

Embodying Country – City Relations

The *Chola Cuencana* in Highland Ecuador

Introduction

The people from the *campo* (countryside) have simple hearts, and now they have this one opportunity to do something big, something different. But I don't want the same things. I'm from Cuenca, from the city; there is a big difference between the campo and the city – a very big difference (Luisa).

The 'Chola Cuencana' is the most celebrated 'folkloric' figure in the greater Cuenca region of the Southern Ecuadorean Andes. Seemingly originating in the country, but ever-present in the city, she embodies relations between the two sites where her romanticised image – and her real-life counterparts – are instantly recognised by their uniform of *polleras* (brightly coloured skirts), panama hats and plaited hair, and their baskets of fresh produce. In this chapter, I explore the tensions between idealised representations of the Chola Cuencana and the lived experience of rural women, and ask how the reproduction, in both the country and the city, of this model of the 'ideal type' of peasant woman, can inform our understanding of social relations, not only between urbanites and the peasantry, but also within the country itself. In particular, I am interested in examining how these models and representations are being challenged and/or reinforced by the changing food, dress and labour practices of real-life 'cholas', and the effect this has on established social hierarchies that have their foundations not only in country-city relations, but also in class, race and gender. Hence, I am treating the Chola as a mechanism through which to understand how rural-ness is imagined in both the city and the country, and my aim is to tease out the way that both domains are relationally constructed, invoked and (re)produced through both folkloric narratives of the Chola Cuencana and the women who are embedded in the rural domain today.

Cholas, wearing ‘traditional’ dress and with their wheelbarrows and stalls piled high with vegetables and tropical fruits, are viewed by urban-dwelling expatriates and middle-classes professionals alike as a living, breathing embodiment of rural simplicity. For expatriates particularly, many of whom have migrated to Cuenca in search of a ‘simple life’ (see Abbots, in press), cholas are an indication their aspirations for ‘simple food’ are being realized: “Isn’t it great?” Quentin exclaimed, “the peasant women with the baskets and the wheelbarrows of fruit – it’s like going back to the old days, you know, when you bought food directly off the people who grew it”. He was not alone in making these remarks, and I had numerous other conversations with expatriates about ‘good’ food in which my attention was drawn to “those women who come in from the country and sell the stuff straight off their land”. Furthermore, the presence of living cholas was commonly called upon as material evidence of the abundant availability of fresh, clean produce in the city during my discussions with expatriates and the middle-classes. Discursively constructed as a purveyor of home-grown, ‘simple’ foods freshly removed from the rural landscape, the Chola is thus a marker of food quality in the city. As I discuss further below, the *pollera*, panama and plaits adds value to food traders’ wares and suggests their *campo* ‘authenticity’ to urban consumers. This agricultural produce, in turn, (re)situates the Chola in the rural domain; food and costume thereby mutually reinforce each other and serve to semiotically reaffirm an imagined countryside. However, I argue that these symbols do not circulate of their own accord, but are mediated through, and overlaid onto, the bodies of lower class rural women, who are then further positioned within a broader framework of purity and pollution (cf. Douglas 2002). Purveyors of ‘simple’ food then not only come from a purer and simpler place, but also one that is othered by being situated further back in time than the self (cf. Fabian 1983); a process suggested by Quentin’s reference to “like going back to the old days”. As such, in this chapter I look to demonstrate how small scale food production and the Chola become entangled within, and embody, an imagining of the countryside as a place that is clean, traditional, non-complex and non-industrial, which is produced in dialogue, and juxtaposed against, constructions of the city as modern and complex.

The Chola Cuencana as a Regional Icon: Embodying *Mestizaje*

In Ecuador, as in other parts of Latin America, the noun *cholo* (*chola* in the feminine form) literally refers to a racial category that describes a person of both Spanish and

indigenous heritage (Roitman 2009: 120, Weismantel 2001: xxv). In this sense, cholo is synonymous with *mestizo* (mixed race), yet the expression is also used relatively, with its meaning being dependent on the subject position of both the defined ‘cholo’ and those who are doing the defining (Roitman *ibid*: 120-4). As such, ‘cholo’ is neither politically nor morally neutral: As Roitman comments, it takes on “severely different meanings” (*ibid*: 123), and she notes how it is an “aggressive way” (*op. cit.*) of labelling highland migrants on the coast, while more likely to invoke “endearing qualities” in the highlands (*ibid*: 123). Similarly, Meisch (1998: 254) explains that cholo is an insulting term, relating to an indigenous person who presents themselves as white, across most of the Andes but is not derogatory in Azuay (the province in which Cuenca is located), where it refers to cultural practices rather than race. The meaning of cholo is thus context-specific and spatially informed. It is also gendered, and when applied to women across Bolivia, Peru and the Ecuadorean Andes it commonly designates *mestiza* market traders.¹ These are not only located in the ‘real world’, selling agricultural and artisanal produce, but also appear as ‘stock characters’ in an array of regional narratives, from folklore and literature to tourist brochures and commodified souvenirs (Weismantel 2001: xxi). However, while there are parallels and synergies between chola narratives in-between and within nation-states, all have their own political economy and historical trajectories, as well as their distinct symbolism, and the Chola of the greater Cuenca region of the Southern Ecuadorean Andes, known colloquially as ‘la Chola Cuencana’, is no exception. In this context, the female, mixed-race market trader is celebrated as an iconic cultural symbol that distinguishes the region. But she is also situated within broader processes of nation-building and *mestizaje* (racial and cultural blending). Hence the Chola is not only embedded into, and produced by, the dynamics of regional and national politics, but is also entangled within city-country, gendered and ethnic relations.

