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**Envisioning gender, indigeneity and urban change: The case of La Paz, Bolivia**

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# Envisioning gender, indigeneity and urban change: The case of La Paz, Bolivia

## Abstract

La Paz, Bolivia, and its neighbouring city, El Alto, have been experiencing patterns of urban accumulation, dispossession and displacement that demonstrate the importance of social, cultural and historical logics to understanding the politics of urban space. A striking feature of these patterns is that the image of the person who has accumulated enough wealth to displace people, is that of an indigenous woman. The Aymaran woman, traditionally dressed in *pollera* skirt and Derby hat, who pays in cash for luxurious properties in the affluent, white area of the Zona Sur, is a trope that has entered popular culture and political discourse. In this article, I explore the development of this cultural trope from its emergence in the 2009 film named after the area in question, Zona Sur, and subsequent uses of images of this film in social media to describe and resist political changes in the city as related to space, property and belonging. My contention is that the trope of the rich Aymaran woman, and the reversal of expected patterns of urban development that she represents, places the colonial, cultural and gendered dynamics that structure how capital shapes urban space, into sharp relief. The rich Aymaran woman who has made her money in informal commerce transgresses ideas of propriety and belonging in La Paz, and also received ideas about urban processes and gender in critical geographical literature.

**Keywords:** Bolivia; film; gender; indigeneity; informality; urban theory

## Introduction

La Paz, Bolivia and its neighbouring ‘boom town’ city of El Alto are experiencing the results of a ten year economic boom that has facilitated substantial infrastructure development, attracted significant foreign investment, and led to an exponential rise in real estate prices (IMF 2015). Predictably, these developments have led to changing patterns of mobility across the city as the financial potential of the economic

and real estate booms is unleashed, and new transport links connect excluded with affluent areas. Perhaps surprisingly, the main beneficiaries of these processes are people of indigenous or mestizo descent working in the vast informal markets in the North of La Paz and the city of El Alto – areas that have erstwhile been considered marginalised, and the latter even referred to as a ‘slum’ (Davis 2006, 28). Such is the economic growth in these areas that their predominantly Aymara-speaking inhabitants are buying up property in the salubrious, and mostly white, Zona Sur [Southern Zone] neighbourhood of La Paz. This phenomenon has received widespread coverage in the Bolivian press, been noted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2015), and confirmed by local real estate agents. ‘Everyone has a story, they’re the ones who are buying most’ (Interview, Estate Agent, August 2015).

In film, television, social media, the press, and local discourse, the way that these processes of change are being envisioned is with an image of the Aymaran woman, traditionally dressed in the Andean pleated skirt - the *pollera* - and Derby hat, carrying large amounts of cash with which to buy property in the Zona Sur. As if to underscore the reversal of the classed, raced way that such dynamics of displacement are generally thought to take place, one La Paz based newspaper controversially referred to the increasing presence of El Alto wealth in the Zona Sur as a ‘colonisation,’ although this term was later replaced with the less politicized phrase ‘gain territory in’ (Página Siete 2014). It is this transformation and its depiction in the 2010 Bolivian film *Zona Sur* that this article will focus on. My contention is that this image of the rich Aymaran woman, and the reversal of expected patterns of urban development that she represents, places the colonial, cultural and gendered dynamics that structure how capital shapes urban space into sharp relief. This trope has emerged in a context in which Bolivia’s ruling *Movimiento al Socialismo* [MAS] party has

adopted a ‘decolonial’ approach to economic development, which challenges the colonial underpinnings of the distinction between formality and informality. Aymaran women are known for their economic power in informal commerce and the household, and the sense of transgression generated by an image of an indigenous woman displacing a white family reveals gendered assumptions about household structures which are often left unacknowledged in urban studies.

