Hip hop as empowerment: voices in El Alto, Bolivia

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Hip hop as empowerment: voices in El Alto, Bolivia

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In response to neoliberal policies that have been in place since 1985, Bolivian young people have increasingly used hip hop music as a means of protest and to reclaim social and political participation. Hip hop in Latin America tells the story of the struggles that marginalized people have suffered, and speaks to the effects of international policies fueled by globalization. This paper focuses on what the Bolivian hip hopper Nina Uma calls “Hip hop revolution”: a hip hop that critiques and interrogates the social, political, and economic structure, the differences between the haves and the have nots, and proposes using hip hop to spread “education as cultural action of freedom”. This article examines the ways young people of El Alto, Bolivia are making sense of their social, political, and economic context.

Keywords: Indigenous; hip hop; globalization; neoliberalism; Bolivia

We’ve already warned you, the Aymara men are better than the system. (On a banner at the entry of El Alto, Bolivia)

Abraham Bojórquez, an Aymaran hip hopper and member of the hip hop group Ukamau y Ke, was 26 when he died on 20 May 2009 in El Alto, Bolivia. Bojórquez was nationally and internationally known for his revolutionary lyrics, and his criticism of politicians, of the political and economic system, and of the media. The sudden death of Bojórquez meant a great loss not only for the hip hop movement but also for Indigenous youth in El Alto who used hip hop as a form of creative expression to promote social, economic, and political equity in Bolivian society amidst the neoliberal policies in place since 1985. These policies included the privatization of national oil and gas companies, railroads, and mines and left thousands of Bolivians, mainly Indigenous, unemployed and displaced. The policies pushed many to migrate to cities such as El Alto, which were unprepared to accommodate the new residents. As poverty increased, the informal economy in the cities grew, and cultural ruptures occurred among migrants and people of Indigenous descent.

The imposition of western cultural, social, and economic trends over nonwestern countries that comes with globalization has shaped Bolivian society. Globalization marginalizes Indigenous people from mainstream political and economic practices. Ironically, it is within this context of globalization that Alteños found hip hop as a critical tool for expression and protest. Bojórquez and the hip hop movement in El

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Alto was a response to the oppressive conditions of neoliberal policies and the capitalistic system. This article shows the ways Alteño Indigenous youth use hip hop for empowerment. They respond to neoliberal practices which were put in place almost three decades ago, yet still affect them today. First, I provide a historical overview of neoliberal policies in Bolivia and El Alto in particular. Second, I explain the ways Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy articulates with these policies. I detail the methods of this study, and share findings from interviews and analysis of hip hop lyrics. Lastly, I discuss the meanings and implications of the hip hop movement for the Indigenous in this neoliberal context.

From indios to citizens: “El Alto siempre de pie, nunca de rodillas”

El Alto, once a part of the neighboring city of La Paz, is situated in the Altiplano, on the southwest side of the urban center of La Paz (Arbona and Kohl 2004). El Alto is home to close to one million people, 90% of whom are Indigenous, with a majority identifying as Aymara (74.2%) and to a lesser extent Quechua (6.4%) (Albó 2006). Poverty and the quickly growing population of El Alto greatly aggravate the living conditions in this city. El Alto’s population increases by 10% annually, which has strained the city’s economy (Crowder 2003). Initially El Alto was a transitory settlement for poor, Indigenous people who were looking to migrate to La Paz. Nowadays, El Alto has outgrown La Paz in population and has developed its own identity, which according to Lazar (2008, 31) is one of an “Indigenous city.” With the fastest growing population in Latin America, El Alto has become a center of rebellious social movements, and home of the “hip hop revolution.”

Since the sixteenth century, Bolivian Indigenous people have suffered displacement and exploitation; however, they have always asserted and defended themselves. Indigenous insurrections protesting taxes, lack of land ownership, exploitive mine work, and forced settlements were common. One of the most famous insurrections occurred in 1781: Tupac Katari positioned his army toward La Paz from what is now the city of El Alto; the siege lasted for approximately eight months (Albó 2006). Two centuries later, another milestone in Bolivian history occurred: the 1952 revolution brought changes in the economic and social structure in the country (De Mesa, Gisbert, and Mesa Gisbert 2001). The triumph of the revolution not only meant the implementation of universal suffrage, allowing women and Indigenous the right to vote, but also a huge agrarian reform. According to De Mesa, Gisbert, and Mesa Gisbert (2001), the Agrarian reform of 1952 meant the end of the latifundio and the elimination of a system of exploitation of peasants by land owners. Huge pieces of land were returned to the Indigenous population, and the basic principle of “la tierra es de quién la trabaja” was put into practice. Small pieces of land were given to the peasants, creating a microfundio. This broke the Aymara-Quechua tradition of communitarian work of the land. This division of the land allowed Indigenous people to incorporate themselves into the economic market, but with a limited amount of agricultural production. The peasant status changed from servant to landowner. This situation forced many peasants to leave their land and migrate to the city of El Alto.

In the 1980s, two events provoked the migration of more Indigenous people to El Alto. First, a drought caused tens of thousands of peasants to leave their lands and move to El Alto, looking for means to sustain their families. Second, in 1985, neoliberal policies brought the privatization of national mines, oil and gas compa-
nies, telecommunication companies, and railroads (Postero 2006), producing: “slashed social spending, high unemployment, a disastrous pension reform scheme, and the fragmentation and destabilization of social movements” (Postero 2006, 129). Privatization meant “relocation” of workers around the country. Many unemployed workers were miners who were relocated to El Alto. The miners played an important role in the social constitution of El Alto as a city, impacting the construction and organization of the city’s neighborhoods. These relocated workers also became a powerful political force. Due to this migration, El Alto became the city with the greatest migratory population (Albó 2006).

