

## CHOLA CONTRAVISUAL: NEW FEMINISMS

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**Abstract** In 2023, Peru made headlines for experiencing a gender-based violence crisis, with 21.194 cases reported in January and February and one woman being killed every three days in March alone. Feminist movements vow to address the ongoing crisis, yet in Peru, traditional feminism tends to marginalize indigenous, poor, LGBTQTIA+ women, who are most affected by gender-based violence. Chola Contravisual (CC) is a feminist art collective based in Huancayo that challenges societal norms, stereotypes, and inequalities through their artwork. Through an intersectional and queer theory lens, I analyze how CC responds to traditional feminisms. Because they saw themselves, and other womxn with multiple subaltern identities under- or misrepresented within institutionalized feminist movements in Peru, they decided to form their own new feminism. Their methods do not follow a Eurocentric logic of knowledge production but seize indigenous ways of knowing, making their work meaningful especially because these people have been previously ignored and silenced in Andean communities and traditional feminist movements.

*Keywords: coloniality of gender, gender-based violence, feminist movements, decolonial queer theory, intersectionality*

## I. Introduction

In 2021, at least 4.473 women were victims of femicide across Latin America (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, n.d.). Discrimination and violence are even more prevalent for people identifying as LGBTQIA+ (Lanham et al., 2019; Muñoz & Waters, 2021; De Souza & Sélis, 2022; Malta et al., 2023). In 2023, Peru made headlines for experiencing a gender-based violence crisis, with 21.194 cases reported in January and February and one woman being killed every three days in March alone (James, 2023; Giardino, 2023). Sadly, the problem is not new. Gender-based violence has been an issue for a long time, femicides are endemic, and numbers are increasing (Quispe et al., 2023).

Gender is not the only determinant for becoming a victim. Peru has a history of violence and discrimination against poor indigenous women especially (Johns, 2015). A recent study reports that 62.5% of native women have experienced violence by an intimate partner in Peru and identifies legacies of colonialism, systemic inequalities, and discrimination as contributing factors to the high rates of gender-based violence among indigenous women (Calderón et al., 2023). Well-known is also the forced sterilization of over 20.0000 indigenous women during the Fujimori regime (Vasquez del Aguila, 2020; Ko & Ñusta, 2020). Based on past experiences and basic human rights, the right to control sexuality is especially high on indigenous women's agenda (Bant & Girard, 2008).

Indigenous, poor, LGBTQIA+ women comprise the most marginalized group in feminist movements. They hold multiple intersecting identities and social justice movements that are representative of only one of those identities often have conflicting agendas. For example, traditional development policies often render these women invisible; their rights and context-specific needs are neglected in favor of what is considered their basic needs (Bant & Girard, 2008; Garner, 2021). Traditional feminist movements and initiatives in Peru also fail to recognize how race, gender, class, and sexuality interact and therefore fail to represent this liminal group. For example, for indigenous, rural women, control over their sexuality, reproductive health, community and dignified representation are more important than family planning, birth control, and individual autonomy (Bant & Girard, 2008; Quiroz-Pérez, 2017; Stavig, 2017). Peru has no laws that protect queer or transgender people and violence against them is prevalent (Rose, 2019). Sexual and gender dissidents are not protected because Peruvian legislation favors heteronormativity.

Chola Contravizual (CC) is a feminist art collective based in Huancayo that challenges societal norms, stereotypes, and inequalities through their artwork. Their mission revolves around deconstructing systems of oppression, freedom of

expression and amplifying the voices of indigenous women and lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer (LBTIQ) people. They address the intersection of gender, race, class and sexuality through a queer lens that acknowledges the fluidity of identities. In a 2021 interview, co-founder Geraldine Zuasnabar criticises the colonial epistemologies of other feminist movements in Peru. The intersection of gender, race, class and sexuality that tends to be neglected in traditional feminist movements becomes especially clear in Zuasnabar's answer to what Pride means to her: "we want to put on the agenda not just the right to marry; we want to stop being killed" (Mama Cash, 2021, para.4). This quote highlights the risks of being a queer, indigenous woman in Peru and how this priority is much more pronounced for queer, indigenous women than in traditional feminist agendas.

The emergence of CC is a response to feminist movements in Peru, that failed to represent liminal groups. I explore how CC contributes and challenges traditional feminism in Peru by posing the research question: How does CC respond to traditional feminism in Peru? First, I explain intersectionality and decolonial queer theory. Then, I provide an overview of feminism in Peru, highlighting the most relevant gaps for my argument and defining what I mean by traditional feminism. Consequently, I analyze CC's mission and methods and how they appear in the miniseries "Mejor Chola Que Mal Acompañada" [Better Chola than Badly Accompanied]. Finally, I conclude with a short reflection on how CC advances new feminisms.

