

## The politics and aesthetics of attraction in the Gran Poder festival: reflections on a 'methodology of affect'

By Nico Tassi (University College London)

For indigenous residents in Bolivia's capital city, La Paz, the religious festival of Gran Poder represents a fierce and proud expression of cultural resistance to the practices of the dominant creole sectors, and also an endeavour to entice the privileged other to the attractive dynamics of the festival. In this intercultural context, the interplay of resistance and inclusion attempts to redress the oppressive discriminating practices experienced by the urbanised indigenous. Such a delicate operation is ultimately performed not so much at a discursive level but rather through a series of aesthetic and performative practices where sensorial 'attraction' holds a pre-eminent value. After highlighting the functioning of such 'practices of attraction', I will move on to describe my involvement in them and analyse the challenges they pose to the ethnographic work and to the practices and demeanours of anthropology. If emotional involvement and sensorial engagement are qualities often discouraged in our academic upbringing, in this specific context they enabled me to bridge theory and practice and to 'understand in the flesh' field dynamics without considering the native's world as holding an epistemological disadvantage in relation to the anthropologist's. This personal physical involvement allowed me to take 'native conceptions' seriously, therefore using them and sensing the constraints our own disciplinary principles may exert on them.

---

Once the ancient world was burned,  
Queque Mañuco [Jesus Christ] created  
other plants and animals much tamer  
and less strong than before. He then  
created the present-day man who has  
little strength but great sentiments.  
[Quechua post-conquest myth]

### The faces of La Paz

Suddenly the barren Andean plateau dramatically sinks into a deep canyon. La Paz stands proud on the steep slopes that lead from the top of the plateau to the bottom of the canyon. Its inhabitants call it, with a mixture of fear and affection, *la hoyada*—the pit. All earthly and human resources, all demons and saints, 'all degrees of heat and hue, of love and hatred' (Arguedas 2000:270), of poverty and wealth are concentrated in *la hoyada*.

Since its first urban restructuring, during the colonial time, the urbanisation of the city provided for a neat demarcation between indigenous and Spanish/Creole zones. The indigenous population was relegated to the western slope of the canyon while the eastern slope housed the colonial administrative centre, the cathedral, the activities and rituals of the elites. Due to an infamous law enacted during the republican period,

the circulation of indigenous people was restricted to certain areas of the city until 1945 (Mesa, Gisbert and Mesa Gisbert 1997:562).

Following the influx of indigenous migrants from the countryside, new spatial boundaries, although more permeable, were quickly redrawn. Separate economies came to constitute another element of discrimination between the urbanised indigenous (*cholo*) and the creole (*criollo*).<sup>1</sup> The submerged informal economy, street sellers and open-air markets of the western slope came to embody the image of a subaltern indigenous world vis-à-vis the creole 'professionals' working for the mainstream public and private institutions. Beginning in the 1970s with the sale of sowing machines and radios, the *cholo* retailing economy moved on to televisions and computers, household appliances and digital technologies. It rapidly evolved into a seriously lucrative business led by intrepid Aymara entrepreneurs who took advantage of the growing influx of contraband goods. Despite their dramatic economic achievements, the *cholos*' social mobility was highly limited and their status was never recognised as 'middle class'. They remained marginalised for their perceived 'uncivilised' manners and unorthodox morality. A specific social category—*comerciante* (merchant)—with a slightly pejorative meaning emphasising the 'coarse materiality' of their lifestyle was created to address wealthy *cholos* and to differentiate them from the creole middle class more proper and sophisticated and much less affluent.

### 'Folclor': redressing the conflict

The reaction to these discriminating practices fed by dominant sectors of society recently became visible with the increasing political force gained by rural indigenous movements. Not only did their political rhetoric denounce racial and social discrimination, but they also launched a counterattack by trying to diminish the creoles' virtues and rights of citizenship. The position of *cholos* remained more ambiguous. They combined a rejection of the individualistic values and the corruption of the ruling elites with an attempt 'to attract' them into their practices and gain their recognition. On the one hand the *cholos* embraced an openly confrontational attitude towards creole elites, and on the other, equally openly, sought to include them in their economic and social activities. These ambiguous dynamics are deeply embodied in the Gran Poder festival, a crucial urban event organised by *cholos* and consisting of a combination of music, dance and religious practices that still retains a vigorous indigenous character. According to Maldonado Pérez (2004), Gran Poder is an expression of 'luxury and revenge' elaborating an over-abundant display of