After his second re-election as president in 2002, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada:

had a heavy hand in transforming Bolivia into a lab rat for neoliberal economics … From 2000 to 2003, the income of the poorest 10 percent of the population declined by 15 percent, while that of the richest 10 percent increased by 16 percent. (Dangl 2007, 79)

By 2003, the quality of life had worsened and unemployment had risen. Sánchez de Lozada, pressured by the promise of a loan from the International Monetary Fund, proposed a “12.5% income tax on citizens with the lowest salaries in the country” (79). His plan encountered opposition from many social organizations and labor unions, but the largest protests were headed by the National Police, and supported by many union groups around the country.

Later in 2003, the government of Sánchez de Lozada decided to sell gas to the USA through a Chilean port. The gas was going to be sold raw, and would yield little profit. People protested and asked for the industrialization of the gas in Bolivian territory in order to have “cheaper access to gas related products, better local distribution and use of resources” (Dangl 2007, 122), and to have “more revenue for social programs” (127). El Alto became the “center of resistance to government control, as community organizations” (131) gave all the support to one of the most powerful uprisings in Bolivian history.

El Alto is “the site of one of the most powerful and radicalized social forces in Latin America” (Fuentes 2005). These forces are clearly visible in the social protests that Alteños led in October of 2003. The Alteños have a tradition of self-organization. The youth of El Alto create their spaces in quite a different way: “… newly urbanized campesinos adolescents who speak Quechua, Aymara, and Spanish … are constructing new forms of cosmopolitanism” (Goodale 2006, 634). This cosmopolitanism, explains Goodale (2006), comes from the hybridization of hip hop music and Indigenous cultural identity. This amalgamation creates the possibility of Bolivia’s modernity and generates solidarity with other global youth movements in which oppression, racism, and injustice are the foci.

El Alto has become a center of rebellion and social movements. It is also the home of what Nina Uma, an Alteña hip hopper, calls the “hip hop revolution”. This revolution involves music that critiques and questions social and political structure, and economic inequality, and represents what Freire (2000) calls “education as cultural action of freedom” (7). Hip hop expression is therefore both a pedagogy and a form of cultural expression. Young Alteños educate and promote change in their communities and Bolivian society at large using music. Hip hop music provides a view into young Alteños’ reactions to the election of the first Indigenous president in Bolivia’s history.
When Evo Morales was elected as president in 2006, industries that were once privatized became nationalized. Morales implemented anti-neoliberal policies. Moreover, policy regarding Indigenous people began to change, and led to increased Indigenous visibility and pride. Currently, Morales’ government has an official discourse that aligns with Indigenous cultures and opens political and social spaces; this is a departure from any other time in Bolivian history until 2005 (Lazar 2008).

From the time I conducted this research, 2009, until this article went to press, 2012, several events tainted Morales’ administration. In 2009, the Morales government was in a phase of transition from a neoliberal government to one with anti-neoliberal policies. In 2011, Bolivian citizens questioned Morales’ supposed social and communitarian government principles when he planned to build a highway in the heart of a national park, which was Indigenous territory. The government refused to engage in dialogs with Indigenous communities living in these territories. This provoked a massive march that lasted for more than two months; as a result, the government lost the support of Indigenous groups, intellectuals, and old allies.

The historic events described here shaped the place that Indigenous people have in Bolivian society. In El Alto, the events that occurred in 2003 gave way to the creation of a hip hop movement that tried to break traditional anti-Indigenous or racist views by proposing new visions of an egalitarian society. Alteño youth see hip hop as a means of struggle for poor, oppressed minorities; they identify themselves with the African-American community from the Bronx who, according to the group Wayna Rap, have suffered racism, classism, and oppression, just like them. In the next section I give an overview of hip hop history in the USA. I outline how it became a global movement, and how it is used by Bolivian hip hoppers.

**Hip hop revolution as cultural action of freedom**

Hip hop is not just an African-American or North American cultural movement but it is, “a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world” (Mitchell 2001, 1–2). Hip hop started in New York City as a constructive alternative for poor, minority youth who were confronted with violence, drugs, racism, and classism. Yet, hip hop now is not only a means of expression, but also a way of life, especially for young, poor African-Americans. Some scholars are critical of the movement, stating, for example, that: “young Blacks have used this access … far too much to strengthen associations between Blackness and poverty, while celebrating anti-intellectualism, ignorance, irresponsible parenthood, and criminal lifestyles” (Kitwana 2002, xxi). Yet other scholars argue the importance of hip hop as a pedagogical tool. For example, according to Dimitriadis, citing Giroux (2009), it has: “elaborated a ‘public and performative’ kind of pedagogy, one sensitive to the ‘shifting nature of knowledge [and] identity’, one that operated in ‘new spaces’ outside of school” (2009, 51). Hip hop, in other words, becomes a performative and pedagogical tool for marginalized youth.

Now a global movement, young people have co-opted hip hop to critique society or the “system” that they feel oppresses them (Mitchell 2001). As a result, it can be seen that hip hop in different countries has: “been combined … with local musical idioms and vernaculars to produce excitingly distinctive syncretic manifestations of African American influences and local Indigenous elements” (Mitchell 2001, 3). Global hip hop artists adjust art, music, and style to fit their own conditions, and to name their own circumstances.
In El Alto, Bolivia, a city created by and for people that migrated from the countryside to the city, the hip hop movement gained momentum as a result of neoliberalism. It carves a place for Indigenous culture in the current social context. In 2003, El Alto’s hip hop movement began with a group of youth that wanted to propose new social alternatives. Noticing similarities between their own unjust conditions and the African-American communities who were confronted with injustice in the Bronx in the USA, the hip hop group Wayna Rap explained:

The first time I heard rap I felt identified with that ... I started to find more about it and I found out about all Martin Luther King’s struggle in the US, a lot of struggle from the Black Panthers that looked for re-vindication because there used to be a lot of racism ... That reality happened here in Bolivia, all the discrimination, racism ...

