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Fashion in Bolivia's cultural economy

Forthcoming, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*

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Abstract

In 2016, Bolivia's indigenous fashions gained a place on the global stage. The Brazilian ambassador to La Paz hosted a catwalk show dedicated to the luxury designers who specialise in *avant garde*, high quality variations on the distinctive *pollera* outfit – the pleated skirt, derby hat, shawl and striking jewellery that have been definitive of indigenous identity in La Paz for centuries. In the same year New York fashion week featured, for the first time, a designer from Bolivia, Eliana Paco Paredes, who is also known for her elegant and luxurious *pollera* designs. This article explores the development of *Chola Paceña* fashions and traces its social and political lineage, and place in traditions that continue to underpin Aymaran social networks and economies, whilst also becoming a symbol of their consumer power. Bolivian GDP has tripled since 2006, and this wealth has accumulated in the vast urban informal markets which are dominated by people of indigenous and mestizo descent. It is predictable that such a rise in consumption power should enable a burgeoning fashion industry. However, the femininities represented by the designs, the models and the designers place in sharp relief gendered and racialized constructions of value and how the relationship between tradition, culture and economy, has configured in scholarly work on creative labour which has been predominantly based on the experience of post-industrial cities in the global North.

In August 2016, a catwalk fashion show was held in the gardens of the residence of the Brazilian Ambassador to Bolivia (Página Siete, 2016b). The residence is a luxurious building located in the centre of the country's capital, La Paz, on the main thoroughfare, Avenida Arce. The show was televised, and hosted by two nationally known presenters. La Paz – *Paceña* - high society was there, including the mayor and his wife, and drinks were served. The models were beautiful, trained and professionally made up, the designs stunning and befittingly expensive, and the lights and music dramatic.

Despite all the elements of a standard fashion show being present, there are several remarkable, nay revolutionary, elements in this scene. Firstly, it was in Bolivia. This land-locked Latin American country, until recently the poorest in the region, is not known for luxury goods such as those that were on show. Secondly, the clothes on display were the fashions of the *Chola Paceña* – the indigenous costume typical of La

Paz, consisting of a long pleated skirt, blouse, shawl, derby hat and jewellery (See Figure 1). Whilst the *pollera*, as the outfit is referred to, has long been the object of fascination for anthropologists and post-colonial theorists, it has not historically been considered a fashion item; indeed until the 1952 revolution, the *pollera* was banned from public offices in La Paz (Stephenson 1999). The TV presenters, both of indigenous, Aymaran background, made a point of describing the colours in Aymaran terms, illustrating black and white by referring to the traditional preserved potatoes of the region, *chuño* (black) and *tunta* (white). The mayor's wife was there, a white woman from Santa Cruz, and a former beauty queen, dressed in a striking pink *pollera*, as were other society women who had taken up the trend for the evening. Thirdly, whilst the fashion show bore all the hallmarks of the well-produced catwalk shows of London and New York, in itself testament to the breadth and depth of this industry in La Paz, the first five models to appear were not professional. They were a group of five Aymaran women of various ages who are known locally as '*Las Escaleras*' [the female mountain climbers]. Earlier in the year, these women set themselves the challenge of climbing some of the highest peaks of the Andes whilst dressed in the *pollera* (The Guardian 2016). They opened the fashion show, dressed in the luxurious designs, but also wearing their climbing gear. One came out in a *pollera* with a hard hat and a light, another with an ice pick, another with ropes, and all wearing climbing boots (See Figure 2). The presenters joked that one of the *Escaleras* had been particularly nervous before coming out. 'She's climbed the highest mountains and yet she's nervous about this'!



Figure 1, *Chola Paceña* fashion show, August 2016, La Paz, Bolivia



Figure 2, One of the *Escaleras*, *Chola Paceña* fashion show, August 2016, La Paz, Bolivia

Orthodox economic theory can offer a simple explanation for the growth of Bolivia's fashion industry: GDP has tripled since 2006, on the basis of a global boom in natural resources of which Bolivia is particularly rich (IMF 2015). This rapid economic growth has created a middle class keen to consume, and now multi-national companies are seeing Bolivia as a market worth capturing (La Razón 2015b). In turn, the municipal government in La Paz has adopted urban development policies taken from international models which proscribe the promotion and commercialisation of cultural industries. The Chola Paceaña, dressed in the pollera, has been central to the city's branding campaign – *La Paz Maravillosa* - and the mayor's office co-ordinated the appearance of Chola Paceaña designer Eliana Paco Paredes, at the invitation of Agatha Ruiz de la Prada, to show her work at New York Fashion Week (El País 2016).

