SEX AND THE CITIZEN: BARBIES AND BEAUTY QUEENS IN THE AGE OF EVO MORALES¹

Introduction

In this famous image (figure 1) of the ‘discovery’ of America by Theodor Galle in 1580, the European Amerigo Vespucci, erect and holding the tools of rational science (an astrolabe) and his religion, finds ‘America’ in her hammock. She is naked but full of wonder rather than fear and appears open to his advances. Europa, the female symbol of Vespucci’s continent, is nowhere to be seen in this allegorical encounter: this is not a meeting of equals. Vespucci gives the new continent a feminine version of his name and the profoundly gendered and sexualized nature of the encounter is quite apparent. Indeed the subtitle of the caption reads: ‘At once he called her; thenceforth she was always aroused.’ ‘Excitam’ means to rise up as well as to arouse or to excite;² it is quite clear that America is doing both.

The sexual subtext of this engraving has received considerable commentary (Hulme, 1984; Montrose, 1991; McClintock, 1995; De la Guerra, 2003; Schreffler, 2005) but what is less often noted is that America is represented by a European-looking fair-haired woman. Peter Mason (1990) has written in some detail about how the natives of the New World were initially incorporated into Western notions of the ‘wild man’ – a European internal alterity transported across the Atlantic and projected onto the denizens of the new world. More importantly, it is also the case that since the conquest native Americans have been conceptualized as female: in his famous debate with Las Casas, Sepúlveda made an explicit comparison between the moral and intellectual capacities of indians and Spanish women (Pagden, 1982) and there are numerous example from courts of law to military accounts where indians have been explicitly described as comparable to European women (Silverblatt, 1987; Lewis, 2003). American natives have long been conceived as the European internal other, Mason’s point, and specifically a female one.

This image goes beyond the allegorical depiction of the colonial encounter; it is also an illustration of one of its concrete manifestations: from the earliest days of the Conquest Spanish men took indian wives as part of the spoils of conquest but also as a tool of conquest. The most celebrated example of this is the story of Cortés and Malintzin/La Malinche which Octavio Paz sees as the founding myth of Mexico and Mexicans; there are, of course, countless other examples all through the Spanish Empire.
Such images, and the racialized politics behind them, are not simply elements of an archaeology of power but continue to appear in contemporary Bolivia. The cover of my Bolivian goddaughter’s exercise book shows a conquistador boy with blue eyes next to a girl dressed with the pollera skirt and shawl typical of contemporary Indian dress who is smiling coquettishly at him. A particular version of American history is encapsulated in this image: white men taking Indian women as sexual partners resulting in a mestizo, that is mixed, nation. As has been widely noted (e.g., de la Cadena, 1995; Nelson, 1999; Canessa, 2005) Indian women epitomise Indianess. The compulsion that was often a part of these relationships is rarely mentioned in these quasi-mythical accounts of the origins of nations but there are many people today who remember when the hacendado or his mayordomo (steward) was deemed to have access to any women of the Indian community, even very young women; and in particular on her wedding night, the "jus prima noctis" (Condarco Morales, 1983: 31) known more commonly as the ‘derecho de pernada’. As Stephenson has shown, it has also been considered a civilizing mission (1999: 38) and a means by which the nation can be whitened and relieved of its racial burden. The right to have sex with Indian women is accrued on the basis of creole citizenship which can even become a civic duty. Conversely, Indian women are sexually accessible to white men because of their lack of political power, because of their lack of full citizenship in the nation.

Beyond the allegory of the discovery of America that Galle intended, the etching is also a powerful representation of conquest and the continued oppression of Indians by whites in an intimate and sexualized relationship which resonates not only in countries with large indigenous populations but also those with African-descended populations. In a number of works that became highly influential, Freyre explores the benign and ultimately redemptive relationship between masters and slaves in great detail.
It is precisely the relationships between white masters and black slave women that alleviated racial friction, 'smoothed by the lubricating oil of a deep-seated miscegenation' (1966[1936]: 181). In the Mansion House and the Shanties he writes about the making of modern Brazil (the book’s subtitle) in prose which is sometimes highly intimate, writing as he does, of: ‘our mammy who rocked us to sleep. Who suckled us. Who fed us, mashing our food with her own hands ... (and) who initiated us into physical love and, to the creaking of a cot, gave us our first complete sensation of being a man.’ (1966[1936]: 278). In his account, which, along with Casa Grande e Senzala, is sometimes seen as the foundational text of Brazil’s ‘racial democracy’, black men and white women are, however, thrown into the background, rather like America’s cannibal kin in Galle’s etching.

In the Andes, historically as well as contemporarily, Indian women are accepted into the most intimate spaces of the homes of white elites in a way that Indian men are not and domestic service is one of the very few areas where being and looking indigenous is a positive advantage. Rather like Freyre’s sentimental prose about slaves at whose breast the white man sucked and became the object of his first sexual experience, many middle-class Andeans have a strong emotional attachment to the ‘cholita’ who raised them and with whom, as well, they had their first sexual encounters. And the sexual relationship between white master and Indian woman was a regular dramatic feature of Andean literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Stephenson, 1999; Weismantel, 2001). Such relationships were clearly not, however, restricted to novels as Gill (1994) has shown for domestic workers in La Paz in recent decades. Indian men, needless to say, do not occupy the same position in the memories of creoles and the enduring image is one of the cowed and servile Indian who will turn to bloodthirsty revolt without warning.

