

PISHTACOS: HUMAN FAT MURDERERS, STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES, AND RESISTANCES IN PERU

ERNESTO VASQUEZ DEL AGUILA

Georgetown University, Washington, DC

PISHTACOS: PREDADORES DE GRASA HUMANA, DESIGUALDADES ESTRUCTURALES Y RESISTENCIA EN EL PERÚ

RESUMEN:

Las desigualdades políticas, económicas e institucionales tienen un enorme impacto en lo cotidiano de las personas y en sus problemas diarios. Se producen experiencias colectivas de sufrimiento social que a menudo encuentran alivio a través de la producción de imaginarios compartidos. Entre las poblaciones marginadas/marginales del Perú, la continua exposición a experiencias de colonización y opresión, así como el enfrentamiento a las injusticias, el empobrecimiento y las desigualdades actuales, han constituido el escenario para el surgimiento de un personaje maligno: el *pishta-*

co, que, por lo general, suele ser un extranjero poderoso que roba la grasa humana de los indígenas y de los indigentes. El pishtaco, una figura ambigua, cambiante y compleja, representa diversos aspectos del poder y de la violencia que son muy familiares para los habitantes de las regiones andinas del Perú y de Bolivia. Este artículo analiza el mito del pishtaco en el Perú, desde su surgimiento en la época de la Colonia hasta su representaciones en los medios actuales y los comentarios que aparecen en los periódicos digitales peruanos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *PISHTACO*; DESIGUALDADES ESTRUCTURALES; RESISTENCIA; PERÚ.



1. Introduction

Reality and magic are social and cultural constructions. In settings such as the Peruvian Andes, these two domains are deeply rooted in the outlook of people who integrate a world of saints, devils, deities, and enchanted beings with whom they interact (Taussig 1977). These narratives are inscribed in the daily lives of indigenous people; they are woven into their individual and social stories. Rumour, gossip, and even narratives about situations that *never happened* are important tools to understand these historical processes. Several scholars have documented stories of witchcraft, cannibalism, rumour, and supernatural narratives around the world that appear as responses of oppressed individuals to situations of instability, violence, and structural inequalities (Masquelier 2000; White 2000; Butt 2005). These narratives provide marginalized people with cultural resources to articulate their experiences of suffering and make sense of their individual and collective situations. As noted by White (2000), the study of the origin of social phenomena, or the “truth” about people’s narratives, is less important than the study of the production of collective ways to negotiate contradictions, tensions, and ways of coping with structural vulnerabilities.

The myth of pishtacos is part of the collective narratives of Peruvians. They circulate from time to time, and when they return to commit their murders, everybody

has heard about them, even if only a few people have ever claimed to have seen them. The victims of pishtacos report the crimes of pishtacos as not necessarily being from their own experiences, but they narrate events that circulate within their social world and, in this sense, these stories have the most validity. The evidence is constructed in social interactions among the group and in concrete experiences of vulnerability and unequal relationships with Peru’s hegemonic groups. These human fat murderers went from being a myth presented in rural and marginalized urban areas to being characters presented in social media, the news and popular culture. For some Peruvians, pishtacos are part of their everyday lives, an evil that threatens the lives of marginalized individuals. For others, pishtacos are only rumours presented among “ignorant” people. Pishtaco stories are rooted in a system of moral accountability that sustains the truth of their narratives. Pishtacos are not simply fears, anxieties, and superstitions of “pre-modern” people. Magic narratives and even rumours have the power to shape everyday experiences, and despite their uncertainty, they offer invaluable sources to understand the world, the way the victims — the storytellers — do.

2. Race and Class Hierarchies in Peru

As a consequence of almost three centuries of Spanish colonization, Andean countries such as Peru produced a hierarchy of

bodies based on a very marked racial and social symbolic classification, and although Peru has a large indigenous population, these racial and ethnic minorities remain structurally and symbolically subordinated. The process of *mestizaje* (mixing of races) in Peru continued throughout the colonial period while during the era of the Republic, Chinese and Japanese migrant labourers, as well as new waves of Europeans, integrated into the Peruvian society. Peruvian independence from Spanish colonization during the mid-nineteenth century did not eliminate the subordination of racial minorities, but rather implied the continuation of the *blanco* (white) or *criollo* (mixed) elites (Bethell 1984). For someone unfamiliar with Peruvian society, most Peruvians might seem racially homogenous, but the vast majority of the population in metropolitan areas in Peru is actually highly heterogeneous, with mixed backgrounds, complex racial and ethnic identities and ways of differentiation.

Peru has one of the largest indigenous populations in the Americas. The latest 2017 National Census, showed an indigenous population in Peru of more than 5.9 million, comprising approximately 25.7 percent of the total population (INEI 2018). Despite this large number, only a small minority of Peruvians identify themselves as indigenous, almost half of the population acknowledges having indigenous ancestors, but most recognize themselves as “mestizos” (Telles and Flores 2014), an ambiguous and fluid category that could be closer to whites or indigenous, depending on factors such as social class, rural vs urban, and even gender. Sulmont and Callirgos ar-

gue that the “imagined construction” of ethnic and racial differences in Peru has its roots in the debates and projects of nation building during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These debates and projects produced a social structure of ethnic and racial boundaries and an “ethnoracial grammar” that continues to be used by social actors in contemporary Peruvian society to describe and interpret their differences and inequalities (Sulmont and Callirgos 2014).

Since the 1930s, growing internal migration has transformed Peruvian cities into centres of attraction for all Peruvians from different social and economic backgrounds. Lima, the Peruvian capital, was the main destination for internal migrants. It currently accounts for almost thirty percent of the total Peruvian population (INEI 2015). Many of the neighbourhoods in Lima were known as *pueblos jóvenes* (young towns), a euphemistic name that conceals class and racial discriminations. In recent times, some of these neighbourhoods exhibit high levels of economic development and the areas were renamed as *Conos* or outskirts. However, the stigma of being part of the *Conos* of the city continues to create a spatial segregation between white and mestizo/indigenous districts of the city. These *Conos* are the settings where migrants and their children have to reconcile their cultural beliefs with those presented in the city, where narratives, such as the *pishtaco*, are considered by racial and class elites to be the result of the “ignorance” of marginalized people.