There was a sense of solidarity in fighting racism and inequalities. Also as a pedagogic tool, hip hop required few material resources, easily lending itself to various forms of self-expression. It explains and denounces the living conditions allotted to Indigenous and poor people in Bolivia.

In addition to Bolivia, countries such as Cuba, Colombia, Brazil, and Chile have hip hop movements that reflect the situations of oppressed youth in each country, and engage issues such as race, poverty, and inequality. For example, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a group of women hip hoppers, who are daughters of the desaparecidos as a result of Argentina’s dictatorial government of Videla during the 1970s, protest the disappearance of thousands of people using hip hop. Hip hop has been a viable and attractive means of expression for young people to organize and speak out against social injustices.

**Awareness and praxis**

Paulo Freire’s (1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provides a lens by which to understand the young Alteños’ struggle for freedom. Freire (1993, 26) argued that oppression is “not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order”, created by a process of dehumanization. Mainstream education within an unjust society normalizes the idea of inferiority through “banking education” (Freire 1993), which according to Freire, is an education that sees people as machines who have to adapt to their environment and conditions as opposed to changing the situations that oppress them. The oppressed can only experience freedom through conscientização (conscientization). *Conscientização* implies not only an awareness of the world but a call to praxis for justice and equity. This praxis needs to be an action that aims to change the conditions in the world that oppress people. Awareness and praxis are taught and performed in the Alteño hip hop movement. Drawing from Freire and Macedo (1987, viii), the Alteños have a new understanding or literacy and are “reading the word and the world” through singing, performing, and taking action.

Furthermore, Freire theorized about the, “need for not just a local liberation initiative, but an ethically grounded and politically ... unity among ... oppressed groups ... across the globe” (Roberts 2003, 460). Hip hop unites youth globally against oppressive neoliberal policies, which maintain “gross inequalities under globalisation” (462). Hip hop allows a rupture with the “common sense” (Apple 1999, 15), and it brings awareness and conscientização about exploitative neoliberal conditions. Free and accessible to all, this performative art is a key element in an informal education practice. The hip hop revolution, according to Nina Uma, is not
a good to be purchased. This runs contrary to what education has become under neoliberal policies: a commodity only available to those who have the means to acquire it. It is a means to raise awareness, organize, and change political practices that affect the underserved.

**Methods**

As a phenomenological study, this project seeks “to understand the lived experiences of a small number of people” (Rossman and Rallis 2003, 94). Moreover, it uses an “in-depth, exploratory, and prolonged engagement; interactive interviews” (94) to understand the personal experiences and the personal meaning of those experiences. In the context of the Alteño hip hop movement, I wanted to understand stories people constructed in and with their music and what meanings these stories had for them.

The data collection took place in June of 2009 with the Alteño youth, and is based on 20 hours of audiotaped interviews, participant observation, field notes, and lyrics provided by participants. My commute to El Alto for the interviews was approximately an hour from the South District of La Paz where I was raised and still have family. I was born and raised in a middle-class family in La Paz and most of the City of El Alto was new for me.

My entry into the field was my meeting with the director of the Casa Juvenil de las Culturas Wayna Tambo, a space that is dedicated to the Alteño youth. Access was more difficult due to the recent death of Abraham Bojórquez. This event forced me to observe the movement from a different position and restructured my interests. During this time of loss and remembrance, the gains that had been made under Bojórquez’s leadership in youth empowerment and the ways in which this empowerment contributes to a new sense of self-identity among the Indigenous in Bolivian society were apparent. With the help of the Wayna Tambo director, I contacted four hip hop artists and scheduled interviews with them. All used the Aymara language as well as Spanish in their lyrics. The Wayna Tambo director was a key informant; he provided information about the historical and social context, as well as an analysis of the hip hop movement in El Alto. The research, depending on participants’ preference, was carried out in both public and private spaces, including community centers, parks, a singer’s house, and my house. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish, transcribed, and translated into English.

**Casa Juvenil de las Culturas Wayna Tambo**

The Casa Juvenil de las Culturas Wayna Tambo is an organization that serves as both a cultural center and a radio station. Its work is strictly directed to Alteño youth and is solely in the cultural ground of El Alto. This cultural center focuses its attention on Alteño youth culture. Because the majority of the people are Indigenous, their culture mixes Indigenous traditions and modern art forms such as hip hop. This encounter creates “hybrid cultures”¹⁰ (Rodríguez 2002, 11), which creates and recreates new identities among the youth of El Alto.

The Wayna Tambo pays primary attention to art forms that emphasize or reflect Indigenous concepts or practices (Rodríguez 2002), including the Indigenous Aymara language and, to a lesser extent, the Quechua language. Both languages are used in the young people’s artistic production of hip hop and other music. As a result, one finds diverse forms of music, such as hip hop or heavy metal, being
sung in Aymara in performances by different Alteño groups. In this way, the voice that these youth create is a hybrid of the traditional and the modern.

