

Peru: Yuyachkani, Resisting Cultural Amnesia

While many Peruvian individual theatre artists and groups have actively engaged their audiences with works that address relevant social issues, Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani stands out for the breadth and depth of its accomplishments. Yuyachkani, named after a Quechua word meaning “I think / I remember,” is a theatre collective that actively stages social memory. Based in Lima, the group’s makeup is also representative of the major ethnic groups present in Peru. Its core members are a mix of Quechua native, European-blooded Criollos, European and Native blooded Mestizos, and Afro-Peruvians. Most of them have been working together since 1971, creating a repertoire unparalleled in scope, quality, and longevity. Their mission

The Persistence of Memory

“I came to Lima to reclaim my cadaver: this is how my speech will begin when I arrive in that city.”

In the drama Adiós Ayacucho, Alfonso Cánepa, a peasant organizer, tortured, massacred, killed, mutilated, and partially buried in a mass grave, journeys from Ayacucho to Lima to reclaim the missing parts of his body that he thinks his killers took with them to the capital.

Since 1990, year in which the play premiered, Alfonso Cánepa, the main character in Adiós Ayacucho, has told his story innumerable times, and on each occasion his narration takes him to the main square of Lima.

But at high noon on June 4, 2001, Alfonso Cánepa’s presence in Lima’s main square was not fiction. He was physically there, in front of the presidential palace, waiting for the transitional president, Antonio Paniagua, to sign into law the creation of a Truth Commission in Peru. As we all waited together for the arrival of organizations representing relatives, abductees, detainees, disappeared, victims of violence, and other Human Rights NGOs, Augusto Casafraica, the actor who lends his voice and his body to Alfonso Cánepa, said one more time:

“Mr. President:

Through this letter, its signatory, Alfonso Cánepa, Peruvian citizen with address in Quinua, peasant by profession, submits for your consideration, as the Leader of our Republic, the following matter:

On July 15, I was made prisoner by the civil guard of my village, held in isolation, tortured, burned, mutilated, killed. I was declared a desaparecido [. . .] Your anthropologists and intellectuals have determined that violence originates with the subversives. No, sir. Violence originates in the system and in the State that you represent. Who tells you this is one of its victims, with nothing less to lose, based on his own experience.

I want my bones, I want my literal body in one part, in its entirety, even if it is entirely dead. I seriously doubt whether you will even read this…”

—Miguel Rubio Zapata, Director, Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani

is particularly relevant in Peru, a country that has rewritten its history, burdened with the disappearance of entire cultural narratives. In this context, Yuyachkani became famous for productions that combined the political theatre aesthetics of Bertolt Brecht and the anthropological theatre approaches of Augusto Boal and Eugenio Barba with rigorously researched adaptations of the performative forms of indigenous—particularly Andean—Peruvian culture: the dramatic dances, music, masks, and costumes of its rituals and ceremonies. In recognition of its history and quality of socially engaged work, the group was awarded the Peruvian National Human Rights Award in the year 2000.

Upon the creation of the TRC in 2001, Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani, in their usual fashion, collectively discussed and voted to join the complex search for the truth and the ensuing tough journey towards national reconciliation, which was still underway. They were mindful, however, that gaining access to the Andean communities who suffered most of the violence would be very difficult. These were culturally marginalized populations who were still terrified to speak out, fearing retaliation from both Senderistas ("Shining Path" members) and the military. Miguel Rubio Zapata, the company's director, says, “This is when we asked ourselves, why not tour with our work these hard hit areas of the country? This would soon become possible through the work of Servicios Educativos Rurales (SER, Rural Educational Services). This is how we were able to present Adiós Ayacucho and Antígona as a part of a campaign to inform the population about the TRC's mission called “So that it will never happen again.”

First, the group joined SER, and then reached a verbal agreement with the TRC to perform outreach work in the communities where public hearings were to be held for the collection of testimonies. The artists added the healing power of performance to the difficult task of reconstructing and remembering the traumas of war. For this purpose, the collective created two new works, adapted a third, developed a series of workshops, and prepared a number of site-specific social interventions and street art installations.