These are indeed factors in the rise of Chola Paceaña fashions, but the remarkable features of this fashion show, as highlighted above, tell a different story, one which raises questions about the gendered and racialized nature of value and the economic subjectivities and tropes which frame even critical debate on the cultural industries in the global North. The categories that can be questioned are specifically the middle class woman consumer, exploited Global South garment worker, and the appropriation of indigenous traditions by commercial, Western modernity (Hansen 2004; Larner et al 2007; McRobbie 1997). The economic growth that has doubtless been a necessary condition for the rise of the fashion industry, needs to be understood in a political economic context where half the economy is constituted by 'informal' business and traditional markets, state and public institutions are rooted in colonial power, and there has been no welfare state to roll back to create a 'precarious' cultural workforce (Munck 2013). Rather, the city's informal markets, where the pollera is designed, sold and worn, are a site where Aymaran women have long wielded economic power. Chola Paceaña fashion designers see themselves as continuing the Aymaran tradition of strong women in the family, community and market, rather than the 'self-made' woman of middle class consumer society. These women have built their businesses in the informal economies of La Paz which are underpinned by the identity and tradition which the pollera now represents. Although many continue to work and live in these areas, they have been able to break in to traditionally elite spaces in the city *on their own terms*.

To demonstrate this, in what follows I explore questions of value, gendered economic subjectivity and the culture of economy – the traditions, values and identities which

underpin economic exchange. Placing Chola Paceña fashions at the centre of the analysis involves the deconstruction of conceptual dichotomies that have framed studies of cultural production and consumption, in order to parochialise the post-industrial context in which most of this scholarship has been developed (Craik and Jansen 2015). The binaries of tradition and modernity, consumption and production, culture and economy, authenticity and appropriation, all conspire to make the case of Chola Paceña fashions surprising, different, and, to make the importance of the post-colonial lens clear, 'exotic'.

The recent rise in indigenous wealth tends to be associated with Aymaran culture, whose markets, underpinned by traditions of fiesta and reciprocal exchange, have historically been exceptionally strong (Tassi 2017). However, the categories of 'indigenous' 'Aymara' or 'chola' are unstable and constructed in alterity to a white urban norm, and the categorisation of ethnicity in Bolivia is complicated by the various imbrications with language, rurality/urbanity and controversies around the category 'mestizo' (Perrault and Green 2013). 'Aymara' denotes one of the predominant ethnic and linguistic groups in Bolivia, along with Quechua, and, in the Bolivian context, cholo/a is a re-claimed epithet referring to people of indigenous or mestizo descent living in the city. 'Chola Paceña' fashions makes reference to the history of urban indigenous women in La Paz using the expense of the pollera to distinguish themselves from rural migrants who could only afford mass produced, imported western clothes (Gill 1993). This iconic outfit is far from the 'chola fashions' that have been popularised in the US. These styles are associated with Latina urban sub-cultures in North American cities, and their recent appropriation in white bourgeois popular culture has been much decried (Vice 2015). The Bolivian pollera by contrast is worn as everyday dress, by the designers and consumers who are popularising the trend. It is not appropriation which is driving this, but rather a shift in the reference points for political and economic power, as well as style, innovation and femininity.

I have conducted research in La Paz since 2006, and the area in which I stay, Avenida Kollasuyo, has become a centre for Chola Paceña fashions. It is the location of the first boutique of Bolivia's most famous fashion designer, Eliana Paco Paredes, and over the last ten years multiple galleries and small businesses have built up catering to all levels of the industry – from renting out outfits for dance blocks in fiestas, to luxury commissions from overseas. Kollasuyo is in the North of La Paz, and the area has developed rapidly and informally, has improvised infrastructure, and is dominated by

bare-brick houses which crowd together on the steep Andean slopes. The neighbourhood is described by the people living there as 'humble' and most are of indigenous, rural descent. The neighbourhood is known for the fiestas and dancehalls which have built up there due to the area's continued connections with the countryside, where the fiesta traditions have their roots. The Avenue leads in to one of the city's more notoriously crime ridden and violent areas, *Cementerio*, but there is, as with many informal areas of La Paz, and despite appearances, wealth here.