The Wayna Tambo understands young people as a critical element in the transformation of Bolivian society. Youth, explains Rodríguez (2004), provide a reference point to see and understand the cultural changes. These cultural changes are never apolitical; they are charged with political content. Rodríguez explains that youth generate and revitalize the cultural scene, and at the same time allow a view of traditional culture. The Wayna Tambo aims to create a political empowerment of Alteño youth through spaces of dialog where youth culture is negotiated, recreated, and identities are invigorated. The Wayna Tambo understands young people as agents of social change; it sees them as conscious subjects instead of static objects. The Wayna Tambo proposes alternative ideas and practices through the promotion and diffusion of cultural events and cultural productions. It also offers discussions about topics that concern the youth from El Alto.

The next section will analyze the data gathered. Lyrics and pieces of interviews were analyzed and grouped into two themes: self and society and the Indigenous and the system. The data provides examples of responses to neoliberal practices.

**Hip hop movement and identity in El Alto**

The hip hop that Alteños propose is a hip hop that instead of being aggressive, or violent, is reflexive (Bojórquez in Dosbalas 2007). Through hip hop, oppressed youth protest against the material conditions of lives and propose political agendas for change. Alteño hip hop artists also make efforts to re-establish ties with Indigenous culture, mainly through native language use. Wayna Rap and Nina Uma demonstrate an example. During a live performance at a private party I attended in 2009, Nina sang using Spanish and Aymara:

\[
\begin{align*}
Jallalla pachamama, ch'ama quechuas, aymaras. \\
Jallalla pachammama, ch'ama pueblo guaraní. \\
Toda la fuerza está en ti.11
\end{align*}
\]

Long live Mother Earth, strength Quechuas, Aymaras
Long live Mother Earth, strength Guaraní people
All the strength is in you.

Nina Uma is able to construct a new Alteño youth identity mixing Spanish and Aymara with modern hip hop rhythms and asserting Indigenous people’s relationship to nature. Both Wayna Rap and Nina Uma use native languages in their songs as a way of making Indigenous cultures visible, as well as to show that they are not ashamed of being Indigenous. Also, through the use of Aymara or Quechua, the youth demonstrate resistance towards rampant anti-Indigenous racism in a country where, ironically, the majority of the population is Indigenous.

Bolivian youth have not conceded to the dominant discourse; they construct their own identities, which reflect both Indigenous heritage and globalization:

By refusing to accede to all of the traditional categories of Bolivian identity (campsino, Indian, Aymara, Quechua, runa, q’ara), the rappers of Wayna Tambo are part of a second revolution in Bolivia, one that is not their grandparents’ revolution, even though the tires still burn at the blockades, the air is still thick with tear gas, and the
rubber bullets are all too often replaced with the real thing. This second Bolivian revo-

lution is essentially discursive. (Goodale 2006, 635)

Historically, Bolivian revolutions were enacted by blockades, marching, strikes, and
other types of public protests. Today the youth in El Alto are trying to incite a rev-

olution using political speech (about racism, classism, or social injustice, for exam-

ple) and using their traditional tongues. The following lyrics are an example:

For the traitors, the calm ends here
I have a wound tattooed on my heart
From the day they shot my village
A helicopter killing my brothers, peasants and miners
Who were demanding their rights. (Translation belongs to Breitburg-Smith and Webb
2006)

These lyrics demonstrate the political agenda of the movement. Rather than using
violence, the movement uses art to transmit thoughts and raise social awareness.

Two main themes emerged as I analyzed lyrics and interviews: self and society
and Indigenous and the system. Self and society refers to identity markers that can be
found in the content of the lyrics and speech of hip hop artists. These markers refer
to Indigenous collective and individual identities related to being a young Aymara in
El Alto. The second theme, Indigenous and the system, refers to hip hop singers’
opinions about and critiques of the sociopolitical system functioning in Bolivia in
general and in El Alto in particular. The system affects them both directly and
indirectly economically, socially, and politically. I elaborate in the next section.

Self and society

Positionality is key to understanding the identity construction and the roles El Alto
hip hop artists play in Bolivian society. In analyzing their unequal place in society,
they reify an Indigenous identity that contests the colonial mind-set.

According to the director of Wayna Tambo, this new identity that Alteño youth
are building results from two main elements: the general explosion of demands
related to ethnic identities and Indigenous rights in the world in the 1990s and
Bolivia’s own history, tainted by colonization and globalization. He adds that the
re-vindication movement in El Alto has a marked Indigenous component, especially
because of the relationship that the people of El Alto maintain with the countryside.
The majority of migrants stay connected to the country by maintaining land in their
places of origin. However, as Llajuas, a young Alteño hip hopper in his early 30s
and member of the group Ukamau Y Ke, explained to me while sitting in a plaza
in the center of El Alto, young Alteños are losing the connection with their places
of origin, they are used to the city and everything it brings:

We are already used to the computer, internet, TV, etc. We go to the countryside for a
field trip, to visit grandma and grandpa.

Contrary to the common idea that cultural traditions and identities are muted due to
migration to a new location, these loose ties between Indigenous youth and their
places of origin could be a result of the illusion of social mobility that oppressors
offer to the oppressed (Freire 1993). Duncan-Andrade (2009) calls this “hope deferred”. He explained this as the, “‘hope’ for change in its most deferred forms: either a collective utopia of a future reformed society or, more often, the [individual’s] … future ascent to the middle class” (185). Society offers the false promise of upward social mobility, and, as a result, great numbers of people move to the cities hoping for this deferred and non-existent social mobility.

