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CONSTRUCTING CULTURES OF *CHICHA*:  
FUSING FRONTERAS IN A LIMA SOUND-SCAPE

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Beginning in 1940, waves of Peruvian peasants began to migrate to the capital city of Lima in hopes of finding enough economic security to build a stable life for themselves and for their families. The majority of these peasant migrants came from rural communities of the Central Andean highlands, from provinces such as Ayacucho, Junín, and Huancavelica. In these rural highland towns, the most common (and almost always the only) source of mass-media was the radio, which aired musical programs (primarily featuring international genres variety shows and advertisements for urban job offers or consumer goods).<sup>1</sup> Traditional Andean music was not broadcast and, according to Raúl R. Romero, that fact conveyed a strong ideological message: local musical traditions are not important and are neither admired nor respected by the outside world where urban, modern values reign, and are disseminated through the mass-media (Romero, "Preservation" 196).

On the outskirts of the city of Lima, the newly arrived highland migrants began to hastily construct *pueblos jóvenes* (young towns). Located far from the financial and service center of the capital, the *pueblos jóvenes* emerged atop city garbage dumps, while the refuse of others served as the construction material for migrant housing. Services such as electricity, sanitation, running water, or public transportation rarely reached these neighborhoods. It was in this squalid, marginalized space in which the second generation of highlanders was born. The lives of these children would begin on the outskirts of the Peruvian capital and, in some ways, this relegation to the space of the outsider would become a defining characteristic of the generation's existence. Considered *cholos* (provincial highlanders) by their *limeño* classmates, and *limeños* by first generation highlanders, these children were forced to create an identity of their own, as they simply did not fit into any of the discrete categories of identity available.

Perhaps the most important defining and unifying symbol of this second generation is the music called *chicha*. Like the fans and the performing artists of this music, *chicha* is a complex fusion of the urban and the rural, the very modern trends, and the highland traditions. It is a cacophony of layered rhythms, complex syncopations, unintelligible shouts, and intersecting instrumentations. To attempt to tell even a part of *chicha*'s story—to describe such elements as socio-historical

1 Such 'international genres' most commonly included *cumbia* and merengue music from Venezuela, Colombia.

contexts, musical style, lyrical form, and subculture manifestations—quite clearly remains a complex and ambitious task. In this paper I will discuss *chicha* music as a tool of identity construction for second-generation urban youth beginning in 1960.

*Chicha* music was born in a complex socio-aural environment after decades of increasing popularity of Andean genres in Lima following the first commercial release of a record featuring traditional Quechua language music which was promoted and organized by José María Arguedas in 1949 (Romero, "Peru" 370). By the 1960s when a surge in the migration of single, rural youth to Lima began to occur, various Andean mestizo celebrities had managed to achieve widespread popularity, resulting in an increase in recording contracts for performers of Andean genres (Romero, "Preservation" 196). Additionally, the vibrant, tropical rhythms of Caribbean percussion drifted across the Peruvian airwaves and onto the streets during primetime broadcast hours making Venezuelan and Colombian *cumbia* the genre of the moment. United States, Latin American, and British rock music also remained popular amongst young, urban listeners. During these years, the popularity of *cumbia* and rock music in Lima increased, along with the numbers of highland migrants arriving to the capital city. In this constantly changing aural and demographic environment, the urban fusion genre known as *chicha*, or *cumbia andina*, emerged (Romero, "Peru" 370).

The principal performers of *chicha* were of Andean origin, though the musical style, and group make-up most obviously reflects an influence of Caribbean *cumbia*, as well as American and British rock. The typical *chicha* group is composed of two electric guitars, an electric organ (replaced by a synthesizer in the 1990s), an electric bass, various Latin percussion instruments (timbales, congas, bongos, cowbells), and one vocalist. The overwhelming form of consumption of *chicha* music in the first years after its initial emergence was in stadium-like venues known as *chichódromos*, which opened up both in downtown Lima and in the outskirts of the capital near the neighborhoods populated by rural migrants (Rázuri 74). *Chicha* groups also performed throughout the year at various festivals in the highland provinces, as well as in the various regional social clubs that had formed in the capital city (Romero, *Debating the Past* 143; Rázuri 75). Among *chicha* groups (as well as performers of mestizo *huayno*) there seems to be a tendency to move away from "rural collectivism" and towards an emphasis on "urban individualism" (Romero, "Musical Change" 26). This shift becomes clearly evident in provincial festivals where musical contests with individual winners now take the place of the traditional practice of an entire town making music together. Wilfredo Hurtado notes that when Andean music moves to the city (either in the form of the mestizo *huayno* or *chicha*) the relationship between the public and the musicians takes on a Westernized nuance, in that the making of music becomes a