The specific empirical work on which I shall draw for this article comprises interviews with three high profile Aymaran fashion designers, and a total of eighteen interviews with others involved in the Chola Paceña fashion industry- those designing, selling and renting out pollera outfits for a more modest clientele, dancers, models, photographers, and proprietors of dance halls. I participated and observed various fiestas and shows, including the one at the Residence of the Brazilian Ambassador described above, and conducted a focus group with women from traditional elites in business and politics on their views of Aymaran fashion in light of this catwalk show. In what follows, I explain why the wealth from Bolivia's economic boom has accumulated in the informal areas of the city, such as Kollasuyo, where Aymaran women are renowned as strong market women who are responsible in the traditional Andean household for both income generation and the recreation of identity and tradition. The history of the pollera demonstrates the complexity of the outfit, as an item of clothing that was once prohibited in certain spaces in La Paz, as an identity in itself, and, more recently, as an item of conspicuous consumption. The pollera hence destabilises the categories of tradition, modernity, production and consumption. The femininity represented by Chola Paceña fashion designers continues Aymaran traditions of women's power in the market and the community, and their traditional power has now become visible, and desirable, at national and global scale.

Culture, tradition and Bolivia's economic boom

The strength of the Bolivian economy is a crucial precondition for the rise in pollera fashions, reflecting the pattern across the Global South that the rise of the middle class has led to a boom in conspicuous consumption (OECD 2012). However, the identity of this new middle class in Bolivia differs from that which the economists and development specialists predict, in that it represents a disruption of traditional, colonial elites politically, economically and culturally. Bolivia is an exception because of the particular

configuration of anti-neoliberal sentiment and indigenous social movements that brought Evo Morales, claimed to be the country's first indigenous president, and his party the Movement towards Socialism (MAS) to power in 2006. This government has brought in redistributive measures and a decolonial approach to development that have been successful in redressing the country's exceptionally high levels of inequality (Farthing and Kohl 2014; IMF 2015). The key economic measure taken by the MAS has been to nationalise hydrocarbon industries, and reinvest the wealth in social welfare. They have also invested in infrastructure and ensured that new contracts with foreign investors respect Bolivian sovereignty by paying due taxation (Farthing and Kohl 2014). There have been accusations of government corruption, (e.g. Cendrero 2014), but nevertheless, the IMF has found that Bolivia, unlike many of the other countries that have experienced this boom, has decreased its rates of poverty and inequality, and this is attributed to the redistributive welfare policies of Morales (IMF 2015; Farthing and Kohl 2014). The power base of support for the MAS is among indigenous people in rural and peri-urban areas who have supported their strategy of nationalising resources, welfare reforms and a commitment to 'decolonising' development and including indigenous people. This stance is anti-neoliberal, but not necessarily anti-market. The Andean and particularly Aymaran markets that form Evo's power base are renowned for their strength and expanse, and have been a site of resistance to colonial rule for centuries (Larrson and Harris 1995).

The MAS decolonial approach has also provided a context for an Aymaran bourgeoisie to emerge. The Ministry of Decolonisation has issued certificates recognising indigenous knowledge that had previously been rendered invisible by the educational structures that have come with colonialism and capitalist development; public sector workers are required to have an indigenous language (La Razón 2015a), and the Aymaran principle of gender parity and complementarity – *chachawarmi* – has been integrated into legislation to ensure equal representation of women and men in politics (Maclean 2014b). Each of these measures has been highly controversial, but, the prestige and confidence that have come with indigenous presence in government, has led to greater confidence among Aymaran traders to demonstrate their wealth, and express their culture in the city. The new Aymara bourgeoisie that has emerged has consumed on their own terms, resulting in the spectacular boom in Aymaran culture – and, in particular, architecture and fashion - which has so caught the eye of the international press (Financial Times 2014; The Guardian 2015).

The MAS government favours rural and peri-urban areas which are dominated by informal, traditional markets as part of their anti-neoliberal approach to development, and as a political strategy to maintain their power base. This has been evident in their decisions on particular infrastructure projects, for example the routes for the public cable car network in La Paz, their investment in an 'indigenous fund' credit facility for indigenous people, and their approach to taxation. Taxation overall has been raised and collection has been made more rigorous, but there are frequent accusations that there is more scrutiny on formal businesses in the traditionally elite areas, than on those in the informal areas of the city. This approach, whilst popular with their base, has been controversial, and formal small and medium businesses have been keen to point out their iniquitous treatment, and that informal markets have acquired substantial wealth over this time, despite not paying tax (La Razón 2013; Los Tiempos 2016). The MAS has made some attempts to incorporate the country's sizeable informal sector into its modernisation programme and formal tax regimes, but the strength and size of the informal economy, and the position of the MAS power base in rural and informal peri-urban areas, has made this politically difficult (La Razón 2013; Los Tiempos 2016). These political factors have contributed to the creation of a middle class in the predominantly indigenous and mestizo informal markets rather than those associated with the traditional 'criollo' class.