The trope of the wealthy indigenous woman encapsulates the complexity of class, race, ethnicity and gender, a complexity which is reflected in local debate on how this emergent wealthy class should be designated. She is a member of the variously called Aymara bourgeoisie (Rea Campos 2016) or ‘chola’ bourgeoisie (Toranzo 2009), among others. The debate around the nomenclature pivots around the salience of indigeneity, urbanity or class respectively. Although the term ‘Aymara bourgeoisie’ excludes other linguistic and ethnic groupings and those who would self-identify as mestizo, it emphasizes the importance of traditional Aymaran culture in the development of markets in La Paz and El Alto; in contrast, the term ‘chola bourgeoisie’ emphasizes the urbanity of indigenous people who have migrated to the city and left behind their cultural identity (Rea Campos 2016). The term ‘cholo/a’ can be used pejoratively to imply someone who has conformed to urban/Western culture, particularly when applied to a woman, but has been reclaimed, and Chola Paceña beauty contests and fashion shows highlight the wealth of this emerging middle class. The Chola Paceña is defined by the long pollera typical of the city, which has been argued to be a ‘cultural mimesis’ as an item of clothing that has come to exemplify indigenous identity and power, originated with the fashion of the Spanish colonisers (Rivera, cited in Diaz Carrasco 2014, 138). Although the pollera, given the rise of the indigenous middle class, is becoming a consumption item, to be *de pollera* denotes, as

per tradition and the history of Andean markets, a woman who is in charge of negotiations and key investment decisions, and who dominates the city's vast informal commercial areas.

The film *Zona Sur*, portrays a white, upper class family in this once exclusive neighbourhood of La Paz and their struggles to maintain their standard of living in a changing political and economic climate. The trope of the wealthy Aymaran woman is crystallised in a crucial scene in which the family's Aymaran godmother, 'Comadre Remedios,' accompanied by her lawyer and assistant, offers to buy the family's house in cash. A still from this scene has become a 'meme' in social media and has been used in online resistance to conflict over the newly opened shopping mall, the 'MegaCenter', also in the Zona Sur of La Paz. In political discourse, the character of the wealthy Aymaran woman is both villainised and heralded, either as exemplifying the benefits and 'corrupt' gains that have accrued to Bolivia's indigenous population under Morales, or as representing a triumphant re-assertion of indigenous culture and power over *criollo* spaces in the city. The controversy which this character attracts demonstrates that she is transgressing ideas of propriety, belonging and status in La Paz. She is also transgressing received ideas about how urban development is gendered, classed and racialized, in both mainstream and critical work on the subject which remains predicated on the modernizing categories of public/private, productive/reproductive, and risk/care (Peake and Rieker 2013).

Comadre Remedios, dressed in the traditional Aymaran pollera, carrying cash earned in the vast and wealthy Bolivian informal economy, hence poses a challenge to the increasingly universalizing and reductionist tendencies of critical urban theory, which focuses almost exclusively on the movements of capital and displacement in terms of socio-economic status. It is clear that the drives of capital are crucial to

understanding how cities are formed, and are responsible for ravaging cities and creating phenomenal levels of inequality and indigency, especially in the Global South (Davis 2006; Harvey 2011) The consistency of this pattern of urban development, especially in Latin America where neoliberal adjustment policies were exceptionally harsh, supports Marxist geographers' contention that processes of urbanisation are identical with processes of capital that can be observed at a global, indeed planetary, scale (Brenner and Theodore 2005). However, these understandings of urban change tend to foreground necessary relations, essentially socio-economic status (Clarke 2005), to the point that they underestimate, or in some cases exclude, cultural and political factors that underpin interpretations of belonging, and hence do not adequately represent the power dynamics involved in changing urban spaces and mobilities. This is of particular concern in a post-colonial nation where a reductionist approach implies an imposition of categories that fail to reflect how marginalization is experienced and understood by those involved, hence perpetuating knowledge systems which are part of that very exclusion (Roy 2011; Simone 2010).