During an interview with the director of the Wayna Tambo center he explained that:

Colonialism has been internalized in the people. People from El Alto didn’t say they live in El Alto, they were ashamed of their ethnic origins.12

According to Freire (1993), the concept of shame appears from the identification that the oppressed creates with the oppressor. After centuries of being placed on an inferior societal level, Bolivian Indigenous people have internalized an identity of lower class citizens. The oppressed do not see themselves as equals; rather, they see themselves as inferior to the ruling class (Bartlett 2007). Llajuas explained:

It was embarrassing to speak in Aymara in certain places, for example speaking Aymara in public offices was terrible. The fact to wear pollera13 or sombrero borsalino14 or manta15 … it was a big discrimination, it was an automatic way of denigration ...

Llajuas’ statement reflects the internalized shame and oppression that some have accepted and others have resisted. The Alteño youth have created their Indigenous identity from their ethnic origins, the history of their people, and the unequal conditions in which they have been raised.

In an interview with two young hip hoppers in their mid-20s from the group Wayna Rap, while sitting at a windy park next to the Public University of El Alto, one of the members stated:

Our people, our grandparents, my mother, my grandma used to wear pollera, my grandpa was a migrant from the countryside. When they came here it was very difficult for them because they used to suffer discrimination, exploitation, lack of education ...

The lack of resources and the experiences of exploitation are a type of violence. While not overtly physical, this is a violence directed at their humanity, and at their right to practice their culture, customs, and language. The oppressor denies them their human condition and their culture and forces them to internalize inferiority.

All the conditions explained here reached a climax in 2003, when the disenfranchised organized and demanded the resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. However, this event signified more than just the overthrow of a neoliberal government, but a historical change in the Indigenous’s social status, agency, and identity. As Llajuas explained and the group Wayna Rap echoed in a later interview:

From 2003, I think that the youth, the Alteña society feel proud, because from here, from El Alto all the protest voices rose to overthrow a government. It is because of this that the Alteña and all the young people, the whole society: the pollera, the sombrero from the city of El Alto started to acquire life, value. As a result we started to create an identity of pride. We felt proud of being Alteños and Aymaras. (Llajuas)
Before 2003 there used to be a lot of discrimination toward ourselves. The Alteño used to say ‘no’, I’m not from El Alto, I come from down there. However, he used to live near to us. (Wayna Rap)

The Alteños overthrew their government due to their ability to unify, learn, and evaluate their conditions; they became the main actors of this historical moment. Empowered by confronting their oppressor, they regained pride in their identity. This is a very special case, because they were not only facing White middle-class men, but a government that represented the new Bolivian colonizador.16

It is important to mention that this process is not new. Many other Indigenous uprisings have happened throughout Bolivian history. However, the change will only be lasting when subjugation is removed and power is shared. The oppressed must regain their humanity. The participation and leadership of the Alteños in many of the most important uprisings in Bolivian history have been steps toward this goal. Furthering this idea, the director of Wayna Tambo explained the participation of the Indigenous people during different historical events:

El Alto was never disassociated from all the Bolivian processes … the uprising of the Tupac Katari movement, his headquarters was in El Alto. The revolution of ’52 has no explanation without the Miyuni miners that are now in El Alto.

These events show the presence that Indigenous people have had during all the major Bolivian unrests. Miners have a strong presence in any uprising because they know oppression first-hand from their dangerous work conditions. Peasants and miners are responsible for the occurrence and success of many of the Bolivian uprisings.

In 2003, a new movement began in El Alto with a group of youth that wanted to use hip hop to propose new social alternatives to neoliberal policies. Considered a powerful and effective instrument to communicate about revolution and injustice, hip hop would reach more young people. Llajuas explained:

The truth is that we don’t have any economic means; that is why we do something easy. If we would have money we would be doing music in the symphony … you can easily buy what you need but we don’t have money, this is why we have chosen hip hop.

Nina Uma echoed Llajuas:

With hip hop you can create your own track; sometimes you don’t even need a track.

The easiness and versatility hip hop has, allows hip hop artists to gain people’s attention and to have more impact on their public. As Nina Uma mentioned:

When you propose this from an artistic point of view, the impact on the people is different. I’ll tell you, I can get up on a stage and say everything that I said, but if I don’t do it in an artistic way people will get bored, they won’t listen to me. I won’t be able to touch people’s feelings.

Nina Uma explained the power that hip hop has over people. Hip hop artists are able to artistically bring their word to the table. According to Freire (1993), “the word” will be the means by which the people will generate a change in society. The word is
an instrument which makes dialogue possible” (68). The word has two levels: reflection and praxis. If both levels are present then there will be a true transformation. The means by which the word is spread is not particularly important, but its convenience provides access to all. As the two members of the Wayna Rap group explained:

Making rap in our language: Aymara, Quechua and using traditional musical instruments, mixing Afro-American hip hop and our culture, and we show it [our culture] to the world.

The hip hop movement is using the word by trying to promote reflection about the world. It also makes a call to action for this change to be possible. The way in which the word is spread is not important, as long as it inspires dialog (Freire 1993). It is important to understand that the call to action is non-violent and is an all-inclusive vision of social change. The identities of Alteño youth have been shaped by these social and historical events. Moving from an identity of inferiority to one of pride, young Alteños have asserted themselves through a fight that does not use violence, but proposes change through conscientization and dialog.

The Indigenous and the system

The discourse of Alteño hip hop artists critiques issues of globalization, capitalism, neoliberalism, imperialism, education, mass media, economy, and society. The deceased Abraham Bojórquez, during one of his presentations at a hip hop festival in Ecuador in 2007, said:

My people of Latin America are one flag, we have to break with the vision of borders that has been sold to us.17

Bojórquez’ vision of one united Latin America beyond borders is a recurrent idea in Alteño hip hop. The logic behind it is that all Latin American countries share a similar history and are currently undergoing similar social and political processes due to the large Indigenous population, as well as the large number of poor people in many of these countries. During the interview with Wayna Rap, one of the members explained:

Poverty is the same everywhere in Latin America, so we are trying to make the connections to become a unified Latin America. Without divisions we’ll be stronger.