## **2. Intersectionality, Queer Theory and Decolonial Theory: an Inclusive Framework**

As can be seen from the struggles faced by LBTIQ, poor, indigenous women in Peru, tracing issues such as gender-based violence to one identity marker alone is not sufficient. The forced sterilization of over 20.0000 indigenous women happened amid some big achievements for the women's rights campaign in Peru (Stavig, 2017). The PNSRPF 1996-2000, a family planning program that was meant to advance the rights of all Peruvian women, was used as justification to sterilize poor, indigenous women (Stavig, 2017; Garner, 2021). These women were stereotyped as overly fertile due to their race and culture, and population control was considered crucial to curb poverty (Stavig, 2017). Only in 1999, a report revealed that through systematic misinformation and coercion, sterilization had been conducted as a form of birth control especially on rural indigenous women (Stavig, 2017). Traditional feminism failed to account for identity markers, that could exacerbate human rights violations of liminal women. This

is an example of how fixed identity categories can become the basis for oppression (Gamson, 2003). Poor, indigenous women's identity was situated under the umbrella of gender and intragroup differences were suppressed in favor of one unified goal (Crenshaw, 2005). As such, the traditional feminist agenda obscured the role of race and class in women's oppression. For a long time, this failure went unrecognized, the forced sterilization remained undiscovered because poor, indigenous women lacked a voice in feminist movements.

Therefore, taking an intersectional approach is crucial to understanding the issues faced by LBTIQ indigenous women in Peru. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals hold multiple intersecting identities that shape their experiences (Crenshaw, 2005). It highlights how these intersections create unique forms of privilege or oppression and rejects single-axis approaches to social issues, recognizing that experiences are shaped by multiple factors and differ across different sections of the population. It also emphasizes the need for inclusive activism that addresses the diverse needs of marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 2005). Because poor indigenous women and poor, indigenous LGBTQIA+ people hold multiple subordinate identities, their specific needs are often neglected, rendering them invisible in activist movements (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Instead, these movements prioritize the needs of the dominant prototype of their group (e.g. white urban women). This is also due to colonial legacies that privilege specific prototypes over others, most prominently whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity.

Deep-rooted colonial epistemologies, meaning ways of knowing, shape ideas of gender and sexuality in Peru. The family planning program can be considered a result of heteronormative ideas of women's role, at the same time imposing what a family should look like. The resulting human rights violation and ongoing lawsuits additionally dictate who is considered worthy of claiming reproductive rights. Heteronormativity describes cultural and legal norms that assume that there are only two genders, which are reflected in biological sex and naturally attracted to each other (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). The colonial construction of heteropatriarchal hegemony others people who do not fit the binary categories, which serves to justify their exploitation (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Tamale, 2020). Binaries are used to dehumanize people by putting them in opposition to each other (white/non-white, heterosexual/homosexual, natural/unnatural, right/wrong), thereby creating dominant and subordinate groups. Colonialism imposed Eurocentric gender structures on indigenous peoples in Peru, that still sustain systems of oppression based on the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2007). The coloniality of gender refers to persisting colonial gender hierarchies and norms that oppress indigenous women and LGBTQIA+ indigenous people by presenting

them as abnormal and delegitimizing existing indigenous understandings of gender diversity (Lugones, 2007).

Queer theory also critiques the fixed, binary understanding of gender and sexuality as imposed by heteronormativity (Alsop & Lennon, 2002). It challenges the norms and assumptions that dictate what is considered “normal” in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, advocating for fluidity and an end to hierarchies. At its core, queer theory aims at disrupting the dominant system of heteropatriarchy (Gamson, 2003). As such, it aligns with decolonial discourses, serving to dismantle power structures and reveal the social construction of binaries. In combining queer theory and decolonial theory, we gain a deeper understanding of how rigid identities serve to sustain the oppression of liminal groups. Decolonial queer theory leaves room for decolonial queer thinkers and situated critiques of power relations, making the struggles of racialized queers more visible, and advocating for complete liberation from imposed systems (Belizário, 2016; Bacchetta et al., 2020).