Comadre Remedios' transgressions in urban space and theory illustrate debates on the relationship between culture and economy, and the importance of factors such as identity and belonging, often considered epiphenomenal to underlying capital developments, to understanding power and political change in the city (du Gay and Pryke 2002). She illustrates the power of popular cultural responses and the 'everyday' and the tactics used by those living in the city to make the space their own, and exert rights to space that the powers that be may overlook or deliberately curtail (Beebeejaun 2017). Popular culture – film, news media, and more recently social media – reflects and characterises different areas of the city, and shapes and recreates

ideas of belonging. It is hence a rich source of language, categories and identities via which to understand the city, urban processes and mobility.

The wealth and economic agency represented by the image of Comadre Remedios challenges the gendered assumption at the heart of much liberal theory, in which women are associated with the private sphere, care economy, secondary income generation, and consumption (Peake and Rieker 2013). However, the fact that new accumulated wealth is represented by a woman *de pollera* comes as no surprise to anyone who knows the city of La Paz or is familiar with the gendered dynamics of markets there. The economic power of the Andean woman is rooted in traditional household, community and market structures, which prize hard work, business acumen and an ability to manage money, as feminine ideals. Despite women's economic power, however, reproductive and care labour remain entirely women's responsibility, and rates of domestic violence in the area are exceptionally high. The forces of development and globalization have brought material and discursive influences on these 'traditional' ideas of gender and family, and have led to increased pressure for women to generate income and in some cases migrate (Maclean 2014). Nevertheless, the ideal of the Andean woman as hardworking, savvy and in control of business and money has endured and shapes gendered economic subjectivity in informal commerce in La Paz and El Alto.

The analysis which follows is drawn from a broader research project on cultural identity and urban change in La Paz. It will firstly situate the emergence of the image of the wealthy Aymaran woman in the context of socio-economic change in Bolivia. It will then place the scene featuring Comadre Remedios in the context of the film as a whole, including comments from the director of the film, Juan Carlos Valdivia, who was interviewed as part of this research. The political importance of



this scene is discussed with reference to its emergence as a meme in the conflict over the new MegaCenter shopping mall. The trope is then analysed to critique the oversights of critical urban theory with regards to gendered economic subjectivity in the Global South, with particular attention to the importance of the intersection of class and ethnicity, and the enduring colonial underpinnings of the distinction between formality and informality.

### **Space, mobility and identity in La Paz**

La Paz lies in a valley, extending from 3000-3800 metres in altitude, and, as is typical of the region, is highly unequal in terms of wealth. The imbrication of socio-economic status with ethnicity and culture demarcates different neighbourhoods. The more salubrious neighbourhoods are found in the Zona Sur that lies in the lower, and therefore warmer, area of the city. This is a predominantly residential and commercial neighbourhood that has historically been mostly inhabited by monolingual Spanish speakers, white and mestizo people. The business district, government offices and state universities are in the centre of the city, which has become home to various bohemian bars and cafes frequented by the student population. On the slopes of the valley stretching up to the north are areas that have been built up informally as La Paz and El Alto experienced rapid population growth due to rural urban migration over the 1980s and 90s (Andersen 2002). El Alto and the North of La Paz are characterized as popular and informal, and people living there are assumed to be of lower economic standing. However, these areas are teeming with commerce –from the huge markets for fruit and vegetables such as Max Paredes, to the imported, contraband white goods and electronics in Uyustus, and the designers of Gran Poder who make the costumes for the city’s numerous festivals (Tassi 2017).

The relationship between indigeneity, urban marginalisation, informality and wealth in La Paz is complex, and it is clear that culture and identity play as much a part as economy in understanding power, exclusion and vulnerability in this city. The cultural boundaries between the slopes to the north and the valley of the south have always been, in the words of one participant describing her discomfort when in the Zona Sur, ‘very clearly marked out’. At first glance, it might be tempting to think that these areas are also economically worlds apart, and when infrastructure, vulnerability, population density and access to public goods are considered, they are. However, the local adage ‘the higher you live, the poorer you are’ no longer holds. Property on the main thoroughfare of El Alto, Avenida 6 de Marzo, is valued at up to US\$800,000 according to local newspapers – and these prices have risen steeply over the last decade (Global Property Guide 2015). Whilst the built environment and general aesthetic of the north would belie this, there is no doubt that these areas harbour substantial wealth. That is not to underestimate the poverty and vulnerability also to be found there, but it problematizes the assumed imbrication of gender, class, ethnicity and informality that dominates discussions of urban development.