The sexual availability of Indian women did not, however, develop its own erotics to the extent of the mulata in countries with a significant African-descended population (although see Weismantel, 2001). There is little evidence in Bolivia that mestizo and creole men find Indian women physically attractive – the direct opposite is much more likely to be expressed – which is not necessarily to say, however, that they do not find Indian women desirable. This echoes Nelson’s comments on sex between mestizo men and Indian women in Guatemala where men say they feel compelled to have sex with Indian women, who are often depicted as ‘ugly or smelling bad’, as a way of proving their manhood and whiteness; but they are not expected to have liked or initiated it (1999: 24). Sexual desire here appears to be constructed not out of a sensual aesthetic but out of an erotics of power. In contemporary Bolivia images of feminine physical beauty are overwhelmingly white. This is evidenced in images on billboards, magazines, television advertisements and in beauty pageants where Miss Bolivia is invariably white. In an image of the Miss Universe pageant of 2005 (figure 2), Miss Bolivia is representing ‘national dress’. By coincidence she looks remarkably like the woman in the Galle etching but, more importantly, as with the etching, she is rendering the indigenous inhabitant of the continent in terms of an erotic fantasy. In this particular fantasy, moreover, it is the lowland Indians less threatening to the state, and social elites, who are being imagined rather than highland groups who, at the moment this photograph was taken, were organizing to overthrow white political power. This furthermore points to an enduring paradox: whilst Indian women, through colonial structures, are construed as sexually available to mestizos and whites, the
predominant image of the desired female body is of the white woman; and whereas the
indian woman’s body was accessible to creole men, the opposite was most certainly not
the case. Miss Bolivia here resolves the paradox in a fantasy: the body of a white woman
with the accessibility of an indian woman.5

In a recent article Bret Gustafson points out that in beauty pageants and
carnivalesque displays white women in Santa Cruz adapt indigenous dress – the two-
piece tipois shown in the photo ‘sexier than the “real” thing’ (2006: 365) – in order to
capture the ‘erotic allure of the indigenous maiden (yet not their physical appearance)”
(2006: 356). Gustafson does not, however, interrogate the sexual allure (2006: 357) of
the indigenous maiden which is divorced from an appreciation of indian bodies, even
as he details cruceños’ profound antipathy to people looking indian. This has clear
resonances with white and mestiza prostitutes in Guatemala who cater to their clients’
fantasies by dressing in full indigenous traje where the authenticity of the traje and the whiteness of the prostitute are key (Nelson, 1999: 225). Indian maidens, it appears, are sexually desirable when the bodies displaying indigeneity are, in fact, white. I suggest that the eroticization of the indian woman is rooted in her sexual availability — sexual access without responsibility — which has been the pattern of relations between white men and indian women since Theodore Galle made his etching.

Sex and the citizen

I will return to the issue of beauty contests below but first I would like to explore some of the consequences of such a racialized and sexualized conception of citizenship for the village of Pocobaya, an Aymara-speaking highland community where I have conducted fieldwork since 1989.

Women in this community are also exposed to hegemonic ideas of sex and race, which serve to underline their sense of exclusion from the nation. In Pocobaya the images of women that people see are almost exclusively of white women, and this is certainly the case when they travel to the market town of Sorata or the capital city, La Paz. Women in Pocobaya are, however, heavily involved in making ‘indian’ dolls for export (figure 3).

In the production and sale of these dolls (mostly to the United States) the women and men who produce them are indexing their indigeneity as a valuable commodity; the unsophisticated techniques and rough fibres are markers of a putative and commodifiable authenticity. In this they are part of a globalized economy but also a particular economy of desire whereby the object of desire is indigenous authenticity: the fibres must be natural, the labour manual and the images true. The very crudeness of the techniques, which are in sharp contrast to the highly sophisticated weaving styles of the Andes, are in themselves markers of authenticity because they conform to the simplicity which is indicative of indigenous authenticity as imagined by consumers. In this the doll makers are engaged in an economic relation which is similar to that of other Latin American women and men who engage in transactions based on their exoticism to sell sex (Kempadoo, 2004) or for marriage (Hurtado, 2006). In all of these cases those involved are responding to images and conceptions of themselves which, as dictated by the market, they strategically reproduce. So like Colombian women described by Hurtado (2006) who must suppress their sense of agency and independence in order to conform to an Italian’s idea of the meek and mild Latin woman, people in Pocobaya must ignore their sophisticated visual techniques and weaving styles to satisfy a Western market which finds crude methods charmingly evocative of an indigenous simplicity.

In the case of the dolls in Pocobaya, they are designed by people in La Paz led by an American woman who first came up with the idea of making such dolls for export. The doll depicted here is a simple example and illustrates the pollera skirt, the manta, shawl, and the sandals made from car tyres which characterize indian women’s dress in the countryside.

Both men and women are involved in making these dolls and the accompanying llamas etc. But no one makes dolls for their own children. In fact, people are generally puzzled as to why anyone would want the dolls they make; these dolls are not part of their own economy of desire that places no value at all on representing themselves as
wearing the crude bayeta fabrics, which, in Pocobaya at any rate, are indicative of the kind of clothing they were obliged to make and wear in the time of the hacienda. To the north of Pocobaya and at some distance from the village there are communities who continue to wear their homespun bayeta (flannel) and these mollos, as they are called in Pocobaya, are looked down on for their primitiveness.

Consequently, the dolls, rather than representing a condition they aspire to, represent a condition they seek to overcome; so instead of making dolls for their own daughters they buy them; and what they buy are Barbie-like dolls which are relatively cheap but still use up cash resources which are rare in a community which is primarily subsistence based.

From a very young age girls are exposed to an image of what the standard of feminine beauty is and this is constantly reinforced as they grow up. When the girl shown in figure 4, Waliya, received a doll from her parents, her older sisters examined it and pointed out with glee and to the annoyance of their mother that it had prominent
breasts and a narrow waist. One of the sisters was particularly fascinated by this and, to the irritation of Waliya, was taken to stealing the doll in order to undress and examine her body.

At the time this photograph was taken, in 1991, it was rare for parents to buy toys for their children and hers was one of the first such dolls in Pocabaya. In fact, her parents were only able to buy the doll because they made money selling the ‘indian’ dolls for export. For Waliya’s father, Remegio, being able to buy his daughter a doll was a mark of conspicuous consumption but it was also a mark of aspiration: in that year he often talked about moving to the town, where his wife and children would
speak Spanish and all would wear Western dress. In his words, they would ‘progress’ and become ‘more civilized’. It was clear to him, as indeed it is to most other people, that the kind of progress he envisaged entailed a reorientation of his family’s identity to one that was conspicuously whiter; people are acutely aware that being whiter brings greater prospects for advancement.

