change sex, they do not yet have any rights to choose to stay at an in-between state, or transit back and forth. Concepts like 'gender dysphoria' or 'gender identity disorder' are used to justify transsexual operations and legal recognition of changed sex. However, these concepts are in themselves anchored to gender normativity, denying intersexualism and occasional *travestism*. In this context of gender normativity, some *travestis* have adopted 'hysterical' practices pursuing an idealised femininity. These are outlined below.

4.1 Body transformation

Many of my *travesti* colleagues and friends inject liquid silicon into their bodies to increase voluptuousness of chest, hips and buttocks, in spite of the potential for disfigurement and threats to health (e.g. substance migration around the body, tumours, necrosis, infection, pulmonary embolism or death). This 'decision' has many edges. The *travesti* majority is poor, and thus excluded from other more expensive options for bodily transformation, since health policies define these procedures as 'cosmetic', although they are essential to their psychological well-being. *Travestis* also seek alternative services –

shamans, beauticians, automedication – since they do not trust the health services. These factors, combined with a lack of knowledge and low self-esteem result in a complex route back to liquid silicon as the only way to meet their goal. Cosmetic surgery implants and automedicated ingestion of hormones, although perhaps initially ‘successful’, can also fail in the medium or longer term due to side-effects or changes in aesthetic trends.

One friend, Carla, for example, had injected liquid silicon into her forehead, cheeks, chest, hips and buttocks to achieve the desired voluptuousness. After emigrating to Europe and earning enough money, her aesthetic and procedure perceptions changed. She decided to go for silicone implants. The surgeon told her that in order to do so, they would have to remove all the liquid silicon, including from those parts of the body to where it had migrated, prior to proceeding. Carla decided to go ahead with this painful procedure that has now left large scars. When I asked her if she was satisfied with the results, she answered affirmatively. Might she have pursued different aims or used different methods without normative pressures?

4.2 Choice of ‘macho’ partners and violent relationships

I met Rosa when we were teenagers. Some years later I ran into her at a club and asked where she had disappeared to. She answered that she now has a violent and controlling partner who does not allow her to leave home, and that she was out partying only because he was away on a work trip. After some time I met her again. She told me everything was better, that things changed since they started ‘modern’ (exchanging active and passive roles) sex, and the beatings, verbal violence and isolation had stopped. Gender-busting practices have liberated both partners.

4.3 Denial of their sexually active role

Travestis commonly admit to taking only a passive role with their sexual partners, and may ridicule those who do otherwise. When I met Gata at a discotheque, we quickly started talking about men and sex. Later a common friend told me Gata had a female partner and two children and that she does sex work as the breadwinner for her family. I asked our common friend why Gata had not told me. The friend explained that other *travestis* tease Gata about it, to which she objects violently. Gata had somehow

developed two genders, one for her social scene and work, and one for her family life.

4.4 Denial of the ‘former’ male they were

When he decided to dress as a woman, Jana tore up family photographs of herself where she appeared as a man, and asked her mother to give away all her men’s clothes to the church. At the same time, he gave up work as a teacher of religion and she became a hairdresser. Some days later she bumped into ‘himself’ at home; her mother had disobeyed, giving her past clothes to her brother. Today Jana is a *travesti* activist with a Masters degree in gender studies. When watching a family video, she came across a strange man on the screen; suddenly she realised that man was herself. When prompted on what she experienced when facing up to ‘himself’ again, she could not describe the feeling. A sort of pity, maybe embarrassment, maybe nostalgia, filled her face: ‘It seems that man should have happened a long time ago’.

4.5 The worst of both gender roles

Travestis have inherited the worst of both gender roles. When a *travesti* is beaten, she is perceived as male enough for policemen, or anyone, to freely hit him. In relationships it depends. Sometimes masculinity prevails when it comes to working to maintain the family and/or partner. Sometimes femininity prevails, as *travestis* are subjects of violence and victimisation by the same family circle. Suddenly, once again, masculinity takes over when the law arbitrates. In the labour market, discrimination means sex work is almost the only available option.

This wrong time/place situation has deepened for contemporary *travestis* with the incongruity between their practices of a sensuality that defy gender boundaries, and a discourse of binary genders as the cornerstone of identity construction. Through their journey, from dresses to bodies, *travestis* have turned the ‘hystericisation of the woman’s body’ – that Foucault argued in an early draft of his *Histoire de la Sexualité* (Foucault 1979) – into an essence, and appropriated it within their own discourse; transmuting the violence outside and taking it inside their minds and bodies.