The body can be seen as a metaphor of the social order and the indigenous body continues to be in a subordinate position in

contrast to the white body. The economic, social, and symbolic capital of the *Blanco* (white) populations in Peruvian society is illustrated through the production of mass media images and discourses in which non-white people are absent. Weismantel questions the notion of *racial democracy* in Latin America, a widespread assumption even among scholars that overemphasizes class as the main issue in Andean cultures and makes race almost an invisible structural factor. However, the colloquial use of common epithets shows the racialized nature of Andean societies: indigenous people are portrayed as “dirty”, “sheep”, and “mules”; while *blancos* (whites) are “decent”, “educated”, “cultivated”, “good” people (Weismantel 2001). In a compelling study about race in Peru, Drzewieniecki (2004) finds positive and negative stereotypes about four racial categories among urban students. *Blancos* (whites) oscillate between being the “luckiest” and the “most attractive” within the Peruvian racial hierarchy, to being the “liars, exploiters, overbearing, and arrogant”. *Cholos* (indigenous heirs) are considered “sentimental, strong, ignorant, hard workers, and lazy”. Ardito (2004) found that up to 90 percent of Peruvian television commercials promote people with white physical features, excluding the faces of the vast majority of the population. Within this structure, the larger part of Peruvians still consider whites as the “best race”.

Peru has been experiencing extraordinary and sustained economic development over the last decades. The country has seen a dramatic decrease in the levels of poverty, from 60 percent in 2004 to 20.7 percent in

2016, which now leads Peru to be categorised as an “upper middle income” country (The World Bank 2016). However, indigenous people from the Andes or Amazonian region consistently have higher rates of poverty and lower scores in Human Development Index (HDI) than other groups in Peruvian society (Sulmont 2011). This situation is even more dramatic for individuals who live in extreme poverty – 26 percent of the population with an indigenous maternal language in contrast with only 7.7 percent of native Spanish speakers (Sulmont and Callirgos 2014).

The lack of social mobility, defined as individuals’ or groups’ ability to move from one status or class position to another within the social hierarchy, shows the profound structural inequalities still present in Peru. Even though Peru has a high level of basic formal education, quality education is frequently shown to be a central factor in limiting social mobility. Salazar, Quispe, and Choque (2015) reveal that only 6 percent of Peruvians living in poverty can access to higher education, and of those, only 5 percent manage to graduate. Additionally, social mobility in Peruvian society is not only a process of accumulating more economic, educational or social capital, but it also provides the opportunity to break with and shift ethnic and racial identities as well (Sulmont and Callirgos 2014). Political marginalization is another issue in contemporary Peru. There are a series of social conflicts due to the Government’s lack of consultation with indigenous communities about the access and the use of their lands and natural resources for mining, which has led to irresolvable social conflicts.

Drawing upon Bourdieu's (1990) concept of "symbolic violence", by which complex forms of social and cultural domination operate without the presence of physical violence, the imposition and perpetuation of power and subordination through forces that are unnoticed seem "invisible" in every day social interactions. Symbolic violence against non-white people in Peru has an enormous impact in the production of "structural violence". As many scholars have described, structural violence has the power to become part of people's social relations, institutional practices, economy, and so forth, which creates forms of suffering and injustice that are deeply embedded in people's everyday lives (Farmer 2001; Padilla et al. 2007). Structural violence places specific people or groups in situations of heightened vulnerability and legitimizes their subordinated position. A vivid example of structural violence in Peru is the case of more than three hundred thousand women who were sterilized during the Fujimori government (1990-2000), the vast majority without their consent (Defensoria del Pueblo 2002). A complex mixture of a dictatorial regime, historic discrimination, and structural inequalities legitimized government policies to violate the reproductive and human rights of women and indigenous people (Blaisdell and Vindal Ødegaard 2014; Vasquez del Aguila 2006). Both symbolic violence and structural violence are implanted in ubiquitous structures and normalized by institutions, culture, and daily experiences in Peruvian society. They create devastating consequences of social suffering in a dynamic process of institutionalized and routinized violence (Kleinman et

al. 1997) that frequently produces symbolic resistances, such as the myth of the pishtaco.

What follows is a historical account of pishtaco stories, from colonial times, to the early Peruvian Republic and up to the present. This genealogy of narratives shows the fluidity and adaptation of this cultural symbol at different times of crisis and social and political mobilizations in Peru.

3. *From Spanish Colonization (1532-1821) to the Early Peruvian Republic (1821-1930)*

In 1532, Francisco Pizarro led a group of Spanish soldiers who captured the Inca Atahualpa, which marks the beginning of the Spanish colonization and a long period of resistance and indigenous conflicts with the new regime. In 1542, the Viceroyalty of Peru was established and lasted until 1821 (consolidated in 1824), when the war of independence led to the creation of the Republic of Peru (Bethell 1984).

The word pishtaco comes from the Quechua word "pishtac", which means "to behead", cut the throat, or cut into slices. The first meaning of the pishtaco was to be a *degollador* (slaughterer). There is a controversy about the origin of the pishtaco (Kapsoli 1991). Some people find evidence in pre-Incan cultures, particularly among the Moche society (100 AD to 800 AD), which celebrated human sacrifices. Most scholars situate the origin of the pishtaco with the arrival of Spanish conquerors, linking this figure to medieval European folklore and indigenous expression of suffering and resistance to the colonizers (de

Prybil 2010). Before the Spanish conquest, human sacrifices happened in the context of religious ceremonies, but this is not the setting for the pishtaco murders (Oliver-Smith 1969; Kapsoli 1991). The core elements of these stories are associated with European colonizers, and so the first pishtacos seemed to be a representation of Spanish conquerors (de Pribyl 2010). Spanish soldiers and Catholic missionaries were the first Europeans to arrive in the Americas and both were considered the first pishtacos who killed indigenous people in the Viceroyalty of Peru. Missionaries were said to have searched for the indigenous *unto* (fat) to improve the sounds of their bells, and to shine the faces of Catholic saints. They were said to have evangelized during the day and killed their victims at night (Molinié Fioravanti 1991).

One of the first testimonies about the indigenous fear of pishtacos is provided by Cristobal de Molina, a Spanish chronicler during the sixteenth century. The indigenous *unto* is valued and sold to prepare medicine, to cure the wounds of colonizers and different types of diseases brought from Europe (Oliver-Smith 1969). The fat of the indigenous body, therefore, serves as raw material for the introduction of Western medicine to the indigenous world.