In the last decade, transport connections between these vastly different areas of the city have been developed. Government and municipal administrations have invested in public transit systems that connect areas of the city that are separated by distance, altitude, wealth and culture, and which have radically changed the aesthetics and mobilities of the city. The central government invested in a cable car system which connects two stations in El Alto with the Central Zone and the Zona Sur, and more lines are under development. The municipal administration in La Paz created the Puma Katari bus transit system which connects the Zona Sur with the centre of town, and will be extended to the North of the city towards the neighbouring municipality of

El Alto. These connections are limited, but the rapidity with which one can now traverse the city has changed mobility, not only in terms of practical considerations like time, but also in terms of the spaces which people feel entitled to access.

These investments, among others, have been made possible thanks to the astonishing political, economic and social changes that Bolivia has experienced since 2006. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has tripled (IMF 2015) and the political landscape in the country that has been dominated by white *criollo* elites has been transformed. The spoils of this rapid growth in GDP have accumulated in the informal markets to the north, which have historically been dominated by women (Maclean 2014b; Paulson 2002). The IMF has confirmed that inequality in Bolivia has decreased, unlike the patterns observed in other developing countries that have experienced a similar economic boom over the last ten years (IMF 2015). Evo Morales' government has invested in social welfare – *bonos* – that have gone to the elderly, children and mothers (Farthing and Kohl 2014). Controversially he has transformed the public sector, which historically has been dominated by the white/mestizo middle-class, requiring in some cases that candidates speak an indigenous language to be considered for the post (La Razón 2015a). Whilst this has been seen as a justified challenge to centuries of colonial domination, it has been heavily criticized for politicizing the civil service and judiciary, as well as being discriminatory in a context where the imbrication of ethnicity, cultural identity and language resists attempts at a simplistic reversal of colonial influences (Rocabado 2009).

The level of wealth in the informal markets of the north of La Paz is a point of dispute not only in terms of the amounts involved and its provenance, but also in terms of the tensions between formal and informal economic structures that developed as a result of or in resistance to colonial powers. Markets in the Andes are historically

underpinned by communitarian structures of reciprocity, bilateral inheritance, fictive kin and fiestas that have their roots in Andean agrarian society. These structures allowed economic power to be generated autonomously from the colonial state (Lagos 1994). These community traditions have endured the various transformations that colonialism, revolution and globalization have brought, and continue to underpin the informal market activity. Certain families with a history of working in informal commerce in La Paz have been well placed to take advantage of Bolivia's economic boom, and specifically the government's decision to peg the currency to the dollar, making it relatively cheaper to import goods wholesale to sell at a profit (Tassi 2017).

The presence of wealth in these areas is a long observed phenomenon. However the rapid increase in wealth and conspicuous consumption over the last decade has raised suspicion of financial corruption, tax evasion and involvement with narco traffic. The informal economy mainly functions on cash exchange, and in the Andes the tradition of community fiestas relies on a complex system of loans that is crucial to the flow of finance and the creation of community infrastructure and spaces (Lagos 1994; Tassi 2017). However, as the Bolivian economy has grown over the past decade, the efforts to bring the city's informal markets under the umbrella of formal governance via taxation has increased. The fierce debate that has ensued brings out the tensions between what counts as corruption and what counts as a communitarian economy (Sheild Johansson 2017), as well as the colonial underpinnings of the modernizing state and the political expediency of the national government's approach. The *Servicios de Impuestos Nacionales* have been rigorous and conspicuous in their enforcement of the tax regime, and signs reading 'closed down for non-payment of tax' can be seen on empty former businesses throughout the centre of La Paz. However, it is well known that in the informal markets substantially sized businesses

will sell without charging sales tax or giving receipts, and will do so with impunity (La Razón 2013). Small and medium formalized businesses argue that the approach to implementing these policies has been politicized, with informal businesses, who play an important role in Morales' political support, left unchecked, hence facilitating the accumulation of wealth in these areas (Los Tiempos 2016). Rapid growth in the informal markets and the economic power that women wield there, has created the possibility of an indigenous, wealthy woman who can transform the urban landscape.