---

<sup>1</sup> *Cholo* is a highly problematic term with a strong pejorative connotation. It is usually used by creoles to disparagingly address urbanised indigenous. In some circumstances the word *cholo* is proudly appropriated by indigenous migrants in the city to vigorously emphasise their cultural difference from creole settlers, although they usually define themselves as *mestizos*. Identifying the crossbreed between people of Andean and Spanish descent, the definition of *mestizo* has been extended to people of indigenous origins who left the country and undertook an urban lifestyle. While *mestizos* are integrated into the creole world and have embraced their habits and costumes, *cholo* still maintain strong bonds with the peasant-indigenous world and culture. The word *cholo* is used here in an attempt not to confuse the urbanised indigenous with the traditional definition of *mestizo*. *Criollo*: While most people would consider as extinct the branch of Bolivian citizens of Spanish-colonial descent, *criollo* still constitutes a meaningful social category grouping those members of the elite who have retained or embraced a lifestyle inspired by European upper classes.

materials—costumes, music, food and alcohol—that provokes both attraction and jealousy in the exclusive dominant sectors.

During the solemn celebrations of Gran Poder, a powerful music-driven parade of *cholos* enters the exclusive districts of state institutions and city's officialdom, showing off their newly acquired economic power as well as a certain emotional pre-eminence. A total of around 20,000 dancers and musicians snake down the western slope of La Paz, starting off from the highest and poorest neighbourhoods with open sewers and dusty roads. At a slow pace the parade enters the commercial barrio of Gran Poder, filled with high-tech shops often offering contraband goods, and then it flanks the Sanctuary where the image of the Lord of Gran Poder is exceptionally taken out of the church to salute dancers. After winding across the barrio the parade reaches the hotels and handicraft shops of the tourist area and eventually flows into Avenida Mariscal Santa Cruz, the main street right at the bottom of the Andean canyon where La Paz stands.

The fraternities participating in the festival number more than 60. Each performs one specific dance along the route and easily reaches the 300 participants. Dance groups are normally accompanied by two brass bands, one standing in the middle of the fraternity and the other closing the group. Dancing has remained the most visible and tolerated form of religious celebration, an expression of devotion (Abercrombie 1992) as well as a demonstration of material well-being.

The peculiarity of Gran Poder resides in the fact that indigenous sectors have retained the administration of the festival and the 'indigenous' symbolic capital, as opposed to other Andean regions where this symbolic capital has been dispossessed by a creole elite or incorporated into the nation-state symbolism (Degregori 1998). Gran Poder practices become an instrument in the hands of the *cholos* to redress disadvantageous social conditions and to stay away from the discriminating discourse of the dominant sectors by carving out a space where the confrontation takes place at a performative level. This is a space where, provisionally, even the sophisticated creoles, although sometimes reluctantly, get rid of their composure and rhetoric of propriety and join in the 'primitive' fiesta, bringing sensuousness to sense:

A servant of Indian origins, working in the posh neighbourhoods of *Zona Sur*, she switches on the radio, a popular radio broadcasting *kullawada* music. She starts moving, swaying hips and the rich kids can't help assimilating and imitating her movements. I say she is the silent ambassador of our 'folclor'. This is what I call to colonise, to make 'folclor' penetrate all social layers. The same takes place on the other side of the border where our Bolivian brothers live: Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. My compatriots go to Argentina for the sugar cane harvest. Argentina is a big consumer of cheap Bolivian labour. When travelling, Bolivians carry everything: their religion, their Pachamama, their pots and pans, their costumes. Statistics say that now 1,300,000 Bolivians live in Argentina. Suppose half or even 10% keep dancing. That means 130,000 Bolivians doing fiesta there. They make the gaucho appreciate Bolivian music. This is another way to attract. The same takes place in Chile. It's another form of grabbing them with our sentiment, with our cultural and folkloric power. (Luis Jimenez, in interview with the author, 20/02/04)<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Luis is a former school teacher in his 40s and in 2004 was the fiesta organiser (*pasante*) of the fraternity *Los Rebeldes*. He was the main character of a short documentary about Gran Poder Heidi Lipsanen and I were shooting with the permission and collaboration of Gran Poder Association of