It is not simply a matter of assigning *travestis* a unique gender or sexuality, nor taking for granted their homosexuality or their desire to become a genital woman.⁵ *Travestis* need freeing from normative

pressures, to enable them to actualise their own self-expression. Far from being unreflexive products of culture, *travestis* undergo critical processes of self-examination, which might usefully be deployed in a wider context.

4.6 Post-feminist transgender?

Where is the post-feminist transgender? When did vestments as symbols of power, the androgynous as double synonym of perfection, get lost? How did the enriching multiple points of view (before: a female within a male body; after: a male within a female body) as a major advantage, become denied? The effort to reclaim *travesti* subjectivity has ramifications that also affect women. The challenge to *travesti* exclusion is not enough by itself. It needs to be paralleled by studies of the subjectivities of Pre-Hispanic Peruvian women, to challenge the stereotypes that exclude and oppress them.⁶ The demand from *travestis* that they be recognised and empowered as the women they visibly are, challenges the stereotype that the poverty and powerlessness of Peruvian women is natural, and can be allowed to remain. Thus the demand for *travesti* rights is inextricably bound up with the aims of the feminist movement to emancipate women, of all kinds, everywhere.

5 Reflections

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. (Lorde 1984: 112)

For Peru's *travestis* the struggle for rights and for recognition can be fortified if only we could reclaim our history. Revisiting pre-Hispanic

traditions that show the existence of in-between genders reveals how we have been forced to fit colonial gender binaries. Peruvian *travestis* are not alone: indigenous transgender identities existed across cultures, space and time the world over, suppressed and reviled by colonial Christianities. Reclaiming our history calls for us not only to reconstitute the inclusive culture of the past, but to reclaim *travesti* identities in all their variety. We need to enquire into *travesti* pasts in all regions of our country to affirm *travestis* in the present and build respect for contemporary *travestis*' desires and needs, whether as consumers, religious people, sex workers, bisexuals, parents or women. As this article suggests, and as activities such as the *Travesti* Museum of Peru – a travelling exhibition celebrating pre-Hispanic and contemporary *travesti* culture – demonstrate, art's political dimension can be used to powerful effect in this struggle.

Maybe it is time for a new challenge of the structure of 'the Master's House', which as Afro-American lesbian feminist Audre Lorde noted, cannot be dismantled using the master's tools. *Travestis* are indeed objects of gender. But they are also subjects, capable of gender self-determination, as many feminists in the 1960s demanded. It is time to listen to the wide range of critical inter-sex and transgender narratives and learn from their problematisation of conventional gender thinking, and from their experiences. To do this, we need to work with women's movements to move beyond the limiting dichotomies that constrain us all. Applying the principle of gender relativity would result in a healthier and wiser development, one in which people can claim their rights to combine genders, to transit and to choose.

Notes

- 1 Deuteronomy Ch. 22, verse 5, and 1 Corinthians Ch. 12, verses 14–15; King James Authorised Translation.
- 2 Much feminist work has problematised gender binaries (e.g. see Butler 1990). There is also voluminous research on alternative transgender formulations in the anthropological and historical studies of spiritual traditions, strongly reinforcing the view of gender as a continuum (e.g. see Eliade 1964; Bullough and Bullough 1993; Conner *et al.* 1997 and Herdt 1996). Only the Judeo/Christian/Muslim complex of faiths insists on this particular juxtaposition of binary sexes and genders.
- 3 Examples like this have been held by legal and health authorities to be unethical/criminal, but is not dissimilar to reaction to anti-abortion policies and the lack of gender opportunities and a society willing to find a culprit other than itself.
- 4 On this point, the literary metaphor of Latin America as a *travesti* is useful; *travestism* becomes a historical, not metaphorical, model for the cultural development of any colonised territories such as the Americas.

5 Sex work is an ideal metaphor when working on this issue; gender and eroticism not as desires, rather as results, of the sex market and gender labels.

6 The investigation 'Divine and Human' done by Marisa Villavicencio and exhibited in 2004 in Peru, Mexico and USA re-contextualises women's roles in former Peruvian societies.

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