

**‘Aprendemos a convivir’: conjugal relations,
co-parenting, and family life among Ecuadorian
transnational migrants in New York City
and the Ecuadorian Andes**

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***Abstract** The aim of this article is to examine conjugal relations, co-parenting and family life among Ecuadorian transnational migrants in New York and the Azuayo-Cañari highlands of Ecuador. It counters two commonly-held views of transmigration. Officials and academics often stress the negative impacts of male migration to the USA, arguing that it leads to spousal abandonment. In addition, studies of gender in transnational relationships generally concentrate on women’s experiences and lack a more nuanced understanding of men’s lives in migration. Based on interviews with both male migrants in New York and women in Ecuador, this research focuses instead on how intact couples work to redefine roles, relationships and family life; how they learn to live side-by-side (aprender a convivir). The article begins with an account of men’s adjustment to single life in the city, which is then juxtaposed to women’s experiences in the sending villages. The main section presents a narrative of one couple, revealing how they handle remittances, communication, child-raising and their own relationship. Their experiences highlight the tensions and problems faced by young couples starting to form their own autonomous households in a setting increasingly different from that of previous generations. But, despite hardships, such couples often state that their relationship improved after migration.*

convivir (v): to live together; to coexist; to exist side by side.

Oxford Spanish Dictionary

‘Conecte sus sentimientos’ [‘Connect your sentiments’]

AT&T Billboard advertising international long distance, Ecuador, 1999

‘Lord, help us to remain together despite the distance.’

Prayer scrawled on the interior wall of the Sanctuary of the Señor de Andacocha, a migrant pilgrimage site in rural Ecuador, 2000

During interviews with male Ecuadorian migrants working in Queens, New York, as well as in their home communities in the Andes, discussions frequently centred on family and fatherhood, and the difficulty of maintaining the two during their long stints abroad. During one particular conversation with five migrant men who had recently returned from the United States to their home community of Jatundeleg in the Andes, I asked the following question: 'While you were abroad in the United States, what part of your life here was hardest to keep intact?'

Instantly, 33-year-old return migrant Manuel Pañora¹ blurted out a response: 'Remaining a *matrimonio* [married couple], of course.' By the looks on the others' faces and their affirmative nods, Manuel's fellow villagers, all of whom had been back in Jatundeleg less than a year, appeared to agree with him and quickly followed up with their own comments. 'For me it was being able to keep my wife as my wife,' Roberto, a handsome 26-year-old who spent four years in the United States while his wife remained in Jatundeleg, added. 'Living apart as husband and wife,' Miguel Urgilez confirmed, drawing on his experiences of having lived both alone and briefly with his wife in the United States.

During my early fieldwork experiences I had grown accustomed to hearing occasional stories about the infidelities of migrant husbands abroad. I pushed the issue. 'You mean staying faithful and not meeting other women? Is that what you mean?' The men laughed, some nervously as a silent truth was spoken.

'Oh yeah. There is a lot of that,' Luis Sinchi answered matter-of-factly. 'Many guys—' But before he could finish Miguel interjected a clarification, lest the conversation do little more than recycle macho stereotypes. 'Well, maybe that too,' he interrupted,

but it is something else. When I left I had a good relationship with my wife, but once I was in the US, our relationship was not always that way. The distance is hard. You have to work at it on account that everything changes. The man changes: the woman changes. There is a whole change of mentality [*'cambio de mentalidad'*]. We learn to live in harmony with one another [*'aprendemos a convivir conjuntos'*].

The experiences of Miguel Pañora and the other men of his generation highlight common scenarios and dilemmas many migrant husbands and fathers shared with me during the course of my research. In addition to the changes in their conjugal relationships, many men mentioned that they endured separation from their families and the undesirable living conditions of undocumented migrant life in order to provide a better childhood for their children than they themselves had experienced. In particular, men repeatedly noted how working in the United States allowed their children in Ecuador to attend school, to wear the latest North American fashions, and to be freed from the burdens of agricultural labour, as the local economy has steadily shifted from subsistence farming to a reliance on migrant remittances. However, in contrast to men's own narrative accounts of marital relations and fathering from abroad, Ecuadorian policy reformers, government officials and social scientists have painted an alternative portrait of the deleterious effects of international migration.

Policy reports, scholarly articles and news stories repeatedly point to rising incidences of spousal abandonment and divorce as among the primary casualties of high levels of male out-migration. Rather than images of the resilience of migrant households bolstered by remittances, the dominant image has been that of *hogares disorganizadas* (disorganized households), a telling example of the contempt many Ecuadorians have for their compatriots who leave the country.

While divorce statistics in migrant-sending communities are difficult to substantiate, and even more difficult to link concretely to male out-migration, there is no denying the visible stresses and strains a husband's absence places on marital relationships. Indeed, among the families I knew best in Jatundeleg lurked an unsettling acknowledgement that migration could just as easily shatter dreams as it could fulfil them. In New York City, a telling reminder of the strains migration places on marriage were the handful of 'multiserv' businesses along Queens' Roosevelt Avenue that provided migrants with rapid and affordable divorces from afar by orchestrating the serving of divorce papers on wives in Ecuador. Still, while not denying these realities, this article starts with the assumption that although spousal abandonment, separation and divorce are inevitable results of any migration situation, they alone cannot adequately explain how migration affects conjugal relationships. With respect to the Ecuadorian case, these negative outcomes are not even likely to tell the whole story of the majority of couples and families. Indeed, focusing too heavily on relationships that do not weather the trials of migration misses many of the nuances surrounding the ways men's mobility, and women's reactions to it, transforms, reorients and reprioritizes conjugal relationships, as well as parent-child relationships in transnational space. The more germane ethnographic issue tackled here concerns how *intact* couples work to redefine conjugal relationships and, in some cases, family life, in transnational space.