During the colonial period, pishtacos were found among the colonial authorities; they were descended from the Spanish colonizers or powerful local authorities who killed indigenous people to extract their fat (Degregory 1989). For the rest of the colonial period, in the indigenous world, any stranger was seen as a pishtaco, and he was considered dangerous and deadly. These

colonial pishtacos had the protection of the Catholic Church and the colonial authorities (Kapsoli 1991; Sifuentes 1989). Here we find a central element that remains constant through time: pishtacos are “untouchable”. They have the defence of important institutions, so their victims are vulnerable with no access to justice or protection (De Pribyl 2010). Another constant aspect of pishtacos was that they are nocturnal murderers whose main objective is the extraction of fat from the body of their victims. The killing of indigenous people in the mines to support the Spanish Crown explains the fear and terror in these populations, who interpreted the disappearance of their people as a sign of oppression by the Spaniards (Molinié Fioravanti 1991; Oliver Smith 1969).

During the nineteenth century, in the early years of the Peruvian Republic (1821-1930), pishtacos are portrayed as prosperous miners or merchants who wanted the fat of the indigenous body to make soaps, medicine, and for combustion to support factories during the incipient era of Peruvian industrialization (de Pribyl 2010). State authorities were also interested in the indigenous fat to pay the Peruvian foreign debt. The indigenous body became the basic element in the production of commodities –the raw material for the new economic system (de Pribyl 2010). In the second half of the 19th century, pishtacos mutated from colonial authorities to members of the new economic and political elites. They were powerful *mestizo* local male authority figures and *hacendados* (landowners). Pishtacos are scary, to be feared, dreadful, successful, and powerful men (Oliver Smith 1969; Si-

fuentes 1989).

Some of the testimonies illustrate pishtacos as powerful landlords who, as cannibals, eat the flesh of their victims (Kapsoli 1991, 62; Weismantel 2000). An interesting feature of these pishtacos is that they spend so much time sleeping during the day and kill their victims at night. Wachtel (1994) relates tales from the highlands of Bolivia, in regions where the intrusion of modernity creates crises among more “traditional” communities, about vampire-like pishtacos who drink the blood of their victims. The assumption is that powerful and “modern” individuals who are seen as a threat to the social order are most likely to fall under suspicion of being pishtacos.

These pishtacos acquired their wealth through their business ventures along with the indigenous fat they sold in Lima, the national capital and symbol of power and status over rural communities and smaller provincial cities. During these years, the scene of pishtacos’ crimes takes place almost exclusively in rural villages and neighbouring urban enclaves. Regional differences between pishtacos from the Peruvian highlands and from the Amazon region are very marked. The stories of murders appear and disappear throughout the provinces, in places such as Puno, Huancayo or Ayacucho. Lima and other urban centres remain almost absent from these stories (de Pribyl 2010; Kapsoli 1991; Sifuentes 1989). The stories of the pishtacos’ victims have the power to be orally reproduced from memory and they circulate by word of mouth. In rural and impoverished societies where quality formal education continues to be a privilege of the elite, oral

history remains as a means of maintaining social identity and group solidarity¹.

4. *Internal Migration and Political Violence in the 1980s and 1990s*

From the 1930s to the 1970s, Peru transitioned from being predominantly rural to a largely urban configuration, with more than 76 percent of the population living in cities by 2015 (INEI 2015). The growth of internal migration to the cities brought pishtacos to the urban centres, with internal variations of the narratives becoming less clear. Second generation migrants remember the stories that their parents told them about pishtacos, but city dwellers have not yet completely incorporated these stories as part of an urban social imaginary (Ansion and Sifuentes 1989; Portocarreo et al. 1991).

During relatively stable and peaceful times, pishtacos appeared sporadically and seemed almost part of a distant past. Throughout the years of political violence in Peru, between 1980 and 2000, indigenous and marginalized people were caught in the crossfire of the war between the Maoist guerrillas, *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path), and the Peruvian Army. The fear of pishtacos was reborn and crossed regional boundaries. These were the years of forced intern-

1 The *kharisiri* is a mythical character among the Aymaras in the South of Peru and Bolivia with close characteristics to the Pishtaco such as being powerful individuals like politicians, Catholic priests, medical doctors, engineers. They can be local or foreign people. In contrast to the Pishtaco myth, *kharisiri* not only steal human fat and organs, but also blood from their victims, something that pishtacos never do. For further discussion about *kharisiris* among the Aymara population in Peru and Bolivia, see: Blaisdell and Vindal Ødegaard 2014; Canessa 2012; and Rivière 1991.

al migration. Displaced people, due to the devastation of their rural communities, sought refuge in the already marginalized areas of Lima (Morote 1998; Portocarrero et al. 1991; Degregory 1989). During these years, thousands of people were moved from the zones of violence to the cities, particularly in Lima. Pishtacos also migrated to the cities, accompanying their victims in their pilgrimage to escape the cruelty of the war between Sendero Luminoso and the Peruvian Army. Displaced populations settled in isolated areas and shantytowns in Lima, excluded from the rest of society, which saw these migrants as possible "terrorists" (Moline Fioravanti 1991; Portocarrero et al. 1991).

Here, we find the recreation of pishtacos figure as representative of the Peruvian State. Pishtacos became government officials with "credentials from the Government" holding power over neglected people. Pishtacos are also professionals (especially anthropologists, sociologists, and NGO workers), medical doctors and, in general, anyone who can pass as "friendly" but has the secret agenda of stealing the vital organs of marginalized populations. As during colonial times, these modern pishtacos were seen as being protected by the State. Their crimes could not be denounced; while the rest of the impoverished population was vulnerable to the pishtacos' violation (Morote 1998; Rojas 1989; Sifuentes 1989). Marginalized communities were once again helpless and desperately exposed to indiscriminate violence.

The Peruvian Army and Sendero Luminoso suspected indigenous people were supporters of the "enemy", so both forces

committed crimes against them. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2003) estimates almost 70,000 fatalities happened during these years, of which 75 percent were poor and of indigenous ancestry. The report's strong evidence did not change the mind of many Peruvians in positions of power who, until now, continue to deny the mass murders of these populations. This was also the time of communal organizations fighting against Sendero Luminoso. *Rondas Campesinas*, an autonomous peasant patrol in rural areas of Peru, was very active during the years of political violence. Its original function was to protect villagers from theft, but soon evolved to become a parallel system of policing and exercising justice. Throughout the years of political violence, some of these patrols had the mission of capturing pishtacos, but there are serious allegations of transgression crimes committed by these rounds against people they were supposed to be protecting (TRC 2003).

