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A City of Migrants in Rebellion: Democracy and Indigenous-Popular Experiences of El Alto's Gas War in 2003

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes popular experiences of the "Gas War," a massive popular uprising in Bolivia that took place in September-October 2003 against gas exportation promoted by the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (2002-2003). It focuses on the city of El Alto, the epicenter of the uprising. It contributes to the scholarly discussion on the Gas War by shedding light on how ordinary Alteños (people of El Alto) remember the war, or "the Massacre of September-October 2003" as many of them call it. The article investigates how their memories of the Massacre are tied to their struggles against discrimination, poverty, and racism, a struggle which shapes El Alto's history as a city of migrants from the countryside and provincial towns. It presents the testimonies of ordinary Alteños, and the performance of *Arriba El Alto*, a theatrical work of the city's troupe, in order to examine how their everyday experience of marginalization informs their memories of 2003. It explores how the discourse of the pueblo's struggle against the colonial-neoliberal state acquired concrete meanings for Alteños in 2003, which had to do with their own life struggle on the urban periphery. To analyze how their struggle was articulated with a broader political process at the national level, it delves into the notion of "Bolivia's Third Revolution in 2000-2005" proposed by several historians, and discusses meanings of democracy in El Alto, which relate to emancipatory projects of plurinational decolonization, as well as providing a discussion of the political conflict in Bolivia after the resignation of Evo Morales Ayma in November 2019. It argues that Alteños in 2003 made their city central to those projects by asserting their rights as citizens and creating their own space of democracy vis-à-vis the national state.

Keywords: Democracy, El Alto, Indigeneity, Popular rebellion, Revolution

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INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes popular experiences of the "Gas War," a massive popular uprising in Bolivia in September-October 2003 against gas exportation promoted by the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (2002-2003). Scholars and journalists have discussed the war largely as the culmination of indigenous-popular uprising in 2000-2003 against neoliberalism that was implemented by Supreme Decree 21060 in 1985 and the Laws of Capitalization passed during the first presidency of Sánchez de Lozada (1993-1997) (Gómez 2004; Gutiérrez 2008; J. Mamani [2006] 2013; P. Mamani [2005] 2010; Tapia et al. 2004; Webber 2011). The war ended on October 17, 2003, when Sánchez de Lozada fled to the U.S. and submitted his letter of resignation to the Congress by fax, amid immense popular protests centered in El Alto, a city built by indigenous (mostly Aymara) migrants from the surrounding countryside and mining towns. The "uproar of indigenous-popular multitude" in 2003, according to Pablo Mamani Ramírez ([2004] 2010, 204-205), created "new scenarios of social action and conflict," undermining "the dominant structures of power" monopolized by Bolivia's white and mestizo minority. The insurrectionary force of this multitude was articulated with broader national politics of anti-neoliberalism, which originated in the "Cochabamba Water War," the massive popular uprising against the privatization of public water services in Cochabamba in 2000.

The article contributes to the scholarly discussion on the Gas War by shedding light on how ordinary Alteños (people of El Alto) remember the war, or "the Massacre of September-October 2003" as many of them denominate it. The article investigates how their memories of the Massacre are tied with their struggle against discrimination, poverty, and racism, which has shaped El Alto's history as a city of migrants from the countryside and provincial towns. It presents testimonies of ordinary Alteños and *Arriba El Alto*, a theatrical work of the city's troupe, to examine how their everyday experience of marginalization informs their memories of 2003. It explores how the discourse of the pueblo's struggle against the colonial-neoliberal state acquired concrete meanings for alteños in 2003, which had to do with their own life struggle on the urban periphery. To analyze how their struggle was articulated with a broader political process at the national level, it delves into the notion of "Bolivia's Third Revolution in 2000-2005" proposed by several historians, and discusses meanings of democracy in El Alto, which relate to emancipatory projects of plurinational decolonization and the political conflict in Bolivia after

the resignation of Evo Morales Ayma in November 2019. It argues that Alteños in 2003 made their city central to those projects by asserting their rights as citizens and creating their own space of democracy vis-à-vis the national state.