His colleague further explained his view and action toward their goal, stating:

Latin America has different cultures, we fight in the streets, we suffer social inequalities, then let’s unify all together. With rap we are trying to do so, and we are uniting friends from Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, ... Venezuela, so we try to show to the people that we can achieve a union between Latin Americans.

Solidarity among Latin American countries is born from the “struggle for their liberation” (Freire 1993, 33), from the solidarity among the collectivity and from the understanding of a common struggle to fight poverty and the mechanisms that create it.

It is not strange to find political similarities among poor Indigenous communities throughout Latin America. This is particularly true considering the history of
European colonization of the Americas. European colonizers brought a paradigm which believed in a division between White men, women, and other races (Kahn 2010). This system of thought permitted a bloody and oppressive conquest and subjugation of Indigenous people, as well as an idea of ownership of Indigenous people. Conquistadors believed that all the new discoveries belonged to them as a natural consequence because of their innate superiority (Kahn 2010). In this case, oppressors objectified Indigenous people, removing them from a context of humanity and subjugating them; “the situation of oppression is a dehumanizing one” (Freire 1993, 29). This relationship of power and ownership between oppressors and oppressed has a long history which, as a result for the oppressed, has produced an internalization of their “natural” inferior place in society; they believe in the place they occupy, the place of an object (not a subject) and of dependency on the oppressor. This state of dependency refers to social, mental, economic, and identity dependence. They cannot be without the oppressors, but they can never be like them either (Bhabha 1984).

Latin American countries share similar colonial histories. In addition, living conditions, such as the poverty and oppression of native people, have not changed much throughout time and persist through the current political moment (Dangl 2007). The power of Latin American natives comes from their unification. Accordingly, one of the members of the group Wayna Rap at the end of our interview began to rap in Aymara:

There is a song that talks about how we, Aymaras and Quechuas, are rising with strength, with strength, it’s called Chamakan Sartasiri, and it goes like this: ‘Aymaras and Quechuas, we are rising up from the darkness, lighting up Latin America … the sun will come for everyone’ …

These lyrics reinforce the importance of unity and solidarity among different groups to engender change and empowerment. Implicitly, the lyrics caution against divisiveness.

The Indigenous people of El Alto have organized to resist subjugation. Freire (1993) argued that, “the oppressor minority subordinates and dominates the majority; it must divide it and keep it divided in order to remain in power” (122). The power of the oppressors depends on the oppression and division of the people. They see any type of unification as a serious threat to their power. As a result, the actions taken to stop the unity of the powerless can take the form of physical violence.

Many of the hip hop songs talk about the repression that people suffered during different political moments. Ukamau Y Ke in their song Tupak Katari denounced the repression and use of military force in order to break the mobilization of mainly Indigenous migrant people in the City of El Alto in 2003:

Here for the traitors the calm has ended … I still remember the day my people were shot from a helicopter killing the peasant brother and the miner who were demanding their rights … why then were my people held at gun point to the head with a machine gun …

The organization of oppressed people is rapidly brought down by the oppressors because it is seen as a threat to the peace and prosperity of the privileged system (Freire 1993).
One of the many consequences of the colonial mentality is racism and discrimination. In Bolivia, Indigenous people are seen as inferior due to their belonging to Aymara, Quechua, or any other native group. Ukamau y Ke, in their song *El Abismo del Racismo*, rap:

Racism here, racism there. I ask to my country when is this going to stop? … that’s right, I talk to you racist that believes that you are above people and because of that you discriminate against people calling me Indio, without noticing that you get sick with your own hate. You put me down because I’m poor, I don’t have money but I have a noble heart. You discriminate against me because I’m Black, what’s wrong with you? We are not longer in the time of slavery. You don’t know that I feel proud of my culture? … I talk to you racism, here all the colors are one … race of racists … we are poor, we are peasants, we are from the villas: your worst nightmare.

In the same way, Alto Lima, a hip hop artist from El Alto denounced racism in his song *Un Canto Liberal*, with the following words:

Why? If we are in our home, you see the race difference as a threat? What is going on? The mentality is getting old, reproachable attitude …

While anti-racism and anti-discrimination messages are expressed by these young artists, they also articulate messages of peace and integrity. Ukamau y Ke, in their song *Wila Masis Mayacht’asiñani*, rap:

Revolution of our country with peace in the heart. Many years we have suffered … the time to rise is here, stop the humiliation, stop the expulsion, is time of our vindication. Natives of these lands, let’s fight for the equality, justice and equity, let’s understand that together we will defeat, we can triumph together.

This rap reflects Indigenous people’s desire for freedom, understanding that they will only be freed when they liberate both themselves and the oppressors from an oppressive system. The system enslaves both people in power and the powerless, and it is only through the actions of the oppressed that the enslavement will end (Freire 1993). These actions of freedom and this dialog between people must take place with an attitude of love and understanding to be fruitful. “Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself … love … must generate other acts of freedom; otherwise, it is not love” (Freire 1993, 70–1). Only love for humanity will bring revolution and, consequently, change. The Alteño hip hop artists spread the message of integrity and peace using hip hop. They know and understand that the only way of living is by understanding and believing that all human beings are equal and that economic or racial differences are not natural divisions, but instead social constructions that allow certain groups to maintain privileges over the exploitation of others (Johnson 2006). Llajuas explained:

What we [the hip hop movement] wanted was to transform society, we wanted equality, equity, and because of this … we’ve always preached that the art is a tool to transform, for conscientization of the people.