The word 'folklore' has assumed a pejorative connotation in the English language, often implying a theatricalisation of folk traditions enacted by the nation-state in order to perform and strengthen a sense of nationhood. By contrast, in Bolivia, and especially among *cholos*, 'folclor' holds a positive connotation to the point of having been embraced as a marker of urban indigenous identity (*folclorista*). Instead of the fictionalisation implied by 'folklore' and its top-down characterisation, 'folclor' is identified as a popular phenomenon from below resisting stylisations and exerting 'attraction' on the dominant sectors. (For a deeper discussion of the complexities of folklore in the Andes, see Bigenho 2002 and Arguedas 1993.)

## The means of attraction

Music and dances performed during folkloric festivals cannot be understood without taking into account the economic and political subjugation of urban indigenous groups by the *criollo*. The response to economic and social subalternity is emotional and 'folkloric power'. In the case of Bolivian migrants in Chile and Argentina, as well as in the case of rural migrants in La Paz, the most direct way to react to a subordinate economic and political position is by means of 'folclor'; a tool that holds the power of 'attracting the foreign soul'. Bolivia's chronic scarcity of economic resources to be exchanged with richer neighbours, and the socio-economic discrimination against the *cholos*, has led urban indigenous groups 'to invest in the spiritual' (Weil 1989) and the emotional. In this situation, where economic and racial discrimination is a source of continuous frustrations for the indigenous migrant, 'folclor' becomes a domain of 'attraction' which contributes to equilibrate the traditionally imbalanced relationship of power between *cholos* and creoles.

Gran Poder elaborates an interesting aesthetics of over-abundance in the display of the costumes, dresses and jewellery that are emphatically exaggerated—not in an attempt to produce a parody, but rather to combine tradition, economic sway and spiritual power. The sensational and gripping visual abundance generated by the presence of a high number of fine quality goods and fabrics in a context where scarcity is usually prevailing is thought to create an exhibition of wealth that 'attracts' (Himpele 2003). The body plays a crucial role in these dynamics of parading and attracting, as the profit derived from the economic activities is incorporated into the body itself, thus making it an instrument that jubilantly displays abundance. Successful *cholita* sellers exchange their good teeth for gold ones, and wear up to 9 *pollera* skirts one on top of the other, expanding the volume of their bodies and conveying a sensation of well-being, power and attraction. The plumpness of the body, the voluminous roundness of their piled skirts materialise the unsubstantial profit of their commercial activities into something not just tangible but also attractive in its sheer physicality and immediate visual richness.

The abundance of music, food and alcohol are elements perceived as crucial in 'attracting' newcomers to join the fraternities. In fact, the visual richness, the glossiness of costumes and banners, is complemented by the continuous sensorial stimulation produced by the uninterrupted music. This intense material display seems to draw out a correspondence with spiritual and religious forces, in line with an

---

Folkloric Groups (ACFGP). This interview was recorded at Luis' home in Bajo Seguncoma and the quotation is an excerpt from his long answer to my question: 'Could you please tell me how you got involved in Gran Poder?'

Andean understanding of divine and earthly powers as intimately interlinked. Paradoxically, it is the intense physical stimulation produced by the impressive material abundance and sensorial intensities what seems to elicit the presence of a transcendent force.

Despite my anxiety about finding a symbolic meaning in that attractive combination of music and dance, costumes and movement, the explanation seemed to lie closer to the physical event than I initially supposed. Irritated with my insistent questions and obsessive research into an ultimate meaning of what was taking place during the festival, my friend Javier advised me to stop mystifying the festival and simply enjoy it. In Javier's words, 'We dance for dancing... Look, a Chilean girl asked me to show her how to dance. She looked at me puzzled as if she was searching for the meaning of something she couldn't grasp. You must feel it on your body, that's it.' This immediacy of the correspondence between the meaning of the event and the sensorial effect produced engenders a form of corporeal understanding that becomes crucial also for the urban elites taking part in the festival:

The first time I saw a parade I was 11. I was so impressed that I told my dad I wanted to dance. I believe it's a thing that has to be felt. [...] I did folkloric ballet but that had little to do with what I liked. I wanted to dance in another way but for the time what I liked was totally weird. There was a social class that was allowed to dance and another which wasn't. To dance *morenada* implied being an outcast, the *cholo*, the *indio*. As I was a university student and belonged to a middle class family I should have mingled with middle class people. They were saying: 'What's wrong with you, why do you listen to such music' [...] My parents were telling me that Gran Poder belongs to the *cholos* and during the days of the festival we would stay at home since the city was closed and nobody was around [...] Then one day [Jaime] invited me to dance for the fraternity Eloy Salmon. There things are different, however I doubted... I was resisting. When I told my mother I was dancing in Gran Poder, she said 'What's wrong with you, how can you dance in Gran Poder, it's just the underclass'. It's not like that anymore, today MPs are dancing... you can see light-skinned people with bright eyes dancing in the *moreno* crew [...] I remember the sensation of tiredness and sorrow when I danced. There is a moment when you want to cry, your feet hurt and you can't breathe. It's a continuous effort, very intense and draining. Despite the sorrow, people manage to get to the Sanctuary. You have this religious fervour inside, you have promised something, you have asked something and you are being reciprocated. There, I see the hand of God; there is no other way to explain it. [Jaime] says we are dancing for an image. I don't think so; I dance *for what I feel during the parade*. [The images] help you, they satisfy you and it is very 'filling' when you get to the end. (Ingrid, in interview with the author, 19/05/04)<sup>3</sup>

Even sophisticated *criollos* with a racist background overcome their resistance and eventually yield to dancing. There is something attractive about those prohibited dances, in those obscene performances belonging to the 'people from down below'. And there is something miraculous about this combination of vulgar, despicable 'rubbish' people, 'religious fervour' and eventually feeling the 'touch' of God's hand.

<sup>3</sup> Ingrid (I here use a pseudonym to safeguard the privacy of the interviewee) is a young and established professional in La Paz. She is originally from a 'traditional' landowner family and she is an active figure in the *Entrada Univeristaria*—a parade of Andean dances organised by university students and staff. This interview took place at Ingrid's workplace in La Paz and the whole discussion was centred upon her conflictive relation with 'folclor' and the urban indigenous sectors.

But for La Paz it is also miraculous to witness the combination of tall and slim *criollas* dancing and chanting side by side with chubby *cholas*. Certainly, this does not obliterate social and racial differentiations (Himpele 2003:216) or different motivations for participating in Gran Poder. While *cholos* tend to privilege the values of collectivism and seniority in the parade, sometimes young and ‘good looking’ creoles are dressed up with seductive costumes and placed in front of the group, slightly detached from the rest, displaying individual physical qualities and beauty. However, I have personally witnessed the case of a *criollo* taking up the prestigious role of fiesta sponsor and the consequent formation of bonds of *compadrazgo* with a *cholo* family (*compadrazgo*, literally ‘co-paternity’, is a system of ‘co-parenthood’ that links parents, children, and godparents in a close social and economic relationship). Also, I have seen crowds of *criollos* from the lower part of the city enthralled by music and dance joining the parade and imitating with zest the steps of the *cholos*:

Eventually, the upper classes have been touched [by indigenous music and dance], it came to them, it got into them and now they are sometimes more devout than *mestizos*. (Carlos Estrada, in interview with the author, 10/02/04)<sup>4</sup>

### The unacknowledged zone of shared pleasure

In the middle of the post-parade celebrations my butcher friend Iban alias ‘el Taliban’ ended up arguing with a creole female professional. Heartened and audacious from the amount of alcohol he had been drinking before and after the parade, Iban asked provocatively why a light-skinned professional would be spending her time in a *cholo* festival, dancing to *cholo* music, shouting and chanting together with those unsophisticated people. With increasing sarcasm, Iban went on to comment on the contradictory tendency of certain creole professionals who despise *cholos* in their public statements while almost secretly being attracted by their ‘primitive’ fiestas.

I should remark that Iban’s behaviour was rude and offensive. However, this *cholo* straightforwardness signalled an unacknowledged zone of shared pleasure within ‘folclor’—a secret space of commensurability between the polarised social categories of the Andean urban context. Christopher Pinney interestingly observes how sometimes these zones of shared desire can be produced by a ‘subaltern resourcefulness’. Popular sectors hold a certain ability to attract and excite the almost concealed sensitivities of the haute bourgeoisie through those popular forms that seem to produce an immediate sensorial impact on the beholder (Pinney 2002:361-362).

