

Only the Bridge Matters Now | Solo el puente cuenta ya *Migration, Ayni, and Memory in Virginia's Bolivian Community*

The Valle Alto is a valley in the Andean mountains of Bolivia. The region has a historical pattern of emigration dating to the late 1800s. For Valle Alto towns, emigration functions as a kind of “grassroots foreign aid,” an informal strategy to sustain economic livelihood (Jones, 2008, 6). Bolivians from the Valle Alto region developed this survival strategy after centuries of weak public institutions, structural poverty and widespread unemployment that date back to the continent’s colonization.¹

Bolivians from the Valle Alto, referred to in this paper as Valle Alteños, have emigrated in response to a deep history of exploitation. They have moved primarily to Argentina, Spain, and the United States. The largest community of Valle Alteños is currently in Northern Virginia where they have built strong cultural, familial, and economic relationships between individuals and towns in the Valle Alto and Northern Virginia. Andean emigration, Bolivian emigration, and the relationship between the Valle Alto and Northern Virginia are understudied phenomena.

It is yet to be determined what will be the legacy of a changing family structure as families are separated over thousands of miles; how ancient Andean rituals and traditions will endure new places and face ‘the melting pot’ of The United States; and what the long-term social impacts on towns and communities in the Valle Alto will be. Bolivian scholar and filmmaker Leonardo de la Torre, who has worked extensively in the Valle Alto, believes answers to these

¹ In *Open Veins of Latin America*, Eduardo Galeano writes, “Recovery of the resources that have always been usurped is recovery of our destiny” (Galeano, 1973, 8). This is a statement that turns upside down the debate and conversation about immigration from Latin America in The United States, as well as Europe. Latin America’s natural resources and labor have been robbed and exploited by countries in Europe and The United States since the Spaniards set foot on the continent nearly five-hundred years ago. The “development” that the Global North – The United States and Europe – has been able to achieve has been with the wealth and resources taken from Latin America (in addition to Africa). What Galeano says is about justice. It questions who has the right to life benefitting from development funded by Latin America’s wealth and labor.

questions, “must come directly from the words, the expressions and the emotions of the actors themselves—from research that takes an ethnographic and even artistic approach” (Jones). *Only the Bridge Matters Now* is a multimedia project about Bolivians from the Valle Alto that responds to de la Torre’s concern. The project documents Valle Alteños’ efforts to build transnational community, mobilize the Andean notion of solidarity and reciprocity, *ayni*, and subvert the construction of borders by building bridges. In this context, bridges matter more than borders.

It is said that Bolivians from the Valle Alto residing in Virginia do not migrate; they bring everything with them to Virginia so they are able to continue their lives almost exactly as if they were in Bolivia. Valle Alteños perceive the whole planet as the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) and thus all land as one. In Bolivia or Virginia, the land is the same *Pachamama*. Soccer, dance, dress, song, and food, along with nostalgia and longing, are activated to construct shared memories of place and create space. In this way, people actively create Bolivia space in Virginia such that “...they never completely arrive in the United States, for in that way, they will never completely leave Bolivia” (Paz-Soldan, 2007, 170).

At almost 9000 feet in elevation, the Valle Alto lies southeast of the city of Cochabamba in the department of Cochabamba, Bolivia. The valley floor is about thirty miles wide and temperatures average seventy degrees Fahrenheit. The area is a historically productive agricultural zone (Yarnall, 2010, 111) dominated by three provinces: Esteban Arze, German Jordan, and Punata (Jones, 2008). The number of people that have left the Valle Alto in Bolivia is uncertain, though estimates of Valle Alteños living in Virginia range between 150,00 and 300,000 people (Jones, 2008). As a result, many towns in the Valle Alto are nearly empty of people who were born in the town. The majority of people who remain are seniors, the parents of people living in other countries, and individuals from other regions of Bolivia who come to take care of and live in the houses of people who reside outside of the country. Entire towns have essentially transplanted to Northern Virginia, where Valle Alteños work tirelessly to establish a leadership

and organizational structure to keep the towns united transnationally/across borders by holding events and raising money.