Very near to Pocobaya is the mestizo community of Khacha, where people are no less poor and work the land in exactly the same labour intensive way as people do in Pocobaya. Many of the people of Khacha, however, have blue eyes and fair or red hair. They are also bilingual in Aymara and Spanish whereas women in Pocobaya are predominantly monolingual and those that do speak Spanish do so in a very inflected way which marks their indian origins. Adolescent girls in Pocobaya are very aware that their peers in Khacha have very different life opportunities from theirs. They know of one girl from Khacha, for example, who works in a pharmacy in La Paz, the kind of job that requires ‘buena presencia’ when advertised, a phrase that is a well-known code for not looking like an indian. When girls from Pocobaya emigrate, whatever their aspirations, they end up working as domestic servants in the city or as poorly paid field hands in other areas of the country.

The one exception that I know of is Beatriz, who, due to the rape of her great grandmother by the mayordomo of the hacienda, has a Spanish, not indian, surname. She also is relatively light skinned and does not have the bone structure that typifies indian people from the highlands. A good student, she worked hard to perfect her Spanish and left the community as soon as she could. For a while she worked as a craftworker in La Paz where her boss encouraged her to cut her plaits and dress ‘de vestido’, in European dress. When I met them in a side street off the Calle Sagarnaga, which is the main craft (artesanı´ a) street in La Paz, both she and her boss were pleased to show me how much she had changed. ‘Look at her,’ her boss beamed. ‘She has been out of the sun for several months now and look at her skin. That is how she will progress. [Ası´ va a progresar.] Just you see, in a short while no one will ever guess she was an indian [campesina].’

This example of whitening for social ascension can be reproduced for virtually any Latin American country in the past as well as the present; but imagining citizens as white has to do with more than simply issues of race and social ascension: it is also about how sexual desire is constructed and expressed.

Sexual images of white women abound, not simply in bars but in popular restaurants frequented by a wide range of people from the indian working classes. The image in figure 5 (taken on Domingo de Tentación and so titled) illustrates this simple point.

The near ubiquity of such images in popular bars and restaurants raises a number of questions. In contemporary rural and urban highland Bolivia indigenous women wear lots of clothes; the wealthier a woman and the higher her social status, the greater the amount of clothing, and some will wear as many as five heavy skirts. The showing of flesh is neither common nor eroticized and women and men remain fully clothed even when working in the hot sun. Putting images of naked white women on the wall is not, therefore, simply expressing a sense of desire for white bodies – bodies with a different form as well as colour – it also implies a very different modality of desire, in particular when one never comes across erotic images of indigenous people, male or female, clothed or naked. Erotic female bodies are white female bodies.
Almost as common in bars and restaurants are Alpine meadows with healthy cows and Swiss chalets. My first reaction when confronted with these scenes was to wonder why, with the stunning mountains all through the Andes, people had pictures of the Alps? It finally occurred to me that they were the same kinds of images: what is aspired to in the Alpine meadow scene is a prosperous, ordered...

**FIGURE 5** Domingo de Tentación. Photo by Wolfgang Schüler.
and green mountain environment populated by a white yeomanry living in large and well-ordered houses. Both kinds of images are consequently part of the same economy of desire.

Although public erotic images of men are rare in Bolivia it is equally the case that the bodily aesthetics one sees presented, for example in posters and on television, are overwhelmingly white. An image taken in a barber’s shop in the provincial town of Sorata (figure 6) is a simple example. According to the barber, Ruben, all of his clientele, the occasional anthropologist notwithstanding, are from the town or surrounding countryside; that is, his clientele is predominantly Indian in origin and indeed the language that is most often spoken in his shop is Aymara. Yet, of the dozens of pictures he has on his wall to illustrate hairstyles not a single one looks indigenous and at most one or two possibly even look Latino. Any customer sitting in the chair will be looking at the hundreds of pictures of white men on the wall, examples of male beauty to be admired and copied, and a larger image of himself in the mirror. What no one could fail to notice is that the image in the mirror does not look like the images on the wall and whatever hairstyle the customer comes out with, he will not look like those men whose pictures were for 20 minutes or so in front of him.

**FIGURE 6 Ruben in his barber shop. Photo by the author.**
For men as for women, whiteness is presented as an object of desire – what they should desire in the opposite sex as well as for their own bodies. The barber shop images, the pictures on the walls of popular restaurants and bars, Waliya’s Barbie-style doll are aspirational images but these aspirations to progress, modernity and whiteness are usually frustrated.

Desire is a very difficult phenomenon to investigate but in conversations with men from Pocobaya it is very clear that erotic images of women, along with exposure to pornography in mining camps, have caused desires and tastes to develop in ways that can not easily be met in their villages. Their masculinity, their sense of citizenship as well as their sexual desires are developed in conjunction in particular spaces such as mining camps and army barracks (Canessa, 2005).

Male citizens

As I have discussed in previous work and will summarize briefly here (Canessa, 2005) military service is a key component of creating citizenship (see also Fraser, 1989; Radcliffe and Westwood, 1996; Gill, 1997; Arnold, 2006); indeed, one of the key functions of military service in conscript armies since the age of Napoleon has been precisely to create citizens. It is in the army where men from Pocobaya really learn to speak Spanish, and get a sense of the geographical extent and diversity of their nation. In the words of Lesley Gill, ‘military service is one of the most important prerequisites for the development of successful subaltern manhood, because it signifies rights to power and citizenship’ (1997: 527). Through military service men obtain the libreta militar, the military booklet which is a requisite for a national identity card. These two documents are essential for obtaining a passport, a job in a government agency, or a degree at the state university (ibid.: 537). They also learn that speaking Aymara is punishable and that, in this racially hierarchical army, Indian men can not expect to be officers unless, that is, as my friend Zenobio told me, they ‘progress’ and change their name from ‘Condori to Corte’s’; that is, if they become Spanish-speaking mestizos.