The group Wayna Rap took a similar position:

We realized that they were also friends, we were all friends and that actually politics are the enemy.
The most challenging task that the oppressed have is to free themselves and to liberate the oppressors (Freire 1993). Only the power that rises from the weakness of the oppressed will be strong enough to liberate both of them, only “human beings in communion liberate each other” (133). Because hip hop artists communicate a message of integrity and equality, it can be said that they understand their art as an instrument to spread their message. In this case, hip hop is their means of expression and their means of lucha (struggle). Abraham Bojórquez, when interviewed for the hip hop festival in Ecuador mentioned that:

We want to continue doing hip hop not with a fascist vision, but with a proposing vision … to use the hip hop as a means for struggle.

Llajuas agreed with this statement, saying:

Our art not only criticizes … but I think it also proposes.

As seen in these two quotes, the idea of every revolution is to teach and to propose new and better lives for everyone. At its beginning, revolution has to emerge as a strong criticism from the viewpoints of the oppressed (Freire 1993). A member of the Wayna Rap group comments on the role of education in creating change:

Education turns us submissive, turned our parents submissive, it turns us shy, afraid, now we want our education to be one that spreads the pride of being who you are, with our songs we tried to revalorize that pride. They need to go with attitude, I’m from El Alto, I’m brown, I’m Indigenous, I’m this, so what?, wherever they go. That whites, browns, mestizos, Indigenous, we can all live together. To achieve this equality we need to educate ourselves and know ourselves, we want that, we need the same opportunities.

This member processes his identity as learned by the education system; considering the power that mainstream education had on his life, he considers how it could be empowering as well. Only through “reflection … upon their world [can they] transform it” (Freire 1993, 60). By understanding one’s condition and one’s position in society, the steps for creating change become more apparent. This change can only be achieved through education, an education made by the oppressed and not for the oppressed.

The Bolivian education system, like most education systems, has supported “banking education”, which socializes the majority to submit and comply with the system that oppresses them. According to Freire (1993, 53), “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention”. This means that people can change the system only if they have the opportunity to think in a critical way, to ask questions, and to propose alternatives. “Problem posing education” aims to change the world in order to provide better and more just opportunities for everyone. This revolutionary education is created by the oppressed for the oppressed; it involves awareness and activism. It looks to change the world instead of changing people to adapt to the world.

Discussion
Several events have occurred since my data collection which have compelled me to make final notes on the theory used, and on the complexity of terms like Indige-
nous, oppressed/oppressor, and unity. While I chose a Freireian framework to analyze my findings, this theory falls short of addressing, “the complexity of overlapping and contradictory positions in which the position of oppressor and oppressed are shifting and ambiguous” (Weiler 2003, 34). The complexity of events, relationships, and identities with which Alteño youth are confronted cannot be completely understood with critical pedagogy. An example of this complexity is the state repression that Indigenous communities suffered by the possible construction of the highway through the Territorio Indígena Parque Nacional Isiboro Secure (TIPNIS), which will devastate the lowland Indigenous resources. The process of change is long and complex. Even if one oppressor-leader has been removed or changes his way of thinking, to build a just system takes decades or longer of praxis and participation from all parts of civil society.

One important change supporting the empowerment of the Alteños is that the region (Latin America) is going through a process of regaining lo indígena (the Indigenous). Jackson and Warren (2005, 549), discuss “reindianization processes” that recuperate the cultural character of a group and with it the term Indigenous. This runs contrary to what happened in Latin America during the 1980s and the 1990s, where class consciousness contributed to Indigenous identity and social movements (Paredes in AnarchaLa 2010), encouraging them “to self-identify as campesinos [peasants]” (Jackson and Warren 2005, 551). This process of “reindianization” is visible in the “reinvention of the indianness with Morales’ presidency” (Kunin 2009, citing Svampa). The term campesino is still being used hand in hand with the term Indigenous. This can be seen in phrases like Indigenous socialism, which is based on the Aymara communitarian structure. It can also be seen in the use of denominatives like Indigenous peasant (campesino) unions.

The Morales administration has created a discourse that aligns with Indigenous rights, Indigenous identity, and the values that being Indigenous brings to society. One of these values, which according to Morales’ discourse differentiates Indigenous identity especially in the context of western-neoliberal countries, is the respect for and communion with Mother Earth. Nevertheless, in 2011, contrary to all their previous speeches on the protection of the environment, his government tried to build a highway that would have crossed and divided a national park and Indigenous territory with the discourse of bringing development to that area of the country; undoubtedly aligning himself with neoliberal politics of development at the expense of the environment and Indigenous living in that territory.

Morales’ duality of behavior is a prime example of the complexity of understanding oppression. While Morales has been demonstrative in policy-making that affirms and empowers Indigenous people, at the same time, the economics of development are so profitable that his commitment to the Indigenous is compromised. Is he an oppressor or is he oppressed? This is the nuanced territory of oppression that begs further discussion.

It is clear that the discourse of unity was broken to fulfill regional ambitions at the expense of “other” Indigenous (those who are not Aymaras or Quechuas), who did not agree with government development policies. Furthermore, the discourse became invisible when Evo Morales rejected the opportunity to have a dialog with lowland Indigenous people, undervaluing their requests and concerns, and allowing them to march “over 600 kilometers for more than 60 days” (Avila 2011) to the capital City, La Paz. They suffered inclement weather, thirst, and intolerable police repression in order to meet the president. The use of the image of the Indigenous
(lo indígena) as something that equals the protection of and respect for the Mother Earth becomes an essential part of Morales’ discourse. However, Kunin (2009) astutely pointed out, “Indigenous and being Indigenous is essentialized by outsiders like NGOs who are the ones that state what it is to be Indigenous, and who are Indigenous”. It is this simplistic, almost paternalistic view that envisions Indigenous as noble, kind, and one with the earth, that problematizes what is happening now in Bolivia with TIPNIS. This engenders questions as to who can claim Indigenous identity. The neoliberal interests of the current government tend to co-opt “Indigenous” and “Mother Earth” in ways that serve its “development” agenda, raising concerns about their future.