### **Comadre Remedios and the Zona Sur**

The 2009 film *Zona Sur* explores the complexity of class, race and gender from the perspective of a white, elite family in the Zona Sur who are dealing with Bolivia's political and economic transformation since 2006. It is written and directed by Bolivian director Juan Carlos Valdivia who grew up in the Zona Sur, and made the film after realizing the ethical tensions involved, given his own background and position, in filming indigenous people in Bolivia.

I was going out there with the indigenous people, to their houses and they would tell their stories in depth to me... Who am I to recount their story? So perhaps I should look at myself first, before looking at the other. And so that encounter with the other forced me to tell the story of where I am from. (Interview, Juan Carlos Valdivia, May 2017)

The film is both a 'tribute to and a critique of' the Zona Sur. It is a tribute in the sense that it addresses a lacuna in Bolivian popular culture of a nuanced portrayal of the country's white elites, who tend to appear as a pastiche. As Valdivia observes, 'we're always the bad guys, the neoliberals, the exploiters'. Nevertheless, the most impactful elements of the film are found in its portrayal of the acute, classed, racialised and hierarchical cultural separation that exists at national and household scale. Families in

the Zona Sur are depicted as living in a ‘bitter sweet’ bubble, cushioned by consumption but unable to cope with the economic and social pressures that are undermining their position. The Bolivian version of the film did not have subtitles for the Aymaran dialogue to emphasise how the urban elite normalize their seclusion, and also to illustrate how, while the servants know the most intimate details about them, their employers are completely ignorant of their world. The audience watches the story unfold through the eyes of the youngest child, Andrés. He is frequently above the action, in his tree house or on the roof, and the camera follows his lead. Each shot is filmed in a circular motion, foregrounding the tasteful, expensive, furniture and *objets d’art* which befit the family’s upper class status, whilst demonstrating the instability inherent in their position

The protagonist, a glamorous, divorced mother of three children, Carola, holds the household together with the help of two Aymaran house servants, Winston and Marcelina. Carola’s ex-husband is conspicuous by his absence - he is not referred to, nor is it clear if he assists in the maintenance of the household. The lead characters are female – and this was a deliberate decision by Valdivia to show the relationship between matriarchy and machismo in Bolivian society, a dynamic that helps to understand the prominence of women in La Paz’s recent transformations:

Women weaken men by making their lives too easy here... The men are held high up here - deified - but in doing that they’re castrating them. And on the other hand the women are tough, and that forges their character. And that’s the basis of matriarchy... it’s like a contract, an exchange.

The household is clearly falling on difficult times economically. The servants have not been paid for six months, and Carola’s unspecified ‘business’ is failing to bring in commissions, although her contacts are apparently providing ‘favours’ and ‘loans’.

Money is an issue throughout the film, but is expressed in terms of Carola's determination to maintain the family's standard of living, and status, including her children's privileged lifestyles. Her demanding persona, and the gendered dimensions of racism, are exhibited in her dealings with the servant Winston, at whom she shouts when he inquires when he and Marcelina are going to be paid. In one scene Winston is waiting on Carola in the bathroom, ready to hand her a towel. As Valdivia explains

He is not even considered a sexual being. She even pees in the bathroom in front of him - if you thought you were in front of a man, you would not do that. The discrimination is such, that he's not even sexual.

However the shift in economic power is hinted at when Winston attains a loan on Carola's behalf from the sister of an Aymaran friend of his who sells juice on the street. Her daughter, Bernarda, is in a lesbian relationship with a student from her university course, and Carola berates her, not specifically for dating a woman, but for going out with someone with a mestizo background, rather than choosing someone from her own social class, and laughs mockingly when Bernarda claims she is going to move to the northern part of town with her girlfriend. Throughout the film the complex dynamics of class, ethnicity and gender are not only situated in, but expressed in terms of the urban landscape.

