

Ceviche Revolution: Coastal Cholera, Marine Microplastics, and (Re)Fashioning Identities in Postcolonial Peruvian Gastropolitics

Abstract: As the flagship national dish and candidate for UNESCO intangible heritage, ceviche has become a poster child for Peru's global gastronomic revolution in the past decade. Led by "gastropolitical elites," the Peruvian boom sought to influence perceptions of the country, from struggling economy blighted by internal conflict to sophisticated culinary destination and exporter of world-class cuisine. However, the elite-led boom echoes colonial power structures, whereby indigenous and nonwhite Peruvians are exploited and/or erased. As a raw-fish dish with a historical attachment to the ocean-imported disease cholera, as well as contemporary associations with marine microplastics, ceviche is firmly entangled with water. Considering that coastal lifeways have hitherto been overlooked in analyses of Peruvian gastronomy, ceviche merits particular attention

"THE PLATE THAT UNITES all Peruvians is ceviche . . . it is the great ambassador for Peruvian cooking," celebrity chef Daniel Casas (pseudonym by request) has reflected. We are discussing the gastronomic boom for which he is implicit in instigating and maintaining as the international juggernaut into which it has developed over the last decade. Widely considered as the country's national dish, with an annual day in its honor, and Peru's entry for consideration as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, ceviche can arguably be seen as the jewel in Peru's culinary crown. As such, it should be a principal entry point of study when addressing framings of the Peruvian nation through the gastronomic boom. Yet it has remained understudied from the perspective of gastropolitics. Furthermore, ceviche is important not only as a beloved dish but as an elite tool of nationhood (Matta 2016), which necessitates the intersectional investigation that this article will for the first time explore.

Indeed, gastronomy has fast become one of the most important cultural products in the global marketing of *peruanidad*, the construction of a contemporary Peruvian identity closely linked to tourism and concepts of modernity (Nieri 2020: 267). But as Babb (2011) notes, tourism in post-conflict

for the way in which it is globally framed by gastropolitical elites. Using interviews with Peruvian interlocutors and ethnographic fieldwork in London's Peruvian culinary scene, in this article I address the ceviche discourse and its place within the construction of the nation. I will argue that, in relying on the popularity of Japanese food and presenting ceviche as sushi-like (though importantly, not necessarily "nikkei"), gastropolitical elites seek to remove the dish from its situated realities, where it is associated with dirt, disease, and the nonwhite. I analyze the historic cholera outbreak and an Oceana marine microplastics campaign to discuss the embedded discourse inherent in what, or who, is "not wanted" in ceviche's exported image, to conclude that, through ceviche, elites attempt to refashion the nation following logics of coloniality.

Peru is not just about controlling the global view of a country but is fundamentally linked to the *refashioning* of history and the nation. In the past decades, Peru has become a nation "transformed from terror to culinary destination" (García 2021: xii), but the gastronomic boom is not just about casually forgetting a conflictual past. According to García (2021), the boom is also deeply linked to racial hierarchies and the erasure of those considered unworthy of a place in the new construction of *peruanidad*, now a whitewashed and sophisticated state of being that excludes indigenous and low-income Peruvians. Refashioning the Peruvian nation through gastronomy and associated images can therefore be seen as an act of coloniality, in which certain people and ideas are unwelcome and excluded by gastropolitical elites.

In discussing the recent rise of Peruvian gastronomy on a global stage, Cánepa Koch and colleagues (2011) use the metaphor of the mirror and the showcase to better describe this phenomenon. Peruvians talk about food with each other, share recipes, family tricks, and flavors, and enjoy beloved plates together as part of their *peruanidad*, viewing themselves in the metaphoric mirror (2011: 13). The showcase is where one can exhibit "objects, symbols, products, and

fantasies” to the world (15). If the showcase stands alone, it tells no story — it is just an exhibition. However, when a mirror is placed behind this display, Peruvians become a part of the story that the world is told about them (15). “Bad tourism,” for example, would be only the mirrorless showcase of symbols and products, as the people behind these offerings would be invisible (15). This kind of “tourism” can extend to destinations outside of Peru where the gastronomic boom is making waves, including culinary center London, England, for example, which this article will also consider. However, it is the invisibilization of the people behind the gastronomy that García explores in her work when she argues that “the gastronomic revolution has not broken free from coloniality” (2021: 10), and instead relies upon “gourmet cuisine, gentrification, and ‘civilizing’ other” as “central components of this culinary project” (2021: 11). Where the metaphorical mirror is removed, indigenous and poorer (“uncivilized”) Peruvians are no longer reflected. Arjun Appadurai defines gastropolitics as “conflict or competition arising through the medium of social transactions around food” (1981: 495). In Peru, García argues, gastropolitics are used to erase and conceal those who elites do not wish to include within the international image of the nation.