For communities of the Valle Alto, migration is understood as a proven path to increase access to capital and expand both individual and community development opportunities. Centuries of colonization led to deep structural inequalities, weak institutions, and exploitation of resources and labor. Natural climate changes and human-caused climate change contribute to droughts, which in turn lead to the lack of food and income for farming families. In the Valle Alto, emigration is seen as the most possible route to accumulating capital for buying land, planting an orchard, educating children, paying for medical care, and achieving 'progress' for the towns. It is the most viable way Valle Alteños seek what they believe to be a better quality of life (Yarnall, 2010, 111).

In 2008, Cresencio Soto, the former mayor of the Third Section of Esteban Arze Province, explained that it is, "Simply, ... the role of the Bolivian to migrate" (Yarnall, year, 113). French geographer Genevieve Cortes wrote in 2004, "...Residents of the region have long understood the need to leave in order to stay" (quoted in Yarnall, 2008, p.121). In other words, emigration has become a fixture of the cultural landscape in the region. Sandra Patiño, a single mother from Tarata, a colonial town and the capital of the Estaban Arze province, explains the internal logic of Bolivian migration:

"I think that I come from a family that's been immigrants since always because I believe that the best of Bolivians is carried in our blood, the fact that we need to move from one place to another depending on the needs that we have." (Personal interview 2016; my translation).

Juan Carlos Gonzalez, who is also from Tarata, lived in the United States for ten years before returning home. For him, moving from one place to another includes leaving the Earth, "I can live on Mars or the moon as long as there is work" (personal interview 2016). Juan Carlos continues to live in Tarata with this wife and children. It's imperative to listen to the experiences of people who migrate and place those experiences in the

context of history and systemic forces.

Historical Context

The first wave of emigration from the Valle Alto dates to the late 1800s when a decline in the mining industry in Potosi, Bolivia, sent many people to work in nitrate mines in the Atacama Desert of Northern Chile. Most miners returned to Bolivia by the beginning of World War I after the invention of synthetic nitrate. A second wave of emigration followed the Bolivian National Revolution and the agrarian reform processes of 1952. Large farming estates known as *latifundias* which had been owned by the Bolivian elite and used indentured servants and poor farmers to subsist, were split apart in 1952, and parcels of land were given to indigenous farmers (Yarnall, 2010, 113-114; Jones, 2008; de la Torre, 2009, 64). While land distribution happened in the Valle Alto, the distribution was flawed. Land was given in small parcels and the best agricultural lands remained concentrated among the elites. The small parcels also had to be subdivided for future generations of each family that owned the land, which resulted in less land per farmer over time. Large-scale machinery and irrigation systems were needed to remain competitive, but subsistence farmers did not have the capital necessary to purchase them. Less land and lack of machinery resulted in the potential for only one annual crop, severely limiting farmers' income and reducing the labor demand for agricultural activities (Whitesell, 2008, 213).

Before 1952, the majority of families from Tarata owned large amounts of land, which was adequate for subsistence farming. The Revolution of 1952 redistributed land ownership unevenly, and most families lost their land and source of income. As a result, young people were forced to find other sources of income. They consequently spent much time studying and very little time doing manual labor. While the loss of property and making a living from land ownership led Valle Alteños to seek other professions such as teaching and artisanal craft making, these professions were not economically stable. In addition, commercial competition killed the success of selling artisanal goods (“Justo Barriga, 2016”).

Making matters worse, in the late 1900s, Bolivian leadership undid market protections that had been in place for decades in order to become a more global market and expand trade and commerce. This caused an influx of very cheap bulk items and a decline in demand for artisanal goods. Justo Barriga, an engineer who grew up in Tarata, commented about his generation of friends during the 1980s:

“That phenomenon... of not looking after the activities that they had, it stopped becoming profitable and because of that, they left. That’s a very important phenomenon for migration also to grow” (personal interview 2016; my translation).