In distinguishing the term “Indigenous”, it is important to question in what ways Alteño hip hop artists understand and negotiate highland Indigenous identity vs. lowland Indigenous identity. How do they negotiate their belonging to the Aymara or Quechua culture? Both are the largest Indigenous cultural groups in Bolivia and have more political representation than lowland Indigenous communities. Gustafson (2002) mentioned that, “Aymara and Quechua symbols, languages, and cultural substrates pervade Bolivian identity formations of all types and contribute to the wider imaginary of Bolivian as an ‘Andean’ country” (5–6). Alteño hip hoppers advocate for one Bolivia where everyone is included independently of their race, ethnicity, or group affiliation. Future research is needed to observe how the hip hop movement has evolved and what has been proposed during these times of political turmoil. Taking into consideration that “youth tend to engage in horizontal political engagements” (Kunin 2009, 6) by rejecting formal or conservative forms of politics and engaging in more communitarian and direct ways of discussion, it will be interesting to see if the Alteño hip hop movement was able to maintain its original discourse of unity and equality by creating a sense of cohesion, unity, and cooperation independently of people’s different cultures, organizations, and territories.

Finally, it is important to take into account the Bolivian government’s double discourse of unity vis-à-vis actions of disrespect towards minority Indigenous groups and how this can affect movements like the Alteño hip hoppers. Barclay (2009) compared Morales to Mugabe’s racist government, referring to Morales as “The Mugabe of the Andes”. While I do not agree, it is imperative to analyze events like the TIPNIS decision and ask how far the brotherhood among different Indigenous groups can endure if some do not share the government’s views. It seems that power induces even those who are members of oppressed groups to forget their positionality. Power will transform an oppressed person into an oppressor if he or she has no true commitment to the people, or if he or she lacks a different vision of what development and community should be.

Conclusions

This study documents and analyzes how young people from El Alto use hip hop music to express their political, social, and economic concerns while asserting their Indigenous culture and history. It explains the use of hip hop as an educational instrument for the process of “healing” (Duncan-Andrade 2009). Healing is achieved through revolutionary education, and education that empowers people. As a result, people liberate themselves from the yoke of their oppressors. Hip hop is a means for ideas and identity expression and calls people to action; it is a “liberation process” (Freire 1993). Llajuas exemplified this idea as he stated,
“Our art not only criticizes … but I think it also proposes”. Through hip hop music, Alteño youth create a type of identity that reflects the significance of being Indigenous in Bolivia, and of being an urban migrant with rural ties, struggling with poverty, unemployment, and discrimination. Hip hop artists empower themselves through articulating their struggles and begin the process of healing from the act of silencing that they experience. This healing, however, can only be understood if it is carried out in a collective way, Duncan-Andrade (2009, 190) explained that we have a “collective capacity for healing”. People coming together in opposition to the oppressive system will be the only way that any revolutionary change can be implemented.

These young hip hoppers are trying to spread what Freire calls conscientização. It is meant to reach every level of society in order to create political, economic, and social reforms, while reclaiming and empowering Indigenous identities. Llajuas explained during an interview: “we’ve always preached that the art is a tool for transforming, for creating consciousness in the people”. One of the most important elements discovered is the young Alteños’ desire to educate the people, as the members of Wayna Rap explained: “To achieve this equality we need to educate ourselves and know ourselves, we want that, we need the same opportunities.” This element is based on Freire’s theory, which posits that education is a tool to liberate the oppressed from the yoke of the oppressors. The oppressor may not know he is oppressing other people; he is simply occupying his appropriate position in society. This is why it is so important to educate not only the oppressed but also the oppressors. As Wayna Rap stated: “whites, browns, mestizos, Indigenous, Indians, we can all live together. To achieve this equality we need to educate ourselves and know ourselves. We want that, we need the same opportunities.” To achieve this equity and equality, Freire (2000) firmly believed that the process and effectiveness of transformation wholly depended on the quality of education. Alteño youth, living in a context of material scarcity and oppression, are using what economics cannot control: their voices and their minds, to create, educate, and organize through their very political music.

Notes
1. “Ya lo habíamos advertido el hombre Aymara es mejor que el sistema.” The translation is mine.
2. Alteño makes reference to people from El Alto.
3. “El Alto always standing, never on their knees.” The translation is mine.
5. Latifundio: a massive extension of land, which belongs to a single owner. It is associated with farming and exploitative working conditions for the peasants living there.
6. “The land is owned by the one who works it.” The translation is mine.
8. Peasants.
9. Term used to name the people that were taken away by the government and never brought back.
11. The translation is mine. The term ch’ama was translated using the definition provided by Pueblos Originarios de América (n.d.): http://pueblosoriginarios.com/lenguas/aymara.html.
12. This quote and subsequent translations throughout the paper are mine unless otherwise stated.
13. “Gathered skirt worn over several petticoats” (Lazar 2008, 286).
15. Wool shawl.
17. This and the following quotes from Abraham Bojórquez were taken from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-V4l5QhwJb4&feature=related, unless otherwise stated.

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References