Though gastropolitics has long been a topic of anthropological enquiry elsewhere, it is important to note that literature specifically addressing the Peruvian gastronomic boom has only just begun to emerge, with the first book-length study by María Elena García appearing in 2021. Though comprehensive in its analyses of race and coloniality within gastropolitics, this work overlooks ceviche almost entirely, instead, where a specific dish is addressed, focusing on the Andean culinary offering of guinea pig (cuy). Granted, it is not uncommon for anthropological reflections to focus more on the Andean/Incan in Peru, while the coastal region (and its cultural products, including ceviche) have commanded less attention. Often considered emblematic of a romanticized precolonial Peru, the image of the Inca dominates contemporary cultural imaginaries, and indeed, tourism and marketing campaigns (Cánepa Koch and Lossio-Chavez 2020). When extended to gastronomy, viewing Peru through an Inca lens necessitates an appreciation of potato and maize cultivation, common in the mountains far from the coastal regions (Cánepa Koch 2011: 87). This is not to say that the Incas did not trade with the coast, as records show a strong appreciation of coastal products (Rostworowski de Diez Canseco 2005). Ceviche, however, does not appear in the story of the Inca. This omission in a beloved, though well-hashed history, places the dish in a unique position. Those who may wish to imprint their own ideas and histories onto the symbol of

ceviche will not have to compete with stories of an Incan past. In fact, though the history is contested, the roots of ceviche as prepared today may lie in the exchange of products during the conquest, making it certainly a hybrid, if not colonial, dish.

I will argue here that gastropolitical elites have framed ceviche as sushi-like both in order to present an image of Peruvian gastronomy as “sophisticated,” like (their perception of) Japanese food, but also to move the dish away from its situated realities and, particularly, its past associations with cholera. I will explore the ways in which cholera, and *cevicherías*, became associated with poorer neighborhoods and migrants in order to assign blame for disease as well as risk. This, I will suggest, finds contemporary expression in blame over plastic pollution. As such, when a 2018 marine microplastics campaign stated, “I don’t want this in my ceviche,” it is possible to ask what, or who, is sought to be removed from the story of ceviche as intended to be told in gastropolitical times. Though I argue that the “new” story of ceviche overlooks Japanese-Peruvian contributions toward the Peruvian kitchen’s success with *nikkei* food, no specific indigenous groups are being targeted for erasure here, unlike what García (2021) found in her research. Here, the story of ceviche appears to disparage those who may not fit into the contemporary ideas of a new Peru — poor individuals considered to be less hygienic and undesirable as representative of the nation. There is no place for them in ceviche, and as the dish supposedly represents the nation, this suggests that some may also wish to deny them their place within the “new Peru” altogether. Indeed, the current scenario is loaded with complexity, as racism and classism interact to muddy the picture. Race and poverty/lack of hygiene are often intertwined in the country; however, in the framing of ceviche as disassociated from disease, a strong focus has been on socioeconomics rather than race.

Methodology

Thirty-one in-depth interviews were undertaken with a wide range of interlocutors involved within the international Peruvian gastronomic scene, such as chefs, as well as other relevant interviewees, including Peru-based environmental NGOs Oceana, ProDelphinus, Planeta Oceana, ORCA, and others; Peruvian government workers; fishermen; activists; and artists. Participants were selected due to their involvement in the gastronomy and/or marine industry in Peru and/or London. In particular, Peruvian “celebrity chefs” were consulted in acknowledgment of their key role in developing,

maintaining, and evolving the gastronomic boom. It is important to note that these individuals are often from higher socioeconomic classes, with culinary studies undertaken in Europe, thereby placing them in a particular social strata of control (Matta 2019). Interview participants were not exhaustive, and the sample is not meant to be representative of all Peruvians but principally those involved in the power relationships instructing the course of the boom.

Interviews were undertaken in Spanish and English and lasted approximately one hour each. Interviews were held on Zoom and voice-recorded. They were later transcribed, translated into English (where necessary), and coded for recurring themes. All translations are by the author. I use all names with permission, apart from one individual who asked to remain anonymous and has been assigned a pseudonym.

Ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken in and around London's Peruvian gastronomic milieu, through eating in restaurants owned and run by Peruvian chefs and their protégés and attending ceviche-making classes. London was chosen for ethnographic fieldwork for a number of reasons. As a world culinary capital, London has offered lucrative opportunities for Peruvian restaurateurs, despite the dearth of Peruvians living in the city. Over twenty Peruvian restaurants are now operating in the capital, including two run by celebrity Chef Virgilio Martínez, and two run by a protégée of celebrity chef and gastronomic-boom instigator Gastón Acurio. When studying the symbols and ideology behind Peruvian gastropolitics as presented to a foreign audience, London is therefore one of the most relevant destinations within which to conduct fieldwork.

If You Love Sushi, Ceviche Is Love at First Bite

Speaking about the global image of ceviche, Chef Daniel Casas states that there was never any “invention of marketing” when presenting ceviche as the national plate, as one can genuinely see “thousands of cevicherías in Lima.” However, authentic imagery does not necessarily translate to international Peruvian restaurants. For example, “Lima London,” the brainchild of celebrity chef Virgilio Martínez, is a far cry from a genuine Lima cevichería. In her analysis of Martínez's menu at his Lima-based restaurant “Central,” García deconstructs this approach to restauranting as inherently based in settler-colonial logic, whereby the “real Peru” is delivered to elite consumers in a way that invisibilizes those people who reside outside of Virgilio's imaginations of the country (2021: 67). This suggests that the gastropolitical project may, in fact, seek to present something other than “authenticity,” and

instead create a different reality of Peru that corresponds to ideas of modernity and progress in a specific way.