CITY OF MIGRANTS: URBAN FORMATION IN EL ALTO

El Alto had been, according to Enrique Flores Gómez (resident of barrio Kiswara in the city), "like a small community and pueblo" before large numbers of migrants from the countryside and mining towns arrived in the city. "There were only the airport and the 6 de Marzo Avenue (the principal avenue in La Ceja, the administrative and commercial center of El Alto), nothing else" (interview, January 11, 2017). Flores and his wife Inés Pinto González (interview, January 11, 2017) moved from Caracollo, a provincial town in the Oruro Department, to El Alto in 1993. "In these twenty-five years in which we have been living, the City of El Alto" has become one of "the most populated cities in Bolivia." Flores and Pinto were among many young people who left the countryside and provinces to seek a decent job and better education for their children in the city. Migrants from the countryside and provinces mostly lack the professional skills required for urban residents to make a stable living in the city. Sixto Justo Solis Mamani (interview, January 23, 2017), migrant from Pacajes, says:

> Many migrants had been dedicated to cultivating, sowing potato seeds, cultivating *chuños* (dried potato cultivated in the Andes) and barley, everything agricultural. But when they arrive in the city, they don't know how to work because here mechanics, electricians, tailors are needed.

Many Alteños portray their lives in terms of their (and their parents') suffering, struggle, and survival in the city, where they have had to live a precarious life because of their lack of decent housing, material conveniences, sewage, household water, and professional skills. Solis underscores that many rural people moved to the city to escape the "abandoned" state of the countryside. "There was no school…there was no potable water…no electricity." The countryside was "totally forgotten" by many governments that have ruled Bolivia. For many rural people, migration to the city meant an exit from impoverishment and

marginalization, and a step toward social mobility that might help them attain to middle-class status.

Many Alteños also describe their lives in terms of their negative experiences of racism as Gonzalo Choquehuanca Quispe (alteño from barrio Río Seco in El Alto) does (interview, November 18, 2016). Urban people in the *Centro* (downtown) and the *Zona Sur* (middle- and upper-class residential areas of La Paz at lower altitude) "saw El Alto in a very peripheralizing, disrespectful, and self-distancing way, calling it a dangerous place," where criminals and uncivilized indians lived.[1] Residents of the Centro and the Zona Sur, according to Choquehuanca, maintain a colonial notion of savage indians, without making any effort "to understand the forms of cultural traditions and practices" of migrants from the countryside, mining towns, and provinces. "El Alto was growing" to become an urban space that did not conform to the Bolivian notion of city as *q'ara* (the Aymara word used in Bolivia to refer to white who may see her- or himself as mestizo but is seen as white by indigenous people). From the perspectives of q'aras, El Alto is an indian city, or *Chukiyawu* (the Aymara term usually translated as "the City," or "La Paz"), which has created in the minds of q'ara an abnormal space, where being urban does not correspond to modernity and progress. A city – inhabited by the indian masses– is not a space of civilization but a deviation from the norms that legitimize the colonial divide between indians/countryside/barbarism/backwardness and q'aras/city/civilization/progress.

El Alto is hardly an "orderly" urban space with a "uniformity of codes, identities, statistics, regulations, and measures," which, in James C. Scott's terminology (1999, 78; 83), renders its culture, economy, and people "legible" to policymakers in terms of social control administered by the state. For a long time, *juntas vecinales* (neighborhood associations) in El Alto have demanded that official authorities address the city's needs for basic urban infrastructures, such as garbage collection, medical center, public transportation, schools, sewage system, street lighting, and well-paved roads. With neither national, nor regional government taking care of those infrastructural needs, juntas vecinales played a role of *microgobierno barrial* (small barrio government) that has created its own practices and rules pertaining to residents' everyday lives and relations to official authorities (P. Mamani, [2005] 2010). As Sian Lazar (2008) highlights, juntas vecinales and other civic organizations, such as federations of artisans and merchants,