The feminised image of the Chola Cuencana, dressed in traditional costume of *pollera*, panama hat and plaits, and selling her rural and artisan wares, dominates popular culture in the greater Cuenca region. Schoolchildren learn the words to the poem ‘*Chola Cuencana, mi chola*’, penned by the national poet Darquea Granda (1947), and can recite its lines – which include: ‘with your elegance and grace you evoke

¹ For discussions of cholas outside of the Ecuadorean context, see Weismantel (2001) for Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia and Seligman (1989) for Peru.

Andalucía; But in all your senses Cuenca's culture flowers' and 'there is in your brown face [t]he freshness of the dawn' – verbatim from a young age. Versions of the popular song set to Granda's words are also played seemingly everywhere from homes and shops to bars, restaurants, buses and taxis. Likewise, music videos, which range from professional recordings of recognised performers and sponsored advertisements to shaky, hand-held captures of intimate gatherings, are produced and presented on an array of open access websites including 'YouTube'. Material representations of the Chola Cuencana also reside in the city. A large statue of the Chola greets those entering Cuenca and, in the city museum, a static diorama depicts these 'typical' Cuencano women alongside a number of "ethnic groups", including their neighbours, the Amazonian Shuar peoples. The Chola is also commodified, fetishized, and marketed. Chola Cuenca images circulate on postcards, tourist websites and a seemingly infinite array of souvenirs and artefacts including: fabric dolls and ceramics; key rings; woven bags; wall hangings and cushions; clocks, paintings and wall plaques. Finally, she is enacted: Brought to life in both the beauty pageants, that take place in rural communities across the region and culminate in the final Chola Cuencana contest held in the city, and dance groups that perform in the national theatre and are, on occasion, bussed out to 'community tourist' projects and cultural fiestas for the entertainment of locals and tourists alike.

Yet, although ostensibly timeless and 'traditional', and seemingly reflective of the physical appearance and cultural practices of mixed-race, lower class women in the region, the Chola Cuencana figure also comes to us as a modern 'invention' (cf. Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983), albeit one that has its roots in her real life counterparts and their social histories. Thus, rather than using the concept of 'invention' to describe the processes through which the Chola Cuencana is constructed as traditional, I prefer to draw on Williams' (1977) concept of 'selection', as it draws attention to the ways in which traditions are constructed from existing cultural and social formations and shows us that traditions are those practices and meanings selected for emphasis at the cost of excluding and diminishing others. Moreover, challenging the neglect of 'tradition' in Marxist thought, Williams further argues that it is "an actively shaping force" and the "most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits" (ibid: 115) and, as such, indicates the power dynamics of the selection process; an argument crystallised by Weismantel, who states

“folkloric figures such as the Chola Cuencana [sic] may claim premodern and popular roots, but their current incarnations are modern artifacts, promulgated by the bourgeoisie for their own ends”. (2003: 327).

A closer historical investigation of the objects in which the Chola is dressed does indeed start to illuminate the processes of selection, and the social values and relations on which it is founded. Rowe (1998: 281) explains that *pollera skirts* are of eighteenth century Spanish origin and, in contrasting this to the dress of, for example, Otavaleñas in North Ecuador, which features the long and narrow *anaku* skirts of pre-Hispanic/provincial Inca origin, argues that the *pollera*’s prevalence in the South indicates a greater susceptibility to the influence of Spanish costume. This comparison indicates the Cuenca region’s orientation towards Spain, a characteristic also documented by Brownrigg’s (1972) account of the political and social capital of ‘los Noblos’, a white, Spanish elite and by Fock’s (1981) discussion of alliances with Spanish *conquistadores* during the early colonial period. However, the skirts have not remained a static import, and Weismantel notes that although it is a ‘traditional’ item, “the pollera is highly susceptible to trends and fashion fads” (2001: 106). Moreover, the iconic *sombreros de paja toquilla* (Panama hats), which signal Cuenca’s place at the centre of this once-flourishing industry, do not derive from an organic development of rural artisan skills and commerce. Rather, Panama hat production stems from a mid-nineteenth century social reformist agenda aimed at moulding the impoverished, ‘immoral’ and increasingly rebellious peasant class into economically productive – and socially docile – citizens (Palomeque 1990, Pribilsky 2007). As Pribilsky (ibid) explains, the Panama hat industry of the greater Cuencano region is intrinsically entangled in the liberal revolution of 1895 and the construction of the modern nation-state; the foundations of which were ‘work as a moralizing force’ and ‘progress’. It is at this historical juncture that “the great leap of modernisation of the State and society” (Ayala Mora 2005: 123) is understood to have occurred in Ecuador, and, in this context, Panama hats, in contrast to their folkloric and traditional connotations today, became symbolic of modernity, industry and advancement. The initiation of their production thereby reflects both urban anxieties and the consequent “deliberate social engineering of the new liberal state” (Pribilsky, ibid: 59). Further entwined with these national, and to some degree pan-Latin American processes, are regional tensions, as the political elites of Cuenca, fearful of the rising power of the capital, Quito, and

concerned with being drawn into a homogenous nation, sought to assert a distinct Cuencano identity (Weismantel 2001: 25).