Men like Justo Barriga migrated to Argentina, especially Buenos Aires, and developed emigration as a diversified economic strategy that included temporary and permanent migration. This migration of men to Buenos Aires was well established by the 1960s and increased in the 1970s. They mostly worked in construction and would return on an annual or semi-annual basis. After they were settled, they brought their wives, sisters, and children to Argentina, but an economic crisis in Argentina in the 1980s redirected migration to the United States (Yarnall, 113-114; Jones; de la Torre, 64).

During the 1960s a few residents from the Valle Alto came to Northern Virginia and found employment. These migrants formed a small social network in Northern Virginia, and by the 1980s, the area had emerged as the preferred destination for Bolivians from the Valle Alto, which is characterized as the beginning of the third wave of Bolivian migration. By 1990, the Bolivian population had tripled because concomitant pull and push factors of the local demand for labor (Yarnall, 113-114; de la Torre, 64) and the economic crisis in Argentina. In fact, most Bolivians from the Valle Alto who came to Virginia came via Argentina. Virginia’s Bolivian population then doubled in size again from 1990 to 2000 (Price, 2007, 200). Local demand for labor and the growing social network of Valle Alteños, created the conditions for what scholars call “chain migration” (MacDonald, 1964, 82). Today, it is estimated that about 2.5 million of Bolivia’s 10 million citizens live outside the country. That is nearly 24% of its population, or one

in four people (Strunk 2013, 4109; Whitesell, 2008, 217). This estimate makes Bolivia's diaspora one of the biggest diasporas in the continent, proportional to a country's population (Gordonava 2014, 7). In 2006, the Bolivian community in Northern Virginia was estimated to be around 150,000, enough to be counted as Bolivia's 8th largest city (Whitesell, 2008, 216). This calls into question the use of nation states as a frame of identity and even place. What if Arlington, Virginia were actually Bolivia's 8th largest city?

Transnational and Transborder

The use of nation states as a frame of analysis in looking at migration in the Americas is problematic. Not only is this frame reductive and binary, it is U.S.-centric. Latin American perspectives on migration to the United States can question the very existence of nation state borders and call into question the US-based discussion on homeland security. Anthropologist Lynn Stephen suggests that we need to reorient the focus on human security in thinking about migration to focus on human security, which "...has to do with access to essentials such as food, housing, education, health care, and employment" (Stephen, 2008, 440). Rights to live in specific territory are a question of well-being in the Americas.

This framework is a way to re-frame the conversation about immigration in the Americas. If the all of the countries of the Americas could see themselves as part of one land mass, as peoples with more linkages than borders, with the well-being of one dependent on the well-being of the other, then the focus on national security in the United States would become a focus on human security. It would be a move away from focusing on and prioritizing nation state borders to focusing on and prioritizing human life, safety, and well-being regardless of borders. Society could pivot from framing migration through nation state borders to framing migration through the cultural, economic, social, and spiritual bridges that are sustained between peoples and places in the Americas. These bridges become a way to envision and insure human security regardless of

ethnicity or national identity. By creating bridges, communities assert autonomy over their resources and development.

Stephen says this perspective is “offered as a corrective to the perspectives that see Latin America as ‘outside the United States,’ and assimilation as the logical and desirable outcome of migration” (Stephen, 2008, 429). Transnational villages, such as those from the Valle Alto, that co-reside in The United States think beyond the outside/inside nature of nation state borders. They function as a communal reality counter to the idea that Latin America is outside of The United States. Latin America is in The United States and The United States is part of the Americas.

Stephen suggests looking beyond the national framework in order to understand the full nature of what is being crossed. It’s not just national borders that get crossed by peoples’ bodies. People are moving or “transing” between borders that are cultural, social, ethnic, gender, racial, language, and state borders (Stephen, 2008, 430).