Developing this idea further, in the following paragraphs I will argue that celebrity chefs seek to present ceviche internationally as closely related to Japanese food, with strong emphasis on its likeness to sushi. For them, this is an innovative way to construct an image of “sophisticated” dining (as opposed to the realities of local cevicherías), and break into markets that may otherwise have been more wary of raw fish. However, these ideas obscure the realities of “authentic” ceviche by invisibilizing the lived worlds in which it operates. Furthermore, the debt owed to *nikkei* (Japanese-Peruvian) cuisine, and as such to nonwhite Peruvians, is dismissed as the Japanese-sushi connection is presented as a “new” innovation rather than one based in Peru's historical immigrations.

It is the case that unlike roasted meats and potatoes, typical of Andean cuisine and potentially more easily assimilable to the foreign palate, the sights, textures, and flavors of ceviche are arguably less recognizable. The presentation of raw fish, bathing in a sharp milk of citrus and chili, certainly presents a more adventurous option for some consumers, and this could have proved a challenge for restaurateurs when trying to expand into new markets. However, when Gastón Acurio and interlocutors first devised their strategy to bring Peruvian food to the world, they saw good company for ceviche in Japanese cuisine. As Chef Casas argued:

The conditions were already there for the “ceviche revolution.” In the case of ceviche, the way was already paved for us thanks to sushi. In the 1960s, if you had imagined a child eating raw fish with wasabi and algae, you'd think it was crazy. But now, sushi is something that everyone loves. Forty years later, people were ready for something new, and along came ceviche . . . raw fish, but not with soy sauce, instead with spice and different flavors . . . its new and people haven't previously tried it.

However, it was not simply acceptance that was sought but also respect, and above all the image of sophistication and refined dining. According to Casas, while it was the global popularity and acceptance of sushi that set the “conditions” for making ceviche the “next big thing,” it was the perceived sophistication and quality of Japanese food that helped contribute to the desired image of high gastronomy and refined dining. They called it “a strategic decision” to enter the market on the tails of sushi and emphasized the dream that ceviche would not just be “sold in a street corner in a *rustic* way” but that people would be “awed” when entering a cevichería. For Casas, the dream was to utilize the hard work already done by Japanese chefs to sensitize Western palettes to raw fish in order to popularize ceviche globally.

Though Casas did not engage directly with Japanese restaurateurs to do so, Chef Martin Allen Morales of Ceviche Soho Restaurant addressed this strategy head on by “studying” the evolution of sushi. He argued that though ceviche is raw fish, “we had the example already from sushi, but sushi took time to develop in this country.” Morales said that he studied the evolution of sushi, and “interviewed many Japanese restaurant owners” as he “understood that there had been a journey of twenty years, starting with very fine dining Japanese restaurants, and then slowly kind of going lower in terms of the price points.” Morales noted how sushi had entered the market as a high-end cuisine before slowly trickling down to more reasonably priced establishments as it solidified its position in the market—precisely what he hoped would happen for ceviche, and for Peruvian food more generally. His strategy was not merely theoretical, as it drew directly upon sushi’s popularity to market ceviche to non-Peruvian publics. Morales noted that “[in promoting ceviche] we drew from the comfort already there, saying, if you love sushi, you’ll love this even more. I tried to coin several phrases, I think there was something like if ‘you love sushi, this is love at first bite,’” underscoring how critical the existence of raw-fish dishes was in promoting ceviche and bypassing resistance to an otherwise ostensibly unique plate.

One telling omission of the chefs is the influence of Japanese cuisine within Peru itself. Referred to today as nikkei cuisine, waves of Japanese migration to Peru between 1899 and 1936 resulted in the development of nikkei food as a response to local demand for dishes palatable to Peruvian tastes (Cánepa Koch 2011: 57). Nikkei is “fundamentally characterized by its use of fish and seafood alongside local [Peruvian] ingredients” (2011: 58), and today finds expression through dishes such as sushi *acevichado* (“cevichized sushi”). Nikkei is a fusion food, touted as an important element of contemporary Peruvian gastropolitics (though potentially more so through the fusion of “bloods” after colonialism rather than fusion of Asian and Peruvian ingredients for food, *per se*) (García 2021: 40–41). From the 1970s onward, Japanese restaurateurs began to open nikkei restaurants in middle- and upper-class Lima neighborhoods (Morimoto 1993), and Takenaka (2019) argues that this ongoing success was a result of associations with the already globally popular Japanese cuisine. It would thus appear that it was nikkei cuisine that first utilized its relationship with Japanese food to establish itself in the market. When recounting the marketing strategy for ceviche, however, the debt owed to nikkei chefs was not mentioned much in interviews. If the indigenous Peruvians that developed and refined *cuy* dishes are invisibilized in García’s study of Peruvian gastronomy, then here the

Japanese-Peruvians who refined nikkei food and marketability of raw fish are neglected in the international success story of ceviche. In the narratives of the chefs, it was they who harnessed the power of Japanese cuisine to promote ceviche as the “next sushi,” thereby reconstructing a story of Peruvian cuisine and success that erases certain people—here (historical) migrants.