Another important aspect at that time was the association of the pishtaco murders with the need to solve the economic crisis. The Peruvian economy was experiencing a dramatic economic contraction, produced by the first term of Alan Garcia's government (1985-1990). The repayments of Peru's foreign debt were interrupted, and hyperinflation rose to record levels. Ansion and Sifuentes (1989), Morote (1998), and Portocarrero et al. (1991) recounted stories in which the government was accused of choosing the indigenous body as a commodity to solve the economic crisis, taking indigenous fat to pay the external debt because these people's fat was believed to be more ex-

pensive and appreciated on the international market. Fear was stoked by rumours circulating about pishtacos who were killing indigenous and marginalized people in order to help pay off the foreign debt.

At this point, pishtacos also became human organ traffickers, particularly *sacajos/robajos* (eye-thieves). Pishtacos were embodied in white, middle or upper class doctors who were looking for human organs to transplant to rich patients. The stories differ in detail, but the essence is the same: there are powerful white men who hunt for human organs and for life force of indigenous and marginalized populations (Portocarrero et al. 1991; Sifuentes 1989; Zapata 1989). While the indigenous male body is portrayed as short in stature, hairless, small in size and belonging to an oppressed race, the pishtaco is conceived of as a white foreign man, a “gringo”, a tall, white man, not necessarily from the USA (Gow 2001). At that time, pishtaco stories incorporate urban elements, adding new fears and anxieties. Over time, people’s uncertainties became more complex and the narratives had to adapt to these changes. Pishtacos were described as not only stealing fat but also other human organs such as kidneys and particularly the eyes of children:

They take children to steal their eyes ... [T]he vast majority of children are between four and fourteen years, from large families but poor. [M]y cousin’s neighbour’s son was left sitting in the door of his house with fifty dollars in his pockets. The organ traffickers are part of an international mafia (Sifuentes 1989: 151-53).

Education is a valued source of progress and social mobility in Peruvian society. Several scholars such as Ansion and Sifuentes

(1989) and Portocarrero et al. (1991) explain the association of these pishtacos with eye-thieves as being due to the fact that for migrants, the eyes are the means through which their children gain education and access to “official” Peru. Children without eyes are children without a future or the possibility of progress. By losing their children’s eyes, parents face the fear of being deprived of their only hope for their children of social mobility and of being integrated into the dominant society.

There are several stories of white local doctors who came to the marginalized communities accompanied by mestiza female nurses and mestizo and black male guards looking for the children in schools, clinics and streets (Portocarrero et al. 1991; Sifuentes 1989; Zapata 1989). As in colonial times, these white pishtacos were not alone, but they were helped by urbanized local people who betrayed their communities. These urban pishtacos threatened teachers who protected the children and took the children’s eyes and kidneys in order to sell these healthy organs to sick patients in rich countries (Morote 1998; Portocarrero et al. 1991; Rojas 1989). The presence of female nurses in these stories can be explained as a representation of the quite common perception that these health practitioners discriminate against the poor and indigenous people. In rural communities and public hospitals, patients usually complain about the bad treatment that female nurses give them, as a means of exhibiting their social position as mestizos over indigenous people; hence, these women are associated with the hegemonic power of medical doctors. Black people in the indigenous ima-

ginary evoke colonial times when African slaves performed the role of liaisons between the white colonizers and indigenous people in the mines and factories where they were exploited. In this sense, the black accomplice of the Spaniard conqueror emerges helping the white doctor in the same enterprise: to oppress indigenous people. During colonial times in an indigenous rebellion in the Peruvian Andes in 1742, black people, Spanish conquerors, and Catholic missionaries were condemned to death and accused of being “Indian exploiters” (Ansion and Sifuentes 1989; Morote 1998). In this scenario, pishtacos are not always white; the colour of their skin is a less important sign of racial alterity than other features such as clothes, hairiness, material belongings, and economic and social capital that place pishtacos in a privileged position of authority and wealth. In other words, the “whiteness” of the pishtaco resides in his appearance and performance and not always in his race or ethnicity.

5. *Pishtacos Go Global: The Myth Becomes Reality*

In November 2009, the head of the Peruvian police criminal investigation unit appeared on prime time national television reporting the discovery of a band of pishtacos in the highlands of Huánuco and Pasco which had murdered more than sixty people over the past three decades in order to extract their body fat and sell to European cosmetic manufacturers at US\$15,000 per liter. The police presented four members of the pishtaco band with seventeen liters of human fat stored in

dirty, returnable bottles of *Inca Kola*, Peru’s national soda. The police explained in detail the procedures used by the pishtaco gang to extract human fat. With the skills of modern forensic technology, pishtacos dismembered the bodies of their victims, cut off their victims’ heads, arms and legs, removed the organs, suspended the torsos from hooks while candles, put above warmed the flesh and the human fat dripped into empty bottles. The Peruvian media, including the most respected newspapers such as *El Comercio* and *La República* and the national broadcaster *RPP*, covered the breath-taking news². The pishtacos now had names and faces and unresolved crimes and disappearances in the area were expected to be resolved. Important members of the Alan García’s Government (2006-2011) supported the police investigation, inquiring as to why international traffickers are interested in the fat of Peruvians from rural communities.

The impact of the police operation hit the international media. The evil crimes of magic creatures were revealed to be a reality. Pishtacos were a band of regular thieves and human murderers connected to an international mafia of cosmetics produced

2 *El Comercio*: “Me dedico a ‘pishtaquear’ hace dos meses”, confesó a la policía Marcos Veramendi”. Available at: <http://archivo.elcomercio.pe/sociedad/lima/mededicopishtaquear-hace-dos-meses-confeso-policia-marcos-veramendi-noticia-382814>.

- *La República*: “Pishtacos’ tenían 17 litros de grasa humana”. Available at: <https://larepublica.pe/sociedad/433539-pishtacos-tenian-17-litros-de-grasa-humana>.

