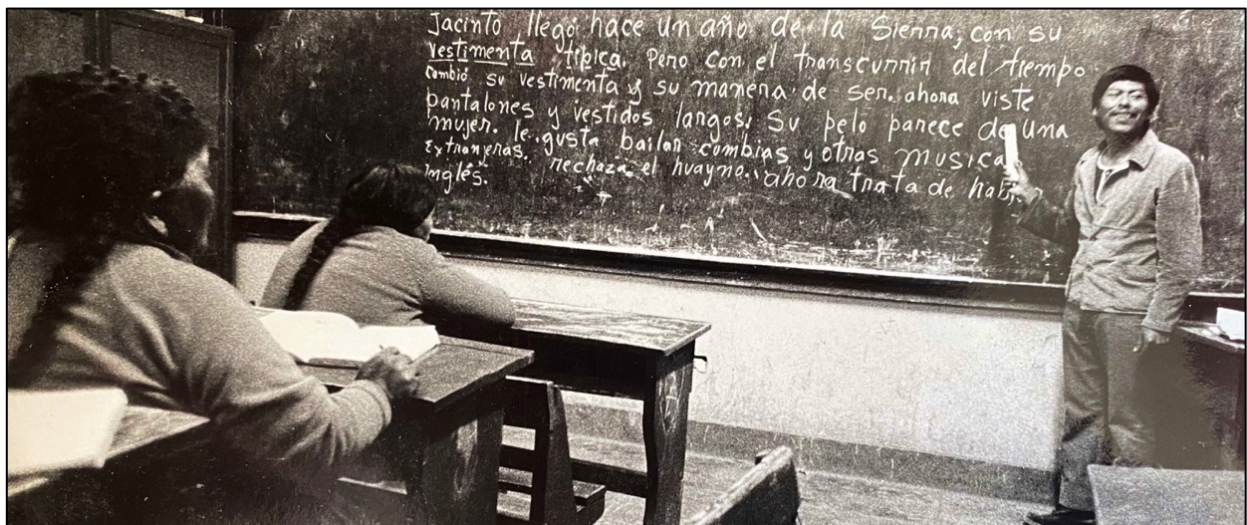


Cipriano's Challenge

Walking past the hastily constructed straw huts, I looked for the small school used at night for an adult literacy class. My mouth was dry; this slum on the outskirts of Lima was treeless, gradually built up on a barren desert hillside. As I neared the only cement building, Cipriano came out to greet me. I was struck by his short stature, his glowing brown skin, and his intense gaze. He locked eyes with me, this taller *gringa* doing doctoral research, while collaborating with the national literacy program ALFIN in 1976. I was intrigued that the Ministry of Education was promoting a radical approach to teaching reading and writing, a method aimed at helping illiterate peasants not only to *read the word* but to *read the world*, as articulated by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.



Cipriano teaching literacy through the story of an Indigenous migrant who loses her cultural practices in the city

A social justice activist, Cipriano identified with this liberatory approach. He found the literacy class a place where he could support other Indigenous migrants to the city by getting them to connect with each other, share their experiences of migration and poverty, and begin to organize to change some of the conditions of their lives.



When he invited me to his class, I was not surprised to see him posing questions on the black board:
"Porque hemos venido de nuestro pueblo? (Why did we come here from our villages in the countryside?)
Que problemas hemos encontrado al llegar a la capital? (What problems have we encountered since we arrived in the capital city?)"



A family in their house in the desert on the edge of Lima

As a young Aymaran boy from southern Peru near the border with Bolivia, Cipriano had followed the mass migration of peasants to the capital city of Lima. Families like his were desperate to find ways to survive, as the industrialization of agriculture in the Peruvian countryside had dispossessed them of land for growing their own food. When I travelled to the Sierra, I was impressed by the biodiversity of potatoes peasants sold in the markets, but also by the deepening poverty that eventually had many gathering their few belongings and boarding a bus for the nearest city or the capital.



Indigenous children with alpaca in the Peruvian Andean region



Migrant on a bus to the city



Fertile agricultural land in the mountainous region

What they found in the land surrounding Lima was not fertile farmland like they left, but thousands of migrants in tent cities, what the government euphemistically called *pueblos juvenes* or “new towns.” Most had been formed by *invasiones*, or, literally, invasions – desperate migrants occupying vacant land which over time became permanent slums.



Migrants squatting on desert land outside Lima

But there were limited options in the city for Indigenous *campesinos*: the young girls usually became *empleadas* or live-in maids in middle class and upper-class homes; boys found work as gardeners in these homes. I had seen both when visiting the family of my upper middle-class Peruvian roommate Malena, and felt awkward about what was a quite common arrangement, what in my world would be seen as having “servants,” or live-in help. I had also been photographing the lively informal economy where enterprising migrants, or *ambulantes*, set up shop on the streets to sell goods or offer services. Cipriano was in that group as an Indigenous rural migrant, spending his first years in the capital as a shoe-shine boy, lugging his box of polishes from park to park, to buff to a sheen the sturdy shoes of businessmen and workers alike.

His experience of poverty and racism clearly shaped Cipriano's political perspectives and informed his activism. One day he brought me a book that he had written and self-published on the history of colonization in Peru. He had never attended university so was self-educated and I grew to see him as a highly sophisticated thinker. He clearly knew more about European and world history than I did! I often got into conversation with him about political events, the current leftist military government (a combination I had never imagined!), the contradictions we observed within the national literacy program, and our fumbling attempts to facilitate classes that engaged adult students in sharing their own stories, in valuing their lives.