As such, the presentation of ceviche within the international culinary world seems to highlight and expand upon the Japanese cuisine while simultaneously dismissing the existing Japanese influences in Peru through nikkei food. However, another response raised by Chef Casas is worthy of attention for what it reveals about ceviche and ethnicity. Casas stated that positioning ceviche on sushi’s tails could help prevent its being seen as a “rustic” food to be sold on street-corner *cevicherías*. Something is wrong with this framing, however, only if one were to disparage rustic (read: rural), streetside selling. And indeed, within Peru’s recent past was an occasion when *cevicherías*, and those who frequented them, became implemented in a public health disease outbreak that posited ceviche as unhygienic—precisely the opposite of what contemporary gastropolitics seeks for Peruvian food (García 2021). Moving ceviche closer to Japanese food, therefore, is not just about presenting a more “sophisticated” image but also arguably a move away from its situated realities in Peru, as those were historically linked to disease and lack of hygiene. In erasing people, therefore, there may also be a desire to erase a connection to an undesirable past, even if that past did not implicate nikkei Peruvians at all.

Cholera in Your Ceviche

In January 1991, Peru became the epicenter of a cholera outbreak that first spread across coastal cities before turning inland, and then on to the rest of the continent (Maguiña Vargas et al. 2010). Through proper handling of the epidemic, lethality remained low and thus it would be reasonable to consider the outbreak a public health success (2010). But this is not to suggest that damage was not done. As one of only two epicenters in the Americas, alongside Haiti, Peruvian cholera influenced international perceptions of the country as impoverished and indigenous (Briggs and Briggs 2004; Trumper and Phillips 1995), and the perception of ceviche as a harbinger of disease was part of this discourse.

Being that seafood is a key culprit in bacterial infections (Nestle 2003), it may come as no surprise that the raw fish of ceviche became closely linked to cholera risk. Public health advisories were to avoid raw and uncooked seafood (Cueto 2001), leading to import bans on Peruvian ceviche by other

Latin American countries (Trumper and Phillips 1995), and following evidence that all tested street-vendor goods showed signs of bacterial infection (Khol 1991) there came the temporary removal of the dish from menus across Peru (Cordova and Andonaire 2020), with an eventual order by the mayor of Lima banning all street *cevicherías* (Suárez and Bradford 1993: 33).

Yet this was about far more than a public health concern. Given that then-president Fujimori made a public show of eating ceviche so as to avoid the economic fallout of the dish's tarnished reputation (Caretas 2005), not all ceviche was considered potentially unsafe. As will be argued, it was the ceviche prepared and eaten by certain groups of Peruvians—those who lived, worked, and most importantly, ate in local (“rustic,” as Chef Casas called them) *cevicherías* and markets—that was deemed to be risky: the ceviche consumed by the same Peruvians that the gastropolitical discourse seeks to invisibilize in its global quest to promote a certain image of Peru and its inhabitants.

With cholera, this discourse became linked specifically to ceviche and the pollution of coastal waters and fish. As a disease, cholera in general has a “strong association with the sea” (Colwell 1996: 2027), and historical outbreaks across the globe have been associated with the arrival of ships from areas already suffering from the epidemic. The epidemiological explanation for the Peruvian epidemic followed this same line of thought, with Chinese ships and crew initially blamed for the discharge of ballast water (Cerde and Lee 2013: 1934) and for the importation of cholera from sick crew members (Cueto 2001: 110). Trumper and Phillips argue that cholera is frequently blamed on the “other” and associated with the Orient (1995: 170). However, as scholars note, the simultaneous appearance of cholera in diverse locations along the Peruvian coastline instead points to ecological factors, most likely a phytoplankton bloom triggered by El Niño (Colwell 1996: 2027; Ramirez et al. 2012: 148). Cueto concurs with this theory, suggesting that although Chinese mariners were blamed, “it is far more likely that the source lay in a massive contamination of the phytoplankton, fish and shellfish that were near the coast” (2001: 110). Though the former theory has not stood the test of time, it is worth noting that the blame for the disease was displaced onto the racialized other from the very start of the outbreak.

Once present in Peruvian port cities, cholera subsequently spread through the contamination of water and food (Seas et al. 2000). Significant emphasis was placed on the emptying of raw sewage into the sea where banks of fish and shellfish used for human consumption resided (Cueto 2001: 108; Joralemon 2017: 34), implicating ceviche directly in the spread of disease.