As this article joins others in an issue dedicated to exploring various dimensions of the 'transnational family', it readily enters into the ongoing scholarly and policy dialogue regarding the ways migration processes reshape gender and vice versa. In the past decade a spate of studies has emerged stressing gender as an organizing concept of migration (often in a transnational perspective), directly related to patterns of deployment, settlement and return migration (Alicea 1997; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Hirsch 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001). Reacting to criticisms that previous work on gender and migration did little more than 'merely add women' to their enquiries, these and other studies have been convincing in their insistence that constructions of gender and 'cultural commitments' to family (Creed 2000) are as important to understanding migration patterns as economic concerns of push and pull. However, in many studies of the transnational family, only women's experiences of forging family ties in migration have been of paramount interest. Indeed, where men's experiences as migrants have been explored in relation to transnational families, it has often been within contexts that emphasize the beliefs and behaviour of men as obstacles to forging strong family units (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kibria 1993) rather than the joint efforts of men and women.² The goal of this article is not to dispute previous studies of transnational families, but rather to call for more nuanced understandings of men as migrants, not

as merely one half of conjugal units, but rather, as Matthew Gutmann stressed, as ‘men in their roles as *men*’ (Gutmann 1997a: 385, original emphasis). Moreover, analysing men’s migration as a gendered experience does not mean that we must necessarily jettison notions of masculine power and patriarchy as being important to understanding the difficulties of managing family life in migration contexts. Rather, by paying closer attention to men’s lives in migration (in conjunction with women) we ultimately arrive at a more sophisticated picture of power, one that, if studied correctly, often reveals that ‘what has changed is not male power as such, but its form, its presentation, its packaging’ (Brittan 1989: 2).

As I argue below, for many couples stretched between New York City and Ecuador’s Azuayo-Cañari highlands, migration serves to reorient and question commonsensical and taken-for-granted gender roles and ideologies for both men and women, as they work to fit their daily routines into the new rules and priorities of maintaining a transnational livelihood. In particular, two related processes occur. First, migration alters ‘traditional’ roles, divisions of labour and meaningful categories of gender construction. Simply put, male migrants now in charge of their own domestic lives come to assume many traditionally female roles, while women adopt tasks once carried out by their husbands. However, as Miguel and his friends described to me, maintaining marriages transnationally requires more than simply accommodating to new roles. Beyond ‘degendering’ male and female tasks (Gutmann 1996: 151), namely removing the assignation of specific behaviour to one gender or another, couples must also work in tandem to ‘learn to exist side by side’ (*aprender a convivir*) in order to meet their goals of success in migration. Indeed, what counts as ‘success’ for many migrant households – minimally defined as a couple’s ability to ‘get ahead’ (*salir adelante*) with remittances – depends as much or more on wives’ ability to work with husbands to orchestrate household affairs and handle remittances as it does on the hard labour of husbands abroad. The present discussion looks specifically at the history of one migrant couple, focusing on the processes through which the couple learn ‘to exist side by side’ with one another despite some of the challenges posed by migration. Before examining their case study, I present a brief description of how men’s accommodations to lives as migrant labourers constitute gendered transformations, followed by a similar kind of examination of the experiences of women living without husbands in the sending villages of the Azuayo-Cañari highlands. Juxtaposing the experiences of husbands abroad with those of wives in Ecuador reveals the subtle ways in which couples negotiate the uncharted waters of maintaining relationships in the context of migration.

The data presented in this article were gathered during fieldwork conducted in New York City and the south-central Ecuadorian Andes, beginning in 1997 and over the course of a year in 1999 and 2000, as well as brief return trips to both sites (of between two and six weeks in duration) in 2001, 2002 and 2004. In the past decade, international outmigration to the United States (and Spain more recently) has left an indelible stamp on nearly all aspects of Ecuadorian culture and society.³ In the Azuayo-Cañari region in particular, migration has been an especially important component of a perpetually depressed economy based on subsistence farming and small-scale artisan production. Since the late 1960s, over 150,000 people from the region

have emigrated to metropolitan New York and a smaller number to Chicago, Minneapolis and California (Jokisch and Pribilsky 2002: 78). Approximately 70 per cent are believed to have entered the United States illegally. While the numbers of both single and married women have risen sharply since a major economic crisis hit Ecuador in 1999, the majority of migrants from the region have tended to be young men between the ages of 15 and 27, many of them married, and many with children. In the Azuayo-Cañari village of Jatundeleg, where the bulk of my Ecuadorian research has been concentrated, 51 per cent of male migrants surveyed ($n=193$) were between the ages of 15 and 25. Over half of those surveyed left wives and children in their home villages when they migrated. In the New York City boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn, I interviewed dozens of migrants from Jatundeleg and surrounding communities whom I either knew personally in Ecuador (or knew their family members), along with other migrants I met opportunistically during my US research. In addition, I draw heavily from interviews with, and focus groups involving, the wives of migrants, conducted by a female research assistant and myself.

From Ecuador to New York City: men's migration and masculinity

The south-central Ecuadorian highlands are comprised of densely clustered villages of mixed indigenous and *mestizo* peasants occupying a vast range of mountain slopes and intermontane valleys. In the first half of the twentieth century, households throughout the region practised a combination of low-intensity agriculture and artisan production of straw Panama hats supplemented by the seasonal migration of men to work in the banana and sugar plantations of Ecuador's coast. However, as plantation labour dissolved and overseas markets for artisan goods collapsed at mid-century, families in the region have increasingly looked north, mostly to New York City and Chicago, to make ends meet and maintain the vestiges of an agricultural livelihood.

In the past decade, however, as steady economic opportunities in both the 'sending' areas of the Ecuadorian highlands and the 'receiving' areas of the urban United States have eroded and US immigration policy has tightened, Ecuadorian migrants have become part of enduring social networks that link their host and home communities. Despite the distance of sending communities from the urban United States, highland families stay well connected with loved ones abroad. Families maintain linkages through letters, audiotapes and video recordings sent by postal and delivery services, and depend on money-sending agencies to facilitate the transference of between US \$150 and \$400 each month into households. Migrants also circumvent the obstacles of crossing borders and obtaining illegal entry into the United States by securing the costly services of *pasadores*, migrant smugglers who facilitate clandestine trips north. In 2000 smuggling rates ranged between US \$8000 and \$12,000. Most trips are funded through a long-standing network of loan sharks (*chulqueros*) who charge as high as 10 per cent interest compounded monthly.