- *RPP*: “Pishtacos’ vendían grasa humana a mercados de cosméticos europeos”. Available at: <https://rpp.pe/peru/actualidad/pishtacos-vendian-grasa-humana-a-mercados-de-cosmeticos-europeos-noticia-223666>.

from human fat. It seemed that the victims of pishtacos would finally find justice. The detailed description of pishtacos' techniques provided by the Peruvian police captured international attention. Some local and international journalists compared the pishtacos' method of processing the human fat of their victims with the procedures used by Jean-Baptiste Crenouille, the fictional character of Patrick Süskind novel, *The Perfume*. The following is a sample of some of the reputable international media that covered the capture of the pishtacos in November 2009:

- *AFP*, from France: "Police arrest gang accused of killing victims for human fat" <https://www.france24.com/en/20091121-police-arrest-gang-accused-killing-victims-human-fat>
- *BBC News*, from the UK: "'Fat for cosmetics' murder suspects arrested in Peru" <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8369674.stm>
- *CNN*, from the US: "Arrests made in ring that sold human fat, Peru says" <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/11/20/fat.dead.humans.peru/index.html>
- *El País*, from Spain: "Los 'sacamantecas' de Huánuco mataban para vender grasa humana" https://elpais.com/diario/2009/11/21/internacional/1258758011_850215.html
- *El Mundo*, from Spain: "La caza de los 'Pishtacos'" <https://www.elmundo.es/america/2009/11/20/noticias/1258679886.html>
- *Globo*, from Brazil: "Quadrilha peruana é acusada de vender gordura humana para fazer cosméticos"

<http://g1.globo.com/noticias/mundo/0,,mull385808-5602,00-quadrilha+peruana+e+acusada+de+vender+gordura+humana+para+fazer+cosmeticos.html>

Over the following days the truth began to be unveiled. The independent media linked this case with a previous one which appeared in 1989, during the debacle of the first term of President Garcia when a band of pishtacos was also "discovered" killing indigenous people in the provinces to sell their fat to cosmetic industries in rich neighbourhoods in Lima. By the end of the month, the possibility of a smokescreen created by the Interior Ministry to steer attention away from a death squad in the north of the country gained credibility. The alleged pishtaco crimes again remained unresolved.

It is not my intention in this article to examine the veracity or the production of smokescreens by governments in crisis or corrupt members of the government, but instead to focus on the narratives and stories that readers of online newspapers attached to these news stories during the weeks following the police investigation in 2009. These narratives constitute an invaluable source of information from people all around Peru and abroad who shared their stories about pishtacos. They constitute evidence of the fluidity of pishtaco stories and their evolution in current times in the Peruvian social imaginary. Pishtacos continue to evolve and incorporate elements from modernity and globalization.

The forthcoming sections analyse testimonies of readers of the online version of

the Peruvian newspaper, *Peru21*³, a very popular news outlet with printed and digital distribution that extensively covered the event in 2009. These online readers left their stories, comments, and beliefs about the long presence of the pishtacos in the Peruvian social imaginary. Evidence was collected in November 2009 and translated from Spanish into English by the author. These online readers can be classified as “unbelievers/sceptical” and “believers” about the veracity of pishtacos. They all engaged in an intense debate about the truth or falseness of the pishtaco.

An important aspect of the witnesses of readers who believe the veracity of pishtaco was the claim for justice for marginalized people. Male and female readers told their stories and the stories of their parents that were never heard or believed because the victims were poor or because they lived in isolated areas, and considering that the murderers always have the protection of powerful institutions such as the police or the judicial system, which provides impunity for perpetrators and makes the suffering of marginalized people invisible:

This should open the eyes of those Peruvians who live in the cities and ignore what happens in the provinces. This case is just one of thousands that demonstrate that these stories are real, that they are not “rumours”... These cases were never taken into account because they were peasants... If the press had an interest and investigated these cases, they could find the bodies of the victims and the truth could be demonstrated (Online reader com-

³ The full coverage of the so-called “capture” of the pishtaco in November 2009 by *Peru21* can be traced at: <http://archivo.peru21.pe/noticia/370821/caen-cuatro-miembros-banda-que-comercializaba-grasa-humana>. *Peru21* updated its website since the 2009 events, hence, the links to the readers’ comments are not available anymore.

ment, Peru21).

Nobody gave it any importance and in fact, all of us who came from humble families know about this mafia of doctors who extract the liquid from the vertebral column of the patients, of all ages. I was in the hospital; my mum saw how doctors took the liquid from a child while his mother was away; my mother took me home despite doctors insisting I should have stayed. They threatened my mother and blamed her for taking me home, but thank God she did and saved me from this mafia of doctors (Online reader comment, Peru21).

Narratives about pishtacos also recreate a very common story from the early years of the colonial past: the use of the indigenous body as a raw material for the construction of an infrastructure necessary for progress and modernization:

Sometimes they buried the whole bodies of people in civil engineering projects, bridges, mines... These bodies were the basis of the columns of these constructions, so they are stronger and more firm (Online reader comment, Peru21).

There were open tensions between “modern” and “pre-modern” people; discourses from people who identified themselves as white and well educated Limeños (people from Lima) as opposed to people from the provinces and those of indigenous ancestry. The no believers emphasize “rational” arguments about a smokescreen created by police and government officials, lack of education of marginalized individuals, and racial and class issues:

What ignorance for God! They don’t see this is just a strategy to cover the police crimes and the corruption of [the García’s] government! (Online reader comment, Peru21).

This is just an invention of ignorant people from the Sierra (mountains). It is sad the lack of education in our country (Online reader comment, Peru21).

The following testimony illustrates a common reply to comments such as the above mentioned which questioned the existence of pishtacos, arguing in return about the “ignorance” of people from Lima who ignore the reality of the rest of the country:

God what ignorance, poor devil... You should have lived in the *Sierra* (mountains) to live the horror of this. People disappeared overnight. One couldn't stay until late because you could get cut. This is not a legend, “Limeñito”. How dare you think this has political motivations? Pishtacos have been with us for more than fifty years, it's only now that the cases are being exposed (Online reader comment, Peru21).

Non-believers in pishtacos quoted medical and cosmetic reports that argue that the current use of human fat for cosmetic applications is easily accessible and free. Some of these readers assert that people around the globe were willing to donate fat, so the need for murderers to steal the human fat made no sense:

My wife works in a hospital, there is no way that [human] fat can be useful for anything, please read, be informed about medical procedures (Online reader comment, Peru21).

Any medical student would tell you that to transplant human organs is such a complicated medical procedure, it can't be done in the back of a truck, and killing people for their fat? This is ridiculous! Just think of all the obese people who will become millionaires selling their fat, no need to kill anyone PLEASE!! (Online reader comment, Peru21).