From a public health perspective, raw fish may contain live bacteria and can prove a risk for cholera and other diseases (Nestle 2003), though the citrus in ceviche is thought to combat some of this effect. As photographer Liliana Avalos has suggested, a common perspective in Peru is that the lime marinade “cuts the germs,” and it has previously been argued that the use of lime juice would have been sufficient to eliminate cholera in ceviche (Mata et al. 1994). However, more recent studies suggest that lime juice is “not sufficient to reduce the microbial population present in cebiche” (Herrera et al. 2010: 395), and that raw fish must be exposed to lime juice for at least fifteen to thirty minutes for effective bacterial elimination (Mathur 2012: 6), with others arguing for heat pretreatment of fish in order to ensure that all *Vibrio cholerae* is removed from ceviche (Torres-Vitela et al. 2000). Either way, fish and other seafood are reported as a key cause of food poisoning and illness (Nestle 2003), so any raw fish such as ceviche cannot fully escape the necessity for caution.

Beyond biological concerns, I argue that ceviche was also implicated in disease due to the perceptions of the social worlds within which it moves, specifically the marketplaces and streetside *cevicherías* where ceviche is commonly sold and consumed. Thus the gastropolitical discourse might suggest that in order to erase the stain of cholera, one must erase the environments (and people?) within which it was perceived as possible for the disease to spread. This argument follows García (2021) in suggesting that the gastronomic boom discourse seeks to rehash colonial ideas and methods of hierarchal control. In Peru, coloniality is highly classist and racialized, so the desire of the government to re-establish hierarchal control is hardly unsurprising. But since ceviche has recently become such a key protagonist in the fashioning and promotion of discourses about the “modern” Peruvian nation, its specific implication in historical colonialities of power deserves special attention.

Certainly, the image of a streetside *cevichería* is ubiquitous in coastal Peru, and *cevicherías* are the most common places to consume seafood, with many people reportedly frequenting *cevicherías* one to three times per week (Thuesen 2021). Reflecting on her work photographing daily lives in Lima, Avalos described how “on any street corner you’ll find a *cevichería* . . . people go to eat in the street because they are working, and they don’t have any other option.” Small, wheeled trolleys serving ceviche can often be found in popular neighborhoods, in addition to stalls and small restaurants within any marketplace along the coast. Though some of these carts may seem defined by their mobility, they maintain their regular customers, with whom they often develop a rapport. Avalos contended that “for custom we always eat in the

street, and we are careful, we have our places that we know,” highlighting that she always visited the same cevichería that she photographed for her work. In a survey conducted by NGO Future of Fish, Thuesen (2021) also found that people in Lima tend to develop a loyalty and frequent the same market stalls.

Yet, despite the trust placed in cevicheros, it was such cevicherías and their purported lack of hygiene that became directly implicated in the cholera outbreak, as Cueto described: “During a working day in a city like Lima, 2 million people eat food prepared by street peddlers in the open air with no access to any hygiene, garbage disposal, safe drinking water or sanitation systems” (2001: 109).

In Latin America, cholera can be considered a disease of “poverty, backwardness, filth, ignorance, and the premodern world” (Briggs and Briggs 2004: 43), connected to class and race inequalities (Trumper and Phillips 1995: 169), with strong moral connotations attached (Nations and Monte 1996). In their research on the 1993 Brazilian cholera outbreak, Nations and Monte (1996) found that poor favela residents called cholera the “dogs’ disease” and resisted treatment due to unwanted associations with such an affliction. In Peru, local marketplaces and cevicherías in working-class neighborhoods are also often equated with poverty, lack of hygiene, and importantly, indigeneity and the nonwhite (Babb 2011). Thus that cholera is often blamed on ceviche—and by extension, on those that prepare the dish streetside—comes as no real surprise.

Indeed, it may be no coincidence that one of the first places to confirm cases of cholera was Chimbote, a coastal port city in Ancash, north of Lima (Maguiña Vargas et al. 2010). Chimbote was the setting for Peru’s fishmeal revolution in the 1960s, becoming the country’s most significant port for the fishing and canning of anchoveta (Wintersteen 2021: 59). However, Chimbote was not just well known for its place as the world’s largest single-species fishery but also infamous for its status of cultural melting pot. As Wintersteen describes, boomtown Chimbote attracted great numbers of migrants to work in the newly exploding fisheries, with 93 percent of residents identifying as migrants in 1961 (2021: 62). However, a high number were impoverished indigenous Peruvians arriving from the *Sierra*, who encountered discrimination in the city (2021: 70), unaided by the fact that the area gained notoriety for its “noxious atmosphere” and for being a “stinking smellscape” (2021: 60).

Crucial here is the representation of migrants—particularly the Andean, more likely to be identified as “indigenous”—in the diffusion and solidification of unhygienic coastal living. For example, in his analysis of the cholera

outbreak, Cueto directly implicates impoverished individuals and their food habits: “Migrants and other inhabitants of the shanty towns often had to travel a great distance to get to their work, and at noon they bought low-priced and easily eaten food like ceviche” (Cueto 2001: 109). Here it can be interpreted that the low price of the food is equated with a lack of effective preparation and/or ignorance on the part of the cevichero.