1 I do not capitalize "i" in "indian" because the term "does not refer to national origin" but ethnic groups (Canessa 2005, 24-25). I use "Indian" when discussing ideologies, intellectual discourses, and political projects, which consider Indians to be a nation.

have played the role of local mediator between the state and El Alto's barrios. Alto Lima, Los Andes, 12 de Octubre, 16 de Julio, Villa Bolívar, Villa Dolores, and Villa Tejada were among the first barrios alteños to organize their juntas vecinales in the 1950s (M. A. Quispe 2004). In 1957, they coalesced into the *Consejo Central de Vecinos de El Alto de La Paz*, demanding that the national and regional governments pay "greater attention" to El Alto's "social, economic, hygienic, and ornamental needs." Roads were mostly unpaved, with "municipal authorities" of La Paz taking no heed of the lack of plazas and medical facilities in El Alto. "Officials of the Urban Cadaster" made occasional visit to the barrios to "charge exaggerated amounts," which residents were forced to pay (Fernández 2015, 19; 22). In this context of urban periphery, the state was less a trustworthy authority of effective governance than an abusive power that extracted money out of poor people's pockets without doing anything to improve those people's lives.

The persistence of underdevelopment in El Alto is a cause for serious concern among alteños, who cannot but send their children to underfunded public schools, walk the unpaved streets with little street lighting at night, and use *minibuses* and *micros* (the two most common means of public transportation in El Alto and La Paz, which are known for their irregular fare and inconvenience). Another serious issue is public security (Mollericona et al. 2007). La Ceja is particularly notorious for prevalence of robbery and other crimes involving violent assaults (*El Alteño*, February 19, 2017). What Daniel M. Goldstein (2012) argues in his analysis of relations between the state and marginal barrios in Cochabamba finds strong resonance in El Alto. The "spectral figure of the *ratero*" (burglar) epitomizes the criminal violence, which residents of Bolivia's marginal barrios daily face (5). Alteños often complain about the incapacity and even unwillingness of official authorities to protect them from burglars. The official authority, personified by the police, is a threat to the people's safety, and one Alteño noted that some rateros "have pacts with several police" (*El Alteño*, February 19, 2017). The state in El Alto connotes a negligent power that virtually abandons citizens' daily needs but still seeks to impose its rules of administrative jurisdiction, politics, and taxation upon the people. For people of barrios, the state is like a "phantom" that haunts them and makes them wary of its intrusion. It does not exist in a concrete form of system that creates a safe and stable living environment for citizens but stands for an abstract power that encroaches on people's lives (Goldstein 2012, 77-119).

This is not to say that alteños totally reject state intervention in their

barrios. They certainly would welcome a state that helps them make a living, but mostly do not see a state that effectively serves them. Their relationship with the state involves mistrust and skepticism on their part; the state represents a system that "does not protect against insecurity" (Goldstein 2012, 6). Their mechanisms of self-defense, such as private security (for those who can afford it) and lynching of suspected criminals, "undermine state monopoly" of legitimate use of violence, further weakening the authority of the state as a governing body (Mollericona et al. 2007, 88). Lynching particularly reinforces the image of El Alto as a "lawless" city, where passersby can be lynched by a disorderly mob without evidence but simply because of their "criminal-like" appearances and behaviors (Luna 2016). When people in La Paz say, "El Alto is dangerous," they allude not only to the prevalence of crimes but also to lynching that can victimize anybody seen as suspicious by Alteños. Lamentably, for most Alteños who are not privileged enough to access formal bureaucratic processes of legal justice, violence is one of few available means, by which they can protect themselves from "possible criminals" and express their concern about public unsafety.