In the process of raising awareness of its purpose and facilitating public access to community hearings, the TRC greatly benefited from Yuyachkani's reputation for artistic excellence and history of socially relevant works. The TRC recognized that the rich and evocative power of theatre, when combined with the ritual nature of the events, could further the postwar transition, dignify the victims, honor the dead and disappeared, and prompt people to come forward and speak publicly without fear. Dr. Lerner was also very mindful of the fact that the majority of the victims were Quechua speaking. Given the exclusion faced by these people in the complex racial and cultural geography of Peru, the fact that the company’s name was in Quechua and that it integrated indigenous ritual into its performances was likely to have a positive impact among them.
As the TRC toured the most affected regions of the country in search of testimonies, the company prepared the ground with the creation of *Vigilias*, candlelight vigils that included marches, installations, and performances on the night preceding each hearing. Armed with masks, props, and more than thirty years of experience, Yuyachkani's artists joined in the task of truth-gathering, organizing street parades, teaching community workshops, and performing in the street for thousands of people. In the process, they also created an impromptu forum in local streets and plazas where local villagers and peasants would share with them, and with each other, the testimonies offered in the formal structure of the TRC.

Their staged plays, combined with the community workshops, place Yuyachkani in a unique place in Latin American political and community-engaged theatre. They are both “content providers” and “context providers,” a distinction made by artist Peter Dunn and quoted by the art historian Grant Kester, who views the latter as the hallmark of quality artistic work designed not to “deliver art” but to create the right environment for communities to produce it themselves. Yuyachkani often works with communities to create large-scale street performance interventions, using stilts, masks, and costumes. The participants take care of all aspects of production, and Yuyachkani provides them with training and musical instruments (the only contractual agreement is that the participants are to give the instruments back to the company if they do not perform their street parades according to a stipulated schedule). An example of the way in which they move between providing “content and context” is reflected in their work with women survivors of war. Ana and Debora Correa conducted workshops with dozens of women displaced by violence who were sheltered in a religious convent in Lima. From these workshops, the Correa sisters created a dramatic piece, *Kay Punku*, which is now part of their repertoire. I attended a showing of this piece, performed as a work-in-progress inside the convent just for those women and a few fortunate guests. I was profoundly moved by the healing power of the work and the respectfully knowledgeable approach taken by Yuyachkani, as these displaced women, many of whom were in tears, one by one thanked the company and also offered valuable feedback for the ongoing development of the performance. These ethical relationships of reciprocity speak of the kind of community engagement typical of Yuyachkani, which results in empowerment and long-lasting positive effects on the lives of the participants.

**From Smoke to Mirrors: Three Plays by Yuyachkani**

The plays that the company chose to perform in the context of the hearings were a combination of existing and new: the company had been performing *Adiós Ayacucho*, adapted from a short story by Julio Ortega, since 1990, while *Antígona* and *Rosa Cuchillo* were developed specifically to accompany the TRC hearings. *Antígona,*
In *Adiós Ayacucho*, by Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani, Augusto Casafrańca plays a *q'illa*, a mystical Andean dancer possessed by the spirit of Alfonso Canapa, a farmworker leader killed by the military during the war. The play is based on the eponymous story by Julio Ortega, adapted for the stage by Casafrańca and director Miguel Rubio Zapata. Photo by Elsa Estremadoyro

written in collaboration with Peruvian poet José Watanabe and with its solo performer, Teresa Ralli, was inspired by testimonies of women survivors; *Rosa Cuchillo* was adapted and performed by Ana Correa, after the novel by Oscar Colchado Lucio. All were directed by Miguel Rubio Zapata. These works, all still in repertoire and performed internationally, were a fitting trilogy for the TRC hearings. Each one of them addresses a different way in which war affects its victims: the disappeared, the family of the disappeared, and the witnesses of the disappearance.