Because the overwhelming majority of migrants are men, migration has come to signify an important socially recognized benchmark in the transition from youth to adulthood in rural Ecuador. For men as young as 16, travelling north means fulfilling the dream of becoming an *iony*, a name derived from the popular bumpersticker 'I ♥ NY'

used to describe returned migrants who have adopted American styles of speech, clothing and attitude. Most men who seek this dream marry first and not infrequently conceive a child. For migrants, leaving a wife behind anchors them in their home communities and invests women with important tasks related to funnelling remittances into domestic projects – land purchases, house-building and the care of children.

Men's domesticity in New York City

Just as 'women's gender identities are constructed in the workplace as much as in the home ... so conversely we must grasp that men's gender identities are developed and transformed in the home and not just in sites considered to be the typical male reserves, like factories, cantinas, and political forums' (Gutmann 1996: 147). Among Carmela Quispe's collection of photos of her husband Miguel and his brothers in Queens, one picture stood out as her favourite. The photo showed Miguel standing in the tiny kitchen of his shared New York City apartment with his back to a sink of dirty dishes, his arms raised to accentuate yellow rubber gloves pulled over his hands. Carmela made it clear that the picture was contrived – that Miguel had staged it with some friends. This small fact, however, did little to blemish the meaning the photo had for her. Carmela treasured the picture because, to her, it was a commentary about the way migration was changing men. 'The men here they don't do anything in the kitchen. There they do,' she chuckled. 'Look at him working like a dog!' For Carmela, the picture did not so much represent a change in men but rather a visual image of women's payback. She and others expressed to me their delight that their husbands were carrying out the same drudgery abroad that they did at home. The fact that they remained *macho* men made it all the better. Other Jatundeleg wives delighted in sharing stories about their migrant spouses in the United States attending to their own laundry, cooking and cleaning.

In the Ecuadorian Andes, ethnographers have provided only brief glimpses of men helping with domestic tasks (Hamilton 1998; McKee 1980; Stølen 1987). Men hold babies, watch children and prepare meals, yet these tasks are often fleeting. Indeed, as ethnographers often note, men help wives only when there is no other choice, such as the time after wives have given birth. Men's hesitation to perform domestic tasks is closely associated with the public exercise of male power, as noted by other scholars of gender in the Andes (Harvey 1994; McKee 1980; Weiss 1988). Ideally, men's relationships with wives and children are to be structured around the idiom of *respeto* (respect). Women and children are to obey husbands and fathers, allowing them to rule (*mandar*) as they wish as long as they provide for the household. A woman shows her respect and loyalty to her husband by bearing children and raising them. As one Jatundeleg wife told me, 'A man can beat his wife, can be a drunk, can pay no attention to his children. But if he can provide for family and his family give him respect, he is a considered a good man.' For men, then, to be seen by others performing domestic duties alone or alongside wives or children can send a message about the breakdown of *respeto* and the loss of a man's mandate to rule.⁴ Men especially fear the biting remarks of their male counterparts who are quick to affix the label *mandarina* (one who is controlled by another) on men who have lost respect.

In migrant households in Queens, men I knew attended to their domestic tasks and errands – *quehaceres* – because they had no choice. On their days off, men attended to the tasks they could not accomplish within their busy workweek schedules. Typically this also constituted the only day I could schedule interviews with migrants and my persistent questions often served as welcomed distractions from the tedium accompanying cleaning floors, washing clothes and cooking. Aside from rare instances where men found it economically feasible to hire someone to do their cooking and laundry for them, men were in charge of their own tasks.

Men's attention to the domestic duties they associated with women in Ecuador ushered in a new level of awareness of the gendered nature of work that otherwise might be routinely understood as natural and unchanging. As migrants, their new-found roles brought out new appreciation, if not respect, for the work that women performed in rural households in the highlands. One young migrant shared with me his experience of washing his own clothes at a laundromat:

I take my clothes down there in the morning and put them all in [the machine] with some soap. I just throw them in. You know, it's so easy. When the women [back home] do the laundry, that's tough work. They carry the heavy bundles of clothes down to the river and if the river is muddy, they can't do it. When they can, they are there all day ... bam, bam, bam, beating the clothes clean on the rocks. Then you got to haul it all back and hang it up to dry. It's also frustrating work. If it rains, she has to run quickly and take the clothes off the line. She might do that two, three times a week before they get dry.

Similarly, cooking brought migrant men into the heart of the women's working world. For men I knew in Queens, cooking offered none of the power identified with women's cooking practices in Ecuador (see Weismantel 1988) and represented little more than an onerous task. Because men took to producing large quantities of food for the week ahead (usually rice dishes) that could be easily transported to work, they often complained about the time commitment involved in cooking. Without mechanized cookers, keeping watch over boiling pots of rice or beans could gobble up much of a migrant's one free day. In contrast to doing laundry or cleaning, cooking also required multiple skills and steps, including budgeting money for shopping trips, stocking ingredients and, at times, following recipes. Women in Jatundeleg joked about their pathetic husbands calling for tips on how to cook a particular food and the stories of burnt and over-spiced dishes.

In addition to making explicit connections between domestic activities and gender identities, migrants also viewed these changes as part of a larger adherence to the discipline needed to be successful abroad. Many migrants described their time in the United States as a process of getting their lives *bien organizado* (well managed), of trying to develop stability and order in a context where it usually does not exist. This need for order transferred over to the domestic realm. Ruben Cajamarca, a 33-year-old migrant from Jatundeleg lived with four other undocumented migrants in a cramped one-bedroom apartment. Two of the migrants, a husband and wife, alone occupied the bedroom. The other three (all men) shared the crowded main room,

which barely accommodated three mattresses and a television. For a time, the wife assumed the cooking and cleaning duties, yet stopped when she began a demanding job at a garment factory. As Ruben remembered, almost instantaneously the apartment fell into disarray, with dirty dishes and overflowing bags of trash plaguing the shared living space. Things changed only when the chaos began to affect his ability to work:

Puhh! You couldn't believe the enormous mess! [Laughing] It was like out of a movie ... I used to work on a salad bar where I had to wear a uniform every day – something like black slacks with a white shirt and a bow tie. One morning, I woke up late for work and was rushing around to get ready. There was so much garbage on the floor and the counters too that I couldn't find a thing. I needed my tie and I couldn't find it. I also had to iron my shirt and couldn't find that either. I made it work, yes, but I nearly lost my job that day. So it had to change. Period [*punto*].