The rise of *qamiris* (rich Aymara merchants) in El Alto has changed the negative view of the "indian city" to a certain extent. With Aymara merchants who have accumulated a large sum of money through commerce and built their edifices in the luxurious style known as cholet, El Alto is no longer exclusively associated with impoverishment and material deprivation (M.A. Quispe 2017). Cholets in El Alto display brilliantly colored images combined with elements from the preconquest symbolism of Tiwanaku, in order to display the economic power of qamiris. If the Chukiyawu imagined by q'aras is a space of indian backwardness and barbarism, qamiris represent a different Chukiyawu that is economically powerful and controls the circulation of most goods consumed by Bolivians, including q'aras. In this sense, Chukiyawu is not just a racialized space of oppression and subordination but creates a form of Aymara modernity (Untoja 2012).

In a cultural and political context shaped by the rise of ethnic and racial politics of indigeneity since the 1980s, the multicultural reforms in the mid-1990s, and the election of the first self-identified indigenous president in 2005, qamiris have come to symbolize an "alternative" modernity. Proponents of this modernity argue that it would substitute not only for "Western" model of modernization but also for the romanticizing vision of indigeneity as rural and communitarian (Humérez 2019; Untoja 2012). Roger Adán Chambi Mayta, Alteño of barrio Amig

Chaco in El Alto and member of Aymara Youth Collective *Curva del Diablo*, argues that whites and mestizos denominate qamiris "Aymara bourgeoises" in a colonial-racist mode:

> It's like the q'ara saying, "You are rich, and therefore, bourgeois, but not as civilized as we are. You are not bourgeois like us, but Aymara bourgeois who is different from us. We are not like you." This is a discrimination against Aymaras in a despicably new way (interview, El Alto, February 10, 2017).

While El Alto is no longer a periphery in national economy and politics, it remains so in the imagination of those who keep identifying indigeneity with backwardness and archaic past. The phenomenon of qamiris has disrupted the social boundaries that have demarcated the sphere of white/civilization/power and that of indian/barbarism/subordination. This was especially true after 2000-2003, when El Alto played a central role in generating the political process that led to the election of Evo Morales as Bolivia's first indigenous president.

ALTEÑOS' MEMORY OF THE GAS WAR

Arriba El Alto, theatrical work by *Teatro Trono of Fundación COMPA (Comunidad de Productores en Artes)*, represents Alteños' memory of the Massacre in September-October 2003, which informs the popular consciousness of history and politics in El Alto. It exhibits a history of El Alto from migrants' arrival in the city to the Massacre. In it, migrants from the countryside and those from the mines are initially wary of each other because of their different social origins indicated by their costumes. This leads to their conflict represented by the tug of war, in which migrants wearing mining helmets and t-shirts fight those dressed in *awayu* (Aymara and Quechua woven blanket) and *lluch'u* (Andean hat woven from llama or alpaca wool). They, however, end up waging the same struggle against insecurity, poverty, and racism. Different scenes describe their lives troubled by precarious living and working conditions in barrios that are neglected by official authorities. The El Alto staged by Teatro Trono is a space of struggle, where migrants from the countryside and the mines strive to make a living despite all the hardships that haunt their city. The city is also a space of the birth of a new generation personified by the children of migrants. Ángel, a son of migrants, falls in love with Victoria from

another migrant family. Their love affair, however, tragically ends in October 2003, when Ángel is fulfilling his mandatory military service and sent to El Alto to quell Alteños' rebellion against gas export. He and Victoria run into each other on the streets in El Alto. He disobeys his captain's order to shoot at Victoria and other Alteños. The captain summarily executes him, leaving Victoria afflicted with a deep pain of losing her lover. With her grievous cry resounding through the stage, the play proceeds to the final scene, where the names of victims of the Massacre in September-October 2003 are projected onto the screen.

The Alteños depicted by *Arriba El Alto* are a pueblo rooted in the struggle for making a living on the urban periphery and against the state that victimizes them. This struggle gives them an identity as members of "rebel city" (Lazar 2008). The death of Ángel pains his city that remembers him as its son struggling for its dignity; he is a hero for Alteños neglected by the state, stigmatized as backward, racialized as indians, and discriminated by q'aras who perpetuate the colonial and racist system of social exclusion. When the military kills him and many other Alteños, it reveals the oppressive nature of the Bolivian state founded upon colonialism that exploits, marginalizes, and kills indians.