For urban whites and mestizos membership in the nation, that is, citizenship, is a given and rarely questioned. For Indian people, however, citizenship must be learned and earned (cf. Stoler, 1995: 11) and the army is the primary site where this takes place. Indian women, in contrast, have far fewer avenues for learning or earning citizenship: in Pocobaya they are, for example, more likely to be monolingual and illiterate than men, despite years of schooling, so even more civil modes of citizenship frequently prove elusive. Military service, as a consequence, throws into sharp relief the different relations men and women from the Indian community have with the nation-state.

Military service is a masculinizing process and is explicitly experienced as such. Military service acts as a rite of passage: on completion men are feted in their communities under an arch of honour and are considered marriageable; they are also told ‘Now you are a man’, because, as Zenobio told me, boys go into the army because they come out ‘machos’. To complete military service is ‘as if you have reached the Presidency’, to have truly acquired full citizenship, and it is clear that citizenship and masculinity are inextricable.
This is made salient in the punishments meted out to soldiers who fail, those who desert or those who simply cannot take the rigours of military life. Men are made to dress up as women and perform menial, feminine tasks such as sweeping the square. As my friend Eleuterio Mamani, who came out of the army in January 2006 explained:

Yes, there are those who cannot take it, and they get kicked and beaten. And so as not to suffer any longer they escape but they get caught. They are caught and dressed with a pollera, a manta, and a sign is put on them which says ‘I am a woman’, that is what is written: ‘I am a woman because I cannot take it in the army’. And that is how they make them go [publicly] around the streets . . . You see, women don’t go into the army, so if you cannot take it then you are like a woman. ‘You are a woman; you cannot take it’, they say, ‘men go into the army; but you have to dress like a woman’.

’Woman’ here is not, however, any woman but quite explicitly an Indian woman with the signal pollera skirt and manta (shawl) because it is not simply that, as Marisol De la Cadena (1995) put it, ‘women are more Indian’ but also that Indians are more female: to be dressed as a woman would be humiliating; to be dressed as an Indian woman doubly so. Moreover, not to have completed military service makes one a poor marriage prospect in the eyes of many women; and lacking the masculinizing experience of military service plus their poor or inadequate Spanish forces them to inhabit more the Aymara-speaking world of women.

Military service is not only a gendering experience but a sexualizing one as well. It is often through military service that men are exposed to prostitution, a pastime many continue when they undertake seasonal labour in mines. Where military service allows Pocobayeneños to travel and see their country in its variety and lay claim to citizenship, prostitution serves a similar function. In a discussion about what it meant to him to be Bolivian, one friend, Adelio, spoke at some length about the importance of military service but he also beamed proudly as he told me he had slept with white, black and Indian women ‘all the women of Bolivia’. His clear sense of accomplishment at having spanned sexually the three most recognizable racial groups in Bolivia is significant in the context of Bolivia as a mixed nation.

Although in Bolivia the African contribution to the national population is small, it shares a discourse with many other Latin American countries of being a product of the mix of European, African and indigenous peoples (e.g. Placido, 2001). Historically in Bolivia and elsewhere in Latin America the social advance that mestizaje implies has been seen in terms of white men having sex with non-white women (e.g. Freyre, 1966; Wright, 1990; Nelson, 1999). In contrast to the redemptive quality of white male sexuality, the putatively predatory and degenerative sexuality of lower class and darker men has been seen as particularly problematic in twentieth-century Latin American discourse (Stepan, 1991: 93). Unlike many other areas of the Americas where whites were concerned to the point of paranoia over the corrupting hypersexuality of subalterns, Bolivian elites considered Indian men to be singularly lacking in their sexuality; the environmentalism of much social thought during the republican period rendered the inhabitants of the cold, high altiplano as impervious to pain and devoid of any sensibility, let alone sensuality (Larson, 2005: 41). Influential investigations into
the intimacies of indian life such as José Salmón Ballivian’s 1926 *El Indio Intímo: Contribución al estudio biológico social del indio* concludes that highland indians were nearly asexual (in Larson, 2005).

In contemporary Bolivia I have often heard mestizos and creoles marvel at the strength of indians, their imperviousness to pain and discomfort, their insensitivity to cold and rain, and their lack of any kind of emotional or physical sensitivity. This is part of a long tradition of seeing highland indians as telluric embodiments of a harsh and unforgiving Andean environment. In much art of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indians appear as part of the physical landscape, usually in the distance and often as cold and immobile as a rock. In the 1990s, as AIDS spread across Latin America and neighbouring Brazil in particular, a joke went around La Paz: ‘Why is there so much AIDS in Brazil and so little in Bolivia? Because the indians are so ugly they don’t even have sex with each other.’ Here, as on other occasions, the sensuality of the tropical lowlands is contrasted with ascetic altiplano culture.

Adelio’s evident pride in having slept with a variety of women must be seen in this context: first as laying claim to his nation not only through military service and travel but through sex with racial and ethnic ‘others’, a usurpation of a white prerogative; second, as laying claim to an expressive sexuality which has not historically been publicly recognized. Both are an assertion of citizenship; a demand to be included as a fully participating member of the nation.