It is not solely the Chola Cuencana's dress that is the product of Spanish colonialism, Ecuadorian nationalism and regional politics. Her *mestiza* body is also emblematic of a nation-building process and its "racialized imaginative geographies" (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996). As Stutzman notes, miscegenation has always been the foundation stone of the nation, with the Ecuadorian citizen being "a son of Spain *and* of America" (1981: 59, original emphasis), but, following the rise of the revolutionary nationalist government in 1972, the acceptance of a stratified pluralistic society came to an ideological end and the state consciously embarked on a programme of building a *mestizo* nation, of which incorporation and acculturation were the central tenets (Stutzman *ibid*, Whitten 1981). Yet, white supremacy masqueraded under this 'inclusive' culture of ethnic homogenization (Whitten *ibid*: 15) and a state-sponsored culture of *blanqueamiento* (cultural whitening) relegated the indigenous and non-civilised to the rural margins, while the white population was centred to the civilised urban core. Cities and civility have long been associated with Europe across the Andes (Weismantel 2001: 19) and, echoing the arguments of Williams (1973), underpinning this construction of the city and country dynamic is a clear teleology, in which it was envisaged that the indigenous rural classes would desirably, and inevitably, progress from a backward condition to one of dynamic modernity, as they are drawn from the peripheries into the white urban centre of the nation (Stutzman *ibid*). The result, as Radcliffe and Westwood explain, is a 'commonsense' understanding that rural life is indigenous and backwards and city life is white and educated. Race is consequently spacialised and temporalised, and space and time racialised (*ibid*: 111, see also Salomon's (1981) discussion of moral topographies).

Straddling the country and the city, the mixed-race Chola Cuencana crystallises these topographical imaginations, in that she embodies the modern, progressive *mestizo* nation (the city) and provides a reminder of the dangers of the precolonial indigenous domain (the country). She is thus an inherently paradoxical figure in the manner that she simultaneously symbolises a vision for the future while also being firmly rooted in the past. As Weismantel concludes: "[P]opular and elite, white, indigenous and black

Ecuador all jostled together in one iconic body, which was always threatening to come apart at the seams” (2003: 331).

The Chola Cuencana consequently appears to come to us a product of the urban imagination (Williams 1973). Yet, Williams further highlights the multiple, often contradictory, values that are laid over the country and city, and conceptions of the city as modern, and the country as backward, are themselves janus-faced. As I aim to demonstrate, in their urban modernity, cities can be envisioned as clean and sterile, but they can also be experienced as crowded, unsafe, dangerous and polluting. From this vantage point, the country, in contrast, is constructed as simple and pure. As indicated by Quentin’s comment above, anxieties over rural backwardness can readily be transformed into nostalgia for a lost and simple past. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I look to draw out these tensions, as I explore the ways in which the country and city are subjected to multiple, often contradictory, valorisations by both urbanites and rural-dwellers. The Chola Cuencana, I suggest, brings out the best and worst of both sites; she is romantically constructed in narratives as ‘pure’ and ‘simple’, but these valued characteristics quickly become ‘dirty’ and ‘backward’ when she moves out of place. Neither indigenous nor white, rural dweller nor urbanite, she occupies an ambiguous space on the margins, and her attempts to challenge this place are discursively thwarted.

In some respects, it may be tempting to consign the Chola Cuencana to the folkloric domain from whence she came, and regard my untangling of her imagery as a somewhat semantic exercise. Yet, I argue, this imagery continues to be salient, perhaps increasingly, in the greater Cuenca region today. Folkloric images have an uncanny habit of refusing to remain hermeneutically sealed within self-contained historical narratives and their material representations. Rather, as Poole (1997) has demonstrated, visual images, particularly those that are racially inscribed, are instrumental in informing power relations between social groups, and the image world and the ‘real world’ should not be regarded as distinct entities but are instead mutually constituent. Moreover, Kearney (1996) has illuminated the interplay between the nominal and the political, arguing that symbolic representations of the peasantry, if accepted, validated and, in turn, naturalised, creates a mold through which members of this social group are viewed. Thus, images and narratives are

broken out their folkloric domains are projected onto people in the form of stereotypes, to which specific social actors are expected to perform. The question of 'which actors are projecting and which are subject to the projections' takes us back to Williams assertion that tradition, and its associated images and narratives, serves the interests of the dominant class (1977: 116), and I look to build on Weismantel's (2003) argument that the Chola Cuencana narrative 'is promulgated by the bourgeoisie for their own ends' by exploring the ways in which this elite and state-instigated discourse are popularly upheld and transformed. For rural mixed race women in the greater Cuenca region, both performing and refusing the role of the Chola Cuencana can bring economic and political disadvantages and I now turn to address the ways that these idealised representations are mobilised in everyday relations between actors within the city, before turning my attention to changing class dynamics in the countryside.

The Chola Cuencana in the City: A Symbol of Purity and Pollution

As I detailed above, discursive representations of the Chola Cuencana permeate the very fabric of Cuenca city as it is experienced in everyday life. The display of postcards, art and souvenirs; the blaring out of '*La Chola, Mi Chola*'; the dazzling array of brightly coloured *polleras* and panama hats framing shop doors and windows; and the dioramas of the *Museo de Pumapungo*, all serve to embed the iconic regional emblem within the bustling cityscape. Yet these fragments do not remain stationary and without form, but are rather given coherence and animation by the practices and movements of lower class *mestiza* women who can be seen selling their produce in markets, moving through the streets with wheelbarrows and baskets of fresh produce, or simply resting on the benches in the central plaza. In both her imaginary and 'real-life' forms, the Chola Cuencana thus appears to be a central presence. Yet this centrality is, I suggest, illusory. For while the imagined and commodified Chola is critical to the economic and political machinations of the city, her living counterpart remains located on the social margins. She may bring a taste of the country into the city but, as indicated above, this association is double-edged and as potentially polluting as it is purifying. Unlike her imagined, folkloric sister, living cholas cannot be contained to their proscribed spaces, and while they bring 'simple' foods seemingly

untouched by industrial production methods, their rural, indigenous backwardness is also a threat to the cultured, white modernity of the city.