The character of Comadre Remedios, who offers to buy Carola's house in cash, and the shift in economic power in La Paz that she represents, brings out the classed as well as racialised aspects of economic and cultural change in La Paz. Carola clarifies with her daughter that Remedios is '*una señorona con clase*' [a really classy lady], and their equal status is further emphasised by their shared concern over their children's relationships with partners who are socially inferior. When Remedios arrives, she is treated as kin. The two women address each other warmly, and the

servant Marcelina serves both women in the same way, highlighting the class divisions in the room. Remedios wears a luxurious pollera, and has brought her lawyer and her assistant with her to make a proposal to buy the house in cash, as she knows that Carola's 'situation is hard'. She explains her proposition to Carola as her assistant places a large blue suitcase on the coffee table. She opens it, and within, a traditional Aymaran *aguayu* fabric is covering US\$250,000. Remedios explains that she wants to build an apartment block where the house is, and advises Carola that with the money she received she could have a house built, buy a penthouse or send her children abroad, which is striking as Remedios has just stated that she is sending her daughter to the USA to study. Carola is taken aback and reluctant to consider the offer, emphasizing the sentimental value that the house has for her. Seeing her hesitation, Remedios offers her a further US\$20,000, and the audience is left in no doubt as to which *comadre* is in the more powerful position.

This iconic scene has gone on to feature in debates on social media in reaction to some of the cultural clashes that have resulted from changing patterns of mobility, belonging and wealth in La Paz. A flashpoint for these clashes has been the MegaCenter shopping mall, complete with multi-cinema, including two-for-one Wednesdays, a restaurant floor and a gym, that was opened in 2010 in the Zona Sur. The MegaCenter is owned by the Spanish company Grentidem SA, and represents a substantial investment in the city, made on the basis of expectations of an increase in middle-class consumption given the steep growth in GDP (La Razón 2015c). The mall is held by those who live in the Zona Sur to be a sign that Bolivia is finally advancing. One interviewee I spoke to in the multi-cine - a student who had lived in the US - responded to my curiosity about the cinema by saying, slightly sheepishly, and in English, 'Yes, we have it now, finally, even in Bolivia there is a multi-cine.'



The mall, since its opening, had been a preserve of the city's white bourgeoisie, with aspirations to development as defined by increasing Westernization.

However, the accessibility of this mall changed with the development of new transport links, and the increased consumption power of residents in popular areas of the city. The MegaCenter is located next to one of the new cable car stations on the line that links El Alto with the Zona Sur. When the cable car opened a particularly popular journey was to the two-for-one Wednesday night at the MegaCenter. People from El Alto, who are renowned for spotting a bargain and for being 'tight' with their money, regardless of how much they have, took advantage of both the offer and the easy access provided. This changed the cultural constitution of the MegaCenter immediately, and the culture shock it produced is still talked about across Bolivian popular culture (Casanovas 2018). When it first happened, pictures of people from El Alto - distinguishable by race and clothing- sitting on the floor of the MegaCenter and eating their own food, circulated the internet via the Facebook page 'Mojigotes [bad public behaviour] in La Paz Bolivia' (La Razón 2015b). Comments on this page included 'Do they want to be treated well? Well they can learn to behave, it's not asking much, just a bit of hygiene and common sense', and 'Have you ever seen a gringo or a white person making such a mess???? Sitting down to drink on the floor in a public place.' (see the blog A4000 2015 for summary).