The exuberant emergence of a shared terrain of sensorial intensities besides logical-discursive practices has a clear and direct impact on the relation between the ethnographer and her subjects as well as on the quality of the ethnographic interaction. This has prompted me to produce some considerations on a ‘methodology of affect’ in the attempt to better convey the nature and quality of fieldwork dynamics and incorporate in anthropology’s professional practices the spirit of ‘foreign’

---

<sup>4</sup> Carlos is a former president of the ACFGP and now a member of the local Pastoral Council. He is a prominent dancer in Gran Poder and his family is well known in the neighbourhood for having invented the rhythm and the steps of a popular dance called *caporales*. He provided me with invaluable information and contacts for accessing the Gran Poder community. This quotation is an excerpt from a discussion we had in his shop located in the heart of Gran Poder about the religious dimension of the festival.

customs. Marcus has characterised the idea of ethnographic complicity in a global arena where identities and locations are increasingly mobile and itinerant as shifting towards a subtle cognitive affinity. 'Despite their very different values and commitments, the ethnographer and his subjects [...] are nevertheless engaged in a pursuit of knowledge with resemblances in form and context' (Marcus 1998:125). In my experience of the urban Andes, instead of the cognitive/intellectual affinity of pursuing a common objective (knowledge), complicity is understood in the flesh and its meaning and quality are sensed physically as if 'hitting you in the gut' (Buck-Morss in Kester 1997:43). Complicity does not only lie in the common intentions of ethnographer and informant, but rather in a reciprocal corporeal understanding.

During my own research, I sensed how complicity between my informants and myself was being established at a corporeal level, as if in contrast to the condition of epistemological disadvantage presupposed in the discourse and rationale of anthropology (Viveiros de Castro 2003). Sensorial engagement becomes a necessary methodological approach, required by the specific context where affect is a privileged domain—a domain where negotiation with the other is played out and a new sense of identity takes shape. Indeed, I found myself literally being grabbed, following the emotional 'groove' of 'folclor' across the urban landscape. As suggested by the Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés (1999), in this context emotion becomes a key element that 'motorises' the process of understanding.

### 'It has gotten into you, little gringo, it has gotten into you!'

My inclusion in the Gran Poder parade was quite straightforward. I was repeatedly invited by fraternity sponsors to join their dance group and I soon gave in to the pressure and chose to dance with the *Los Vacunos* fraternity, the dynasty of La Paz butchers, where my friend Peter was a lead dancer. The decision concerning where to place me in the parade was particularly pondered upon, as I was a foreign 'white' male dancing *morenada*. First of all I was not as tall as you would expect of a *gringo*, therefore placing me in a prominent position of high visibility would not grant the right 'choreographic effect' to the dance group. Second there was some kind of resistance amongst the elders against placing me amid the *guias*, the lead dancers at the front of the *moreno* group. To dance as a *guia* was considered a rather prestigious position, and to concede it to a *gringo* would have been a sign of weakness and 'excessive reverence' towards a foreigner. Eventually my inadequate dancing skills convinced everybody that they ought to position me in an unglamorous third row in the *moreno* group.

I started rehearsing the *morenada* dance for the parade with the *Los Vacunos* fraternity in March 2004, approximately three months before the festival. *Los Vacunos* would rehearse their steps once a week in a rented dance hall (*local*) situated two blocks down from the Sanctuary of the Lord of Gran Poder. At the beginning of every rehearsal, the fiesta organisers (*pasantes*) and their assistants would pour an alcoholic beverage for every member of the fraternity and on a couple of occasions we were offered cake. The rehearsals were usually transformed into social happenings where the *pasantes* would try their best to make the members 'feel comfortable' and integrate the new ones into the '*Los Vacunos* family'. The *pasantes* would gain high social prestige from the fact that conflicts had been avoided within 'the family' and from the positive comments of the members to their management. The usual comment 'they treated us well' implied a generous offer of free alcohol, good food and music.

We rehearsed just two dance steps and I was immediately struck by their simplicity. Peter, the *pasante*'s son whom I first asked to teach me the steps, was surprised by my initial apprehension about learning the steps, which I had thought would be quite complicated. It became evident that the parade was not about an eye-catching variety of movement and sophisticated dance technique. It was about repetitive uninterrupted music and repeated dance steps. However, this repetition caught my attention and intrigued me for the intoxicating sensation it produced.