JCP: What had to change?

Ruben: I told the other guys that we weren't going to live like goddamn pigs anymore. So I changed. I was cooking and cleaning. I even made a list of things I needed from the store. Now I am totally the *matrimonio* here. Man and woman in the same house.

For many Jatundeleg wives, however, delight in their husband's domesticity abroad could often be bittersweet. While migration almost certainly placed men in situations where they had to carry out 'women's work', the detachment from family also served to exacerbate less desirable conduct typically associated with male behaviour in Jatundeleg. Out from under the watchful eye of relatives and neighbours, and often overcome with loneliness, the temptations of extramarital sexual adventures were at times welcomed distractions and diversions for migrants I knew. This blunt fact was not lost on the wives of the migrants. During a focus group with a cohort of Jatundeleg migrant wives, one woman noted: 'I know he has been with other women, but he would never tell me and I would never ask.' Another presented a more sober assessment: 'Just as long as he sends remittances, I can't care what he does over there. I know he's my husband and he'll return to me.' The resignation some migrant wives were able to achieve with respect to the reality of men's extramarital relations abroad was only so strong, however. Undercutting their abilities to 'accept' men's liaisons was a set of very real fears, including that of being abandoned by husbands who met other women or having a husband return infected with HIV.

Claims of being 'abandoned' (*abandonada*) made by migrant wives and others require a semantic analysis. Some women defined 'being abandoned' as not receiving remittances for two or more months while others simply refused to use the label unless their husbands explicitly told them they were leaving the marriage. In other cases, women decried abandonment only later to report their husbands back in their lives. In all cases, however, fear of abandonment was real and direct. Accompanying

the hurt and pain brought on by a spouse's rejection was the shame that could befall village women. Although invariably it was the extramarital actions of husbands that led to estrangement, abandoned wives were typically branded as victims of a *doble stigma* (double stigma). Village gossip would blame women first for 'losing' their husbands – 'did she mismanage his money or not answer his letters?' – and secondly, when support from a husband abroad dried up, for the inability to care properly for her children. 'Abandoned' women also found the prospects of remarriage to be slim or non-existent (McKee 1980).

Despite the gossip built up around *esposas abandonadas*, I found the number of actual cases to be extremely low (only two instances in the Jatundeleg and its surrounding villages). Similarly, among men in New York, I questioned claims that 'most' migrants were engaged in extramarital relations. Rather, the experiences of my male informants in Queens closely paralleled those Mathew Gutmann (1996) discovered during his research in working-class sectors of Mexico City. Like the supposed machos of the *colonia* Santa Domingo, migrants in Queens were apt to talk about taking lovers, buying prostitutes and cheating on their wives more often than they actually engaged in these practices. (The same was often true of drinking adventures.) The reasons for this are simple and pragmatic, again hinging on issues of time and money. Prostitutes frankly were a luxury that few undocumented labourers could afford. Other types of non-economic extramarital affairs were also difficult. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, one young migrant described the 'problem of getting sex this way'. As he described, 'It does not work that you just sleep with a woman anymore. They want a sign of commitment.' While surely extramarital relations do occur, over the course of my interactions with migrant men I met only two migrants who had engaged in affairs. One of them claimed his actions were purely functional: he hoped to marry a Mexican woman with citizenship with whom he had been living. He planned to stay married to her just long enough to obtain legal status and later bring his original wife and children to the United States.

*El tiempo de las mujeres/the time of women*⁵

When I initially met Carmela Quispe in Jatundeleg, she brimmed with a sense of confidence that belied the difficulties she had faced as the wife of a migrant. However, her current situation masked the initial hardships many women go through when their husbands leave for the United States. Carmela described:

The day after he [Miguel] left I couldn't move. I was thrown into bed [*botada a la cama*] by the sadness and my nerves [*nervios*]. I was sad and overwhelmed. I couldn't take care of these kids and I didn't know what to do. You can imagine. ... I just kept saying, 'How could you leave me? What do you mean you went [to the US] for us? I only know pain!

Carmela's condition of 'being thrown into bed' was common among Jatundeleg women, especially in situations where couples had already established an autonomous household and when children were present. In these cases, the stresses related to a

husband's departure could be extremely acute. Moreover, once women overcame the initial challenges of a husband's departure, they faced a series of other hurdles both pragmatic and socio-moral. On a pragmatic level, wives already burdened with trying to juggle domestic tasks with their farming activities had to reorganize their daily lives, incorporating their husband's tasks into their standard routines. In particular, as remittances began to dominate household economies, the individual decisions couples had to make with respect to growing *maíz* and other crops began to hinge as much on social and cultural considerations as they did on economic ones. However, for up to the first two years of a husband's departure, growing crops remains critical to household survival. During this period, remittance behaviour may be erratic as migrants adjust to the demands of producing surplus cash. At the same time, debt obligations to *chulqueros* limit how much money can be allocated to meet household needs. In fact, few migrant families could continue their production activities without replacing a husband's labour. Many Jatundeleg wives found they spent large amounts of time securing workers to help with the different phases of agricultural production. In some cases this required oiling extended familial relationships with landless and land-poor relatives (*pobrecitos*) in need of a way to grow crops, or contracting day labourers.

Attending to these new duties invariably brought women into gendered spaces and positions previously only associated with men. While feminist scholars have roundly criticized the well-worn model of men/public sphere and women/private sphere (Reiter 1975; Rosaldo 1980), versions of the dichotomy nonetheless live on as ways people order their local worlds (see, for example, Brusco 1995; and examples in Montaya et al. 2002). Indeed, Jatundeleg villagers often iterated the adage, 'men are of the street and women of the house' (*el hombre es de la calle y la mujer de la casa*) to speak of gender relations. Some women identified a paradoxical reversal of roles in this model. As men migrated, women found their daily work taking them more centrally into the public world of the *calle* while husbands abroad were simultaneously forced *en la casa* – bound to their strict work schedules. While surely not the most far-reaching of changes, perhaps the most visible was the presence of women behind the wheels of cars and trucks, a sight that only a few years before my fieldwork would have been unheard of. As one elderly resident in Jatundeleg commented: 'Women still won't get behind the power of a *yunta* [pair of ploughing oxen], but now they drive big trucks.' In migrant households especially, four-wheel drive pick-up trucks had become *de rigueur* purchases. Often hesitant at first, many women found driving a necessity in order to assume many of their husband's tasks. However, the idea that women would drive alone, or worse yet, drive with men who were not their husbands was a source of much concern. The restriction occasionally led to awkward situations such as when I witnessed the wife of a migrant fret over how she would transport two male day labourers to work on her family's fields six miles away from her home. Although she could competently drive her husband's pick-up, she ended up uneasily allowing her elderly father-in-law to drive the truck, although she had serious misgivings about his driving abilities.