One afternoon I invited Cipriano to the apartment I shared with Malena, who had recently completed a doctorate in microbiology at Oxford University in the UK. I asked her to join us for a coffee in our small living room.



Malena (pseudonym) at the family's weekend home on the beach.

As we settled into our makeshift chairs, Malena sat up straight and began probing: "*De donde viene usted?*" (Where do you come from?) "*De la region del Lago Titicaca,*" Cipriano replied, "*y usted?*" (From the Lake Titicaca region. And you, where are you from?) As he turned the question back to her, she squirmed. The conversation turned to politics, and I could sense the condescension seeping through her comments, the resistance steaming out of his retorts. I felt as though I was witnessing in that exchange the painful embodied consequences of 500 years of internalized colonial racism.

Perhaps it was because I was an outsider and a popular educator that I was able to develop a friendship with Cipriano, but I was not immune to his critical analysis. One day as I was showing him a photo story we had created with a literacy class, he asked me about my thesis: "So your research – what will you do with it? You'll go back to Canada, write a book about us, get credit in the university, and maybe even make money from your work. But what difference will it make for us? How will it change any of the conditions of our lives? How will it benefit us??"

Now it was my turn to squirm. "Uhhh, I don't know," I ventured hesitantly. "But I'm not only interested in writing a book. I also want to work in literacy in Canada." While I attempted to defend myself and my motives, there was a knot in my stomach. I realized he was tapping the deep roots of my own history and identity and place in the world. Stories that might take a lifetime to unravel.

Cipriano's questions have echoed in all my work since that year in Peru in 1976. I often hear his voice when I'm entering into or finishing a project, producing a photo essay or film, writing an article or a book: ***How will what I'm doing now contribute to the challenge to dismantle the systemic racism and classism that he lived? How will my efforts help to create a more just world?*** I still don't have any easy answers.



One of the weekly meetings of the Mothers' Club in Huascata (I'm the tall gringa to the left)

I grounded my research into the Freirean literacy programs within the Mother's Club in one of the *pueblos jóvenes* in the desert surrounding Metropolitan Lima. I organized a project to film the women at their weekly gathering, re-enacting different relationships they had with power figures in their lives (the bus driver, the market manager, the truck driver delivering the water, the local Italian priest, policemen, and, very often, their own husbands). At the end of two months, we projected the [super 8mm footage of these sociodramas](#) on to a bed sheet hung on the outside wall of one of the palm leaf dwellings.

In these dramatic representations of their daily lives, we could see the intersections of power based on gender, race, class, Indigeneity, and age. Domestic violence was a recurring theme, but one which I did not address at the moment. As I revisit the newly digitized super8mm film of those sociodramas, I'm ashamed that I did not offer any critical response to this pervasive misogyny. Did I feel it was not my role as an outsider? Or was I not fully conscious of the issue and had not yet developed an active interventionist practice? I recall that this behaviour was almost considered an acceptable norm in many Latin American contexts, and the feminist movement had not yet emerged to challenge the violence head on.



Revisiting this film and revisiting my relationships with Cipriano 50 years after leaving Peru, I also realize that I only had a vague academic understanding of the deep historical struggles between the original inhabitants of this Andean country and the European populations that colonized it. This colonial dominance was perhaps epitomized in a statue of Christopher Columbus in central Lima, erected in 1867, that I photographed from many angles and have used as a teaching tool ever since. The persistent inequalities were “carved in stone”, as the haughty aristocratic Spaniard towered over the naked Indigenous woman (clearly modeled on a European woman’s body) who grasped the cross in his hand, while tossing her arrow aside.

Even today, 150 years later, rare are monuments that reflect the dignity of Indigenous peasants who continue to feed, clothe and shelter the population through their labour. And only recently, are some monuments of the “conquistadores” and colonial leaders being toppled and replaced.



It’s hard to remember exactly how I identified myself in the 1970s when I was first being exposed to this dark colonial history that persists today in the form of neoliberal capitalism, white supremacy, and racism against black and brown bodies, including Indigenous peoples. Perhaps I secretly enjoyed being the ‘blonde gringa’, the exotic creature who represented a modern world that many desired, even if I was starting to critique that world and that desire. I have to wonder how complicit I was then. And Cipriano’s questions echo in my mind to ask how complicit am I here and now.



I'm surrounded by Indigenous peasants and teachers in the Andes.

This is just one of the ways that Peru shook me to the core. My year immersed in rural and urban communities, travelling from the capital to the mountains to the jungle, had offered me a crash course in the colonial history of the Americas and a stark realization that the U.S. empire, my motherland, continued neocolonial processes through its political economic hegemony.

I was struggling to integrate a more critical analysis into my world view (or at least to mouth a more radical rhetoric!). My American parents visited me in the middle of my stint, and I gave them not only the typical tourist experience of climbing to Machu Picchu but also an immersion in the daily lives of ordinary Peruvians. When I insisted they ride the crowded buses, a passenger grabbed my mother's purse from her shoulder and pushed through the wall-to-wall bodies to escape from the bus. Her screaming alerted others to recover her bag, but the incident gave my family one taste of the desperation in Lima's streets.

While offering them sympathy, I also launched into a rant about how this situation was enabled by the U.S.-based multinationals who exploited land and natural resources, peasants and workers alike. They were quite defensive about their "democratic" homeland, America, and would only come to similar conclusions years later while working as elder volunteers on the Muslim island of Mindinao in the Philippines, becoming election observers in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and connecting with liberation theology.

We both had to leave our home country to see it more clearly.