Gas became a central political issue in 2003 not only because of its strategic importance in national economy but also because it came to symbolize the unmet need of the popular majority. As Roberto de la Cruz, a leader of the COR (*Central Obrera Regional*), underscores, "clearly there was no other way. We in the altiplano continue cooking with firewood and dung. It was impossible to tolerate gringos having gas ahead of us" (E. Mamani 2016). The indigenous-popular forces, unleashed during the Gas War, powerfully evinced the indignation of the poor majority at the state that only served the interests of the ruling minority and foreign interests. Antonio Mamani Calani (interview, October 14, 2016), a leader of *La Asociación de las Víctimas de la Massacre de Septiembre-Octubre de 2003*, said "We struggled for the liberation of our pueblo" and "against another sellout to transnational capital" that impinged on the life and dignity of the people. As the Sánchez de Lozada government sent soldiers with tanks to crush El Alto's struggle in October 2003, it made itself an illegitimate power to the eyes of Alteños; from their perspective, it brutalized people's lives in order to give away the nation's natural resources to foreign interests.

Luis Villca Gavincha (interview, October 12, 2016), a bookseller on the Sucre Avenue near the UPEA (*Universidad Pública de El Alto*) and a victim of the state violence in September-October 2003, said that the Gas War represented "a historic era…More than 70 people died" in defense

of their nation's gas, which "the bloody government of Goni" (Sánchez de Lozada's nickname) wanted to "hand over to gringos." The Gas War was a struggle not only of Alteños but also of "people of Sorata and Warisata" who made "barricades and resistance" in defense of gas. Defense Minister Carlos Sánchez Berzaín led the military operation to rescue foreign tourists who were stranded in Sorata because of the communitarian blockades of the highways in the altiplano. During the operation that was carried out on September 20, the military killed five civilians − including an eight-year old child − and injured dozens in Sorata and Warisata. The demand of the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada became nationwide after the massacre of September 20 (Gutiérrez 2008, 253). The CSUTCB (*Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesionos de Bolivia*) declared "the state of siege in the Aymara Nation" after the massacre (F. Quispe 2013, 62). "Mallku" Felipe Quispe Huanca, the general secretary of the CSUTCB, argued that "Sánchez Berzaín has stained himself with the blood of indigenous peasants. If they want a war, we will have to go to that war…We can't continue being massacred" (*Bolpress*, September 24, 2003).

Comunarios of Warisata declared civil war against the government the day after the military attacked their community. Some comunarios said that the massacre had provoked an "armed struggle" of the community against the colonial state. The COR "declared a state of emergency" in El Alto, "announced a radical struggle against the government," assured its solidarity with indigenous peasants, and demanded "the resignation" of the president and "murderer Carlos Sánchez Berzaín" (P. Mamani [2004] 2010, 141-142; *La Razón*, September 22, 2003). Roberto de la Cruz underscored that the upcoming marches and struggles of Alteños "will not be peaceful, since the government raised arms to repress our brothers in the countryside" (*Bolpress*, September 24, 2003). Leaders of the CSUTCB held an emergency meeting in Radio San Gabriel at Villa Adela in El Alto, where they had waged the hunger strike since September 9 against gas export. Residents of Villa Adela and other barrios around Radio San Gabriel "came out onto the streets" to set up *defensa barrial* with "bonfire, sticks, and stones" in defense of CSUTCB leaders, whom the police and soldiers attempted to arrest (F. Quispe 2013, 63). In the words of Hilda Mayta, an Alteña from barrio Amig Chaco and participant in that defensa barrial:

> Every leader from the provinces entered Radio San Gabriel. [The police] was going to disappear [those leaders]. [The police] kept striking the entrances of Radio San Gabriel to attack the leaders...We went to Radio San Gabriel

> in defense of CSUTCB leaders. We set fire to tires and gave coca to the leaders. They too invited us to coca. We chewed coca together. On all the streets, we came out in defense. We rebelled like that every day and every night in defense of gas and our leaders until [Goni] was gone (interview, January 13, 2020).