Internalized colonization reinforces the coloniality of being, the idea that colonial legacies still hold authority in shaping our understanding and ways of knowing, establishing what is seen as natural and socially accepted (Tamale, 2020). Decolonial epistemologies entail deconstructing the coloniality of being, and therefore of gender and of power. They challenge, for example, the dominance of the English language, the scientific method, or written forms of knowledge production, which are considered superior. Colonialism rendered non-Western epistemologies inferior, thereby installing and justifying systems of Western hegemony, such as patriarchy and heteronormativity (Grosfoguel, 2013). Resisting naturalized epistemologies of domination is crucial to unveiling power dynamics and deconstructing gender and racial hierarchies. In combining intersectionality, queer theory and decolonial theory, CC addresses gaps in traditional feminist movements. Using a framework of decolonial queer theory allows me to analyze the work of CC and understand the collective’s approach as a response to traditional feminism.

### **3. Feminist Movements in Peru**

The Peruvian women’s movement emerged in the 1970s and 1980s during the armed conflict with the terrorist group the Shining Path. The conflict resulted in women’s issues being sidelined and hence, the separation of feminist movements from political parties and the mobilization of educated, middle-class women (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017). The two most important feminist movements of the

70s were the Flora Tristán Centre and Manuela Ramos Movement. With the re-establishment of democracy, Western neoliberal values were disseminated that foregrounded political autonomy of feminist movements again. This movement achieved institutionalization with the establishment of the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations to address national policies for women (Grabe, 2022). The women participating in this movement were mainly middle-class urban women and they advanced policies such as the PNSRPF 1996-2000 (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017; Stavig, 2017). Women also managed to establish themselves in academia. The institutionalization of these feminist movements was facilitated by their class and education and failed to represent Peruvian women of other classes and ethnicities or misrepresented them by viewing their needs through a Western developmental lens (Bant & Girard, 2008; Quiroz-Pérez, 2017; Grabe, 2022). The coloniality of gender and of power permeated these feminist's agenda, that assumed their own goals to be universal and imperative to all women.

In 2015, a law aiming to eradicate violence against women has seen some success, supported by the collective mobilization of all women during the “Ni una menos” marches in 2016 (Dunning, 2020). In 2019, the ministry published the National Gender Equality Policy aiming at tackling gender-based structural discrimination and inequalities (Grabe, 2022). Following this policy, Congress passed a Gender Parity Law in 2021, introducing a women's quota for Congress. These achievements, while ground-breaking, do not address structural inequalities faced by indigenous, poor LGBTIQ women. If anything, they exacerbate these inequalities by putting more privileged women in power. Liminal women, then and now, do not identify with the institutionalized forms of feminism (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017). While white, middle-class feminism foreground autonomy and political power, collectivistic values and reproductive, sexual rights are more important for indigenous women (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017; Bant & Girard, 2008). Their understanding of themselves as women comes from their community and indigenous context and heritage, often challenging Western ideals and representations of individualism and emancipation.

Up until today, Peru's feminist front consists of mainly middle-class urban women from Lima. However, due to social media and increased public media coverage, indigenous women collectives are gaining momentum through their radical role in protests and unapologetic appearance as native women (Rodríguez-Ulloa, 2023; Quiroz-Pérez, 2017). The protests against President Dina Boluarte who came to power after the attempted coup by former President Pedro Castillo, showcased many Andean women taking a stance against the government (Gamarra, 2023). Peru having her first female president could be seen as a win for feminists, but for indigenous women, Castillo being ousted from power and Bo-

luarte taking over without being officially elected, is a sign that rural indigenous presidents, like Castillo, are not accepted in positions of power and that their democratic voice is not valued. Castillo was arguably a mediocre president, but he was democratically elected and supported by an indigenous majority. Indigenous people are demanding a new constitution, indigenous women in their traditional attire marching towards the capital and clashing with police forces have become symbols of resistance (Gamarra, 2023; Rodríguez-Ulloa, 2023). Cholas, a term widely used in South America to refer to women of mixed European and indigenous heritage (mestizas), are being celebrated in the context of the protests for their strength and role in challenging the state.

Indigenous women have always been active in protecting their land and caring for their communities, but their role is often erased in dominant feminist discourses (Quiroz-Pérez, 2017). The articulation of racism within feminism never came to fruition because of a lack of intersectional approaches within the movement and persisting colonialities that privileged a minority of women. Increased visibility for cholas has brought attention to their struggles. So has the creation of new feminisms, that advocate specifically for marginalized women and for decolonial approaches. CC is one of them, using audiovisual media activism, and workshops in their community house “La Munay” to educate and amplify the voices of previously underrepresented LBTIQ Quechua women.