“...it makes more sense to speak of ‘transborder’ migration rather than simply ‘transnational.’ The transnational becomes a subset of the ‘transborder’ experience. While we might want to avoid using the term ‘border’ to avoid a literal sense of state borders and substitute the word ‘transboundary’ instead, I am reluctant to let go of the ‘border’ because, while migrants and immigrants are moving across boundaries other than those of nation-states, in the case of many immigrants who being as undocumented the literal ‘border’ remains strongly etched in their psyches and memories of coming to the US” (Stephen, 2008, 430).

Transnationalism itself is not new. The defining aspect of transnational migrants is that transnational activities are a central part of a person’s life (Price, 2011, 211). In the process of maintaining links with their places of origin—Bolivia in this case—they create an identity that is somewhere in-between being Bolivian and American (Price, 2011, 211). This is because migrants never leave their ‘old’ worlds behind. Most keep feet in both worlds (Levitt, 2001, 3). The result is that village life takes place in two places. Sociologist Peggy Levitt refers to some types of transnational communities as *transnational villages*.

These villages have four central characteristics. First, actual migration is not required to

be a member of a transnational village. Second, they emerge and endure because of social remittances. Social remittances are the ideas, behaviors, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending communities. They are “the tools with which ordinary individuals create global culture are the local level.” Once the process is begun, daily life in the village is changed to such an extent that migrants and non-migrants alike become dependent on one another. Third, they create and are created by organizations that act across borders. Lastly, there is a strong contrast between material well-being and social costs. While material well-being increases, social costs also increase (Levitt, 2001, 5). Transnationalism runs deep in the Valle Alto (de la Torre) and the relationship between communities in the Valle Alto and Northern Virginia constitute the emergence of a transnational village full of transborder migrants.

Only the Bridge Matters Now affirms the importance of bridges over borders, of bridges of solidarity, reciprocity, and memory. Bolivian migrants participate in building bridges through concrete social, cultural, and economic activities such as soccer, dance, singing, and cooking. However, it is the emotional and psychological aspect of the bridge building that is the mortar, a mortar composed of emotion, nostalgia, and remembrance. This affective dimension of the bridge plays the biggest role in keeping these communities united and woven together over vast space and time.

Territory of Emotion and Nostalgia

The motivation to participate in the social, cultural, and economic activities that create bridges is driven by emotion, nostalgia, longing, remembrance, and solidarity. Bolivian poet Eduardo Mitre writes about nostalgia, memory, distance, absence, false return, and identity in the Bolivian migrant context. His work seems unconcerned with common themes of literature that addresses migration experiences. Rather than concentrate on borders and crossings, for example, he is more interested in distance and the impacts of longing and absence on identity formation. In

general, narratives of Bolivian experiences tend to focus on the feeling of longing for Bolivia rather than on experiences of otherness in the adopted country (Vargas, 156).

Claret Vargas, a scholar in Latin American literature, writes that Mitre expresses, “...Absence as painful, but also as bearable, nostalgia as inescapable and soothing, and history as relevant and tangential” (151). For Mitre, the loss of memory is the loss of self: “Olvidar es morir y renacer otra persona (To forget is to die and be reborn a different person)” (Vargas, 2007, 143). Vargas writes, “Rather than thematize the longed-for homeland, or the unfamiliar landscape that must become his own, he bridges the two spaces with meditations about existence, absence, and longing” (Vargas, 2007, 161). In *Camino de Cualquier Parte*, Mitre writes,

“Así, uno parte y se aleja (So, one parts and moves away) / con el mapa del tiempo (with the map of time) / para descubrir el tesoro (to discover the treasure) / en el cofre de la pérdida (in the chest of the lost). // Entonces, ya no interesa (Then, it no longer interests him) / Saber si el camino que va (to know if the path he took to come) / es el mismo que regresa (is the same to return). Solo el puente cuenta ya (only the bridge matters now)” (Vargas, 161).