It is significant that Adelio has to leave his community and region to lay claim to that citizenship. Not only does it underline the lack of citizenship of women in the community11 (and the marginality of the community as a whole), who obviously do not have access to such masculinizing and whitening processes, but relations between indian men and non-indian women are still taboo in this area: I know of no examples of indian men marrying or having public relationships with mestiza or creole women in the area around which I do field work nor have I heard of any. In contrast there are many contemporary examples, as well as those of the past, of mestizo and creole men having relationships with and marrying indian women. The men of neighbouring mestizo villages, often no wealthier than those of Pocobaya, do have relationships with indian women; sometimes to marry them, often eventually to abandon them. In some cases mestizo men will recognize the paternity of their children but they are under no obligation. For example, Ernesto,12 who was in his early seventies when we spoke, told me of his children through marriage, through his mistresses, naming those who still lived in the provincial town; and those he didn’t recognize who lived further away. He told me that the mother of these children is trying to get him to recognize them but he was simply refusing. In contrast, he did recognize the children he had by a woman in Caranavi, a small town in the coca-growing region of yungas.13

**Evo and the new era**

Evo Morales’s election to the presidency of Bolivia with a clear majority of the votes offers an opportunity to undermine this nexus of race, sex and citizenship. Indeed one of his very first acts as President was to appoint indigenous women to key ministerial posts, including those of Economic Development, Government, Health, and Justice. Despite these significant moves, in his personal life and comments he conforms much
more to a conventional model of metropolitan masculinity than that more prevalent in
the rural Indian communities from which he originates and where he receives greatest
support. That is, even if hegemonic whiteness has been overturned, mestizo-creole
masculinity appears not only to have remained unchallenged, but embraced by the
President.

There are some clear limits to Evo’s exercise of power: despite bullish rhetoric
and the partial renationalization of gas, economic control of the country still remains
within the firm control of the same small group of people and international investors;
and Morales has to contend with the serious issue of the eastern regions and their
secession movements. What is less clear is the limits to his ability, or indeed desire, to
deconstruct the tightly bound associations of race and gender, the meta-language of
power, that have underwritten politics – at both the intimate and the national level –
since the Conquest. To challenge the stereotype of the asexual and submissive Indian
man it appears he must do so through embracing the mestizo-creole model of gendered
relationships.

The incongruity of an Indian president surfaces in humour and jokes about Evo.
As has been widely noted since Freud, humour is a means through which anxieties and
incongruities are explored. Whether humour is understood as challenging authority
(Douglas, 1966; Scott, 1985) or as an ultimately ineffectual act of insubordination
(Mulkay, 1988), humour derives its force from dealing with the dangerous, the taboo and
the uncomfortable. It is not then surprising that jokes about Evo Morales’s sexuality
abound in contemporary Bolivia because they address the apparent and unheimlich
contradiction of having an Indian man occupying the highest elected office in the land.

Humour has rarely been a subject that anthropologists have considered seriously but
in recent years scholars such as Donna Goldstein (2003) and Diane Nelson (1999) have
begun to explore humour as an appropriate subject for scholarly analysis. In particular
Diane Nelson has looked at the jokes, cartoons and rumours surrounding Rigoberta
Menchú in Guatemala. For Nelson, these jokes ‘are complex ways of structuring a
variety of anxieties for many different Guatemalans whose national, ethnic and gendered
body images are wounded’ (1999: 173). Bolivia, unlike Guatemala, has not suffered
years of extreme violence directed against Indians but it is experiencing a period of
marked re-evaluation of enduring categories of race and sex; in Bolivia the national body
is not so much wounded but being re-dressed.

Jokes and rumours about Evo Morales, rather like those about Rigoberta Menchú,
‘condense often contradictory fantasies and popular imaginings about the presence of
indigenous people in the nation and in so doing help structure various bodies politic’
(Nelson, 1999: 173). Anxieties surrounding the irruption of Evo Morales in the centre
of the body politic are exposed in humour and rumour.

The idea that the President, who has never married, may have relationships with
white women is the stuff of rampant rumour in La Paz. It also lies behind the Día de los
Inocentes (similar to April Fool’s Day) announcement of Evo Morales’s engagement to
Adriana Gil Moreno, the 22-year-old, US-educated political leader from Santa Cruz in
eastern Bolivia (El Deber, 2005). The joke caused considerable discussion including
whether if this were to happen it would constitute a betrayal of his indigenous politics;
others wondered if it might anyway be true: the titillating discussion surrounding Evo
and Adriana Gil is charged precisely because it deals with the taboo subjects of race, sex
and power, which are being disturbed and reconfigured. Evo Morales is not only,
however, the subject of salacious or suggestive humour but often uses it himself, with the same motifs of race and sex that disturb and excite. Rather like Adelio (mentioned above) who conceives of his inclusion in the nation in terms of the women he has slept with, Morales makes humorous comments that underline his sexual attractiveness to women (which provide some of the context to the Día de Inocentes prank mentioned above). These apparently off-the-cuff remarks, frequently not reported in the mainline press but, rather, on radio or just circulated by word of mouth, cause considerable comment; and it is by no means clear whether these supposedly ill-considered statements are not, in fact, about presenting a particularly virile image of himself.

One example is when Morales was criticized for spending a lot of time in Cuba. The official reason for his visit was for medical attention to his knee. He is reported as saying: ‘He ido para muletas, no para mulatas [I went for crutches (muletas), not mulatas].’ This refers to a well-known joke (of which there are a number of variants) which plays on the confusion between muletas and mulatas but in his jocular denial raises the very image of that which he is denying. It is also a joke that indexes mestizos or white sexual humour because for indigenous people mulatas are not generally a salient category and, as far as I know, this joke did not circulate among indigenous people. What makes this joke funny is precisely the idea of Evo confounding the stereotype of the sexually passive Indian man.

Evo Morales may not have uttered these words and it is possible that they were simply attributed to him but the following example can be unambiguously accredited. In an interview shortly before his election Evo was asked whether he thought he could work with the white business community. After showing a free air pass from AeroSur as evidence of his good relations with business, he continued, ‘In 2003, in the Miss Bolivia contest in Sucre, they were asked whom they liked and 15 out of 18 candidates said Evo Morales… and I don’t think that is because I am single [laughter], well, perhaps some of them. They are daughters of the middle and upper class. Women have another way of thinking about life…’ (La Razón, 6 November 2005).

The interviewer was asking a serious question about whether Evo Morales, as an indigenous politician, could get on with white businessmen and his principal response was, in effect, a humorous retort that their daughters found him attractive. Morales is a highly astute politician and I suggest that his response can best be understood in the context of the historical denial of Indian sexuality, especially male sexuality; but it also reinforces the view that political power is consonant with sexual power.