As the example of driving reveals, the absence of husbands at times caused a moral conundrum regarding gender roles and responsibilities. Although villagers tacitly accepted men's extramarital relations, both at home and abroad, women's

infidelity was patently intolerable. Wives left behind typically found their comings and goings closely monitored by extended family. In-laws (*suegros*), in particular, often assumed as their chief role in the constitution of transnational households to safeguard their son's respect by assuring the honour of their daughters-in-law. Even within the most amicable of family relationships, women worried that their in-laws might place a call to the United States at the slightest sign of impropriety. For their part, however, young couples did not always welcome their parents' vigilance and many strove to achieve as much autonomy from their extended families as possible before a husband's departure. In some cases, the moral ambiguities associated with a young woman living without her husband were partially rectified when the couple had children and a woman could safely live on her own with her children.

If the exodus of men triggered an increased vigilance with respect to women's mobility and sociality, it also afforded women new freedoms, especially with regard to their relationships with other women. Women in Jatundeleg commonly complained about men's tendency to become extremely jealous (*muy cello*) and feel threatened at the very hint that their wives were developing strong relationships with other women. Migration often alleviated this problem. In the absence of men, wives were more apt to share meals with other women, to exchange resources between households and to seek each other out for mutual support. This newfound freedom also spilled over into the assumption of leadership roles. Women occasionally assumed the public offices vacated by their migrant husbands as well as holding more typical female public roles, including coordinating children's catechism classes and leadership in a local hat-weaving cooperative. As one migrant wife, who served as an activities coordinator at the Jatundeleg elementary school while her husband was in the United States and even after his return, told me: 'women were advancing in this community'. However, when I suggested migration was the catalyst, she looked at me in disbelief. 'The men leaving helps,' she noted. 'But it is the women's natural strength [*fuera*] that could not be held back. Women are gaining respect here on their own.' For many women I knew, these changes brought a mix of welcomed freedoms and loathsome burdens. Like the gendered experiences of men, women in the sending communities found their new lives as migrants' wives to be ambivalent transformations of which there were few models to follow. Nowhere perhaps were these changes greater than in the maintenance and development of their transnational conjugal relationships.

Learning to live in harmony: Miguel and Carmela

Male migration to the United States and the attendant changes that accompany women's lives in the sending communities of Ecuador together open up a rich set of possibilities for new gendered conventions, conflicts and challenges. Simultaneously celebrated and castigated, this reconfiguration of gender roles and practices presents men and women with, in Matthew Gutmann's (1997b: 834) words, 'new stages on which to conduct their dramas'. However, these changes do not take place irrespective of one another. To push Gutmann's metaphor further, while men occupy one stage in New York City and women another in the sending villages, they enact the same drama together. They share the same background, the same plot lines and

frequently interact with the same characters. Yet, each couple's drama that unfolds in the context of migration is specific; among other factors it is a product of their relationship history, of the role of their extended families and of the goals they have set for themselves. To be sure, some migrant households were simply more successful in labour migration than others for any number of possible reasons. However, in all cases a critical aspect of their success as transnational families hinged on a couple's ability to integrate their individual gender dramas and to imagine their lives as unfolding on the same stage. Men's transformations as labour migrants in New York impacted women's gender roles and behaviours and the same was true in reverse. As Gutmann argues, 'whether women are physically present or not, female identities often serve as the centre point of conscious and unconscious reference for men in the development, maintenance and transformation of their own sense of what *ser hombre* [to be a man] does and does not mean, and what it can and cannot mean' (Gutmann 1997b: 836). For instance, men I knew in Queens often resented their wives' ability to move about their home villages effortlessly while they felt shackled to a life of 'from home to work and work to home'. But, within the remittance economy, they understood and accepted, if reluctantly, the necessity of their wives' increased mobility for the smooth functioning of their transnational household. Paying closer attention to the life story of Carmela Quispe and Miguel Pomaguiza we can view some of the specifics of this drama of learning to *convivir* in transnational migration.

Beginnings

Carmela grew up in Ayaloma, a small community adjacent to Jatundeleg, the third child in a family of six. When her parents married, they merged just over three hectares of land on which they grew maíz and potatoes. Although they had a larger than average landholding, the family struggled economically and often fell into debt to other households in the community. To generate extra money, Carmela's father and two older brothers worked in construction in nearby cities. At times, Carmela's mother would also send her to Cuenca to sell candy on the streets with her younger sister. When Carmela turned 13, her family met with hardship when her father Hipolito was murdered working on a construction site in Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city. He was asleep at the construction site when he awoke to a knife at his throat and a demand for his money. Hipolito had received his pay and was planning to return to Ayaloma with his money. Unwilling to have his plans spoiled, he resisted his robbers' demand and fought back. Outnumbered by his assailants, Hipolito took a number of gashes to the chest and later died from his wounds. For Carmela, her father's death coincided with a point in her adolescence when she was beginning to form judgements about the men in her life. As she described it, they were nothing but '*chumados, vagos y mujeriegos*' (drunks, vagrants and womanizers). In the image of her father and the story of his death, she found both a martyr and a saint.

At the age of 18 Miguel Pomaguiza did not fit the saintly husband image Carmela had constructed for herself but, as she admitted, 'you can't control your heart' (*el corazón no se manda*). Miguel was born into a prosperous Jatundeleg family. His father owned a significant amount of land (six hectares) and over a dozen head of

dairy cattle. As the eldest son, Miguel was coddled by his mother and was allowed to do as he pleased, mostly drinking and smoking cigarettes with friends. When he began courting Carmela though, his behaviour quickly changed. Sealing their courtship was the overwhelming approval of their union by Carmela's mother and her uncle (who had assumed much of her dead father's parental duties). In early 1987, aged 21 and 20 respectively, Carmela and Miguel married.