As in colonial times, those who believe in

the crimes of pishtacos maintained that fat coming from white and wealthy individuals was not valuable, the local and global market was interested in “quality fat” that only comes from the indigenous body:

They don't like the fat of obese people; they prefer quality fat, the fat of slim people, like regular people from (rural) communities (Online reader comment, Peru21).

One of the readers associated pishtacos with vampires. According to this testimony, to protect oneself from pishtacos, as with vampires, it is said that pishtacos hate and fear garlic, so eating garlic was seen to be a prevention against attacks by pishtacos:

Put a lot of garlic to your food, garlic spoils human fat, so it becomes useless for pishtacos (Online reader comment, Peru21).

Some pishtacos it is believed do not kill their victims instantly, but they survive for a short period of time and then die. These pishtacos steal the fat with great mastery, using syringes, so that their work is unnoticeable; their victims awaken without any symptoms or pain, but they get sick, become gradually weaker and after a few days they die without knowing the causes of their deaths. This theft of the life force leads some national and international media previously cited, to compare pishtacos with vampires. However, contrary to tales of vampires in which blood is the core element of their identity that assures the purity of lineage and articulates vampires' relations with their ancestors, pishtacos are not interested in blood, but in fat or vital organs such as the eyes. In rural Andean communities of Peru and Bolivia, fat and blood are not equivalent; blood is not the life force

nor the vital fluid, but fat is (Canessa 2000). In contrast to vampire-victims, victims of pishtacos do not become pishtacos themselves. Pishtacos do not transmit and share their power, which is based on structural inequalities that are very difficult to overcome in Peruvian society.

From a gender perspective, the pishtaco represents the “hegemonic” male in patriarchal societies. Connell (2000) conceptualizes “hegemonic masculinity” as the version of being a man that prevails in a specific historical and cultural context. These hegemonic men exercise power and dominance over women, children and less powerful men. The pishtaco embodies race, class, and gender inequalities through a spiral of violence and authority against marginalized individuals. Weismantel (2000) analyses pishtaco narratives as an expression of gender and race performances. The “whiteness” of the pishtaco does not rely on the colour of his skin, but in the control and violence he displays as part of the white elite that has been ruling Peru for centuries. Weismantel recounts stories of pishtaco rapes of both men and women. Pishtacos seduce their male and female victims with refined manners and demonstrations of their hegemonic position in the Peruvian hierarchical society. The pishtaco rapist incorporates narratives of the dominant, violent, aggressive, and hyper-phallic insatiable man. Information gathered during the 1950s talked about pishtacos who kidnapped young women and transformed them into their lovers and domestic servants. Some pishtacos allegedly amputated women’s legs and sometimes also their arms to prevent them from escaping

(Kapsoli 1991). Pishtacos were competing with powerful local men here in seducing and impregnating local women. In more recent testimonies, online readers mentioned the case of the children of pishtacos and local women. These children (all men) inherited the vices and evil of their fathers and they themselves became *pishtaquitos* (young pishtacos). There was no witness of daughters of pishtacos:

My mother told me the story of a rich pishtaco who kidnapped the most beautiful woman in town, and kept her for himself. They were always traveling, the pishtaco didn’t have a house in one place, and for this reason the family of the woman could never rescue her (...) they have a son who also became pishtaco like his father (Online reader comment, Peru21).

These pishtaquitos with the passage of time accompany their fathers (pishtaco) on their travels (Online reader comment, Peru21).

The male gender of the pishtaco is a core element that has remained largely intact over time. There is no reference to female pishtacas in the early versions of the stories. Since the political violence of the 1980s, there have been testimonies of female pishtacos who murdered people with the same cruelty as male pishtacos (Délétroz Favre 1993). A valid explanation for the recreation of gender is the presence of important women leaders among the members of Sendero Luminoso. These women were feared by indigenous people for their cruelty, and because in many cases they were chosen to execute the “enemy” (Payne 2013). I found among online readers several witnesses of female pishtacas, some of them captured and killed by terrified popula-

tions:

A distant aunt, whom fortunately I never met, was a (female) Pishtaca. One day several men ambushed her, captured, raped and killed her, which I think was just... It stopped the disappearance of people, which was very common at that time (Online reader comment, Peru21).

As for pishtacos, their victims also change over time. There is a wide spectrum of subjects among the marginalized people who are the targets of pishtacos. In some cases, the potential victims have broken the rules of social cohesion (e.g., a drunken man who does not heed the group's advice of not traveling alone on a dark or isolated road). This kind of "irresponsible" victim differs substantially from "innocent" victims such as children. There are some stories about stolen and raped women, and also some stories about women who fell in love with pishtacos. In all these cases, women were bewitched by the devil, hence the mischievous "magic" provoked female love for the stranger. Another common element among the victims is that they were isolated and thus outside the protection of their group or community. The moral here seems to be: in order to survive you have to maintain social cohesion and always be part of the group. Values such as solidarity and intense social interaction used to unify the community as the only way to ensure protection from the enemies' attacks.

Pishtacos stories have also been part of the Peruvian literature, popular media, and popular art. From novelist and anthropologist José María Arguedas who emphasized in his novels the human nature of pishtacos. They were not evil or super natural beings, but powerful people who exploited the vul-

nerable ones. Arguedas' recompilation of indigenous tales and stories are a testament of the structural inequalities in Peru and the Andean region (Arguedas and Izquierdo Rios 1970). Castro (1992) and Vargas Llosa (1993) are among the many writers who show the universe of the pishtaco in urban settings, where myth and reality overlap. The compelling Vargas Llosa's novel tells the story of police officers trying to solve the disappearance of indigenous people during the time of political violence and massive internal migration from towns to the cities. The author illustrates the cultural clashes between urban and rural Peru and pishtacos are at the centre of this universe. In concert with these narratives, Ulfe (2011) analyses representations of pishtacos through *retablos*, a form of Peruvian artistic artefact from the Andean region that shows religious imaginaries, festivities, and everyday experiences. After the political violence, local artisans incorporated pishtaco stories into their work. These *retablos* have become not only an artistic expression, but a channel to construct cultural identity, as well as to confront oppression, and build resistance against the oppressor.