The first and simpler step (*cruzado*) was produced by crisscrossing your legs and moving sidewise: three steps on your right followed by three steps on your left while moving your arms accordingly. The *cruzado* step was performed when the brass band was playing tubas, and therefore associated with lower tones and characterised by a powerful stepping on the ground, which conveyed to me a feeling of strength and stability, a joyous feeling of empowerment. We advanced slowly and we stepped powerfully as if we were gradually savouring the urban terrain we were venturing into.

The tubas would play for roughly 40 seconds, after which a group of trumpeters would jump in and start playing higher tones. That was the signal for dancers to shift from the *cruzado* step to *media luna*. This was a key moment in the performance as the sudden change of rhythm produced in the dancers a peculiar emotional intensity which either manifested itself in jubilant and contagious shouts—such as '*Somos Vacunos, carajo*' ('We are *los Vacunos*, damn it')—or in an extraordinary bodily energy thrust into the dance. The *media luna* step consisted of rotating your body 180 degrees (a 'half moon' rotation) in three steps, first from the left hand side to the right and then from the right hand side to the left. The movement of both legs and arms was more delicate than in the previous step and the body—head to waist—was supposed to oscillate gently during the rotation.

The first problem I encountered during the rehearsals was my inability to perceive the change of tone in the music—from low to high and vice versa—leading to a failure to shift from one step to another. According to my *fraternos* I was not paying enough attention to the music and of course I immediately became the victim of jokes and gossip. The most widespread comment was '*El gringo no escucha*' ('The foreign guy does not hear'). My failure to hear was literally seen as a physical, although temporary, disability. I repeated the movements mechanically; I could not listen and dance at the same time, meaning I could only partially connect the body to the music.

The performance required you to pay attention simultaneously to the music and to the line and column of fellow *moreno* dancers. Given the simplicity and the small variety of steps, the choreographic effect of the dance as a whole became the crucial element of the performance. Both the dance leaders and the audience during the parade would continuously yell '*Igualar, igualar*' ('Synchronise!'). The components of each dance group must convey a sense of strong uniformity and collectivity. My girlfriend, who was filming the parade, wanted to take a shot of me performing in front of the Sanctuary. She was wandering along the ordered lines of dancers of *Los Vacunos* shouting my name while trying to figure out where I was. I still have a very clear picture in my mind, seen from behind my *moreno* mask, of her standing right next to me, making eye contact with her, and her passing by without recognising me, still shouting my name. The mask, the costume, the boots and the movements of the 100 *moreno* dancers were powerfully identical. The uniformity produced by these perfectly ordered five lines of *morenos*, each containing about 30 dancers moving at



the same rhythm and dressed with identical costumes, was visually striking. The emotion trapped in the bodies came out in different forms: tears, which were seen as a sign of genuine engagement rather than weakness, prayers and insults, shouts and complaints. Arguedas would have said that 'it was as if the beauty and the sadness of the whole world would run across your body at once' (1990:20-21).

The day of the parade we danced across the city for six miles with a costume weighing four stones. We started at ten in the morning and we finished in the afternoon between three and four. We drank some alcohol on the way to 'give oneself courage' (*animarse*), however, the uninterrupted music was intoxicating enough to lose control. At the end of the parade we could not stop moving, so strong had the impact of music been on our senses. The emotional intensities elicited by this peculiar music, dance, and context were not illusory but corresponded to an intensely felt experience enabled by a certain pattern of sounds, movements and objects. The effect produced was the materialisation of a concrete and alive force exerting a physical impact on the body. The indigenous urban settlers, when dancing to the rhythm of *morenada*, described to me the feeling of being wrapped by a supernatural force, almost in the form of a spirit possession. A creole dancer felt as if she was reliving the passion of the Christ on her body and I, the anthropologist, felt the twitch of the 'religious/aesthetic experience' taking place in this particular context. The common sensorial experience was explained in culturally specific terms, but this sensation of human life experienced at first hand created an affinity with those who were not part of our own group and did not share our own collective identity.