Deconstructing the dynamics of formality and informality is key to understanding why the Pacea example undermines the tropes and binaries which frame analysis of cultural industries in the developed world. Informal economy refers to 'all firms, workers, and activities that operate outside the legal regulatory framework of society, and the output that they generate' (Meagher 2013: 2). This includes illegal goods, illicit goods, contraband, or simply businesses that have not registered for tax. Across the developing world, informal economic activity is a sizeable portion of GDP, and in Bolivia it is estimated that over 50% of the non-agricultural economy is informal (Morales and Gomez 2015). Informality is definitive of a development context, but it is not co-extensive with poverty. There can be vast wealth in the informal economy, and, although it is associated with high levels of vulnerability and exploitation, it is also a site of survival and resistance. What's more, the divide between the formal and the informal is itself a colonial imposition – what de Sousa Santos would call a 'sociology of absence' (De Sousa Santos 2010); the informal economy is how most people in the world earn a living – and it is not until formal powers appear, in the guise of colonisers, development agencies or international financial institutions, that these activities are constructed as

‘informal.’ Ideas of precarity, consumption and entrepreneurialism, developed with reference to industrialisation and post-industrialisation in OECD countries, can hence be blinding to the realities of a context in which the State is a colonial imposition, and markets, as well as being sites of exploitation, are built on autonomy and resistance to colonial and post-colonial powers, (Munck 2013).

Despite being out of the reach of formal mechanisms, informal economies have their own authorities, rituals and norms which do, in effect, regulate the market and support labour. Aymaran markets, which are the cradle of the Chola Paceña fashion industry, are a case in point – these cannot be seen as ‘unregulated,’ but rather regulated by traditions, exchanges and identities which are enforced by communities and local associations, but not codified into law or regulation. When contrasted with modern formal systems of bureaucracy, contract law and free competition, informal economies are seen through lenses of tradition and identity, despite the fact that, of course, modern liberal formality is also culturally situated and reliant on a politics of reputation, which includes dress and fashion. This colonial dynamic explains in part why ‘dress practices in non-Western contexts are categorized as traditional, customary, literal markers of status and collective membership, and – above all – unchanging’ (Craik and Jansen 2015: 3). Dismantling the binary division between formal and informal is hence central to understanding the possibility of an indigenous modernity, and deconstructing the apparent paradox of ‘traditional fashion’.

It is not only economic alienation that has been overturned with the growth of an Aymaran bourgeoisie, but cultural alienation from spaces of power and modernity. As celebrated Aymaran architect Freddy Mamani points out, ‘Aymaras have always had money, what has changed is their confidence in showing it’ (Mamani 2016). Aymaran markets are dominated by women who, within traditional Andean households, are responsible for organising production and commerce, and, despite also being entirely responsible for reproductive labour, Aymaran women are seen as economically active and powerful (Maclean 2014a). Indigenous women in the Andes can inherit and own land, and are typically in charge of organising production and commercial business. Whilst reproductive labour is still emphatically coded feminine, women de pollera are also renowned for their commercial acumen. The pollera has become a key symbol of the way that the members of this new bourgeoisie are demonstrating their consumption power, but it also underpins the co-operative traditions of gift exchange and fictive kin which have allowed Aymaran markets to build so successfully over centuries. The

markets of El Alto, and similar markets throughout the country, have centuries of history behind them, and are known for co-operative structures and traditions of reciprocity, which recreate indigenous identity, that allowed indigenous people to resist the colonial state, extend to other parts of Latin America and indeed the globe (Lagos 1994, Tassi 2017). The pollera – whether worn every day, worn to a fiesta or hired to dance in, is not merely a product of these markets – it is the identity which underpins them.

These traditions are maintained within the community grouping –the *ayllu* - to which obligations, loyalty and allegiance is owed, and by reputation, gossip, and expectations of reciprocity. Various ceremonies of fictive kin are used to extend community and kinship networks and so the number of people one can call on in such reciprocal arrangements increases (Lagos 1994; Rivera Cusicanqui 2005). The fiesta is the central point at which these traditions and networks are recreated. Andean fiestas consist typically of a two or three day long *entrada* – a carnival parade of folkloric dances. These dances have been developed to celebrate key points in the agricultural calendar and Aymaran traditions, and also to resist colonial oppression (Lagos 1994). The dance groups meet and practice for months beforehand, and the pride in the quality of the costumes, music and dancing, shows how important the fiesta is to community reputation and belonging.