*Adiós Ayacucho* (see excerpt on p. 166 in the sidebar) tells the story of a peasant killed and dismembered by the military, who painstakingly collects what is left of his bones and begins a difficult journey to the capital city. This story simply and beautifully reflects the layers of personal, societal, and mythical trauma involved in the disappearances. A person is denied his bones, and a whole people is denied
inclusion in the body politic of the nation. Many of the thousands of dead were so marginalized that they had never even received a birth certificate from the state. So they had not been officially born, and, once disappeared, they were not officially dead. Literally, for the state, these people never existed at all. Augusto Casafraanca developed the play using two voices—that of Canepe, who speaks in Spanish, and that of a Qolla, a ritual dancer who speaks in Quechua and who is "possessed" by the spirit of the disappeared.

Originally from Cusco, Casafraanca, who is fluent in Quechua, uses his command of this native language to render the play bilingual. "I was hoping that the play would give people permission to speak their own truths," says Casafraanca. And they did, talking to him in Quechua wherever he performed. "The peasants took full advantage of this opportunity to tell us things that sometimes [they] would not even tell the commission. This was like gold to us. Being trusted with these testimonies honored us, but we had to remind people that we were not the 'official commission' and that they had to tell these accounts to the TRC. We were concerned that once they had spoken their minds so generously, they would feel cleansed and not do it again."36 One such testimony, recounts Casafraanca, was from a woman who, forced to work the land on her own, hooked her own brother's body with a plow. She recognized his corpse because of a small brass ring he liked to wear, which was still around his finger bone. If the story literally echoes the experience of many people, it has mythical resonances as well. Adios Ayacucho plays off of the Inkari, a local myth that tells the story of how the mutilated body of the Inca Atahualpa, buried by the Spaniards in several places, will be restored by Allpamama (the nurturing dimension of Pachamama, the earth mother) and reborn. When this will happen, all the conditions will be aligned for a new world to come into being—an inclusive world in which the Andean people will find justice. The fact that this myth is played out in Adios by a very poor peasant is a beautiful choice by the story's author. The TRC and Yuyachkani were very mindful of the fact that those most affected by state violence would immediately recognize and identify these themes, inspired by their own traditions.37

By the end of the play, the Qolla has lost his ceremonial costume and mask, and fully reveals a humbly dressed Alfonso Canepe; but in reality, it is ultimately Augusto who, in lending his body to Alfonso, has ritually re-membered him on stage. In an instance of fiction engaging reality in conversation, Casafraanca found himself performing the piece right in front of the presidential palace (where, according to the Inkari, the very head of Atahualpa, the last Sapa Inka, is buried). There, from the main plaza, the character of Alfonso Canepe dared to read out loud his letter to the president. Casafraanca recalls, "I was trembling, trying to swallow up my fear, but empowered by the vitality of this man's story, and his struggle for a
Ana Correa in the title role of Yuyachkani's ritual performance *Rosa Cuchillo* performed at Brandeis University in 2007. Based on the novel of the same name by Oscar Colchado Lucio and directed by Miguel Rubio Zapata, Rosa descends to the *Uku Pocho*, the underworld of Quechua mythology, in search of her son, disappeared by the military during the war. Photo by Mike Lovett

dignified death. With me in the night of Lima were the hundreds of Alfonso Cánepas that still awaited justice and truth in Peru.

*Rosa Cuchillo* begins with the main character's death and follows her path to the underworld guided by Wari, her dog in her previous life. Rosa wants to reconnect with her older son, Liborio, but the journey to find his spirit in the land of the dead takes Rosa to a painful place, since her son is a *desaparecido*. Yuyachkani's actress Ana Correa decided to make Rosa's search for Liborio the center of her solo work's plot, and also decided to bring *Rosa Cuchillo* back to the world of the living in search of those responsible for her son's fate. "Rosa died during the 1990s looking for her disappeared son," Correa says. "Her love for him was such that even in death she continued her search through the Andean landscape, the 'World of Below' (*Uqu Pacha*) and the 'World of Above' (*Hanaq Pacha*), until she reconnected with him. Her return to our world, the *Kay Pacha*, signifies the harmony of life and death through ritual and purification, and through that, a way to help people overcome fear, and begin to heal from *forgetfulness*."