#### **4. Chola Contravisual**

CC introduce themselves as:

“a collective of Quechua feminists who seek to achieve dignified, free and happy existences for women and gender non-conforming individuals. Our core business is audiovisual creation, education and cultural management. We promote, in articulation with various networks in Peru and Latin America, innovative experiences of feminist art, based on community processes that activate deep political transformations, networks of affection, creativity and collective action in favor of the autonomy and liberation of women and dissidences”

(Chola Contravisual, n.d.a, homepage)

Their mission revolves around redefining dominant feminist narratives and dismantling naturalized power structures (Mama Cash, 2020). Their critique of traditional feminism addresses the underlying coloniality of gender and of power that defines current feminist agendas. They therefore seek to challenge the accept-

ance of colonial systems that are entrenched in Peruvian thought and political (in)action. CC advocates for new notions of gender, sexuality and bodies that represent LBTIQ womxn (Chola Contravisal, n.d.b). Their members include professional artists and musicians and their work centers around organizing community activities and producing videos and documentaries (Collantes, 2020). Hence the choice of the collective's name, which represents resistance: The term chola is often used pejoratively and here reclaimed by mestiza womxn while contra means counter, connoting the opposition to dominant visual culture upon which differences based on looks (like race and gender) have been constructed and are challenged by CC through visual means. CC's financial autonomy can be seen as a sign of their distancing from institutionalized feminist movements in Peru, a distance articulated by Zuasnabar as rejection of white, elite, urban feminism (Mama Cash, 2020; Collantes, 2020). This is also achieved through their location being in Huancayo, an Andean town, and their activism in Andean communities, amidst the people they seek to represent, thereby advocating for a decentralization of power and knowledge production.

An exploration of CC's miniseries "Mejor Chola Que Mal Acompañada" demonstrates their approach. The miniseries consists of six short episodes reflecting on being an Andean, chola, feminist and diverse womxn in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Chola Contravisal, 2020). Peru experienced a surge in gender-based violence during the pandemic, making addressing underlying systemic issues more prevalent for vulnerable womxn (Muñoz & Water, 2021). The name of the miniseries appeals to indigenous womxn's resistance to dominant gender expectations: it is better to be a chola, albeit marginalized, than badly accompanied. The name also pays homage to the victims of domestic violence. The episodes discuss race, cultural heritage, the body, liberation, social issues faced by rural womxn, and the meaning of freedom and death. They focus on evoking emotions and creating a connection with the viewer through affective ways of showing and telling. Criticisms of colonial constructs, capitalism and a state that misrepresents them are interwoven with images of everyday life, raising existential questions about crucial differences.

In episode 1, while showing close-ups of the protagonist hands making tea, we hear them say: "One day I discovered, or they made me discover, that my skin color was not beautiful" (Chola Contravisal, 2020a, July 8, 0:25). Here, they address how their skin color marks their bodies and how their alleged racial inferiority, experienced through being called ugly, is constructed. They refer to those enacting coloniality as "they", challenging the naturalization of entrenched colonial conceptions, like brown skin being ugly or dirty. The protagonist was made to discover by encountering coloniality in their everyday life, internaliz-

ing oppressive narratives that now pervade mundane activities, like making tea and gardening. Race as a theme is also indirectly addressed in episode 3, where the protagonist is shown digging in soil with their bare hands, then looking in a mirror, comparing their skin tone to the color of earth (Chola Contravisual, 2020c, September 8). They note that it is the color of skin, not dirt. By reflecting on brown skin's naturalness and comparing it to the color of earth, they reclaim stereotypes associated with their skin tone, deconstructing binary colonial constructs of natural/unnatural (Chola Contravisual, 2020c, September 8).

Delving into emotions is presented as an avenue to resist coloniality (Chola Contravisual, 2020c, September 8, 1:35). Emotional, empathic ways of making sense of experiences furthermore challenge the Eurocentric notion of objective, written, rational knowledge being superior to other practices of knowledge production (Lugones, 2007; Tamale, 2020). Emotions are evoked through affective filmmaking techniques, such as close-up shots that create an intimate relationship with the protagonist as they are filmed during private moments, even in the shower. Additionally, personal stories and childhood memories provoke empathy, humanizing the protagonist by portraying them as a person with a past, a present, and a future. The protagonist also does not shy away from showing emotions through facial expressions and exclamations, such as "Damn, that makes me so mad!" (Chola Contravisual, 2020d, September 8).

CC challenges the coloniality of gender by highlighting issues rural indigenous womxn face and how their labor is obscured by urban capitalism. In episode 4, we see the protagonist grocery shopping and preparing a meal. They raise the question, why people thank God for their food while it is the hard work and wisdom of campesinas [countrywomxn] that produces crops, bringing attention to the precarity of female farmwork that is essential to sustain human life (Chola Contravisual, 2020d, September 8).