"A complex fabric of collective identity" brought together El Alto and Sorata/Warisata in the war against the colonial-neoliberal state (P. Mamani [2004] 2010, 143). "Mallku" Quispe (2013, 63) puts it this way: "We're no longer alone. The bloody event in Warisata has perforated the 'rock heart' (*corazón de piedra*) of residents of the City of Tupak Katari (El Alto de La Paz)." "The declaration of civil war," according to Pablo Mamani ([2004] 2010), rendered the Bolivian state "illegitimate" in the communitarian territory that was created across El Alto and the rural altiplano. "The state" was "removed, at least symbolically" from the political territory determined by indigenous logics of communitarian belonging and autonomy (146-147). In El Alto, the indigenous territoriality took the form of microgobiernos barriales that "were articulated in the form of mobilized multitudes" making collective decision on "political actions and control of the territory" during the war against the colonial-neoliberal state. "The state disappeared from the City of El Alto" as "microgobiernos barriales were converted into the central spaces of political power" articulated by marches and assemblies of residents on the streets of each barrio. "Subaltern symbols, such as wiphala, the pride of speaking Aymara, and having knowledge on Andean religious practices," reinforced "urban indigenous identity and rural-urban solidarity" among Alteños (P. Mamani [2005] 2010, 230-231).

Gonzalo Choquehuanca (interview, November 18, 2016) says, "No one thought what happened [in October 2003] would turn out that way…it's little bit funny in that sense." He left his house in Río Seco to hang out on "that Saturday (October 11, 2003) as he used to do on weekends… Suddenly soldiers arrived," shooting at people. On that day, the government of Sánchez de Lozada militarized El Alto, and sent soldiers with tanks to break the blockades of the plant of YPFB (*Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos*), where Alteños and miners from Huanuni obstructed transfer of fuel to the City of La Paz. James Dunkerley identifies the military in El Alto during the Gas War with what René Zavaleta Mercado calls "the classical army, the essential reason for which is the fear of" indian race war against q'aras (Dunkerley 2007, 138; Zavaleta 1983, 51). The state deployed its armed forces "to resist the siege of the indians…, that atavism known as Tupaj Katari," the Aymara leader of anticolonial rebellion

that laid devastating siege to La Paz in 1781 (Zavaleta 1983, 51).

EL ALTO AND BOLIVIA'S REVOLUTIONARY TIMES: 1781, 1952, AND 2000-2003

On October 12, the day with the highest death toll (twenty-six deaths and 90-100 wounded) in the Gas War, which is remembered as "Death Sunday" among Alteños, an Alteña spoke to Radio Pachamama of El Alto, "Soldiers, they [Alteños] are like you. Why are you killing your brothers?" (Gómez 2004, 99) As Ramiro Quispe from Villa Ingenio (interview, November 15, 2016) commented, "Whites go to the Military Academy to be captains, colonels, and generals, but many of those conscripts are only doing their mandatory service as we did. They are like us." The "hierarchy" between "indians and q'aras," determine "the [racial] division···in the [Bolivian] armed forces," which corresponds with the colonial social structure of Bolivia (Apaza 2014, 6).

Cigmar García, a soldier of Chúa Regiment, refused to shoot on Alteños during the regiment's operation on Death Sunday. His captain summarily executed him for disobeying the order. Residents of barrio Villa Ingenio ⁻where he died⁻ honored him with flowers and a poster at the site of his death (Gómez 2004, 96-97).[2] They remember him as "one of us," who are marginalized, exploited, impoverished, and victimized by q'aras. From the perspective of Alteños, Cigmar García is like Ángel in *Arriba El Alto*, who is a conscript from a marginal barrio, or rural community and ordered by q'aras to kill people of his pueblo. Here the system of mandatory military service is seen as part of colonial system that makes conscripts brutalize their people. This system "subordinates and instrumentalizes" indigenous soldiers who are discriminated according to "the hierarchy determined" by colonial distinction (Apaza 2014, 6).