profession and a producer / consumer dichotomy emerges (Hurtado 29). Hurtado asserts that in the Andean context musicians not only sell their songs, but they also remain integral participants in the celebration (29). Perhaps the clearest example of the Westernization of Andean genres lies in the use of the elevated stage for live performances. Lifting the physical presence of the musician up and away from the audience alters the dynamics of a performance and greatly limits the amount of possible interaction between an audience and the musician.<sup>2</sup>

At the very moment when this new fusion of Andean and Caribbean sounds began to increase in popularity, the Peruvian recording industry initiated its expansion beyond the control of a few, very powerful record companies (Romero, *Debating the Past* 143). In this way, it became possible to facilitate the distribution of *chicha* music to a much greater extent than would have been feasible in the past. By 1981 the percentage of urban dwellers in the country of Peru reached 65.2% (up from 36% in 1940), and *chicha* became the number one commercial musical genre. Groups such as 'La Nueva Crema' and 'los Shapis' begin to export their music to an international market, and were even hired by Peruvian community groups in the United States to perform on important national holidays. While *chicha* enjoyed enormous popularity within the metropolis of Lima, as well as varying degrees of popularity in the provinces and abroad, the genre never became popular among non-Andean social groups. The increased sales and popularity ratings most likely correspond to the increasing numbers of rural migrants entering the capital during these years.

In addition to the modern instrumentation, *chicheros* (*chicha* musicians) wrote lyrics pertaining to contemporary urban life. *Chicha* lyrics are sung in Spanish and not in the Andean language of Quechua in which indigenous *huaynos* (and some mestizo *huaynos*) are sung. In his book, *Chicha peruana*, Wilfredo Hurtado enumerates the various themes elaborated in *chicha* songs, such as: the disillusionment caused by urban modernity, agricultural production, the rural home as a space of familial security, the trials of urban poverty, and the bucolic peace of the traditional pastoral life (29). Other *chicha* themes Hurtado mentions include: education as salvation, alcoholism, and religion, or themes mourning a lost love of youth or painful goodbyes (29).

One example of a typical *chicha* song dealing with the theme of migration to a new urban space is the song written by Pablo Loayza and entitled "Volverás mi

<sup>2</sup> For a further discussion of the various affects of altering the physical space of a musical performance as seen in a ritual context, fiesta context, and in the modern media, see Romero (24-25). See also den Otter for a description of the spatial organization of the coliseo musical venues in Lima (299).

niño." This song explores the complex phenomenon of young people's abandonment of the family home in search of a better future. This particular song is comprised of three verses: the first verse consists of eight lines while the second and third contain only four. The line repetition is alternately structured: lines two, four, and eight are repeated in verse one, lines two and four are repeated in verse two, and no lines are repeated in verse three. After the completion of the third verse, all three are repeated again in the same pattern:

Por las mañanitas,  
 vas a llorar (bis)  
 por las nohécitas,  
 vas a sufrir, (bis)  
 tu casita dejaste,                   5  
 tu camita solo está  
 tu perrito se muere,  
 todo pasa si no estás (bis)

y tus hermanitos  
 van a reír, (bis)                   10  
 tu pobre mamita,  
 ya sanará (bis)

volverás mi niñito  
 (en tu casa) a correr  
 tu camita te espera               15  
 tu mamita te quiere

This song is interesting in terms of its syntax, grammatical constructions, and socio-cultural context. Syntactically it should be noted that the principal verb in each verse is placed at the end of the phrase, a common feature of spoken Peruvian Spanish, as well as Quechua which conforms to a subject, object, verb syntax. The actual tenses of the song's verbs help to shape and organize its narrative and provide clues to understand the intended purpose of the song, and the mental state of its singer. The first verse of the song contains three verb tenses; the first four lines are written in the paraphrasal future tense (*vas a llorar, vas a sufrir*, etc.), while the last three lines are written in the present tense (*está, se muere, no estás*). Lines 1-4 and 6-8 are divided by the only example of the preterite past tense which appears in the song, in the brutally straight-forward statement: "tu casa dejaste." In this first verse, the singer (presumably the mother of the child) projects her child's discomfort and suffering (analytic future tense), clearly expresses that this imminent misery will be the result of the child's own decision to leave the family

home (preterite past tense), and then reports the various negative results of the abandonment (present tense).