Outside of the country, Peru’s cholera outbreak was interpreted as an effect of the country’s socioeconomic woes, with blame placed primarily on the indigenous. As Briggs and Briggs write in their ethnography about the Venezuelan cholera outbreak, national discourse suggested the differences in waste management between the two countries would result in a more favorable epidemic outcome for the “modern” Venezuela: “Public health officials frequently stressed that Venezuela’s epidemic would not be as bad as Peru’s because Venezuela was ‘privileged’ in that it had ‘more sewage facilities than many countries’” (2004: 41). Heightened through the association with cholera, the Venezuelan press stigmatized Peru as an undeveloped and unhygienic country full of ignorant “indígenas” (45), who were unable to control the disease due to decades of poverty caused by economic collapse (28). Similar discourses came from outside of Latin America. Trumper and Phillips argue that Western organizations viewed the emergency as emblematic of a “backward” and “sick” Latin American nation (1995: 169–70), and thus played a strong role in labeling the outbreak as an “epidemic” (Smith 2012). Bans were subsequently placed on Peruvian fish exports, with Ecuador, Chile (Trumper and Phillips 1995), and Mexico (Khol 1991) disallowing imports, resulting in Peruvian fishermen losing their livelihoods through reduced demand (Suárez and Bradford 1993). International concerns over cross-infection reached beyond fish, with Argentine and Paraguayan football players refusing to enter Peru (Khol 1991) and a significant hit to the tourism industry (Suárez and Bradford 1993).

It is safe to say that such an image of Peru as a cholera-ridden backwater is a far cry from that promoted by contemporary national discourse, and the implication of fish and ceviche within this framing would be highly detrimental to the gastronomic revolution should it occur in contemporary times. As such, recent studies that suggest that the insufficient lime marinade and “the increasing popularity of Peruvian cuisine may . . . lead to cebiche-associated illness outside of Latin America” (Herrera et al. 2010: 395) should be of concern within the ongoing gastronomic revolution.

One way to address the problem is to completely distinguish ceviche from its local origins, as discussed above in

relation to ceviche's presentation as sushi-like/Japanese. Interestingly, another way may be to reject the notion of lime juice as essential to "cut germs" and disease at all. Instead, chefs are reducing the marinade time and pushing even further for ceviche to be *raw* fish, thereby distinguishing their gastronomy even further from that genuinely found in local *cevicherías* where the fish is marinated for extended periods, often until the flesh goes white.

As evidence of the reach of Peru's gastronomic boom, numerous ceviche classes are now available to Londoners who wish to try their hand at the signature dish. A range of "master classes" are on offer, from the renowned chefs at Le Cordon Bleu to more intimate Peruvian restaurants like Ceviche Soho. I attended a handful of these master classes to learn about the interpretation of Peruvian cuisine for a global audience, expecting to be taught similar recipes for the classic ceviche of white fish with a punchy lime flavor. Though the method of presentation and preparation varied (e.g., some used sweet potato; another used vegetable crisps), I was nevertheless struck by a consistency in the technique: in these kitchens, fish is minimally marinated, just long enough to coat the flesh, before being consumed as a completed plate of ceviche. When I asked about these preparation techniques, Chef Morales suggested that the fish be marinated for only five minutes to get the "best flavor"—otherwise the flesh will become opaque and tough, "as though it were chicken." The chemical reaction that instantly occurs is enough, he said, and that by minimizing the marinade time, the fish would remain "super fresh." This technique was seemingly not confined to the UK, either, as Lima-based Chefs Israel Laura and Daniel Casas concurred with the rapid-marinade technique. Laura described how fish in ceviche would once be left to marinade overnight, until turning white, but that this technique was now somewhat disparaged, seen as detrimental to the texture and flavors of ceviche as prepared in high-end eateries.

Yet as previously mentioned, raw fish contains bacterial risk. Experts suggest a marinade time of fifteen minutes minimum (Mathur 2012: 6)—three times that taught and practiced by the elite Peruvian chefs. At one of the ceviche classes I attended, I posed the question of whether the speedy marinade time would be sufficient to kill any bacteria present. I was told that the "high quality" of seabass selected meant I need not worry about infection. Again, this view was not confined to a London kitchen, as Chef Laura said the same when I enquired as to how infection could be avoided with the aforementioned bacterial risks considered. For Laura, it was not the fish that was the worry, as the use of high-quality products would safeguard against disease. Rather, bacterial

risk could be associated with sanitation: "The problem with cholera was not eating raw fish or not, it was with *hygiene*. People didn't wash the bowls or the knives, it wasn't a problem with the fish, or the lime, it wasn't about ceviche. It was really a problem of *hygiene*." Laura commented on how hygiene was no longer a public health issue because people had drinking water and more education about sanitation. Apart from those people living in the peripheries, that is—the "peripheries" of Lima referring to the *ciudades juvenes* formed by migrants and other low-income individuals.

The emphasis on the high quality of fish is indicative of a process of sanitation and hygiene present throughout the discourse of Peruvian gastropolitical elites, whereby the "cleansing" and "civilizing" through "hygiene brigades" at festivals and markets becomes a "central component of the culinary project" (García 2021: 11).