As suggested above, in their place, situated within the context of city food markets, cholas embody and signify ‘good food’, particularly among the Cuencano middle to upper classes and the expatriate population. Quentin had migrated from Detroit and retired in Cuenca because, like many of his peers, he was in search of ‘the good life’. As I have discussed elsewhere (Abbots, in press), the ‘good life’ is a consistent trope among expatriates who commonly move to Cuenca to enhance their physical health and sense of wellbeing, and the concept encompasses not only improved access to health resources, financial stability and security, a slower pace of life and increased autonomy from the state and its agencies, but also aspirations to consume a diet high in ‘fresh’, ‘clean’ and ‘local’ foods that have been ‘simply’ produced, without the use of pesticides or industrial processes. Middle class Cuencanos presented a similar perspective. For example, Luisa offered the opinion that the people in the *campo* “eat better” than those in the city. The peasantry, she explained, “raise their own cows, sheep, chickens and pigs; all the animals just eat the grass and live outside, they don’t add anything; so it’s much healthier”. She continued to tell me that she always purchased her food from the market and was rather disparaging of her fellow urbanites who “sometimes don’t know better and buy their food in supermaxi [the national supermarket chain]”. “Those chickens [from supermaxi]”, she clarified, “are full of hormones – all their children are getting ill because of it and they don’t realise – they don’t eat as well as the people in the campo; it’s more *natural*, food from the campo”. Born into a semi-rural community, but now working and living as a professional in the city, Luisa draws on her experience of both sites and positions herself as a somewhat more knowledgeable actor in comparison to other Cuencanos ‘who don’t know any better’, but her position is not unique amongst city dwellers, many of whom also told me, in interviews, that the freshest and best quality food could always be found in markets. As Janela remonstrated, “don’t go to supermaxi; the food there isn’t good. The market is better; it’s because they bring it straight from the country – from the ground – so it’s much fresher [in the market]”.

As Luisa’s commentary explicitly highlights, the clean food of the Chola Cuencana is contrasted to the potentially polluting and damaging foods of large-scale producers

and the supermarket. The time politics and racialized geographies noted by Radcliffe and Westwood (1996), Stutzman (1981) and Whitten (1981) are also at play here; food from the country, produced by the peasantry, is conceptualised as simple, natural and synchronic, in comparison to the products of the 'modern' food system found in city complexes. There are, however, a number of ironies and paradoxes in this urban discourse. Firstly, as discussed above, the Chola Cuencana does not come to us from the distant mists of time but is a (relatively) recent urban construction rooted in economic development and political modernisation. Secondly, as Weismantel (2001, 2003) has elucidated, there is also some dispute as to whether the Chola Cuencana is a rural or an urban figure. She explains that, historically, many cholas were skilled and successful merchants, who lived and worked in the city, and whose primary contact with the country was through the importation of fresh produce; a point, she further shows, that is recognised by female Ecuadorean scholars, but less so by their male peers (2001: 35-6, 2003: 335-6). Finally, while some of the fruits and vegetables marketed by cholas in Cuenca do come from smallholdings, the organisation of the agricultural sector in Ecuador is such that much of the produce on sale has either originated, or passed through the hands, of agro-industry (Abbots, in press).

Nevertheless, as the commentaries above indicate, the imagery of a timeless rural domain remains ever present in the romanticised imagination of the country and its female inhabitants, and the Chola appears to flit seamlessly between the two sites – the country as producer and the city as purveyor. Moreover, the discourse surrounding both folkloric and real cholas suggests that the narrative, while a construction of the state, also circulates and is upheld by urban actors in their quotidian transactions and social relations. According to Williams (1977) it is precisely this circulation, or in his terms self-generation, that ensures that tradition cannot be reduced to an 'ideological state apparatus'; tradition extends beyond formal institutions to the socialised lives of its subjects, and is more effective, and vulnerable, because of it. This conception allows for contradiction and conflict to occur under a broader umbrella in which the hegemonic discourse is upheld, and I will elucidate this process throughout the later sections of this chapter when I address how actors in the country reproduce the Chola narrative. But first I want to explore how notions of purity and pollution are invoked when the Chola attempts to move out from the margins.

While the Chola Cuencana may be celebrated as the embodiment of untainted and timeless simplicity, it is also important, for Cuencanos and expatriates alike, that she remains in her place – temporally, spatially, and socially. For despite the political gains achieved by Ecuadorean indigenous rights organisations in recent years (see Andolina 2003, Collins 2000, Espinosa 2000, Whitten 2003), and the resulting professed abandonment of the *mestizaje/blanqueamiento* project amidst claims that the nation is now pluricultural (Ayala Mora 2005), being visibly indigenous or a member of the mixed-race peasantry remains socially disadvantageous. This is particularly pronounced in Cuenca, the whitest and most Spanish of all Ecuadorian cities, where the colour-class system, although being challenged by the mobility and new remittance prosperity of lower-class migrant households (Abbots 2012), remains deeply entrenched (Miles 2004). Thus, women who are instantly recognisable as cholas due to their dress and practices, not to mention the colour of their skin, continue to suffer discrimination in their everyday lives, both institutionally and in their everyday transactions with urbanites. This has resulted in many lower class women ‘abandoning the pollera’, a process that at times can be, as Miles (ibid) sympathetically describes and I have observed among my own research participants, emotionally stressful. The Chola Cuencana may be a celebrated, possibly alluring (Weismantel 2001, 2003), figure but the reality for many of the women who physically resemble the image is a life tainted by prejudice and social inequity. As Weismantel (2003: 334-5) surmises, while many Cuencano families would tolerate their son having a casual relationship with a chola, they would not want him to marry one. The implication that can be read in this observation is that cholas should not be brought into an urban home.²

This structurally enforced social distancing indicates that the less socially desirable attributes of the chola and, by association, the countryside, are never far from the surface. Tradition and simplicity can easily slide into backward, dirty and, in turn, polluting. These concerns, and the associated aspiration to create a ‘clean’ city, are further illustrated by the significant urban renewal and municipal construction

² The exception being, as is the case with a number of the middle class homes that contributed to my research, that they are domestic workers or perform an equivalent low status position within the household.

projects occurring in the city of Cuenca. In addition to the building new footbridges and creating and enhancing civic spaces, the Provincial Government have also looked to 'clean up' the markets. In some cases this process has involved the (often contested) relocation of market sites and stalls, but even those in fixed market sites have found themselves subject to increased regulation, fines, temporary trading suspensions, and mandatory training. These are often centred on hygiene concerns, with traders having to wear gloves, dispose of waste in an appropriate manner, and create an ordered and clean environment (see el Tiempo a).³ Moreover, Weismantel notes that women holding licences as market traders are forbidden to wear the *pollera* while working (2003: 345).