By the late 1980s migration had become a prominent income-earning strategy among a majority of Jatundeleg families. Within Carmela and Miguel's families alone, at least four relatives had left for the United States. A number of migrants had also already returned by this point and many families were feeling the pressures of the increasingly 'dollarized' economy transformed by remittances. Soon after their wedding, Miguel and Carmela moved into a storeroom (*bodega*) attached to Miguel's parents' home and worked their families' crops. Because the two of them hailed from large families, they predicted future bitter battles over inheritance with their siblings. With land prices rising, talk of migration crept up in their daily conversations and hopes for the future. In addition to the pressure to secure land, Miguel was also seduced by the modern *iony* styles of returned migrants. Soon idle talk became talk of planning and Miguel was put in touch with a *chulquero* and began the process of 'bargain hunting' prices for illegal passage.

Carmela did not share Miguel's enthusiasm for migrating and begged him to postpone his plans. '*¡Somos matrimonio!* [We're a married couple!] You can't leave. This is crazy.' Soon, however, Carmela became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter, Jennifer. Miguel put his plans on hold, recalling 'I couldn't go to the United States so I gave my daughter an American name instead.' A son, Valentino, followed two years later; children proved a welcome distraction in a household Carmela was beginning to realize was not the storybook scenario of which she had dreamed. Frustrated with unproductive farming, Miguel increased his drinking and stayed away from home. Although always careful not to present Miguel in a negative light, Carmela repeatedly told me, 'I had my share of problems with Miguel, but he loved the children.' As she recalled, Miguel lobbed every excuse possible at her when he could not live up to his end of the bargain in their relationship.

Miguel wasn't the worst among them, but he drank. Oh, and he could tell me lies to get by! He would ask for a little bit of *plata* to go drink and smoke with friends. He told me it was his obligation. If we were ever to get ahead, have help with our future, he needed to 'play the game'. The game lasted all night and he would be in bed all day. ... I'd say what about these kids? What am I supposed to do with them? They are your kids, too!

When I interviewed Miguel, he elaborated:

We couldn't always seem to get it together. I would drink too much. This is true, but that's because that village is full of nothing but *chumados*! I love my wife and wanted something better for her and my kids. I promised if I went to the US for just a bit things would get better. ... But she didn't believe me. I

understand. Men [back in Ecuador] can't always be trusted, '*siempre a dios y al diablo*' as people say ['always of God and the devil', meaning to seek the protection of something good and bad at the same time].

Despite Carmela's reservations about migration, she maintained her support. She also could not help sharing Miguel's dreams of success. Would they build a house? Own a cattle farm someday? Eventually move to the city? In 1995, Miguel accepted a cousin's help to get a job in Queens. He paid \$7000 for his passage north, leaving Carmela to manage their payments to a *chulquero*. Rather than upset his children, he told them he had business in Guayaquil and would return within the week.

Transnational communication

When I met Carmela, and later Miguel in Queens, much had changed in their abilities to communicate with one another across the thousands of miles separating them. When Miguel departed for the United States in 1995, few families in Jatundeleg had telephones. (Many households had been on state waiting lists for five years or more.) To receive a call from Miguel in the early days of their separation Carmela had to walk one half-hour to the EMETEL (state-run) phone centre in the local province town. There, in a cramped booth with the muttered chatter of other talkers on either side, she would attend to her relationship. The couple kept their calls short and strained to hear each other through the poor connection. Carmela would often miss Miguel's calls or Miguel would altogether forget to call during their agreed time. For his part, Miguel had to battle with a pay phone each time he called, requiring that he feed change every few minutes, often running out of coins before they were finished talking. Recalling these difficulties, Carmela retorted: 'There are just so many problems that I told myself *hay que resignarse, adaptarse no más a vivir sin la pareja* [you just have to resign yourself to not living as a couple].'

By 1999 Carmela finally had a telephone – a cordless model that allowed her to stroll about and talk to Miguel while she attended to her children's needs and household chores (only an hour's time difference separated them). In Queens, Miguel was easily able to find and purchase discount phone cards that afforded a crystal-clear signal and cheap 'talk time' minutes. As Carmela estimated, their calls went from ten minutes on average to over thirty when she got her own phone. The telephone and discount long-distance rates were only part of the equation, however. In the nearly five years Miguel had been in the United States, his ability to remit an average of \$200 per month allowed the couple to purchase a vacant house in the village. Carmela moved out of her in-laws home and for the first time had a modicum of privacy with respect to her marriage.

On occasions, Carmela and Miguel's communication took on a more sophisticated face, such as around the time of Jennifer's first communion party. As I describe below, Miguel was adamant that the party go according to his plans and he remitted extra money to ensure this. 'If I can't be there, I want her to know that I care,' he told me. The party's complicated logistics required the couple to stay in close contact with one another. For weeks Carmela, accompanied by her younger sister, travelled to an

Internet café in the nearby city of Cuenca where they sent messages and received messages from Miguel (writing from a computer in his employer's office). Because Carmela had less than a fourth-grade education, she had to rely on her sister to type messages to Miguel as she dictated them. She also grew savvy in her use of a 'net-2-phone' service where she and Miguel could talk through an Internet connection at half the rate that Miguel paid in phone-card minutes.

Still, communication was never perfect. As other researchers who address 'transnationalism from below' (at the familial and individual level) have noted, transmigrant relationships are almost always uneven. With respect to Salvadoran transnationals, Mahler (2001: 110) explains that 'the lived reality of [migrants themselves] is very focused on the local [and] is punctuated by transnational activities. In contrast, for the non-migrant relatives and friends of these migrants ... transnational ties are an inextricable feature of daily life.' To be sure, the daily activities of migrants I knew in New York often revolved around immediate concerns – getting to work on time, getting paid, finding time to rest before another shift. In contrast, wives in the sending communities could easily spend much of their time tending to issues related to their husbands' absences. They wait in anguish when remittances fail to arrive; weeks pass without telephone calls from husbands abroad. Sometimes these gaps are intentional. Some migrant husbands admitted that they occasionally intimidated their wives with deliberate silences when they were upset or suspected the women were not behaving properly. If, through gossip coursing through the transnational community, a migrant hears that his wife has been unfaithful he might skip his routine calls or delay sending his remittances, just long enough to exert his power. While this unevenness typically worked to men's benefit, women also learned to exploit gaps in communication in order to create leverage in their relationships, especially in their roles as remittance managers.