In July 2004 I moved out of my flat in the Gran Poder neighbourhood where I had lived for most of my fieldwork. I went to the Sanctuary to say goodbye to the *Tata*—an affectionate way of addressing the image of the Lord of Gran Poder—and paid a visit to my dearest friends in the neighbourhood. I visited Juan Yupanqui's photographic studio in a popular barrio on the western slope. We talked in a melancholic manner about music and faith for a few minutes—then he suddenly switched to a more euphoric tone. He looked at me smiling and half-joyful half-jokingly said: 'It has gotten into you, little gringo, it has gotten into you'. He repeated the words '*Te ha entrado... te ha entrado*' as if he materialised the texture and the movement of the substance which had gotten into my body and then laughed loudly. Even the foreigner had understood in the flesh and sensed the allure of this powerfully attractive *cholo* world.

### The body as a medium

In Juan's affectionately mocking words I felt the contradictions of my work. On the one hand, I was the well-educated European working and living with the 'underclass', asking odd questions and considering those indigenous things to be excellent 'material' to work on. On the other hand, there was the stubborn and vigorous *cholo* who skipped the boring questions, dissimulated and eventually found in 'folclor' the counterpart perceived by the know-it-all European as an attractive and poignant domain. The success of this *cholo* instrument was based on its ability to 'get hold of the foreign soul' and to overcome the noise of his 'meaningful' language. Gran Poder shifted traditional rules of ethnographic interaction by defining the body as the cornerstone of its being-in-the-world. In this way the meaning of an event or thing and the sensorial effect it produced became inextricably joined.

A 'methodology of affect' moves away from a certain epistemology of depth, which tends to disqualify the faulty immediacy by which the body senses reality in order to produce an 'in-depth' explanation where a separation between autonomous categories of thought is produced. In fact, a 'methodology of affect' relies on a non-verbalised, sensed complicity as a cross-cultural platform, ultimately necessary in order to articulate the ethnographer and informant's worlds and to translate events and behaviours of one culture so that they can be understood by another culture. Instead of the epistemological superiority granted to the Western knowledge which is still placed by our academic practices on a higher hierarchical level when compared with local knowledges, a 'methodology of affect' implies that the body of the ethnographer becomes the medium on which the ethnographic experience is inscribed and from which it can be translated for other members of the Western or academic culture.

A 'methodology of affect' places the most arduous task of the ethnographic enterprise at the level of writing. Finding the language to verbalise the understanding produced through the body becomes the real challenge, as this requires the anthropologist to figure out a mode of giving voice to the force and intent of embodied meanings. This is particularly difficult in a discipline that tends to grant more reverence to its own language than to 'introduce or enlarge cultural capacities, learned from other ways of living, into it' (Asad 1993:193). Instead of preserving the state in which our language happens to be, the challenge must be one of enabling it to be 'affected' by the foreign tongue.

## **Conclusion: on anthropology and 'affect'**

The Peruvian novelist and anthropologist José María Arguedas beautifully described the paradoxical attitude of the elites during Andean fiestas:

At family fiestas the girls and young [creole] men dance tangos, two-steps, one-steps and other foreign dances to *Victrola* music: but this is only at the beginning of the fiesta when they are all keeping the 'etiquette' and 'elegance' learned on their trips to the coast or during their college years, but when the fiesta has worked into fervour, whether from the wine or the environment itself of the party, then someone dares to ask for a guitar or harp; immediately everyone starts shouting for the same thing and if the host does not have a guitar, they send out to find an Indian harpist or to look for guitars. With harps and violins played by Indians, or guitars played by some of the guests, the tempo of the fiesta increases; all are really happy, they feel in their element; men and women dance the Indian *wayno* with zest, with art, with real affection. As if they suddenly had recovered their liberty, as if some very serious and intrusive gentlemen had left the room, the people clap hands and shout with enthusiasm [...] the fiesta is Indian from now on. (Arguedas 1971:34)

Like the anthropologist, the young creoles of those family fiestas in the Andes are dancing a music they appreciate in moderation as if to secretively cover up 'primitive' emotions and desires we don't want to reveal (cf. Malinowski's infamous diary; Malinowski 1967). The severe gaze of those very serious gentlemen inhibit us from acting with 'real affection'; they cause us to strip our practices of allure and to conceal our desires by wrapping them up in refined statements. The fictional 'elegance' and impermeability to the aesthetic sensorial regimes of the 'Indians' may be necessary to simulate a distance between the anthropologist and the informant. But that reflects too

closely an oppressive modernist narrative that 'folclor' in general, and Gran Poder more specifically, are trying to transcend.