This modernisation project, in light of the commentaries above that suggest that the *pollera*, as a sign of rural authenticity, effectively markets and adds value to food, would seem to be a spectacular 'own goal' by those seeking economic development. However, a distinction between discourse and practice needs to be made, and valuing the produce of a chola is not tantamount to purchasing and eating it. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Abbots in press), there is a disjunction between the words and shopping habits of expatriates, with the majority avoiding the market and street-sellers because they cannot trust the food, and fear that it will be polluting to their body and detrimental to their health and wellbeing. Similarly, Weismantel relays an anecdote in which an upper class woman stays locked in her car on the edge of the market while her domestic worker negotiates the transactions with female traders (2001). This fear of the rural is not uncommon among Andean urbanites (Weismantel 2001: 5) and, by expressing those fears in their attempts to keep their distance, middle and upper class Cuencanos can be seen to be upholding the hegemonic narrative of the state; denying the chola's mobility and establishing her otherness.

Yet, in this market context, cholas are not moving into the 'clean' city spaces. Rather the city is encroaching into their space, and urban sensibilities regarding cleanliness and their requirements for 'modern' spaces are taking precedence; the city is laying

³ Cuenca is not alone in being subject to these changes; markets in the neighbouring city of Azogues have also been subject to similar 'order and cleanliness' projects (see el Tiempo b). In addition there have been pricing initiatives, including the fixing of prices and their display (el Tiempo c).

claim to the market. By seemingly remaining still, in both time and place, cholas have thereby fallen out of step and have become *out of* time and place: they are no longer synchronised. From the vantage point of the city, the Chola, a symbol of the rural, has thus become an anomaly in this newly sterilised city-space, and, in order to fit, must be cleansed and stripped of the vestiges of the country. Her perceived timelessness and tradition has become less of a cause for celebration and more of a problem that requires intervention; her perceived purity, so highly valued when she is imagined to be embedded in the country, has been transformed into pollution.

The Chola in the Country: Class Tensions, Tourism and Stereotypes

The ‘clean-up’ of the market throws the ambiguous position of the Chola into sharp relief, but these processes do not occur solely in the city. As Williams (1973) shows us, although urban imaginations construct the rural as timeless and continuous, the country does not remain static, and in Cuenca this is illustrated by the manner in which the process of city encroachment, that started in the marginal spaces of the market, continues and extends towards the country. Cholas may embody city-country relations and occupy the spaces in-between the two sites, but urbanites too are mobile and they carry their preconceptions of the country, and its residents, with them. However, as I demonstrate, city dwellers are not the only actors in this story; cholas are also actively involved in introducing their own urban elements and eradicating vestiges of rural-ness.

The rural community of Jima (pop. c. 650, Revista Huinara 2005) is approximately two hours by road from Cuenca city, and is well served by regular buses and *camionetas* (small truck-like taxis) that ply the, predominantly unsurfaced, roads that traverse the Andean slopes. Many Jimeños make this journey frequently, leaving early in the morning to spend the day in the city, where they will collect money orders, manage their personal affairs, shop in the markets, mail packages to migrants, and visit friends and kin. But they are not the only ones travelling this route, and the early buses that arrive in Jima discharge the professionals – teachers, healthcare workers and lawyers – who commute from Cuenca and its suburbs on a daily basis. Some, but not all, of these commuters have social and affective ties in the village that extend beyond their professional lives and a number have taken an interest in the development of the

village's economic and social wellbeing; initiating a raft of projects that promote community relations, 'tradition' and economic development. These activities commonly occur under the auspices of the Jima Tourist Foundation, which was set up in collaboration with the Peace Corps and a select group of villagers with the aim of promoting community-based, rural tourism. In their attempts to market Jima and lure tourists – and their dollars – away from the confines of the city's parameters and key heritage sites, the Chola Cuencana, in all her seemingly authentic rural glory, plays a starring role.

Promotional material from the Jima Tourist Foundation urges tourists to 'come learn about and participate in the agricultural activities' of the village, to 'enjoy an authentic traditional fiesta' and watch the 'election of the Cholita of Jima' (Jima Tourist Foundation Website). Moreover, homestays and participatory activities are promoted, but those women who do not conform to the Chola Cuencana model are unable to economically benefit from these activities. Sonia is a newly prosperous member of the 'peasant' class, and has rejected small-holding, preferring instead to conspicuously spend the significant remittances she receives from her migrated kin on consumer goods, domestic workers, and building and furnishing her extensive home. She had been embroiled in an ongoing dispute with the Tourist Foundation, in which she wanted to participate, for some time, and had written a series of letters outlining the reasons as to why she was best placed to offer services to tourists. The crux of her argument was that she had "the biggest house in the village" which, with its spacious ensuite bedrooms, running hot water and a luxury fitted kitchen, was also one of the "most modern". Heightening her tension was the Foundation's appointment of Conchetta, a mestiza woman who lived with her children in a modest adobe house, and continued to earn her living subsistence farming a small plot of land and selling meals in the makeshift restaurant that occupied the ground floor of her home, who was engaged to serve 'traditional' food to tourists and give them a taste of agricultural life by participating in collective workgroups. Quietly-spoken, deferential and commonly dressed in the *pollera* and panama hat, Conchetta embodies the urbanite image of Chola Cuencana in both practices and dress, whereas Sonia, with her jeans, baseball cap, modern house, and coarse and loud mannerisms does not. Sonia, therefore, does not project the 'correct' image of the country.