Beauty queens are important to Evo and he invited the two Miss Bolivias (one for the Miss Universe competition and the other for Miss World) to his inauguration. This caused some surprise, not least on the part of the delighted Misses themselves (Los Tiempos 23 January 2006). In a more recent interview (La Razón, 5 August 2006), in a discussion which revolved around the rigours of being president and the pressure surrounding the new Constituent Assembly, Morales made the point that the cabinet’s favourite pastime was teasing Vice President Alvaro García about his relationship with the ex-Miss Bolivia, 20-year-old Desiree Duran, which has been widely reported in the press. It may be that Evo Morales is attempting to communicate that his cabinet members have some light moments when they are discussing matters of state or, indeed, he may once again be communicating the desirability of his cabinet members in the eyes of young white beauty queens.
Although many people in Western countries find beauty contests trivial a number of scholars have established their importance in many parts of the world and in Latin American in particular (e.g. Rahier, 1998; Rogers, 1999; Pequeno, 2004). In Bolivia, the politics of beauty contests are particularly sensitive since Miss Bolivia made a controversial statement in Ecuador in 2004 at the time of great social upheaval and a tide swell of indigenous mobilization which culminated in the election of Evo Morales. That year’s Miss Bolivia contestant, Gabriela Oviedo, was asked ‘What is one of the biggest misconceptions about your country?’ She replied in English:

Um ... unfortunately, people that don’t know Bolivia very much think that we are all just Indian people from the west side of the country: it’s La Paz all the image that we reflect is that poor people and very short people and Indian people ... I’m from the other side of the country, the east side and it’s not cold, it’s very hot and we are tall and we are white people and we know English so all that misconception that Bolivia is only an ‘Andean’ country, it’s wrong, Bolivia has a lot to offer and that’s my job as an ambassador of my country to let people know how much diversity we have.

Unsurprisingly this caused considerable comment and debate in the Bolivian media (e.g. El Diario, 27 May 2004) and internationally (e.g. New York Times, 29 May 2004), most of it condemnatory although there was considerable support for her position in Santa Cruz as evidenced by blogs and web postings. There are annual elections for two Miss Bolivias – one for the Miss World competition and the other for Miss Universe – and for one Señorita Bolivia for a Latin American competition. Not only are they all invariably tall, white women, they are also almost always from the east part of the country. In 2005, for example, all three were once again from Santa Cruz, which celebrates its whiteness (Gustafson, 2006) in general and in particular that of its women.

Evo Morales’s comments about beauty queens must be taken in the context of the controversy created by Gabriela Oviedo, of which he is undoubtedly very well aware. He is also clearly aware of the wider context of the secession movement in Santa Cruz, which is partly rooted in precisely the anxieties Oviedo expressed: domination by the Indian highland majority.

In the Indian highlands, too, beauty contests are taken to articulate political messages far beyond those surrounding female aesthetics. When the overwhelmingly Indian city of El Alto – a satellite of La Paz – had its first beauty contest in 2005, electing a Miss El Alto and a Señorita El Alto, it warranted an editorial in the serious daily La Razón (25 November 2005) arguing that, contrary to widespread prejudice, the residents of El Alto are not stubbornly wedded to an Indian past but are looking forward to a progressive and modern future, embracing free trade and global capitalism.

[El Alto’s] medium and larger entrepreneurs want to hook themselves up to the train of investment, production, and export. That is, the economy of the big league. Another example, the support on the part of neighbourhood committees of projects directed to reorganizing the physical space to make El Alto a tidier, cleaner and even more cosmopolitan city. And single events, organized for the first time, such as the election of two ladies who will represent El Alto in a high-quality and recognized national event which is the Miss Bolivia Contest.
Given these events, does it seem that alteños want to remain in the past? Or in contrast, aren’t they sending messages to their leaders and to those of the country that they want to change the conflictive image of them and show themselves for what they really are: people who want to progress and build opportunities?  

What better example of the rejection of Indian atavism and the desire for modernity and progress than a beauty contest? A beauty contest which was not, however, a celebration of indigenous physical aesthetics but, rather, one which seemed to give the message that even El Alto can produce tall, pale-skinned and slim beauties. It is worth noting that by November 2005 El Alto had suffered years of political unrest and its residents had blocked access to the city of La Paz several times. El Alto is a primary centre of indigenous radicalism and only weeks after the beauty contest it overwhelmingly supported Evo Morales in the presidential elections.

The winner who went on to compete for the Miss La Paz contest, Carol Alvizuri, at 1.78 metres tall and pale skinned is not exactly typical of the women who live in El Alto. The election of Carol Alvizuri as Miss La Paz in a contest against six other women, none of whom looked remotely indigenous, could be read as a reply to Gabriela Oviedo’s complaint about people thinking Bolivia was populated by short Indians: here, in the Indian heartland, white beauty queens can be produced; and one would not be surprised to learn that they all speak English.

It is not, however, the case that the public necessarily supports such choices. In his ethnography of a beauty pageant in a marginal barrio in Cochabamba, Daniel Goldstein notes that the judges ‘privileged European-derived physical features and cultural styles over their indigenous counterparts’ (2000: 7) and elected a non-Aymara-speaking woman as the winner. On this occasion the crowd protested but the judges’ views prevailed. The judges themselves were selected for their middle-class credentials and hence as successful members of the community. As ‘upwardly mobile urbanized Bolivians’ (2000: 8) they apparently share the selection criteria of the judges of Miss El Alto and echo the beliefs of the editorial writer for La Razón in regarding Western features and standards of beauty as conveying an appropriate sense of modernity and progress. Evo Morales, it seems, shares their views.

Morales has received the wrath of some feminists (e.g. Galindo, 2006), who decry his unwillingness to challenge the constitutional position of the army, including obligatory military service, as well as the Catholic Church, one of the more conservative in Latin America. Both these institutions in different but complementary ways contribute to a particular masculinized citizenship and their hierarchies are overwhelmingly dominated by white men.