In the case of Gran Poder the fracture of our common sense is produced at an affective level by a popular art that demands to be *felt*. Instead of producing a devitalising explanation of the functioning of Indian emotional devices, Gran Poder highlights the necessity to filter and revitalise our disciplinary language and thoughts through the medium of an affective approach to reality, different from the logical and discursive way we normally use to address the other.

As an anthropologist I believe I embody the secret and half-forgotten, middle-class attraction for popular sectors. Possibly in this attraction there is some longing for a lost 'authenticity', but also dissatisfaction with the anaesthetised and neutral practices of academia. Fortunately, the vigour and sharp straightforwardness of Gran Poder does not allow for too much fuss and romanticisation or for sophisticated introspection. To me Gran Poder became a language that highlighted the 'living link' between the besieged indigenous world and what Arguedas (2000:269) ambiguously calls the 'most humane part of the oppressor': the living link between theory and practice, between being there and being here.

## References

- Abercrombie, T.A. 1992. La fiesta del carnaval postcolonial en Oruro: clase, etnicidad y nacionalismo en la danza folklórica [The postcolonial carnival in Oruro: class, ethnicity and nationalism in folkloric dance]. *Revista Andina* 10(2), 279-352.
- Arguedas, J.M. 1971. On Andean fiestas and the Indian. In *The Singing Mountaineers: Songs and Tales of the Quechua People* (ed.) R. Stephan, 22-35. Austin and London: University of Texas Press.
- . 1990. *La Volpe di Sopra e la Volpe di Sotto* [The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below]. Torino: Einaudi.
- . 1993. Qué es el folklore? [What is folklore?]. In his *Breve Antología Didáctica* [Short Didactic Anthology], 79-96. Lima: Editorial Horizonte.
- . 2000. *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Asad, T. 1993. The concept of cultural translation in British social anthropology. In his *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, 171-199. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Bigenho, M. 2002. *Sounding Indigenous: Authenticity in the Bolivian Music Performance*. New York: Palgrave.
- Degregori, C.I. 1998. Movimientos étnicos democracia y nación en Perú y Bolivia [Ethnic movements, democracy and nation in Peru and Bolivia]. In *La Construcción de la Nación y la Representación Ciudadana en México, Guatemala, Perú, Ecuador y Bolivia* [The Construction of the Nation and Civic Representation in Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia] (ed.) C. Dary, 159-225. Guatemala City: FLACSO.
- Himpele, J. 2003. The Gran Poder parade and the social movement of the Aymara middle class: a video essay. *Visual Anthropology* 16, 207-243.

- Kester, G.H. 1997. Aesthetic after the end of art: an interview with Susan Buck-Morss. *Art Journal* **56**, 38-45.
- Maldonado Pérez, S.A. 2004. Los simbolos del Gran Poder [The symbols of Gran Poder]. *La Pepa* **1**(5), 7-9.
- Malinowski, B. 1967. *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Marcus, G. 1998. The uses of complicity in the changing mise-en-scene of anthropological fieldwork. In his *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*, 105-133. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mesa, J., T. Gisbert and C.D. Mesa Gisbert. 1997. *Historia de Bolivia* [History of Bolivia]. La Paz: Editorial Gisbert.
- Pinney, C. 2002. The Indian work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction or what happens when peasants 'get hold' of images. In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (eds.) F.D. Ginsburg, L. Abu-Lughod and B. Larkin, 354-369. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sanjinés, J. 1999. Guion y realidad [Script and reality]. In his *El Cine de Jorge Sanjinés*, 34-42. La Paz: FEDAM.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. 2003. And. *Manchester Papers in Social Anthropology* **7**. Manchester: University of Manchester.
- Weil, J. 1989. From *Ekeko* to Scrooge McDuck: commodity fetishism and ideological change in a Bolivian fiesta. *Ideologies and Literature* **4**(1), 7-29.

## About the author

Nico Tassi is currently working on his PhD in Social Anthropology at University College London. He conducted fieldwork with Andean indigenous and *mestizo* settlers in the Bolivian capital city of La Paz, and his research addresses Andean representations with particular focus on their aesthetic and formal properties. His other interests include the epistemology of anthropology, religion and ritual, and Latin American literature.