In more recent times, journalist Fowks (2015) recounts the emergence of a new movie genre in the Andes of Peru, Andean horror films where pishtacos are the central characters of the stories. Fowks (2015) analyses more than 20 films since the end of the political violence in Peru. The movies have become very popular in the provinces and are increasingly approved in the cities of Peru. Audiences seem to appreciate local faces and places, and stories that resonate with their personal and community experi-

ences. In these modern representations, pishtacos kill their victims, steal their vital organs, and eat their brains and other organs in a genre that fuses the pishtaco myth with other global characters of the horror movie genre. In 2017, an American Peruvian co-production started filming *Yuraq*. A young Peruvian immigrant in New York comes back to the rural areas of Peru. The film asserts that it is based in the “true events” of the pishtaco band from 2009 and will tell the “cruellest and most violent events” about pishtacos’ crimes⁴. From popular tales, novels, retablos and movies, pishtaco stories illustrate how marginalized people have reorganized their universe and have broken the silence and violence of their oppressors through a cultural text that allows them to tell their stories from within their cultural context.

Pishtacos also cross national borders and accompany Peruvian immigrants when they relocate abroad. During four years of fieldwork with Peruvian immigrants in New York and New Jersey (2004-2007) for a study on transnational migration, masculinities and sexualities⁵, I found that the myth of the pishtaco was part of the collective memory from these migrants’ time in Peru. As in Peru, race and social class as well as the division between rural vs. urban place of residence, were pivotal factors to understand the narratives of “believers” and non-

believers about pishtacos.

As previously analysed, middle and upper class Peruvians from cities like Lima, viewed pishtacos as a product of the imagination of people from the Andes and marginalized shantytowns in Lima. For these wealthy Peruvians, pishtacos are only rumours created by “ignorant” people who have no access to formal education. Derogatory references about the background of those who believe in the crimes of pishtacos were very common among these immigrants. Phrases such as “*Serranos* [from the Andes] believe in irrational things”; “these ignorant people can’t think like normal people”; “people from the *conos* [working class areas of Lima] bring their magic and witchcraft from their little towns to the cities”, were very usual among them. Jerry, a white Peruvian born in Lima illustrates these narratives:

I think we all Peruvians, including people living in Lima, have heard about pishtacos, but *we* don’t believe in them, for *us* these are crazy stories [but] *Serranitos* really believe in these monsters, they would tell you that a pishtaco killed their grandmother... Or another relative... I think their ignorance comes from lack of education and poor exposure to news and information (Jerry, 38).

For other Peruvian immigrants in New York and New Jersey, mostly from the provinces, pishtacos are real murderers ignored by “the official Peru” and by people from the cities. They would tell stories that resonate with the ones described in the Peruvian contexts. They emphasize the fear and anxiety in which indigenous and working class people live in disadvantaged areas of Peru due to their structural vulnerabilities and lack of protection from the state and

4 A trailer of the movie and details about the production can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/yuraqthemovie/posts/the-true-storythe-pishtacosin-2009-the-peruvian-newspapers-reported-stories-of-a/1694394570859054/>

5 Vasquez del Aguila, Ernesto. 2014. *Being a Man in a Transnational World. The Masculinity and Sexuality of Migration*. New York: Routledge.

the government. A recurrent narrative was the lack of information of people from wealthy neighbourhoods in Lima about the lives of their country fellows from the provinces. Julian shows a common response to my question about pishtacos:

Limeños have no idea about what happens in the rest of the country, particularly in isolated regions where pishtacos are part of the lives of poor people. Anyone from the Sierra would tell you stories about pishtacos. They attack their victims when one thinks one is safe. They are always there, waiting for the right moment to attack their victims... Children, men, women, anyone can be chosen by pishtacos.... But limeños don't want to believe these stories (Julian, 48).

I did not find references of pishtaco crimes in the USA context. I asked my informants, particularly the ones who believe in the crimes of pishtacos, about stories that they may hear about pishtacos in the USA. I always got the same response: they never heard about pishtaco crimes in the USA. I challenged their certainty, mentioned the example of stories of pishtacos moving from the provinces to the cities and that that could be the case with the Peruvian immigration to the USA. However, their answers were always the same. Their narratives focused on the different context of the Peruvian and USA societies. The most common narrative eluded the fact that institutions such as the police, the judiciary system, and the government, actually work in the USA, which is one of the most powerful factors to describe the vulnerability of the pishtaco victims: the absence of actors and institutions that protect their rights. Another typical answer was the presence of security in the USA. Peruvian immigrants con-

sider their cities at home to be inflicted by different types of violences, from the political violence during the 1980s and 1990s that forced individuals from rural communities to move to the cities, to gang and delinquent violence. Better economic conditions were another factor that prevent the presence of pishtacos in the USA. Javier provides a less idealistic vision of the lives of immigrants in the USA. For him, despite the relatively good economic conditions that immigrants achieve in the USA, their lives are shaped by isolation and lack of social cohesion, which for him is the way people in Peru fight against pishtacos, staying together:

Living here is not a paradise. We [immigrants] can buy a car, a house, have a decent job, save money, but everything is artificial here. In Peru the mountains are alive! [in the USA] people are isolated, alone, nobody cares or trust their neighbours. In Peru, people are organized, they protect each other, that is how they fight against pishtacos, staying together (Javier, 34).

To confront the collective silence that enables the elites to maintain oppression, marginalized people have also created contested narratives that offer a symbolic solution to their subjugation: killing the pishtaco. There are several stories across time of humble people, regular, anonymous men and women, children and elderly people, who claim to have resisted the attacks of pishtacos and to have even killed them (Kapsoli 1991; Sifuentes 1989). Through narratives of social cohesion, solidarity, and collaboration, indigenous people overcome the oppressor, with many stories featuring the "happy ending" of the pishtaco's demise.

However, the resolution of the oppression of excluded populations carries sometimes acts of violence against innocent people treated as modern pishtacos. In times of economic crisis, political violence, social upheaval, and insecurity, outsiders in rural communities and marginalized urban areas have been suspected of being pishtacos and being the source of violence and even death.

During the political violence in the 1980s and 1990s, a young migrant man from the city of Huancayo was killed by a group of villagers in the southern city of Huamanga, because he was suspected of being a pishtaco. The man tried to prove his innocence, but failed when the villagers asked him to speak in Quechua. His position as an outsider was the evidence of his crime (Degregory 1989).