Sonia's exclusion from the 'community' tourist project may be due to a range of professional and personal reasons, but it also points to the politics of the Chola Cuencana and its economic salience, especially when viewed alongside the ways in which the tourist industry across the greater Cuenca region utilise the folkloric Chola image to market the 'uniqueness' of the region, as typified by the souvenirs and postcards discussed above. As Weismantel confirms; "Cuenca wants tourists, and it believes that cholas will bring them' (2001: 27). Yet, as in the city, the Foundation's determination of the most appropriate female actors to be involved in the selling of Jima as a traditional agricultural community, involves the projection of the folkloric image onto real women, with those not conforming to the model being treated as somewhat anomalous. Neither a professional urbanite nor a rural chola, Sonia's place in the country – and her position in the social order – is uncertain and she is consequently rendered invisible by those who look to construct, and market, the country as timeless and traditional. Moreover, by making Conchetta visible to tourists, the Foundation not only reinforces the synchronic representation of the country through her embodied presence, but in doing also reiterates, and valorises, her own chola-ness. This valorisation does not, however, make Conchetta a political equal; she was not appointed as a member of the decision-making board, but as a representative of a traditional rural livelihood. The distinctions – social, cultural, and spatial – between lower class rural women and professional city dwellers are thereby reinforced.

Thus, it is not only from the confines of the city that the Chola is imagined; she is also constructed and marketed within the country by actors who, although engaging with, rather than keeping their physical distance from, lower-class rural women, appear to enact their relations through the lens of their urban, middle-class sensibilities. It is thus not only geographical distance between the country and the city, but also social distance that dichotomises country and city relations and facilitates the performance of urban-ness in the country.

Middle-class professionals moving between the two sites are not the only actors who bring city values into the country: lower-class rural women, like Sonia, with an eye on social mobility and the avoidance of discrimination, are bringing elements of the urban into the rural domain and continue to defy the stereotypes urbanites project

upon them. As Sonia's household typifies, sustained male migration and the resultant influx of remittances into 'peasant' households have transformed the lifestyles and livelihoods of those living within the greater Cuenca region (Whitten 2003) and have facilitated a shift from households being units of production to ones of consumption (Kyle 2000). This process is made particularly manifest in architectural practices, which blur the physical boundaries between country and city by creating a unique urban-rural sprawl in the ever-expanding suburbs (Miles 2004). In the country, remittance prosperous families are introducing 'urban' elements into their extensive home expansion and construction activities; the industrial, modern materials (cf Gough 1996) of tinted glass, concrete and cement, wrought iron and coloured tiles are replacing adobe mud bricks and timber, and agricultural lands are being built over and transformed into leisure gardens (Abbots, forthcoming a). Moreover, many lower class rural women are rejecting all visible vestiges of Chola-ness, including outward displays of labour and 'traditional' dress. As I have documented elsewhere 'peasant' households are channelling remittances into the employment of domestic workers (Abbots 2012), and are abandoning 'traditional' dress – a symbol of simplicity and discrimination – for 'modern', imported clothes, which are often gifts from migrant kin and valued as symbols of household modernity, social mobility, and success in the global economy (Abbots, forthcoming b). In many ways, Sonia is therefore more typical of lower-class rural women than Conchetta, and 'peasant' women are now more commonly seen in the uniform of USA emblazoned tracksuits and baseball caps than *polleras*, plaits and panama hats.

The consequences of these changes in rural women's practices on small scale agricultural production and retailing are telling and, while the majority of households with whom I work look to maintain small plots of culturally significant maize, this is for their own consumption rather than being grown for the market.⁴ The potential for remittances to stimulate agricultural production has been subject to considerable debate (Jokisch 1998, 2002, see also Durand and Massey 1992) and Jokisch's (2002) assessment concludes that households in the Azuay and Cañari provinces (in which the greater Cuenca region is located) take a 'middle-path' in that they do not invest remittances in agriculture, but do not completely reject it either. In Jima, I would

⁴ See Pribilsky (2007) for a comparative discussion of maize, migration and remittances in neighbouring Jatundeleg.

argue that migration has had a greater tendency to facilitate the rejection of small-scale agricultural production for the market, as plots diminish in size to allow for house construction and expansion, and, although some domestic production remains, this has been transformed in the sense that plots are more likely to be farmed by a waged worker. Remittance prosperous ‘peasant’ households are thereby increasingly becoming new members of an emerging leisure class (Veblen 1994; see also Abbots 2012 and Colleredo-Mansfield 1999), and would-be cholas are now far more likely to set up their own business in the service industry, dress ‘Western style’, buy themselves out of communal labour obligations, purchase imported foods, dine out in global fast-food chains, and have their daily meals prepared by a waged domestic worker than participate in agricultural and artisan production. These changes in rural practices, livelihoods and the landscape parallel a shift in economic power, with prosperity no longer remaining in the hands of ‘the nobles’ and the city’s centre, but also being accessible to a previously impoverished peasantry. ‘Cholas’, then, are rapidly becoming an economic force and are using their recent prosperity to bring elements of the city into the country, transforming it and creating their own distinct city-country hybrid in the process. They are consequently moving themselves, spatially, symbolically and socially, into the domain of the urban, and they no longer ‘know their place’. The rural margins are rising, and while it would be over-reaching to argue that the country is becoming the new centre, primarily due to the ways in which the city continues to be symbolically valued as the site of modernity in the country, the economic resources of the ‘cholas’ and the manner they are being utilised, are, I suggest, significantly reshaping country-city relations.