Being from Lima, but of Andean ancestry, Correa also decided to take her work to the ancient city of Ayacucho, a Quechua name that means “place of the dead,” where much of the violence of war took place. Ayacucho was also the site chosen by the TRC to begin collecting public testimony from the survivors. The performance of *Rosa Cuchillo* in Ayacucho was followed by an actual journey through the city’s streets and plazas undertaken by Ana Correa as Rosa Cuchillo.

The work was inspired by courageous Quechua women, including Mamá Ángelica, a founder of the association of parents of the disappeared, legendary for her epic struggle to reconnect with her missing son and to get answers from the government. Correa says, “I once heard Sofía Majer (the TRC commissioner) say that the TRC was created thanks to the work of women like Mamá Ángelica. She once even stepped into the middle of a military parade with her sign asking for the whereabouts of her children, right in the middle of the armed conflict. She was brave, but also deeply pained by the loss of her children. The spirit of Mamá Ángelica and of my own mother informed the creative process.”

Correa did not want to develop a play for a theatre space, but rather a ritual piece for the places in which people congregate on their own. As the company was touring different rural villages with SER, she started to register the spaces where women gathered, and decided that the *Rosa Cuchillo* performances would be staged in an open market. The markets are set up at seven in the morning; on the day of a performance, Yuyachkani would prepare a small stage, and when the place would be full of customers, Rosa, in her white makeup and costume, would walk up to her stall, and offer her “goods” to the community. “I was always afraid that people would kick me out,” Correa recalls. “When I set things up, I asked for permission from the merchants to let me stay. When they asked me, ‘What do you sell?’ I’d tell them, ‘You’ll see, I will bring my goods at nine.’ Then I would do another performance at eleven. I was never asked to leave.”

Correa’s vision for the piece, which she describes as a form of “ritual convergence” rather than in terms of artistic ownership, included the participation of other artists and activists in the creation process. She recounts how an old woman from the region of Ancash developed the beautiful costume. The process of telling this seamstress how to create the costume helped Correa articulate the first draft of the piece. After she told the seamstress what she was going to represent, the old lady understood. “Ah,” she said, “You are going to play an *Alma Viva* (a living soul). I know exactly what to do now.” It took much more than the promised month for the old lady to deliver the costume. When Correa was about to give up, the lady showed up at her house with a beautiful dress for Rosa. A shaman helped Correa with the right recipe for the ritual water, and Correa’s eighty-six-year-old father, a wood carver, made her the wooden knife, ritual staff, and stool without using a single nail. He carved in it the icons of the three worlds of the Quechua cosmogony.
A musician who joined in had just returned from working with the Këro people in the Andes, and recorded the score using actual Këro healing songs, accompanied by authentic ancient Quechua flutes. And TRC commissioner Sofia Majer not only supported the piece as part of the vigils and the hearings, but also helped with the performances, holding the microphone for Correa on many occasions. Correa says:

The performance sets out to achieve an act of justice. It is a ritual of healing, a way to create a space to contextualize the possibility to deal with the forces that hurt us. The ritual started with the making of the piece, not just with the performance. I set out to do an act of justice and to offer consolation to those who were going to undertake the painful task of telling their testimonies to the TRC. I never anticipated that this was going to open up, for me and for the public, a space for healing as well. I do not feel that I am doing theatre when I do this piece. I feel that my whole life's training, and my whole history with Yuyachkani, has been a journey to prepare me to do this work.42

In conversation with the TRC, Yuyachkani artists decided that they did not want to be perceived as affiliated with an officially appointed commission but would rather be associated with the community, and that they would accompany them during this time of reopening of old wounds. Since the first hearings, the character of Rosa Cuchillo was present at all the vigils. People also came to her with their stories, and would bring little containers to take home some of the water that Correa used in the performance. "That was very powerful to us," says Correa. "Rosa has grown so much after listening to what the other women have told her. Everybody has lost someone. Everybody remembers someone. Everybody has a story to tell."