Throughout the miniseries, space for multiple identities is created by using x in place of gendered terms in both spoken language and subtitles. On their "about us" page, CC introduces themselves as "nosotrxs", thereby challenging gendered language binaries (Chola Contravisual, n.d.b). Spanish is a gendered language, which tends to reinforce gender binaries and therefore other dichotomies, such as human/non-human. By removing the gendered marker in "nosotros/ nosotras" [us] and replacing it with a neutral x, they signal the rejection of the coloniality of gender and advocate for fluid, non-binary identities. They emphasize that all womxn, regardless of their sexual orientation, need to be included in feminist movements and deserve to see the fruits of feminist activism (Collantes, 2020). They thereby deconstruct naturalized identities imposed by colonialism that place racialized women in a dehumanizing position (Lugones, 2007). This

persisting colonial conceptualization of gender, race, and sexuality makes liminal women more prone to gender-based violence and other forms of exploitation, central issues for CC.

The coloniality of power is challenged by recounting indigenous teachings of their grandmothers to care for the dead, a collectivistic practice, that is impeded by the pandemic but is nevertheless important to indigenous descendants (Chola Contravisual, 2020b, September 8). Community and the power of collective are emphasized throughout, but especially in episode 5. The protagonist voices that singing and creating with their friends is healing; singing brings liberation (Chola Contravisual, 2020e, September 8). By reclaiming subaltern forms of activism and expression and knowing through feeling, through the senses rather than academic inquiry they foreground decolonial epistemologies. This includes reclaiming the erasure of native languages, for example by calling projects Quechua names and representing Quechua artists on their page. Proudly speaking Quechua throughout the series and proclaiming choosing to not belong in the miniseries undermines the authority of coloniality still persisting in traditional feminist movements (Chola Contravisual, 2020a, July 3). Andean music underlines this sentiment by platforming indigenous art.

CC is reclaiming subjectivity by representing themselves in ways they see fit (Collantes, 2020), achieved through embodied activism (Martin, 2022). The body as a site of oppression, a biological entity used by the colonial system to categorize and justify exploitation, is reclaimed by enacting resistance (Martin, 2022; Garner, 2021). Violence against the body, be it femicide or forced sterilization, is used to disempower and silence womxn. The body as biological marker is used to classify and oppress people deemed unnatural or inferior by the coloniality of gender and of power (Lugones, 2008; Tamale, 2020). CC embodies activism through dancing, making music, performing sexuality and gender and practices of caring for each other and their community (Collantes, 2020). The protagonist of the miniseries is shown doing activism through mundane practices, she is embodying activism through her thinking and questioning, singing and unapologetically being an Andean, chola, feminist and diverse womxn (Chola Contravisual, 2020a, July 3).

## **5. New Feminisms: Towards an Intersectional, Decolonial, Queer Movement**

CC responds to traditional feminism by challenging and contributing to it through an intersectional, queer, decolonial lens. Because they saw themselves,

and other womxn with multiple subaltern identities under- or misrepresented within institutionalized feminist movements in Peru, they decided to form their own new feminism. They reject the generalizing term “nosotras” and replace it by “nosotrxs” to include the experiences of all feminized bodies. They also reject gender binaries and heteronormativity that serve as tools of coloniality to oppress subaltern people. Other artwork on their website portrays Andean sexual dissidents and their Pride march serves to unite gender non-conforming and other liminal identities. As such, they embrace fluidity but organize around identities for political purposes, to point out the pain that is collectively incurred through categorization (Collantes, 2020). Their methods do not follow a Eurocentric logic of knowledge production but seize indigenous ways of knowing. They support LBTIQ people through workshops and a community house located in Huancayo. Their work is meaningful because these people have been previously ignored and silenced in Andean communities and traditional feminist movements but face the most violence.

CC’s work gained momentum due to the increased visibility of rural, indigenous women, enabled through digital media. Their digital art bridges art, technology, and politics, becoming a site of resistance to unrelenting oppression. As traditional feminist movements, which claim to represent all women, fail poor, indigenous LBTIQ people, CC artists unapologetically embrace their multiple intersecting identities and show them to the world. While doing so, their message remains tightly interwoven with the fabric of everyday life, grounded in the lived experiences of the mundane, highlighting the intrinsicity and “naturalness” of their ways of being, thereby contesting Western gender binaries. It also serves to showcase the insidious nature of oppressive power that is deeply entrenched in ways of thinking and being, permeating daily activities. Drawing on indigenous epistemologies, CC shows us alternatives to contesting power that are better attuned to the needs of the most marginalized.

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