The fiesta also has a crucial role in how finance flows around the community. It is an honour – but a very expensive honour – to be the organisers of the fiesta: the *preste*. Being *preste* can cost tens of thousands of US dollars, and with the rise of the Aymara bourgeoisie fiestas are rumoured to cost hundreds of thousands. In order to accumulate this amount of money, people, over the course of their lifetimes, participate in festive sponsorship. The *prestes* contact their networks and ask for loans to support the fiesta, calling in the money that they had given in previous years, and employ traditions of fictive kin to festive sponsorship, asking friends and family to be godmother or father of the dance costumes, the cakes, or the band. If one has contributed to the fiesta every year, then when the time comes to take on the honour of being *preste*, there are a number of prior festive contributions that can be recuperated (Lagos 1994; Maclean 2010). Tradition, identity and culture underpin very explicitly the way that capital flows around the community, and the identity of the pollera, the iconic symbol of Aymaran folkloric dancing, underpins these traditions. As I explore in the next section, the pollera is hence much more than a consumer item.

History of Paceña fashions: Costume, authenticity and the everyday

Although the fashion shows in Bolivia and further afield, and international press coverage position the pollera as a consumer item, the dress has an extensive history and represents the complexities of postcolonial culture and economy that continue to influence the symbolism of the outfit and the way the people involved in this industry see their careers and livelihoods. The pollera is a hybrid of influences that came together in the colonial encounter, and simultaneously indicates the oppression of colonialism and the agency involved on the part of indigenous people in resisting their oppressors. The origin of the pollera is disputed, but it is generally held to have resulted from the strategization and co-optation of various colonial influences by indigenous women (Stephenson 1999). The theory behind the long pleated skirt is that the Spanish households dressed their indigenous servants in the attire typical of Spanish dress at the time, which was then styled into a costume that is now definitive of indigeneity, with regional variations in length, design and colour (Gill 1993). The other striking feature of the pollera outfit is the derby hat. The most accepted theory about the hat is that it was adopted after indigenous women on the Altiplano saw the British men who were working on the railways in South America and adopted it. To European sensibilities this looks incongruous. It is originally a man's hat, and comes from a very different tradition to the Spanish skirt and feminine look of the rest of the outfit, which is an example of how Chola Paceña fashion disrupts gendered sensibilities and aesthetics.

The pollera is prominent in Bolivian fiestas and the folkloric dances performed within them – most notably the national dance, the *morenada*. Bolivian folkloric dances have developed in resistance to the colonial structures into which they have been interpolated. Several dances have Spanish characters – for example the *doctorcitos* – who are mercilessly mocked (Cespedes 2003). The dances are always done in groups and involve numerous rehearsals. These rehearsals became platforms for identity and resistance, out of sight of the colonial powers, who saw this as ‘only dancing.’ Nevertheless, indigenous power was obstructed by various mechanisms which precluded their access to the spaces of power; including the banning of the pollera in public space. As a result, since the 1952 revolution, the annual fiesta of Gran Poder – the city's *fiesta mayor*, involving a parade through the centre of La Paz - is a triumphant procession of folkloric dances, dominated by the *morenada*, in which the pollera

features prominently. Everyday discrimination nevertheless remains – with women avoiding wearing the pollera in certain areas, for example colleges, public offices and banks, for fear of being badly seen. This has changed over the last ten years, as indigenous people and in particular women have themselves taken public office, and hence confidence and a sense of entitlement to be in certain areas of the city is as significant a factor as increased wealth in the impact that Aymaran fashions have had.

The pollera is not however just an outfit – it is an identity. One does not just wear a pollera, one is *de pollera* (Baudoin 2016; Gill 1993). To be *de pollera* is contrasted with people who are *de vestido* – of western dress. The same expressions exist to describe men’s clothing and identity –for example *de corbata* [of the tie]– but the terms for women’s clothing and identities are heard much more often (Baudoin 2016). The feminine identity categories of being *de vestido* or *de pollera* have their roots in the hacienda system in rural areas of Bolivia, although inevitably rural-urban migration and the dominance of global capitalism and associated cultural and material flows, has brought more complexity to local gendered identities (Maclean 2014b). There is pressure for example not to be seen as an indigenous woman who has ‘sold out’ her culture by going *de vestido* – behaviour that can incur the pejorative epithet *chota*. These terms are also markers of racialized exclusion from the elite world of white women (Baudoin 2016, citing Maria Galindo). However, the fact of being an indigenous woman of rural descent does not necessitate wearing the pollera. Two sisters I interviewed in Kollasuyo explained this – one said that she quite simply liked it and tried it out. When she was a child she had looked at the lovely skirts and just thought they were beautiful. The other sister – a tailor – decided to be *de vestido*, and tailored her own clothes – inspired by the styles of Coco Chanel. But it was very clear that one could not be *de pollera* one day and *de vestido* the next - *esto no se hace*. It is just not done.