One of the most important organizations operating in Northern Virginia and Bolivia is the Institute of Cooperation for the Peoples of Esteban Arze (INCOPEA). Many of the structures in the Valle Alto built by emigrants in the United States are funded by INCOPEA, a soccer league in Northern Virginia made up of representative teams from each village in the region (Yarnall, p.118). In 2004, INCOPEA was one of four Bolivian soccer leagues in Northern Virginia: Liga Tarata (Tarata leagues) established in 1996 which had six teams, Liga Bolivian de Veteranos (Bolivian Veteran League) established in 1998 which had eight teams, Liga INCOPEA established in 1991 which had seventeen teams, and Arlington Bolivian Soccer League established 1988 which had sixteen teams. Teams in these leagues organize by town or district of origin in Bolivia (Price, 2004, 172-173). INCOPEA’s primary purpose is to raise money to send back to towns in the Esteban Arze province, rotating which town received the money each year. Geographer Marie Price conducted travel research in 1999 to the Esteban Arze province. She found that INCOPEA played a prominent economic role in the region. INCOPEA’s leadership estimated in 2000 that villages received between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year from league

revenues in Virginia. This money was used to build churches and sports facilities, improve schools and town plazas, and provide electricity (Price, 2004, 182).

It is unclear how many soccer leagues currently exist in 2016. Families from the Valle Alto are growing, resulting in the number of residents of each town from the Valle Alto living in Virginia to be increasing. The families that make up each town that has transplanted to Virginia are growing. This means that each town's population in Virginia is growing. Couples have children and their children have children. For example, there were eleven men from Santa Rosa at the end of the 1980s, just enough to make one soccer team. As of 2016, the town of Santa Rosa in Virginia has around four hundred ninety-eight families and over a thousand members. The population of the town in Virginia is now large enough to host its own internal soccer league to gather together every Saturday and raise money for community projects in Santa Rosa every year, rather than every couple of years with INCOPEA's rotating distribution.

The internal soccer league of Santa Rosa located in Annandale, Virginia, has six soccer teams. Each team corresponds to specific streets in the town of Santa Rosa in Bolivia. If you, your parents, or your husband/wife are from a specific street, you can only be on the team corresponding to that street. This structure is not only used for soccer tournaments, but also for organizing events to raise money and parties such as Mother's Day and the anniversary of Santa Rosa. Each team has two representatives and there are six teams. In total there are twelve representatives that make up the leadership board of Santa Rosa in Virginia, called *LISAR*. One president, vice-president, secretary, and treasure are elected each year.

Geographers such as Price and Edward Soja have referred to the spaces that these soccer leagues create in Virginia as "Thirdspace." They define Thirdspace as a transnational conception of space emerging from the tensions that exist between the inhabited space in the D.C. area and a perceived or remembered space of Bolivia (Price, 2004, 169). It springs from, "...the betweenness-of-place demanded by the transnational realities of immigrant life that begs for a different understanding of space" (Price, 2004, 169). Price and colleague, Courtney Whitworth, add, "the

leagues do more than create a social outlet; they actively assemble a shared memory of place....[which] exists in the shared memories and perceptions of league organizers and players...leagues are concrete expressions of transnational communities and the Thirdspaces they create” (Price, 2004, p.183).

Julia García is a leader in the Bolivian community of Virginia and a keeper and teacher of cultural traditions and knowledge. About Bolivian culture in Bolivia, she said,

“Making culture in any way, whether it be singing, dancing, writing, or speaking the language, rituals, customs, or dressing as a cholita—whatever it is, is a bridge that connects you to something that you have as a foundation. It's your history. And your history, you can't erase it. It is a connection that takes you to your reality even though you're living in a country with different customs. It is a connection—more than connection it's a reconnection—it's a return to what you are. It's like a tree, no? It has roots. Its flowers can fly away, the fruit can leave, but they never forget where they come from. It is like a tree that has roots and to bloom, the flower is not alone, it has roots. And it has to depend on the tree so it's a historical dependence in your life... culture. It's a return, it's a return to search for where you are from. Because cultures, nations, towns have subsisted this way. Some have disappeared, no?...But we're 600 years now—the Quechua culture. We're still here” (“Julia García”, 2016).