Though of course one should not dismiss the necessity of using high-quality fish when preparing a raw-fish dish such as ceviche, it is important to note that if fish comes from an area of the sea with a presence of *vibrio cholerae*, that fish—"high quality or not"—may be contaminated (Nestle 2003).

Sterile eating venues whereby patrons pay hefty fees to slice a raw fillet or await a table order of ceviche are considered "high quality" by Chef Laura. Dusty roadside *cevichería* trolleys where a (potentially migrant) cadre of individuals enjoy ceviche from a polystyrene container are *not* high-quality places in the view of Chef Casas. Indeed, here the argument is not over who engages in the superior infection control, but how they are distinguished as fundamentally distinct. One high quality and hygienic, serving essentially raw ceviche to wealthier clients using silverware, the other low quality and unhygienic, touting disease-laden fish that is literally portrayed as dirt-covered (as are the eaters). It is the image of the second that gastropolitical elites may seek to sprint away from in the quest to elevate ceviche as a cultural ambassador, yet this also removes working-class Peruvians from the story of ceviche. Though cholera risk has now passed, public concerns over contamination of ceviche have not completely disappeared. The threat now comes in the form of microplastics, one of the newer issues of our time, which the following section will address.

Marine Microplastics on the Plate

In a promotional video for the 2018 Oceana and Ministry of Environment microplastics campaign "No Quiero esto en mi ceviche" ("I don't want this in my ceviche"), the viewer is treated to a glimpse of a professional ceviche preparation with

a twist. Sitting in their respective restaurant ambiances, thirteen Peruvian celebrity chefs, including Chef Laura, appear to walk us through the process of creating the “perfect” ceviche as the preparation technique is filmed. Then, the *pièce de résistance*: an adornment of microplastics. A shaker containing small white chunks, not at all dissimilar to an appetizing coarse salt, with the words “Microplásticos Marinos” across the front, is produced. We then watch the chefs sprinkle this microplastic garnish over the ceviche, leaving the otherwise delicious dish peppered with plastics. As the video closes, we are told that microplastics invade the ocean and many species of fish—so, if you don’t want to eat plastic in your ceviche *don’t plastic pollute* (Oceana 2018).

For all its intention to shock, the imagery used in the campaign is perhaps rather tame, but more importantly it does not necessarily represent the true nature of marine plastic pollution. The microplastics used in the campaign are small, white chunks, similar looking to salt, when in reality the microplastics consumed by fish tend to be predominately yellow, blue, and black, with white plastics comprising only 2.5 percent of ingested materials (Reinold 2021). The choice of microplastic representation as a bland salty crystal makes the end result far from repulsive. As evidence, the comments on YouTube campaign videos are flooded with admiration from Peruvian viewers (“delicioso,” “que rico”), clearly missing the point of the campaign. And while increasing scientific evidence suggests that marine animals ingest (De-la-Torre 2019) and co-habit (De-la-Torre 2021) with plastics in the Peruvian Pacific, other studies have found that white fish such as seabass, essential in the preparation of ceviche, are much less likely to ingest microplastics (when compared to blue fish [Zeytin et al. 2019], whose flesh is too dark for the dish). Similarly, Liboiron found that some “41% of all fish species reported in the scientific literature” do *not* ingest plastics (2021: 85). When taken from the perspective of marine biology, therefore, the campaign is not true to evidence. Of course, that might not matter. Chef Laura argued that the important thing was that the message needed to be strong, as “we are brainwashed from social media, if you want to make a campaign that changes people it needs to be impactful, and to a certain point, *violent*.” On the surface, the violence Laura refers to may seem absent from the campaign. However, when considered within the wider discourse surrounding both gastropolitics and ceviche’s place within the narrative, a different picture of symbolic violence may begin to emerge.

I argue that—as with cholera before them—microplastics that “contaminate” ceviche and gastronomy in general have come to stand in as the new threat toward culinary success, and by extension to the image of the nation. However, as

argued in the previous section, disease threat is not only about a microscopic bacterium but also deeply tied to social hierarchies and coloniality. Now, plastic pollution may take the place of blame, redirected toward those Peruvians whose role in the new national image is challenged by gastropolitics’ colonial intentions (García 2021).