In 2016, more than 500 people in a rural community of Huancayo, attempted to take the police station, protesting against the liberation of two men suspected of being pishtacos. Villagers denounced several cases of disappearances of their neighbours but the police said no cases were previously reported. As described above, the clash between the official version of the police and the “rumours” created by rural people was at the centre of the controversy in the Peruvian media⁶.

Two months later, in November of 2016, the rumours about pishtacos circulated on a facebook page. A recorded message alerted about the presence of pishtacos in some parts of Lima. Days later, two male pollsters were attacked by villagers in Huaycan, a

shantytown of Lima, suspected of being pishtacos seeking their children. The violent mob attempted to lynch the pollsters. More than thirty villagers were detained by the police and one was killed??????.⁷ Portocarrero (2016) analyses the profile of the detained villagers. More than 70 percent were men 30 years old and younger. A population hit by unemployment or precarious working conditions and social exclusions in a country that is officially growing and reducing its levels of poverty. These young men saw the police as accomplice and protectors of the alleged pishtacos who were stealing their most precious asset, the lives of their children. These men were claiming justice. As in previous times, pishtacos are back in the everyday lives of impoverished and socially excluded Peruvians and the rest of the country sees the myth as part of the ignorance of marginalized individuals. The myth continues to live.

6. Conclusion

Pishtaco stories are a form of cultural text that indigenous and marginalized populations use as a cultural representation to tell their stories of suffering, oppression, and resistance. Modernization asserts that the past must be replaced by the new, that the rational must supersede the irrational. With the advent of colonialism in Latin America in the sixteenth century, the Spanish empire introduced new machineries of technology and ideology that oppressed and sought to erase the indigenous world.

⁶ Available at: <https://elcomercio.pe/peru/junin/vecinos-toman-comisaria-acusar-sujetos-pishtacos-259699>

⁷ Available at: <https://elcomercio.pe/lima/huaycan-34-detenidos-llevados-penal-lurigancho-152085> and <https://perureports.com/lima-mob-chasing-child-kidnappers-leaves-one-dead-police-injured/4970/>

Independence and the new Peruvian Republic from the early nineteenth century did not change the structural oppression of indigenous people.

The Peruvian racial hierarchy is a continuum of discrimination and social exclusion. Categories such as *indio/a*, *mestizo/a*, *campesino/a*, *serrano/a*, and *cholo/a* express the complexity of race, class, and ethnicity in Peru. For instance, the children of indigenous people who go to school and learn Spanish become *mestizos*, a higher position in the race and class systems. These children are taught at schools that indigenous oral stories are nothing but magic and superstition, and that they need to forget this supernatural world. As Portocarrero et al. (1991) note, for these children it seems that there is only opposition between home and school, between rural and urban, between modernity and tradition. However, indigenous people learn how to negotiate their identities and integrate the “magic” and the “real” that coexist on different levels and in different instances. As Johnson (2013) argues, modernity, progress, and the uncanny are connected to the realm of the everyday lives of marginalized individuals. They do not see contradictions between magical stories and rational thinking or progress. For them, pishtacos provide a rational explanation for what the hierarchical Peruvian society cannot account, and only become irrational or superstition for those outside the context of pishtacos’ potential victims.

Race and ethnicity become more complex if we consider the gender dimension. While indigenous women wear traditional clothes, speak Quechua or Aymara, and are usually less in contact with the cities; men

wear Western clothes, speak Spanish, and are in closer contact with other Spanish-speaking urban areas. Men are identified as *mestizos*, while their sisters, mothers and wives remain indigenous. Race and ethnicity are written on the females’ bodies rather on the males’ bodies. De la Cadena (1996) summarizes this situation in an illuminating cultural idiom: “women are more indigenous than men”, which shows that even among marginalized populations, women are more subordinated in structural and symbolic ways.

The indigenous suffering is not an inevitable tragedy. Indigenous people share these horrific stories as a way to cope with their suffering and exploitation. These stories become expressions of resistance to the erosion of traditional social values based on reciprocity, sharing, and family and community loyalty in the context of global and local capitalism (Scheper-Hughes 2001). Pishtaco stories show what counts and matters in the hierarchical Peruvian society, which body, which suffering is or is not important. During the political violence of the 1980s and the early 1990s, the media portrayed terror as experienced by urban, white, middle class people, and the stories of men and women in indigenous communities were ignored and almost erased from the media. The poor and the indigenous did not have voices to express their suffering. As Weismantel (2000) argues, pishtaco stories show one-by-one, that no matter how often murders occur, each individual tragedy is novel, appalling, and unnecessary. However, pishtaco narratives do not unify indigenous suffering, because even in this apparently homogenous group

there are differences among the victims, differences between men and women, between children and adults, and between “innocent” victims and “irresponsible” ones. The nature of the victim is embedded in a complex system of moral values. What all victims have in common are stories that illustrate the multiple forms of oppression and exclusion that vast number of Peruvians still experience.

Older representations of pishtacos portray them as having the power to enchant their victims, and even as ferocious cannibals. More recent versions of the stories represent them as human individuals. An important element of continuity in these stories is that pishtacos are bolstered by the protection of institutions such as the State, Church, and medical profession. Despite historical changes, the core elements of pishtacos stories remain the same: pishtacos are powerful (almost exclusively) men killing impoverished, marginalized and vulnerable individuals. The identity of the oppressors changes, but, as Taussig (1977)

states, marginalized populations continue to see evil exploiters as constantly recreating suffering and even death. The historic persistence of pishtaco narratives is a response to the symbolic and structural violence that indigenous and poor people have been suffering in the Andean region since colonial times. Pishtacos represent the known and the unknown; they combine the familiar with the unfamiliar.

Marginalized people know pishtacos even if they have never seen one. This apparent contradiction explains the fears, anxieties, and terrors that these stories encapsulate. For believers in the pishtaco, the fear is real. The fluidity and ambiguity of pishtaco stories also expresses the complexities of indigenous and marginalized people’s identities in rural and urban contexts. Pishtaco narratives provide a means of propagation and consolidation, which assures social cohesion in this context of vulnerability, social exclusion, structural inequalities, but also resistances.

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ERNESTO VASQUEZ DEL AGUILA

Dr. Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila is an Affiliate Researcher in the Anthropology Department at Georgetown University, Washington, DC. He earned his PhD in medical anthropology from Columbia University. His latest book is entitled *Being a Man in a Transnational World: The Masculinity and Sexuality of Migration* (Routledge 2014).

Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila

Georgetown University, Washington, DC

ev181@georgetown.edu

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