The second verse refers only to the future, though two grammatical forms of expressing the future are utilized. Line ten uses the paraphrasal future (*van a reír*), while line twelve is constructed with the conjugated future tense (*sanará*). The pure expression of future action in this verse creates a contextual shift in the song, so that the singer no longer narrates the present (speculated or real) discomfort associated with her child's absence, but instead very decidedly reports her vision of the status of the family home upon her child's return.<sup>3</sup>

Also key to this analysis is the use of the diminutive ending *-ito*. Verse three begins with line thirteen which is a variation of the song's title written in the conjugated future tense. It is noteworthy, however, that in verse three the line reads, "volverás mi niño" as opposed to the "Volverás mi niño" which is the title of the song. This addition of the diminutive of child (*niño* → *niñito*) to the third verse is perhaps representative of the emotional structure of the entire song. Three of the four lines of the third verse contain diminutives, and while the first two lines predict the future return of the "niñito" to his home, the last two lines are written in the present tense and seem to serve as a reassurance that both the house and the family are ready and waiting for this projected homecoming ("tu camita te espera / tu mamita te quiere").

This song then consists of an opening verse which is fairly depressing and negative in tone describing the imminent suffering of the child, the unhealthy state of the abandoned home, as well as the abrupt injection of the preterite tense accusatory line, "tu casita dejaste."<sup>4</sup> Verse two describes the vision of a happy future after the family has been reunited, while the third verse seems a sort of lure mixed with an intent to inflict guilt on the wayward child who has so much awaiting him at home (*camita*, *mamita*, *hermanito*, *casita*, and even a *perrito*). The use of *niñito* in the final verse, instead of *niño* could also have alternate or possibly complimentary meanings. The mother could be expressing her realization of the innocence and vulnerability of her absent child who is off wandering alone. The diminutive, however, could simply serve as an expression of the increased tenderness that the mother feels towards the child by the end of the third verse (as

3 That this verse refers to the physical and emotional reactions to the child's return ("tus hermanitos van a reír" and "tu pobre mamita, ya sanará") is not explicitly stated, though it is to be understood as a result of the song's title, as well as line thirteen (alternately "volverás mi niño" and "volverás mi niñito").

4 Here the pairing of the diminutive of *casa* → *casita* with the song's only use of the preterite tense in the word *dejaste* is quite jarring as *casita* carries a connotation of intimacy, familiarity, and emotional attachment. This is not just any *casa*, it is in fact the *casita*, and it has been abandoned.

opposed to the almost accusatory nature of verse one). It also seems feasible that the mother may realize that her son will most likely return as a grown man, yet she still wishes to preserve her image of him as an innocent child, and thus refers to him finally as "niñito". Interesting also, are the semantics of absence. We are never given any overt explanation as to why the child has left the home, though perhaps lines eleven and twelve contain a clue. Do the lines "Tu pobre mamita / ya sanará" indicate that the child has left home in search of work in order to pay for medical treatment for his physically ailing mother? Or does this expression, which predicts the future health of the mother, simply a hopeful reference to the improvement of her emotional health once her child returns? Again, both answers could potentially be valid, as it is not uncommon for a young adult (most often male) to leave the home community in search of work in an urban setting so as to provide financial support for the family back home. In this case, the absence of a definitive explanation may also indicate the shared knowledge among listeners concerning the departure of children from the family home at a young age. In such cases, those left behind not only suffer the emotional strains of the absence of a loved one, but also the physical strain due to an increased workload in domestic and agricultural duties.

While *chicha* music may have become popular in many rural areas of Peru, *chicha* groups sing primarily for urban young people from Lima or even Patterson, New Jersey who maintain some sort of emotional or physical connection to the highland communities of their parents or grandparents. While they may very often bemoan the trials of love, some *chicha* songs also recuperate the themes of more traditional *huayno* songs and adapt them in such a way so that they may speak to the concerns of contemporary urban youth.