Even in Indian urban areas female support for Evo Morales is ambivalent. In conversation with women from El Alto, the largely Indian satellite city of La Paz, even his own ardent supporters distanced themselves from his attitudes towards women. ‘I think Evo is very good for the country but I don’t approve of his behaviour: he is very machista.’ This woman was referring to his history with women and the number of illegitimate children he reputedly has.  

Evo has one son he recognized ‘in the womb’ (La Prensa, 2006) and a daughter of almost exactly the same age with a different woman he recognized under some pressure from his political opponents in 2005. By all accounts he has very little or no contact with either of his children and there is no mention of them in his official biography. He is also rumoured to be the
father to several others, which provided ammunition to his political opponents in the PODEMOS party who ran ads arguing that if Evo had abandoned his own children, how could he look after the country?

There are also a significant number of stories that appear in the national and Latin American press with interviews of women who claim to have been in love with Evo at one time or other as far away as Mexico (Poniatowska, 2006); and many more in websites and discussion forums. It should not necessarily be assumed that these are scurrilous attempts to besmirch the reputation of the President. On the contrary: many of them are written by journalists who have publicly supported him (e.g. Elena Poniatowska in La Jornada). In Bolivia rumours abound linking Evo with any number of women, now and in the past. As one paceña friend said to me, ‘If even half these rumours are true he wouldn’t have time to run the country’! I hasten to add that I have no evidence whatsoever to confirm these rumours and I report them as simply that, rumours. The rumours in themselves constitute a social phenomenon rather like the humour analysed above; and there is little evidence that his reputation with the majority of urban Bolivians has suffered from such attention. In fact one could argue the opposite: the virility of the President is testament to his ability to rule and, moreover, overturns the historical stereotype of the unattractive, feminized and asexual indian man.

That he has indeed succeeded in overturning this stereotype is suggested in a political cartoon, published in La República, of 8 October 2006. The cartoon depicts him as a macho football player next to his white Vice-President who is portrayed in a rather feminine pose. This echoes the jokes and graffiti which refer to the Vice-President as the First Lady (which contradict other rumours about him as a ladies’ man). The event that the cartoon is referring to is the killing of unionized miners in Huanuni the previous month and where Evo Morales sent the army to quell the unrest. Morales certainly demonstrated that he could exercise power in the same way that other presidents have done against indians for decades and even centuries.

For a man to have several partners, marry none of them, and have children recognized or not with many of them is by no means uncommon in Bolivia, as indeed it is in other parts of Latin America. It is, however, not common amongst rural indian people who constitute the majority of the country and where Evo Morales has his origins. In such communities it is extremely rare for men to have children with several partners unless they are widowed, as it is for men to remain single well into their forties as is the case with Evo Morales. In short, from the perspective of many indigenous people Evo, with his many lovers and illegitimate children, behaves like a mestizo.

The rumours and jokes surrounding Evo Morales are more than simply political and personal jokes because they depend on an understanding of Bolivia’s racial and sexual politics for their very humour and interest; more specifically, they depend on a tension between longstanding understandings of race and power and the fact of an indigenous president. There would be no interest in these jokes and rumours if they did not point to a truth; not a truth that lies necessarily in the behaviour of the President but one in the anxieties of a nation becoming accustomed to a new body politic. Following Diane Nelson, I see these jokes and humorous rumours as having very little to do with real people or events and ‘everything to do with the play of fantasy and anxiety’ (1999: 176); and the fantasy about which the jokes express an anxiety is the one depicted in the opening of this paper.
Conclusion

Theodore Galle’s sixteenth-century etching is a powerful allegorical representation of the relationship between Europeans and Indians since the Conquest, a relationship that is not only gendered but sexualized. Indians are metaphorically female and Indian women are open to the advances of white men. Since the Conquest and up to the present day sexual access to Indian women has been a standard perquisite of white male power whilst the sexuality of Indian males is all but erased in a conflation of sexual and political impotence.

Since the 1990s indigenous movements have dramatically challenged five centuries of white rule and no more so than in Bolivia, which in December 2005 elected an indigenous president. Evo Morales is explicit about that revolutionary nature of his election and not just in terms of his regular references to Che Guevara. In his inaugural speech he announced the end of five hundred years of Indian resistance and the beginning of an era of five hundred years when Indian people will be in power; and in his first months of power he abolished the Ministry for Indigenous Affairs on the grounds that it marginalized indigenous issues. Part of Morales’s success has been his ability to express issues such as gas nationalization as indigenous ones (Canessa, 2006b) – all affairs are now indigenous in Bolivia. His administration has also instituted the ‘decolonization’ of education in Bolivia.18

Given that sexuality and desire have long been central elements in the colonial project (hooks, 1991; McClintock, 1995; Stoler, 1995) – both in providing the language for domination as well as the concrete instances of it – anti-colonial projects will inevitably have sexual as well as racial dimensions. Evo Morales is making some key moves to decolonize Bolivia and return power to its indigenous inhabitants but what is much less clear is the implications for the sexual politics of colonialism and specifically for the representation of Indian masculinity. As I have shown, his sexual desirability, and especially to beautiful white women, is important to him; and important to him not just personally but politically. Such desirability is a means through which he can communicate his ability to govern the entire country and not just its Indian citizens; but it is also emblematic of his confounding the racial stereotype of the asexual and unattractive Indian. It appears that for Evo, as much as for Adelio (mentioned earlier), sexuality is a mean through which citizenship can be claimed. However, even as he undermines the racialized hegemony in Bolivia, the sexualized nature of political power is further reified. Rather than completely deconstructing the ideology encapsulated in Galle’s etching, Evo, it appears, has merely reimagined himself in Vespucci’s place.