Yet as Bourdieu (1984) has shown us, economic capital is not always tantamount to social and political capital, and, while on one hand, the mobility of cholas appears to challenge the invisible barriers that look to contain them to the margins, on the other, middle class urbanites are responding through governance and regulatory paradigms. At times these are explicit; discussions over the expansion of planning laws in the country are prevalent, as architects and members of local councils and municipal governments look to control “modern” builds and preserve the agricultural landscape (Abbots forthcoming a). On other occasions, this regulation is more implicit, as suggested by Sonia’s exclusion from the Jima Tourist Foundation. However, throughout these processes, clearly defined and idealised models of what the country,

and the actors living within it, *should* be like are circulated and mobilised. There is a cruel irony here, and one that one that throws country-city relations into sharp relief. Increased governance, instigated by the city and supported by the state, is required to keep the country natural and static by controlling unwanted 'urban' elements, whereas regulation in the city, as illustrated by the market 'clean-up' projects, is instigated with the intention of eradicating the unwanted elements of the country from the city. Matter needs to be kept in its place (Douglas 2002).

In both contexts, however, lower-class rural women are the primary subjects of this governance; they carry the burden of bourgeois urban models of the rural. Regulating the materials used for the construction of rural homes, involvement with 'community' rural development projects, and the creation of ordered markets, while ostensibly orientated towards the control of defined city and country spaces, also, I suggest, regulate and discipline rural women. Moreover, the current renewed celebration and marketing of the chola image can, perhaps, be regarded as a response to the current mobility of this social group. As cholas disappear from the urban and rural landscape, so does their economic potential to attract tourist revenues, and the 'unique selling point' of the greater Cuenca region diminishes. In the language of Williams (1977), the selected tradition has thus become vulnerable to 'contemporary pressures and limits' and alternative formations (ibid: 117). Provincial politicians, tourist industry players, and the middle-classes, in a process that resonates with the original establishment of the Chola Cuencana image, thereby look to reassert Cuenca's distinct heritage, and in so doing, their hegemony.

Upholding the Chola Cuencana: Popular Regionalism, Projection and Mimicry

Thus far, my discussion has centred on the ways in which middle and upper class actors from the city construct, mobilise and project stereotypes of lower class rural women, both within the country and the city, through the folkloric image of the Chola Cuencana. Yet, the Chola does not just belong the urbanites and the chattering classes. As Radcliffe and Westwood (1996) note, national and regional identities are not built solely on the elite discourses that emanate from the centre, but also by popular imaginations that are (re)produced and transformed on the margins. This

process is evident in Jima, where ‘peasant’ women’s refusal to perform to stereotypes and rejection of the accoutrements of chola-ness, should not be regarded as synonymous with their wholesale rejection of the folkloric imagery and feminised narrative of the country. Rather, on one level, lower class rural women appear to uphold the Chola Cuencana discourse, particularly through the use of song and poetry. It was in the country that I was painstakingly taught the words of *Chola Cuencana, mi chola* by members of a ‘peasan’ household, and its importance in constructing Cuencano personhood was made clear. As one my research participants Susana told me; “you must learn the words, it will make you one of us, like my husband in the United States, he had to learn the national anthem there, and you will learn these words [to the Chola Cuencana] here”. Moreover, the same women who are enjoying recent remittance-based prosperity also project the stereotype onto other, less economically fortunate, women through the practice of mimicry.

Carmen and Felicia are two sisters who have recently rejected all public expressions of chola-ness: they no longer wear the uniform of the *pollera*, panama and plaits, preferring instead imported jeans, leisure wear, and baseball caps; the hair is worn in shorter and looser styles; and they visibly lead ‘lives of leisure’, employing waged workers to discharge their communal labour obligations, work their small plot of land and maintain their large ‘urban-style’ houses. On our first meeting, both women confidently told me, “we are modern now”, a refrain I heard consistently during our numerous subsequent encounters as the women looked to explain their changing actions and practices to me. When asked about their dress, Carmen and Felicia, together with a number of their female peers, met the notion of “dressing like a chola” with absolute derision – even though their recently deceased mother, in terms of her livelihood, dress, and food and labour practices, had epitomised chola-ness, having been a small scale farmer and retailer, and worn the *pollera* all her life.

Yet, the concept of wearing a *pollera* is not alien to Carmen and Felicia. They had both been brought up working the land dressed in *polleras*, and their ‘modern’ and prosperous lifestyle had been freshly acquired following the migration of Carmen’s husband and elder sons to the United States. The family’s social mobility then, is a relatively recent experience, but when the women spoke of *polleras* they situated them firmly in bygone times, associating the dress with their mother and the older

generation, rather than their own historical practices. These conversations were often tinged with nostalgia, and they would refer to the beauty of the skirts and the material, while at the same time reasserting how they had no desire to wear a *pollera* ‘as we are modern now’. Through these narratives, I suggest, the women create social and temporal distance between their own everyday lives and chola-ness; the dress of the chola becomes valued for its aesthetic qualities and is viewed and admired as an object of the past – an estranged relic – from a position of modernity. Thus, while they may be closer – in both time and class – to the dress and practices of the Chola Cuencana, lower class women in the country, by estranging themselves from visible symbols of chola-ness, also move them into the realm of folklore.