The *pollera* is hence a discrete identity that is expressed very specifically in choice of everyday dress, and is related to rural-urban migration, colonialism, resistance, and indigenous traditions. This outfit mark the identity that underpins the communitarian, indigenous, economy that has managed to capture so much of Bolivia’s economic growth. The development of this outfit as a consumer item for the new middle class hence appears to be filled with contradictions. At one level the pollera exemplifies the country’s economic growth and greater consumption capacity. The market, and the concentration of economic growth in the Bolivian informal economy, has created a self-

reinforcing pattern of consumption; women de pollera have more money to spend on ever-more luxurious polleras, which itself encourages the production of polleras. The pollera has become an item associated with wealth and feminine power, as opposed to colonial oppression, and so is more desirable as a costume even among those who do not wear it every day. However, it is the communitarian economy, rooted in Aymaran and agricultural traditions that has enabled this accumulation of wealth, and is potentially threatened by the proliferation of the more individualist, contractually mediated social relations of consumerism that accompany capitalist modernity. Nevertheless, the importance of the de pollera identity, beyond the clothing itself, and the continued economic importance of the community fiesta and the gift exchanges which underpin it, are resilient and distinct from the commercialisation of the pollera. The pollera remains a symbol of identity which underpins the trust, exchanges and obligations which keep that community economy together. It is this 'authenticity' – that it is still an everyday item which demarcates identity - which has prevented it from becoming 'just' a consumer item, or a pastiche.

In sum, placed in historical context, the Chola Paceña fashion industry encompasses a post-colonial hybrid, and a signifier of indigenous power and agency. It is a symbol of women's everyday work, and a consumer item. It can be worn as costume in fiestas, but at the same time is a marker of identity that cannot be mixed and matched. Returning to the fashion show at the Brazilian embassy, all of these meanings were on display. The Escaleras opened the show with a display of strength, power and transgression – exemplified by the seeming mismatch between the designer outfits and the climbing equipment. The designs, although being displayed in the quintessential consumer setting, were also markers of identity, as the Aymaran vocabulary used to describe them made clear. This context displaced the high society women taking up this trend as costume from their historical position as reference points of femininity and fashion.

Gender and work in Chola Paceña Fashion

The development of the Chola Paceña fashion industry and its emergence on the global scene, is firmly rooted in Aymaran tradition and economy, which is communitarian and mostly informal. The labour conditions in this economy, the gendered nature of those labour conditions, the notions of value that are produced and recreated, and women's economic agency and subjectivity, challenge the assumptions implicit in analyses of

cultural industries based predominantly in OECD countries and global cities. Women's experience of informal work exhibits a configuration of vulnerability, autonomy and power that represents a different kind of gendered economic subject to that of the consuming middle class woman, or the exploited informal worker (Larner et al 2007; Meagher 2013). In a post-colonial context, women working in the Aymaran fashion industry have been able to challenge ingrained notions of value that are predicated on deeply racialized ideas of what counts as art, innovation and culture. There are clear economic and political reasons for this, as illustrated above. However, the work of the designers involved, and the profile which they have been able to attain, has also contributed to resistance to discrimination. Whilst analyses of social exclusion tend to focus on social and economic barriers to mobility, the Aymaran fashion industry indicates the importance of cultural recognition, and the ineffable factor of confidence.

Knowledge of the pollera and accompanying traditions has been valuable within the community economy for centuries, as illustrated above. The recent growth in this fashion industry and its penetration into new markets within Bolivia and further afield, represents a valorisation of indigenous women's knowledge on capitalist terms, overturning ingrained assumptions about the construction of knowledge, skill and value. All the designers interviewed talk about their skill in terms of passed down knowledge and natural talent rather than training, reflecting the Ministry for Decolonisation's commitment to recognising indigenous knowledge. These women are not apologising for their lack of training, but rather are proud of the traditions which they are continuing, and have the confidence to speak about their skills in those terms in mainstream media, which in itself represents a formal recognition of the value of their knowledge. What's more, it is being valued as skill, rather than as the naturalised gendered burden of labour that goes into recreating tradition. Nevertheless, they are confronted with criticisms that they are '*confeccionistas*' - merely assembling clothes rather than designing them, and not innovating in terms of style- which betrays the continued power of racialized ideas of innovation, skill and value.