Lily Whitesell conducted interviews for a chapter in *Dignity and Defiance* focused on the Bolivian community in Northern Virginia. One person she spoke to is Arminda Soliz, who reinforced Paz-Soldan's statement about “the betweenness-of-place.” She said, “I am Bolivian and I will always be Bolivian. Even if I were to stay here in Spain a hundred years I would never belong here. I will always be Bolivian and my country will always be my country” (Whitesell, 2008, 229).

In the chapter, Whitesell writes that one of the central struggles that Bolivian emigrants face is the struggle to hold onto their language, culture, and identity while integrating into the new world of the United States (Whitesell, 2008, 229). She also states that the same forces that have preserved the Aymara and Quechua languages for centuries have also preserved their cultures. While Bolivian immigrants worry about putting their culture, pride, and identity at risk, many find ways to adapt while not sacrificing their culture (Whitesell, 2008, 230). Transnational connections become a way of life for migrants and family and friends in their hometowns. socio-

spatial networks are created to support this transnational existence, one where individuals “...live someplace in-between being a settler and a sojourner” (Price, 2011, 211).

Bolivian writer Edmundo Paz-Soldan describes this survival adaptation by saying that Bolivians in the United States, “will resist the proverbial ‘melting pot’; that total reinvention of identity which is the registered trademark of this country. Obsessive in their identification with Bolivia, they prefer the invisibility, the isolation, the lack of power – whatever it takes to assure that they never completely arrive in the United States, for in that way, they will never completely leave Bolivia, that small but grand territory of emotion and nostalgia” (Paz-Soldan, 2007, 170).

In the introduction to my thesis photobook, Julia García writes,

“When you arrive in another country, you feel that the land is not strange to you. It is in Mother Earth – the Pachamama – that you find the first connection. She welcomes you, it’s as if you had a piece [of your country] with you. That’s because in your *llajta*, your homeland, you learned to connect with her, to feel that you are of her and she is of you, because the land belongs to you and you belong to her.

From the first moment that you put your feet on strange soil, you begin to love it and to respect it. The earth is one, because on the earth we are all one: *ujlla kanchis* (quechua), *mayakitanwa* (aymara)...

In my life testimony of more than 25 years of living in this country in the north, I affirm that I never left Bolivia. I brought with me so much culture and wisdom learned in my community and my family, where living in harmony and balance with each species and all beings of Earth is the code of life” (Averbook, 2017).

By never fully arriving in the United States nor completely leaving Bolivia, Bolivians in Virginia build bridges and perpetuate *ayni*, solidarity and reciprocity, a value, practice, and way of being that has been central to the resistance and resilience of Quechua communities in the Andes since the Spanish conquest. Building transnational bridges of *ayni* is a continuation of that resistance. It is a strategy confronting the exploitation and injustice of colonialism and colonial legacies.

Conclusion

There is no single reality of living in Virginia for Bolivians. Their varied experiences

depend on numerous differences including: social class; education; language fluency; gender and sexuality; age; debt; legal status; and family and support systems in Virginia. Most people also bring with them dynamics that exist in Bolivia, such as discrimination between urban and rural families.

By focusing less on borders and more on the affective aspects of building community bridges, solidarity, and reciprocity, we are better equipped to connect contemporary migrants with broad historical patterns of colonialism like Eduardo Galeano does in *Open Veins of Latin America*. This helps us to understand what community means in a country and world that is increasingly being defined by migration and human security.

Only the Bridge Matters Now frames immigration through the perspective of the Americas as a region with more linkages than borders, and challenges viewers to consider immigration not through the expected paradigms of nation-state borders, but through the cultural, economic, and spiritual bridges sustained between places and communities.

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