This distancing is exacerbated by the practice of ‘dressing up (in fancy dress)’ (*disfrazarse*) as a Chola during private fiestas, especially when the *polleras* and panamas are temporarily borrowed from women who wear them everyday, and who are also commonly in the employ of more prosperous women. It was during one of the intimate parties that Carmen procured the skirts of Rosa, one of her domestic workers, and proceeded to dance and parade around her guests, who responded with mocking laughs; “look at me”, Carmen joked, swishing her skirts in an exaggerated manner, “I’m a little cholita – don’t I look funny!” The attention then turned to myself: “we should dress Emita up”. “Yes!” came the response from Felicia, “as a chola; you’d look very lovely (*lindisima*) wearing a *pollera*”. “And we could put you on a pony as well!” Carmen exclaimed before the two women descended into fits of laughter. I suggest these contexts in which cholas become figures of fun and their dress, novelties, further serve to reiterate the social distance between those who visibly appear to be cholas and those who have recently rejected chola-ness. The narrative here is different from learning the words of ‘*la Chola Cuencana, mi chola*’ to become ‘Cuencano’. None of the assorted guests suggested that, by dressing in a *pollera*, either myself, or Carmen, would be reinforcing our performed regional citizenship. Rather, by dressing up temporarily, as a novelty for the amusement of our audience, we would be reiterating that the dress and practices of the chola are not part of our everyday lives. By choosing to ‘play’ the chola then, Carmen looks to make it clear that she is no longer a member of the lower rural class, and thus the practice of ‘dressing up’ enables her to place considerable distance between her current social position and her peasant background.

Yet this practice is relational, and Carmen's reaffirmation of her new, chola-less, subjectivity also serves to 'other' those women for whom chola-ness remains part of their everyday existence. Thus, I suggest, that it is through the very rejection of being a chola that the model becomes reproduced and upheld by the more prosperous group of lower class rural women. Not all women have the economic resources, wherewithal or desire to reject the imagery and livelihood of the chola and, although there are generational differences, these distinctions are not clear-cut, and some younger women also continue to embody the image. In their refusal to present themselves as a chola, the more socially mobile women not only become visibly 'different' from those 'other' women who were previously their peers, but also, by situating chola-ness in a 'traditional', non-modern domain, they other cholas in time (cf. Fabian 1983), as well as in dress and practice. Women like Carmen and Felicia consequently shift the burden of conforming the role to other, less fortunate, women like Rosa, thereby creating a new mode of social distinction and hierarchy within the country. The shifting practices of rural women are not thereby challenging the idyllic model of the Chola Cuencana as it is constructed from the city; conversely, the folkloric image is reflected back and reinforced onto the most marginalised women, not only by city-dwellers, but also by members of the peasantry themselves.

With new social divisions emerging within the country, the lower class women who have rejected chola-ness appear to be shifting more towards the centre and adopting social sensibilities that are more akin to those in the city. In everyday life, this can be seen as empowering for the many women who have suffered significant discrimination at the hand of urban elites, as they enter into new spaces and roles, and attempt to move away from their previously marginalised social position. Yet, unlike agricultural producers in other contexts who are able to reaffirm their peasantness (see West this volume), the women of Jima are not on solid enough social and political territory to reclaim and express their rural origins. Surrounded by the trappings of modernity and prosperity, Carmen may 'dress up' as a chola while in the country, where she will only be viewed by her kin, peers and those that are less mobile, but cannot do so when she moves into city, for fear of being seen, through the eyes of urbanites, as a chola. The irony here is, as I have discussed in depth elsewhere (Abbott forthcoming a and b), and indicated above, is that Carmen and Felicia, in their attempts to become urban

and socially mobile, are unable to 'speak' the symbolic language of the city and do not have the requisite social capital and tastes (Bourdieu 1984). Hence, although they may understand themselves to be as culturally closer to the city than their 'chola' peers and domestic workers, they are, as far as the upper class city is concerned, still very much rooted in the country – geographically, socially, and temporally. In the politically stratified context of Cuenca, transforming the self into a white, cultured, urbanite is a far more challenging task than simply changing your style of dress, refusing to participate in manual or agricultural labour, and making a livelihood from remittances rather than the sale of food. As they do not conform to the urban stereotype of 'civilised' (read educated and white), the behaviour and practices of more mobile rural women consequently continue to be judged by urbanites against the city's romanticised image of the Chola Cuencana. And, as exemplified by the Jima Tourist project, a number no longer perform to this model. Thus, they are found wanting on both counts. This places them in a politically anomalous position and mobile 'country' women, at best, become the subject of the city's social mockery and derision and, at worst, politically and socially excluded. In swapping one 'rural' for another 'nouveau riche' stereotype, that is equally, if not more, subject to discrimination and censure, the chola becomes increasingly out of place.

Conclusion

The city's romanticised celebration of the country and its foodways, as embodied by the Chola Cuencana, constructs an 'ideal type' of female food producer and retailer that is reproduced in both the city and the country, and, in turn, projected onto lower class rural women by the bourgeoisie and a socially mobile peasant class. This celebration does not, however, from the subject position of 'real-life' cholas, translate into any significant change to common representations that they are 'backward' and static. As I hope to have demonstrated, cholas are only cause for celebration when they remain in their place, performing their socially proscribed role: in the country, producing food, or in the city, selling food. Yet 'their places' are often conceived as marginal to the civilised urban core and the threat of pollution they present to urbanites results in cholas, and the spaces they inhabit, being subjected to increasing governance and regulation, as in the case of market 'clean-ups'. To be socially mobile then is to throw off the shackles of the rural – in terms of dress, livelihoods and practices – and move towards the urban centre. However, by doing so, socially mobile

rural women echo the discourse of the state and those above them in the social order, pushing their less mobile counterparts back in time and space – into the realm of the timeless country – in the process of attempting, somewhat misguidedly from the vantage point of the bourgeoisie, to constitute themselves as modern and urban. Viewed through the lens of *mestizaje*, cultural whitening and the state's modernity project, the rejection of any public articulation of being 'from the country' by women such as Carmen and Felicia can thus be seen as conforming to the dominant ideological discourse of the state and the upper classes; an ideology which, I have argued, continues to place the white city at its heart.

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