To illustrate, in a focus group of elite business and professional women from the affluent Zona Sur about Aymaran fashions, a particular point of contention was the price of the individual items. There was incredulity that a vicuña shawl could possibly cost the rumoured price of \$20,000US. The initial doubts were based on the price by weight of vicuña, which is one of the world's more expensive woven fabrics, comparable in value to cashmere. A discussion ensued in the group about how price is determined – supply

and demand, the market being flooded with narco-money, and the value added of the labour involved. Eventually, one of the more sceptical participants conceded 'Oh OK, so it's like when I buy something by Calvin Klein, it's worth more than just the fabric' (Focus Group, May 2017)

This exchange illustrates a number of racialized aspects of the construction of cultural capital in the fashion industry. The value of the shawl was seen to be on a par with the value of raw material, which, whilst quality of fabric would be an element, would not be the definitive consideration when assessing the value of work from a western designer. This assumption when assessing the worth of Aymaran fashions is not unusual, and has a long history in terms of the western construction of 'civilisation', set against the construction of the colonial other as 'natural'. The labour of the colonised is part of the process of extracting natural resources, but cannot in itself add value. This notion of value is also gendered – with women's labour generally being naturalised in the sphere of social reproduction, rather than valued as a cultured skill (Socolow 2015). This dynamic underpins the racialized, gendered and classed distinction between art and craft. Whilst there is a legitimate distinction to be drawn, the way that 'tradition' is seen to be repetitive and art 'penetrating new ground' mirrors the gendered value system of reproduction and production, and why indigenous dress and tradition is seen as incompatible with modernity, and therefore fashion (Craik and Jensen 2015).

The fiestas and traditions of which the pollera is definitive are likewise perceived as recreating tradition rather than innovating. The consistency of the outfit, which always has its key elements of pleated skirt, derby hat, shawl and jewellery, and the consistency of the dances and structure of the fiesta would support that view. However, when people involved in fiestas confront the accusation that the music, dances and outfits are repetitive they are incredulous: 'you absolutely have to have the latest designs, the latest music', said one photographer who specialised in festivals, 'else people will know immediately and will speak badly of you – and that's really not the point!'. One of the prestes for Gran Poder in 2017 took me through a photo album of the various festivals in which he had taken part over the years, emphasising the changing trends and little innovations in each outfit. 'This year it's all about boots – the old style pollera and lacey shawl, that's what's most wanted now.' Designers, dancers and customers are very aware of what the latest fashion is in style, material, accessories and colours, and the designers are adopting, updating and fusing their clothes in multiple ways. There is a denim pollera from Eliana Paco Paredes for example, inspired by her clientele in the US.

The erasure of these details and innovations is typical of an outsider's perspective – akin to a non-music lover thinking that all jazz sounds the same- and in this particular case this blindness to innovation in indigenous fashions is racialized, and speaks to the extremity of separation between indigenous and criollo culture in Bolivia.

Women working in Aymaran fashions have successfully overcome the biases in cultural capital to be able to achieve the recognition of the value that their skills add. In addition to creative input, they run substantial businesses. To take the country's top designers as examples, Eliana Paco Paredes has a workshop of over 70 people working for her directly, and also subcontracts to home based workers; Jacqueline Tarque has three shops; and Rosario Aguilar is a lawyer by trade, but has built a career in training models for Chola Paceña fashion shows, as well as designing for high profile clients. Their success illustrates the depth and breadth of this industry, which, as is typical of creative industries, builds up particular celebrity names, whilst also continuing hierarchical and exploitative labour conditions.

The big names in the Aymaran fashion industry are made by the exclusivity, status and wealth of their clientele. Paco Paredes cites Aymaran women politicians as some of her most important clients. These women are *de pollera* in their everyday lives, and take pride in wearing the indigenous outfit that was for so long banned from public spaces, in public office. They seek to consume polleras that communicate power and status. As she puts it, 'the pollera has become a symbol of empowerment, strength and the fight against discrimination' (Interview, January 2018). Aguilar's clientele include the daughters and wives of successful businessmen, who are not *de pollera*, but want to wear the outfit for special occasions. She also, famously, dressed the Santa Cruz-based beauty queens '*Las Magnificas*' in 2017, in pollera designs. Santa Cruz is Bolivia's second city – the economic powerhouse based in the East of the country, with a predominantly white population. It is said that Bolivia's most beautiful women come from this city, and it is renowned for always being the home of 'Miss Bolivia'. The racial aspects of what counts as beauty have however been perspicuous, and were highlighted in 2004 when one Cruceña Miss Bolivia chose to emphasise in interview at the Miss World contest that, contrary to popular belief, Bolivia was not just inhabited by indigenous people (El Universo 2004). In this context, for *Las Magnificas* to be dressed in polleras by an Aymaran designer, rather than as a pastiche of indigenous tradition, is an illustration of the revolution in cultural constructions of beauty that the rise of the Aymaran Bourgeoisie has advanced.