Now that we have looked at an example of a *chicha* song, as well as some historical information pertaining to the genre, the question remains as to what sort of effects this music has inspired within the *chicha* subculture itself, as well as within the greater Lima society? The British cultural studies theorist Dick Hebdige argues that "the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed [...] at the level of signs" (17). Hebdige's formulations become important keys towards the interpretation of *chicha* as a subordinate musical form created by a migrant youth subculture beginning in Lima in the 1960s. Obviously the migrant youth of Lima, many of whom were stricken by poverty, illiteracy, and the difficult process of adjusting to the perils of a hostile urban environment, were at best only able to gain very limited access to any sort of primary political, economic, or social pathways which would have allowed them to challenge the hegemonic powers of the capital city. As in the formulation of Hebdige, this challenge to hegemony was expressed obliquely, through musical

style. Contradictions and objections are indeed lodged both in the form of the musical sign, and the linguistic sign, as well as at the level of the musical form and style of the *chicha* genre. By replacing the provincial *charango* and reed flute with an electric guitar and synthesizer, Andean migrant youth managed to introduce their musical expression into the larger society. Although the majority of *chicha* songs do not in fact speak of the struggles of the urban migrant existence or the complexity of the Andean world vision, many in fact do, and are distributed and broadcast within Lima and throughout Peru at a rate which Andean music broadcast in the 1950s and 1960s could never have hoped to reach.

While *chicha* sales continued to climb, and the music became increasingly popular in some circles, harsh criticism directed against the *chicha* genre also proliferated. Some migrant groups complain that *chicha* music corrupts traditional Andean music and lacks any sort of political aims directed at the alleviation of migrant problems in urban centers.<sup>5</sup> *Chicha* is also criticized by the more economically, socially, and politically enfranchised sectors of Lima society for being a "low cultural product" produced by migrants who lack refined artistic sense, and participate in dangerous and promiscuous gatherings. Hurtado also believes that the negative reaction of the moneyed class to *chicha* music has less to do with the aesthetic quality (or lack thereof) of the music, and much more to do with the elements of cultural reaffirmation and resistance to dominant patterns, which lend the music a sense of protest and opposition to the *status quo* (34). The "dangerous and promiscuous gatherings," which are feared by many members of the privileged sectors of society in Lima, are none other than the live *chicha* performances in the *chichódromos*. As in most large, crowded gatherings of young people, *chicha* venues often became the site of inebriation and fights among spectators. Citizens of Lima who had always voiced concern regarding the massive number of highland migrants entering the city, considered these outbreaks to be proof of their previous complaints about the uncivilized mannerisms and practices of these geographical and cultural outsiders. An article written by Augusto Elmore in the Lima magazine, *Caretas*, in October of 2000, provides a good example of just how violently opposed many upper class sectors of Lima society remained with regard to the unruly music of young, *chicha* enthusiasts:

5 Highlanders like Edgar Davallas of Ayacucho, and Dennis Alejo of Cuzco, who first heard *chicha* after arriving as migrants in Lima in 1972 and 1987 (respectively), simply did not like the sound of the music. Both men enjoy *huayno* and *cumbia* music as separate genres, but do not like the *chicha* fusion of the two styles. As Edgar and Dennis were born in highland regions, they simply did not relate to the *chicha* culture or music. Dennis expressed his belief that "those who like *chicha* music are the children of provincials who like to think of themselves as someone from Lima."



Oyendo la radio tengo la impresión de que nos estamos convirtiendo en un país chatarra. Aparte de algunos buenos noticieros, lo demás, sobre todo en lo que la música se refiere, es pura basura. Fruto de la cultura chicha que nos ha venido gobernando—al punto que la campaña de re-reelección presidencial se hizo a ritmo de technocumbia—, la degradación de lo que se transmite es patente [...]. Todo empezó con los Shapis, pero ahora se ha intensificado hasta convertirse en algo imposible de escuchar. Lamentable: la política chicha, música y cultura chicha. Se ve que somos gobernados por quienes no tienen raíces. (Elmore)

We see here that it is this group of young *chicha* musicians and their fans (all without roots we are reminded), whose uncomfortable, uncontrollable, and unrelenting music creates just as many negative vibes as it does positive. It is also notable that Elmore begins by stating that we are becoming a *país chatarra*, which he (at least in part) blames on the overwhelming popularity of *chicha* music. While he regards "los Shapis" as the fathers of *chicha* music, he concludes his article by extending the term *chicha* to also describe denigrated politics and culture which he terms "la política chicha, música y cultura chicha." The inflection of all of the intensely derogatory, and already familiar connotations of the adjective *chatarra* onto the sign *chicha* is an extremely noteworthy move. This newspaper editorial highlights the fact that the socio-political implications of *chicha* music extend far beyond the airwaves and music stores.