The debate on social media provoked a firm response from the Minister of Decolonisation, as well as in the press and on social media (La Razón 2015b). A student, Sara Paulina Jáuregui, organised an *apthapi* – a traditional Aymaran pot luck party in which people bring and share their own food and sit on the floor – to 'celebrate our differences together', and demonstrate that sharing food whilst sitting on the floor is part of Bolivian culture (Página Siete 2015). This was attended by

hundreds of people, contrary to the expectations of the organiser, and coverage emphasised that the event was attended by *señoras de pollera* and residents of the Zona Sur. There were also a visual response – a meme – that featured scenes from *Zona Sur* and specifically Comadre Remedios. It consisted of a montage of pictures from the incident in the MegaCenter, accompanied by a still from the scene in which Comadre Remedios offers the suitcase of cash, and was used to highlight the shift in financial power and sense of entitlement to space that has taken place in La Paz and is epitomised by this incident. In response to the rejection of people from El Alto taking up space in the mall, the image of the Aymaran, de pollera, Comadre from the film, is captioned saying ‘so, how much is your MegaCenter then’ (see Figure 1, A4000 2015).

[Figure 1 about here]

### **Envisioning gender, indigeneity and urban change.**

The image of Comadre Remedios and her suitcase full of cash has become a motif that features prominently in readings of the social, economic and political flux that the city is experiencing. In a city where the pollera used to be banned from professional and powerful spaces (Stephenson 1999), and the colonial structures of the economy remain, this image has become a symbol of the decolonisation of the economy and the city which has taken place since the inauguration of the MAS government in 2006 and coinciding economic boom. In the image can be read the traditional economic power of the Aymaran woman, the dominance of the informal economy, and the shifting meanings of the pollera as it becomes a consumer item that denotes class status, as well as a marker of indigenous identity.

The use of this image in social media has come to symbolise a triumphant assertion of indigenous identity in spaces that continue to exclude indigenous people on cultural grounds, regardless of their wealth, demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between the economic and the cultural. This image, and its use as a meme, captures more than an economic boom and an explicit tipping of the scales in favour of informal markets built on indigenous economic and cultural traditions. This is a case of popular culture reflecting, recreating and reinforcing a changing sense of who is entitled to be where, which the experience of La Paz tells us is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for changing urban mobility and belonging.

The image of Comadre Remedios embodies the complexities of gender, race, ethnicity and class in the local discursive context., as is clear in the way that she is situated in relation to Carola, the Aymaran servant Marcelina, and the cash. Popular culture and fictional representations can take complexity and create a type, as the development of the meme demonstrates, whilst even intersectional approaches can still rely on etically defined categories of class, race and gender, which may be relevant at the city or national scale, but fail to capture the way that these structures are experienced, recreated and performed in everyday life. The study of popular culture can hence shed light on the landscape of identities, and the vocabulary and images used to explore them, which are created by spatial interactions in the city and in turn shape urban space.

The film and the development of the meme show the importance of the everyday in shaping a sense of belonging in urban space. The political relevance of clothes could easily be dismissed in reductionist analyses as trivial, but the pollera is a prominent political symbol in Bolivian discourse. Until 1952 the pollera was not to be worn in the centre of La Paz (Stephenson 1999), and the annual Gran Poder festival

involves people trouping through the main street of La Paz dancing La Morenada, a dance in which all the women are dressed in brightly coloured, co-ordinated polleras- and even 60 years after the ban was lifted this is done in a spirit of triumph and vindication. To have someone de pollera offering to purchase the house of a struggling Señora in the Zona Sur, is revolutionary in this context. The apthapi, the traditional Andean pot-luck party that was organised as a response to the MegaCenter controversy, is also an example of everyday activities being used to reclaim urban space. Whilst both of these examples – clothing and cooking – represent the problematic feminisation of the task of recreating identity and tradition, overlooking these activities in analyses of urban change that focus on the logics of capital reinforces the gendered exclusions of formal politics, the city, and indeed theory.

The divide between formality and informality is racialized and gendered. Across the world the majority of the informal economy is populated by women (Meagher 2013), and this is certainly the case in the informal markets of La Paz. The suitcase full of cash that Comadre Remedios carries indicates the informality of the commerce in which the country's new bourgeoisie has made their money. Paying in cash for property would raise questions anywhere in the world, and in Latin America, where there is a history of money from narco traffic being laundered by over-paying for real estate, it has particularly nefarious connotations. The suitcase of cash in *Zona Sur*, which reflects numerous stories which residents of that area relate of the 'chola' who arrives at the door offering to pay in cash, represents a clash of economies and cultures. To those in the Zona Sur, the fact that payments are offered in cash is a source of suspicion, and also a representation of the otherness of people who have different ideas of propriety and risk.