The extent of interest in Aymaran designs, and the availability of cheap materials and labour, have however created an industry with significant depth and breadth. The shopping galleries of Kollasuyo, where Paco Paredes still has her boutique, are mostly populated by mid-range designers, many operating informally, who make bespoke outfits for dancing groups for festivals, drawing on their own contacts to do so. These designers are young and *de vestido*, and appeal specifically to the trend for wearing the pollera in dances, rather than the identity of being *de pollera* itself. Naomi has a shop in one of the galleries on Kollasuyo Avenue which she runs with her mother. She has bought the various brightly coloured materials from suppliers in the centre of town, imported from East Asia, and her clientele are mostly girls whom she knows from her college and dancing. She is of indigenous descent but does not speak Aymara, and both she and her mother are *de vestido*. 'I mostly work with the señoritas' she says, using the term to indicate young, urban women. 'They want bright colours and more modern designs.' She rents out polleras specifically for fiestas, and tailors specific designs. She also designs her own jewellery. Naomi's own narrative of how she became involved in fashion presents her specialisation as a livelihood strategy rather than a career, but one in which her particular experience, cultural expertise and tastes are an advantage. 'I'd tried loads of things – selling used clothes, making and selling fried chicken and chips, but this really took off.... I used to dance myself, so I know what young girls want, and I already have the networks.'

Naomi's story as a designer is markedly different from those of the designer names associated with Aymaran fashions. She also operates in the informal commercial economy, but her business is not directly to women who are *de pollera* – her clientele are consuming Aymaran fashion, but not adopting it as an identity. Nevertheless, the possibility of this market has come about because of the strength of the Aymaran community economy, its political ascendance and its reassertion of the economic power of the pollera and the women who wear it, in a global commercial context.

Conclusion

This article has considered the rise of Chola Paceña fashion in light of a feminist and post-colonial critiques of value and the cultural underpinnings of economic growth and trade. The designers involved have been able to use their knowledge, culture and

identity to make inroads into global consumer culture, whilst maintaining and supporting the Andean co-operative cultural and economic structures which have made this possible. The import of their work to feminist understandings of the cultural industries is that they have overturned gendered and racialized distinctions between art and craft, and production and reproduction. The economic agency and cultural power which they display represents a femininity which subverts and challenges the gendered assumptions of the Global North just as the pollera itself does in its co-optation and subversion of European trends. The gendered subjectivity represented by the pollera is of a hard working, physical and capable woman – exemplified by the escaleras, and by the power of the women designers who have made it to the top. Economic growth is recognised as a precursor to greater consumption of luxury goods, but the accompanying image of the middle class woman as consumer does not capture the agency and power that women have always had in Andean markets.

The key to understanding the Chola Paceña fashion industry is the meaning of the pollera in historical and cultural context. This is not a consumer item, but an identity which underpins the industry: the identity of the women involved, and the traditions and fiestas which have enabled the Aymaran economy itself to accumulate so much of the economic growth of the last ten years. It is this economic power and the continued importance of reciprocal traditions that has led to a reworking of the distinction between art and craft, highlighting its racialized and classed implications. The spectacular success of Chola Paceña fashions also shows the importance of cultural symbolism to political and economic power. Despite the many legitimate criticisms of their modernisation and decolonial policies, the presence of an indigenous president who has explicitly addressed the racialized construction of power in Bolivia has provided a sense of confidence and entitlement to space which has overturned the cultural map of La Paz .

The complexity of this history, culture and economy behind the rise of Chola Paceña Fashions highlights the reasons why theories formulated in the west should not be globalised, but rather parochialised. The example of pollera fashions is difficult to describe in the context of an Anglophone academic publication without illustrating how it differs from the ‘norm’ and challenges theoretical construction of gender, culture and consumption. However, it is important to bear in mind that to people in La Paz, the strength of Aymaran women, their increased wealth, and the multiple meanings of the pollera are a part of everyday life, and the categories and distinctions which this

industry would seemingly challenge - ideals of femininity, distinctions between production and reproduction, and craft and art - are etically defined impositions. The contradictions that I have described indicate the biases in these concepts, rather than exotic curiosities about an overseas reality.

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