For members of the *chicha* youth subculture, however, the fact that *chicha* music eventually floated off the stage of the *chichódromos* and into the offices of major commercial record producers in Lima, became cause for a great sense of pride. Knowing that commercial record companies actively recorded and distributed their music meant that, at least to some extent, *chicha* had been accepted by the dominant criollo class that controlled the mass media of the nation. For *chicheros* and their fans, a recording contract translated into a level of legitimization.

Originally surfacing at the level of the individual, or small group re-conceptualizing its own self-identity in the new urban-scape, *chicha* music arises out of a fusion of imported instruments and rhythms, with traditional Andean song structures. That the second generation urban migrant youth did not continue to sing and dance indigenous *huaynos* in their new urban home seems reasonably obvious, but we must also realize that they also did not become devoted fans of the English and American rock bands or of Colombian *cumbia*. The teenagers growing up in the *pueblos jóvenes* in the 1960s were part of a generation on the edge. These youth lived on the edge of the urban space of Lima and on the edge of their parent's rural highland ways. Almost *limeño*, but not quite *provinciano*, does it not seem logical that these young people would fuse a music of their own? Drawing

from the *huayno* structures and vocal styles sung by their parents in household gatherings or social clubs, and the tropical rhythms and instrumental combinations heard on all of the radio stations of the time, this generation without an identity managed to create the music of *chicha*. According to Thomas Turino:

the continual public presentation of a hybrid form such as *chicha* mediates the ambiguities of a bi-cultural identity by creating an observable synthesis that is again internalized and that, having become part of the objective conditions, provides a model for the self-definition and self-perception of individuals. (29)

It seems then, that by providing this "model for the self-definition of individuals," the young *chicheros* began to subvert the perception of the dominant class that considered second generation youth in terms of a useless, placeless, hopeless, generation of criminal minded youth with no sense of self pride or positive direction. By appropriating the mainstream musical "language" of *cumbia* (not to mention the linguistic language of Spanish as opposed to Quechua), *chicha* musicians freely "corrupted" this music by (alternately) inserting Andean vocalic styles, lyrical themes, and structural patterns which led to the decision of several major Peruvian record companies to begin recording and distributing their music. Once recordings began to be widely disseminated, *chicha* became more than just a musical genre, but also assumed the role of a powerful tool for identity construction. Hurtado asserts that *chicha*:

ha roto con los esquemas, con los convencionalismos y busca formas novedosas ciertamente, de alguna manera tiene elementos ajenos, pero a la vez es un canal a través del cual la gente se libera y busca su propia manera de ser y enseñar. (34)

While other modes of expression (poetry, theatre, non / fictional narrative, etc.) remained largely inaccessible to the socially, politically, and economically marginalized second-generation migrants, Turino notes that: "[t]he flexible nature of the performing arts for publicly articulating such complex combinations of indexes and images makes them powerful media for creating and testing emerging social identities" ("The Music" 137-38). He further asserts that "people's view of themselves and their own power is a primary ingredient for maintaining or changing the social order" (145).

The Andean fusion genre of *chicha* followed a difficult path from its underground birth among the marginalized second-generation migrant youth, up to the recording studios owned by the moneyed, criollo elite, to its most recent form of *tecnocumbia* which occupies a floating middle ground.<sup>6</sup> The musical and social

6 While the discussion of *tecnocumbia* extends well beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that while this modern genre reflects little Andean influence in terms of

trends and developments which *chicha* inspired provides a complex example of the intricate nature of resistance in modern society, and the multiplicity of angles from which subversive styles—whether they be musical, linguistic, or otherwise—must be considered. Yet while *chicha* music may have offered a medium through which second-generation highland migrants could begin to construct and express a sense of self and group identity, Hurtado reminds us that “el proceso de identidad nacional no puede resolverse sólo en el campo cultural y demanda una solución integral en base a un proyecto nacional” (42). So while *chicha* music may have managed to create a positive sense of self among many second-generation migrant youth in Lima, any sort of economic, social, or political mobilization for this group must be organized across and through class boundaries, and cannot be limited to movements of self-realization through music and culture.

musical style and composition, many sectors of Lima society feel that it could prove even more dangerous than *chicha* music as it has gained popularity among youth in all social classes. An on-line article in the Peruvian magazine *Gente* entitled, “La tecnocumbia: un nuevo monstruo nos ataca...”, refers to *tecnocumbia* as “un insólito fenómeno social que arrastra multitudes en cada lugar en que se presentan.”

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