To those living in El Alto and the North of La Paz, where transactions are made in cash all the time, by people who have a long history of facing discrimination in the formal banking system, and memories of bank accounts losing value over night with the dramatic currency devaluations of the 1980s, this is a less surprising feature. The seeming urgency with which the purchase is offered does not immediately suggest money laundering to those who earn their living in the city's informal markets. 'You never want to have cash' said one participant, a single mother, grandmother and tailor from the North of La Paz, who vividly remembers the hyperinflation and resulting structural adjustment policies – which remain among the world's harshest – of the 1980s. As she showed me bank notes from that period, with various high face values, including one of 10,000 bolivianos, kept as a memento, she recalls the tragic stories of people who had lost everything because of currency devaluations: 'You need to invest it immediately, preferably in land.'

Carrying large amounts of cash, in a country where bank transfer fees are exorbitant, is an everyday activity. Household livelihood strategies amongst Bolivia's excluded have long included sending family members abroad to work, mostly to São Paulo, Buenos Aires and Spain. Remittances hence form an important part of household income, and household investments often involve gathering money internationally. When transferring money from, for example, Argentina to Bolivia through the formal banking system incurs substantial fees and taxation charges (Deloitte 2015), carrying cash across the border, typically by coach, is a rational strategy. This is illegal and very risky; it is known that people travelling on these coaches carry a large amount of money, and many warn of the dangers of being drugged and robbed during the journey. Nevertheless, it illustrates why the cultural codes around informal transactions have developed, and is a reminder of the

problematic distinction between the formal and informal. In a context where 50% of the economy is informal, the assumption that transactions should be carried out formally is an imposition of a particular economic culture.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been twofold. In analysing the development of the trope of Comadre Remedios, I have sought to show the relevance of popular culture and the complex identity dynamics represented by tropes created therein to analyses of urban change, and the need to understand gender on the basis of local discursive practices. These two aims intertwine, as the concerns of the everyday, which includes popular culture, are themselves feminised, and, as a result, shorn away from reductionist analyses that seek to explain geographical phenomena on the basis of the movements of capital alone. The development and use of the image of Comadre Remedios demonstrates the importance of identities and traditions to shaping not only affective factors such as belonging and confidence, but also to how capital flows, graphically illustrated with the suitcase full of cash. This reflects Lefebvre's argument on the multiplicity of logics that shape the urban:

‘There is not one single logic of [urban] society, but many logics, that is to say, many processes for imposing coherence: a logic of repeated actions (combinatory), a logic of space, a logic of exchange and of things, a logic of meanings, etc. (Lefebvre, cited in Buckley and Strauss 2016, 629)

The logics that are visible in the scene discussed in this article, in the context of the film and the conflict at the MegaCenter demonstrate the dynamic tensions in the struggles, routines and identities which shape urban space. The struggle against colonialism is foregrounded in the scene and the meme, as the indigenous woman, identified visually by the pollera and the aguayu textile lining the suitcase, is

displacing the woman who has been indubitably positioned as the colonial power by her treatment of her Aymaran servants. The discussion between the two co-madres and the presence of Marcelina brings out the classed dynamics involved, and the suitcase full of dollar bills indicates that the power shift represented here is a result of the capitalist dynamics of accumulation and dispossession. However, the image of the cash also represents the informal economy, which follows a communitarian logic that has been forged in resistance to colonialism and has now gained power over neo-colonial capitalism. The characters in this image are all women - the co-madres and their respective servants and assistants. The director's intention was to show the power of women in a culture that prizes the masculine, and women's role in maintaining this dynamic and the power which they gain from it. The characters embody the complexity of economic femininity, and of women's position in capitalist and colonial structures, which, as Zona Sur shows, have been central in shaping city space and ideas of belonging, and cannot be shorn away in analyses of urban processes.

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