Managing remittances, managing relationships

Among the tasks Carmela attended to in her husband's absence, the one she considered the most important was managing the remittances Miguel would send nearly every three weeks. Carmela would receive notice from the branch office and she would head down to pick it up. She explained what she would do next:

There are many things that we need that money for that I often feel it is already spent before it arrives. When Miguel first left, it seemed like all the money went to the *chulco*. There was nothing left to eat with. Now, we have more [Carmela and Miguel cancelled Miguel's smuggling debt in 1998], but I have to be careful what to do. We have plans with our money and if we are not careful there is nothing left. The money is, in reality, not so much. But we can still be moving forward.

JCP: Who decides how the money is spent?

Carmela: We both do. Miguel tells me things we need and I tell him things. Sometimes we fight and disagree. ... We decide those things together.

In other Andean contexts, studies of migration collectively suggest that women fare poorly when men initiate migration (Balarezo 1984; Collins 1988; Hamilton 1998; McKee 1997; Radcliffe 1986). Drawing on cases of internal migration, researchers point out that aspects of gender equality erode as cash flows back into sending communities, devaluing women's non-remunerated work.⁶ Given such strong evidence, what can be said to account for women's increased status in migrant sending communities like Jatundeleg? In other words, why do women like Carmela feel they are 'moving forward' (*adelantando*) even as their men become primary breadwinners?

Part of the answer lies in the qualitative difference between internal and transnational migration economies. In instances of internal migration, responsibility for both the generation and allocation of income generally rests solely in the hands of those, often men, who migrate. Transnational migration offers an alternative situation whereby wives often assume the role of remittance managers. Women in Jatundeleg ensured that the remittances were received; they also cashed and/or banked checks and monitored exchange rates, deciding at which point to exchange money into the local currency (prior to the institution of dollarization). While some researchers have noted the onerous aspects of this job, including the long waits at money-wiring agencies and in bank lines to cash checks (Carpio Benalcázar 1992; Clearfield 1999; Miles 1997), for many Jatundeleg women, managing remittances provided a critical component of their transnational conjugal relationships. In particular, women acknowledged how men were forced to cede some of their decision-making power in order to see the productive use of remittances. At times, women would manipulate these situations to serve their own needs and consolidate money.

Carmela shared with me some of the creative measures she used to wrest power from Miguel in her role as a remittance manager. During the economic crisis of 1999 and 2000, the value of the sucre against the dollar fluctuated tremendously, requiring vigilant monitoring. Like many couples at the time, Carmela and Miguel stayed in closer than normal contact as they tried to coordinate Miguel's remittances with the best exchange rates. Although Miguel fretted over the sucre's persistent devaluation, the more he tried to micro-manage the situation by demanding an accounting of the money he sent, the more Carmela selectively communicated with him. During a particularly acute downturn of the sucre, Miguel demanded to know exactly where the money was going. Carmela did not return his calls. As she recalled:

He panicked and I let him panic for a few days. When he called back I told him that I had received the money and had already exchanged it at the highest rate possible. Sure, he was angry that I had not spoken with him, but he was able to see that he needed me. He can't do it without me.

For their part, wives also worried that their husbands might be holding back remittances and not sending all that they could, especially for household expenses. Still, in their roles as remittance managers, women often occupied better positions than non-

migrant wives to demand portions of their husband's earnings. Some wives expressed how they could better stretch the lump sums husbands sent since men could scarcely demand back what they had already sent. Especially within households that carried large amounts of debt, men feared they would lose everything if they did not remit all they could. As Carmela explained to me, 'Miguelito doesn't know everything when he sends money. He knows I make the payments we have to make, but the rest is for me to decide.'

For Carmela and other women, power (*el mando*) was gained not simply through men's dependency on women to manage their hard-earned wages competently; women's significant input in economic matters also often transferred over to other realms of their relationships. Many women told me how their experiences of managing remittances made their husbands become better listeners and allowed themselves more room to disagree actively with spouses. 'He still has the power but at least we talk about things and I have a say,' one wife reported to me. In particular, remittance management invested women with an authoritative language through which to make better claims for household needs. For instance, women could bargain with husbands to send money for children and other household needs if men were willing to accept their important duties of managing remittances. The most successful transnational households were ones in which husbands abroad identified that managing remittances entailed not only consumption, but also production: the generation of more money. As migrant men realized that hard work and their own cost-saving measures alone could not ensure success, they were more apt to see the utility of learning to work in harmony with wives back home.

Co-parenting

When I interviewed Miguel in Queens, we often discussed his children. Like migrants everywhere, Miguel made it clear that he had 'migrated for his children' (Orellana et al. 1998). But like so many stock-in-trade narratives that frame the migration experience, Miguel's comment required an analytic teasing out of words from deeds. When Miguel left for the United States, he was spared his children's anxiety. While the children did not succumb to the debilitating bouts of depression-like 'nerves' (*nervios*) that befell some Jatundeleg children when parents migrated (Pribilsky 2001), they nonetheless had difficulty understanding why their father had left. Carmela, like many migrant wives, fell into a pattern of telling her children lies about their father to distract them from dwelling on his absence. 'When they were very young,' she laughed in disbelief, 'I used to tell the children that their father had gone to look for special tyres for the truck.'

In the Andean highlands, relationships between children and parents are strongly mediated by gender. In a survey I administered to junior high and high school students in the Jatundeleg area, students defined their relationships with each parent using different terms. Mothers were typically described as fostering relationships of trust (*confianza*), while fathers were defined as building relationships with children through *respeto* in much the same hierarchical fashion as traditional husband and wife relationships. A successful father, I was told, can raise his children 'just by staring

them down'. Miguel, like many young migrants, had little idea of how to have a relationship with his children, let alone from abroad. His most immediate models – memories of his own father – usually proved dissatisfying as a means of fostering bonds with children he barely knew. Indeed, commensurate with the relationship between life cycle and migration, most men travelled north when their children were very young and only dimly aware of their fathers; others left pregnant wives behind and at first only came to 'know' their children through photographs and video recordings. In this context, men learned the sobering truth that if they wanted to have any relationship at all with their small children, they could not do it – literally or figuratively – by 'staring their children down' from thousands of miles away.