Notes

1 This paper was presented at the British Academy UK–Latin America and the Caribbean Link Programme funded workshop on Race and Sexuality in Latin America organized by Peter Wade in Manchester on 9 and 10 December 2006 and Cali on 28 April, 2007. I am indebted to the participants for their comments and general discussion over the two workshops. A version of this paper was given at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés in La...
Paz on 27 June 2007 and I am grateful for the many comments, contributions and discussion that arose from this seminar. I also owe a debt to Michelle Bigenho, José Antonio Lucero and Melanie Wright for their comments on earlier drafts.

2 I am grateful to Lucinda Platt for her help with the translation from Latin. Montrose, however, has a slightly different translation: ‘Americus rediscovers America; he called her once and thenceforth she was always awake’ (1991: 4). De la Guerra, in turn, translates the caption as: ‘Amerigo redescubre América, A partir de entonces ella siempre más fue despertada por este nombre’.

3 Although it is standard practice to use the term ‘indian’ in historical accounts its contemporary usage is controversial. I retain the usage when referring precisely to that colonial relationship which makes it so controversial and to indicate the unequal power relations embedded within it. I retain ‘indigenous’ when referring to contemporary indigenous politics and politicians who use the term; and other instances such as languages native to the Americas. Some slippage between these terms inevitably occurs.

4 This creole prerogative regarding the bodies of indian women is by no means exclusively an Andean phenomenon (see, for example Nelson, 1999: 221).

5 This combination is what stands behind the erotics of octaroons in pre-Civil War US. Octaroons, who were notionally one-eighth black, were legally black and consequently sexually accessible to white men but they looked white. The famous New Orleans octoroon balls (placages) consisted of free white men (but no coloureds) and octoroon women (but no white women).

6 Kemala Kempadoo (2004) in a wonderfully detailed and comprehensive account of sex work in the Caribbean notes a similar pattern: white foreign as well as local men are attracted to the sensuality of the exotic Caribbean and the allure of dusky bodies but in example after example she notes that the darker the woman, the greater difficulty she will have in selling sex.

7 ‘Campesino’ literally means ‘peasant’ but since the Revolution of 1952 it has widely been used as a euphemism for ‘indian’, a term which was officially banned. The people from the mestizo village of Khacha (mentioned above), for example, are quite clear that they are not ‘campesinos’ but, rather, ‘gente’, which simply translates as ‘people’. There is not the space here to go into the complexities of identity in and around Pocobaya (see Canessa, 2006a) other than to point out that people in Pocobaya call themselves ‘jaqi’ and distinguish ‘jaqi’ from the people in Khacha whom they call ‘mistis’ or ‘q’aras’. ‘Jaqi’ is also quite simply translatable as ‘people’.

8 Domingo de Tentación or Temptation Sunday is the first Sunday after Ash Wednesday when the faithful reflect on Jesus’ temptation by Satan in the desert.

9 This is a pseudonym.

10 Despite the small number of Afro Bolivians they do figure in terms of how the nation is imagined. My compadre Remigio once explained the position of indians in Bolivia in starkly racist terms: white people are cleverer than indians which is why they are so wealthy; black people, though, are less civilized and therefore poorer.

11 In urban areas, or those in close proximity to big cities, indian women have greater opportunities in claiming full membership of the nation. On a political level the Bartolina Sisa Peasant Women’s Union has representatives in Congress (including senators) sponsored by the ruling MAS party and indians women have a long history of struggle in the public space of the market. In rural areas, however, few such political spaces exist for women.

12 Pseudonym.
There are, however, other examples of Indian men successfully pursuing white women and that is the ‘bricheros’ who seek out foreign women in tourist spots such as in Cuzco (Alison Spedding, personal communication, Guevara 1994). See Kempadoo (2003), Meisch (1995), and Zinovieff (1991) for similar phenomena in the Caribbean, Ecuador and Greece. In these cases the women in point are foreign ‘gringas’ and do not pose quite the same challenges to social mores.

El 2003 en la elección de Miss Bolivia, en Sucre, preguntaron a quién admiraban y 15 de 18 candidatas dijeron a Evo Morales ... y no creo que fuera porque soy soltero (risas), alguna tal vez. Ellas son hijas de la clase media o alta. Las mujeres tienen otra forma de pensar sobre la vida.

For an interesting discussion on the role of beauty queens in articulating camba autonomy, see Gustafson (2006).

‘Sus pequeños, medianos y grandes empresarios desean encarrilarse al tren de las inversiones, la producción, las exportaciones. Es decir, a la economía de las grandes ligas. Otro ejemplo, el apoyo de las juntas vecinales a proyectos de reordenamiento territorial para hacer de la urbe alta una ciudad más ordenada, limpia y hasta cosmopolita. Y eventos singulares, organizados por primera vez, como la elección de dos damas que representarán a El Alto en un evento de calidad y reconocimiento nacional como el Miss Bolivia. ¿Parecen todos estos acontecimientos que los alteños quieren quedarse en el pasado? O, por el contrario, ¿no estarán enviando señales a sus dirigentes y al país de que quieren cambiar la imagen de aquella ciudad de conflicto y mostrarse realmente como son: gente con ansiás de progresar y de edificar oportunidades?’ La Razon, 25 November 2005.

In Cochabamba, where he is known as a k’ipador (from ‘k’ipay’ when you sow your crops one year and they produce for two harvests without you having re-sown – it applies to men who ‘sow their seeds’ in several places) there is also resistance to Evo’s machismo. A piece of graffiti near the MAS headquarters in Cochabamba reads: ‘Eva no saldrá del costillo del Evo’ as well as ‘Soberanía en mi país y en mi cuerpo’ (Emma Felber, personal communication).

In the words of Félix Patzi, recently Minister for Education: ‘Lo más importante es no negar la identidad indígena y originaria que tienen todos los bolivianos ... Durante 514 años nos negaron como civilización, no fue tomada en cuenta la mayoría poblacional y si últimamente fue tomado en cuenta como folklore, como museo y como arte, pero no como civilización viva, por lo tanto, hablar de descolonización es hablar de la civilización contemporánea indígena.’ Los Tiempos, 11 March 2006.

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