Incidentally, from a purely scientific perspective, microplastics acting as the evolution of cholera threat is quite plausible. As Bowley and colleagues (2021) have found, marine microplastics can potentially transport human and animal pathogens across long distances, whereby they may spread bacteria. Current theories on Peruvian cholera suggest that it may have spread via algae blooms transporting the bacterium from Asia (Colwell 1996), and evidence suggests that microplastics can and do interact with microalgae (Nava and Leoni 2020). Furthermore, research suggests that cholera specifically can be found on marine microplastics (Kirstein et al. 2016) and thus microplastics in fish do pose a real risk of spreading disease. These points do not appear in the Oceana campaign; however, it is worth mentioning them for the implicit, concrete link with recent ceviche-related threats to the national image in Peru. Indeed, as Pathak and Nichter (2019) suggest, the link between plastics and human health should be prioritized as a focus of import, even if medical anthropology has mostly overlooked this relationship so far. In the case of Peru, speaking about microplastics as a threat to ceviche may not acknowledge the accompanying threat of the return of bacterial disease like cholera, but it is nevertheless a possibility. For this reason, one could suggest that when the campaign states “I don’t want this in my ceviche,” this is also a reference to disease and what cholera symbolized: a tarnished national image and an impacted economy characterized internationally as a return and confirmation of Peru’s indigeneity and poverty. However, what is “not wanted” may go beyond biological risks and extend to other “threats” that follow a colonial logic of ethnic hierarchies. Following García (2021), this article has argued that gastropolitics seeks to remove and erase certain individuals from the story. Therefore, to unpack the relationship between the new threat to ceviche and “who” is not wanted in the ceviche story, it is necessary to first ask who plastic pollutes in the first place.

“There are a lot of houses along the coast, viviendas humildes, who don’t have places to leave their rubbish, so they throw it over the cliff, and it ends up in the ocean,” Maggi Lañas of the all-female Lima swimming group Las Truchas recounts in explaining why there is so much plastic in the sea. Las Truchas swim for fun, but when they venture into Pacific waters, they take bags along with them so they can collect the abundant plastic debris that floats in the sea

around them — trash discarded by those living in the so-called *viviendas humildes*. This heightened plastic pollution is indeed an issue of concern for the coast and reflects the consumption of those who live in Peru (De-la-Torre 2020).

Like Las Truchas, scuba divers also often descend with bags to collect rubbish, which they find in abundance in the waters surrounding Lima. To illustrate, Michel Epstein of Pacific Divers showed me photos of their finds: enormous piles of plastic bottles, along with hoses and batteries discarded by fishing boats. Unlike Lañas, Epstein did not lay blame on the poorer people living along the coast, instead claiming that fishermen are the worst polluters and always drop their rubbish overboard while out at sea. In line with this theory, it is worth noting that scuba divers do not venture anywhere near as far out as the industrial fishing fleets, so the culpable fishermen whose waste Pacific Divers uncover would be artisanal, small-scale individuals who have permission to fish closer to shore. Undoubtedly, this plastic pollution is a real issue along the Peruvian coast. However, plastic pollution and those blamed for it is not equally distributed, as interviewee responses suggest. The blame falls on the “other,” and in similar ways to “disease blame,” those considered culpable are poorer individuals living on the peripheries.

Liboiron makes the claim that pollution, and particularly marine plastic pollution as per their area of study, is deeply imbued within colonial structures (2021). There are those who pollute, and those who caretake the environment, with these relations following those same hierarchies of coloniality that can be found across postcolonial societies. As Liboiron suggests, “pollution was (and still is) about naming a deviation from the good and true path of things — good relations manifested in the material” (2021: 19). In the above narratives, we find this binary expressed in those who collect plastics (swimmers and divers), and those who pollute (poor communities and artisanal fishermen). Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are class differences within these roles. As Alejandra Mendoza of Peruvian NGO EcoOceánica discussed, the ability to swim is not shared by all Peruvians as swimming classes are reserved for the privileged. Even many fishermen cannot swim, she said, due to the lower socioeconomic backgrounds from which many come. Scuba diving is also a notoriously expensive sport, with single-tank dives alone costing more than many people can afford, not to mention the price of diving licenses and equipment. Thus, the water-based activities of plastic collectors are ones reserved for the middle classes. The poor pollute haphazardly and dirty the ocean; the wealthy with conscience clean up the litter to save the environment — this appears to be the narrative. Thus, when Oceana’s campaign states that (marine) microplastics are not

wanted in ceviche, admonition tends to be aimed at those who (are perceived to) put those plastics into the sea in the first place. Disease and microplastics are not welcome in ceviche, but arguably neither are the (images of) those Peruvians who may be discursively linked to such pollutants in the minds of elites.

Conclusion

As the flagship dish of Peru’s gastronomic revolution, ceviche presents an important entry point to begin unpacking contemporary Peruvian gastropolitics. In the discourses of elite chefs, the story of ceviche has been told in such a way that seeks to erase certain people, and certain pasts, that could threaten the success of the revolution. However, it is important to remember that many other actors are at play in the ceviche narrative, including *cevicheros*, *nikkei* restaurateurs, activists, and the fish being sacrificed for the dish. If ceviche moves ever further from its situated realities, through rebranding as sushi-like and lightning-quick marinating times, it may be pertinent to ask, at what point will elites stop refashioning ceviche and create something entirely new? Ultimately, the narrative may become something completely ungrounded in realities of Peruvian gastronomy, constructing a new image and idea for a national dish that omits everyday people. It can be considered as a strong example of the coloniality of power when stories are not only refashioned but erased to support the notions of whiteness, modernity, and hygiene that underscore gastropolitics. As such, it is a great irony that the dish that “unites all Peruvians” may be becoming the most culpable in erasing many of them from ideas about the “new” nation seen through gastropolitics. ❖

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