The difficulty of fathering from abroad was real and direct and produced a variety of outcomes. Some men altogether avoided relationships with their children and hardly spoke of them during interviews. Others distanced themselves from children and tried, usually with little success, to enforce relationships of *respeto*. Sometimes men returned to Jatundeleg and found they had no foundational relationship with their children at all, thus causing problems that festered throughout adolescence.

Indeed, migration could produce surprising results with respect to parenting. Miguel told me point blank that he felt he was a better father because he had left. He based his self-assessment partially on his ability to provide more for his children and to make special purchases of gifts for them in ways he could not before. In an extended discussion in which he contrasted work and family relations, Miguel celebrated his ability to be a father up against the undesirable aspects of his life in New York City.

I have taken some really awful jobs in the US – some downright dangerous! At times I would think, man, I could be back in the *campo* [countryside] where the air is nice, with my family and friends close by, working my land, tending to my herds. But things would never change; I could never give them [his children] anything better. So I stayed. Fathers now can provide more for their kids. Fathers now take more concern for their kids. They are not so macho [*ellos no tan machistas*]. They do not father so strictly; there is more *cariño* [affection] between fathers and children.

For a number of migrant fathers I interviewed in New York, being able to develop relationships of *cariño* with children was a welcomed part of otherwise unsatisfying lives. In particular, men welcomed the freedom to love their children outside the rigid strictures of *respeto* that defined the relationships they had had with their fathers. Simply put, distance did make some hearts grow fonder. Yet, the sources of men's desires to build alternative relationships with children were often difficult to tease out from the extreme importance placed on children and childhood within the production of locality and the judgement of status for migrant households. By embracing fathering practices many migrants considered *más modernos y progresivos* (more modern and up-to-date), migrants could build relationships with children, but at the same time distance themselves from the non-migrant households that could not provide the same kinds of things for their children.

As I describe in greater detail elsewhere (Pribilsky 2001; Pribilsky forthcoming), like building new homes and acquiring status symbols or *iony*, providing for children was an important index for gauging the success of migrant households. At the root of this development was the transformation of the position of children within the village economy. Principally, as increased reliance on remittances in migrant households triggered a move away from agricultural production, children were relieved of their obligations to the family farm economy. Rather than waking early to haul firewood or to help with the harvest, the children of migrants increasingly rushed to catch school buses, spending much of their day away from the household. Some parents also sent their children to live with relatives in Cuenca in order to provide them with what parents perceived as a superior education. For transnational parenting, the transformation of children from 'economically worthless' to 'emotionally priceless', to use Viviana Zelizer's (1994) words, opened up new possibilities for the roles of both mother and father.

In Carmela and Miguel's case, this new emphasis on children also placed women in central roles as the ones to foster and mediate migrant husbands' relationships with their children. During their telephone conversations Carmela would invariably field the same questions from Miguel: 'What do you tell them [the children] about me?' 'What did they think of the gift I sent?' As the children grew older and Miguel was able to develop his own telephone relationship with them, Carmela's job diminished, but only slightly. Miguel still depended on her to explain his absence to the children. Like managing remittances, men often found themselves in a dependent position with respect to women's access to children. Often for women, however, the role of mediator became burdensome. As the repositories of tradition (as the only one maintaining 'indigenous dress' for instance) wives were called upon to mediate between their husbands' status claims of *iony* modernity on the one hand and the importance of family life and childhood on the other. Nowhere was this more evident than in the elaborate planning that accompanied children's parties to celebrate baptisms, first communions, confirmations and birthdays. Carmela, for instance, shared with me the details of Jennifer's first communion. In describing Miguel's wishes, she said: 'He wanted a big party like everyone else.' The event required not only a significant outlay of cash but also hiring a disc jockey, ordering flowers and decorations, preparing food and buying special outfits for the children. At the party, the hard work and transnational negotiation and planning to which Miguel and Carmela had devoted so much time appeared seamless. While attendees came to honour Jennifer's religious milestone, the festivities said as much about her parents' achievements. As the party dragged into the early hours of morning, the disc jockey made a special announcement to acknowledge Miguel and encourage everyone to 'say a little prayer for him'.

Conclusion

The experiences of Carmela Quispe and Miguel Pomaguiza serve to highlight central problems and tensions many young couples of the Azuayo-Cañari region face as they begin to form their own autonomous households in a setting increasingly different from that of generations before them. Repeatedly, in their own way, numerous hus-

bands and wives in migrant households told me that their relationships improved after migration. While no couple escaped hardships altogether, many adopted a language of process – of how they had learned to live in harmony with one another over time. As the word *convivir* implies, though, harmony need not translate into perfection. Couples rather learned to accept one another and the roles each must assume to make migration successful. Men learned to listen to women and respect their decisions because they had to. Women accepted, albeit tacitly, men's infidelities and the burdens of representing men and their status in their home communities, but often not without also recognizing that husbands had become more attentive to household needs, sent money when needed and paid attention to their children as best they could so many miles away.

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Notes

1. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. An important new exception to this trend is Hirsch's study of love and courtship among Mexican transnational migrants in Atlanta (Hirsch 2003).
3. For a comprehensive discussion of migration trends in Ecuador since the 1960s, consult Jokisch and Pribilsky (2002) and Kyle (2000).
4. Similarly, men will also shy away from displaying affection to wives and older children in public as such acts may demonstrate a level of intimacy only achieved when relations of respect are removed.
5. This is the name of a popular film by Monica Vasquez (1988) about women living in the migrant sending community of Santa Rosa, Azuay Province.
6. These patterns are not exclusive to the Andean context and have been documented in a wide range of societies throughout the world and in a wide range of migration types (rural–urban, international, and transnational). See the reviews of gender and migration by Nash (1999) Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford (1999) for various non-Andean examples.

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