Cigmar García's death might be comparable to those of the three military nationalist presidents ⁻Germán Busch (1937-1939), Gualberto Villarroel (1943-1946), and Juan José Torres (1970-1971)⁻ who, in the Bolivian nationalist historiography, sacrificed their lives to defend the pueblo against the antinational state. Busch committed suicide on August 23, 1939, after he failed to take the monopolistic control of mining industry away from La Rosca, the tin oligarchy that dominated the Bolivian economy and

2 The Sánchez de Lozada government insisted that Cigmar García was beaten and killed by Alteños. The plausibility of the government's narrative of Cigmar's death is doubtful given the political context of intense conflicts in El Alto in 2003, when Alteños were "in no mood to honor the death of just any soldier" (Webber 2011, 222).

politics from the 1920s to the National Revolution of 1952 (Céspedes [1956] 1968). Villarroel died at the hands of La Rosca, hacendados, and their communist allies, who were appalled at his pro-indigenous policy and the alleged Nazi affiliation of some members of his government (Céspedes 1966). Torres fell victim to Operation Condor on June 2, 1976, five years after he was overthrown by the coup led by Colonel Hugo Banzer Suárez, whose dictatorial regime (1971-1978) crushed the working-class project of the Popular Assembly spearheaded by the FSTMB (*Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia*) and the POR (*Partido Obrero Revolucionario*) (Dunkerley, 1984: 231-232; Zavaleta, 1974). In Alteños' memory, Cigmar ¬and Ángel in Arriba El Alto¬ lost his life because of his loyalty to the pueblo.

Cigmar/Ángel, Busch, Villarroel, and Torres may commonly represent a military of the pueblo, which creates a symbolic unity of the nation against the antinational-colonial state. Yet, the nation of Cigmar/Ángel is different from that of Busch, Villarroel, and Torres, who personify the mid-twentieth century Bolivian nationalism represented by the MNR (*Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario*) and its National Revolution. MNR nationalism, known as *nacionalismo revolucionario* in Bolivia, sought to forge a mestizo homogeneity, negating class, ethnic and regional differences (Céspedes [1936] 2004; Montenegro [1943] 2003). On the contrary, the nationalism expressed on the streets of El Alto in October 2003 was, in the words of Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2008), rooted in "plebeian and communitarian democracy," which was articulated by slogans, such as "Constituent Assembly with no traditional political parties," "Refoundation of the nation," and "Reconstitution of Qullasuyu" (280). As underscored by many historians (Choque 2014, 170-225; Gotkowitz 2007; Rivera [1984] 2010, 81-137; Rivera and Lehm [1988] 2013), a plebeian-communitarian force critically determined the political process in the 1930s-1940s, which led to the MNR's seizure of power in April 1952. In that process, "workers, peasants, and [i]ndians…occupied public space, asserted the right to participate in the configuration of power and the economy, and insisted on an end to the [colonial] discrimination" that "symbolized (and continues to symbolize) the deep structures of racism" (Gotkowitz 2007, 288). In both 1952 and 2003, indians, peasants, and workers played a decisive role as a rebellious force that confronted the structural problems of internal colonialism in Bolivia. Scholars make an analogy between 2003 and 1952 based on the centrality of indigenous-popular uprisings to the political processes that produced a nationalist state (1952) and a plurinational state (2009).

This analogy –and historical continuity it implies– is central to the discussion on "Bolivia's Third Revolution" (Dunkerley 2007). Forrest Hylton and Sinclair Thomson (2007) argue that, in 2000-2005, indigenous anticolonialism was articulated with nationalism of peasants and workers of 1952. From Thomson's perspective, the MNR's criollo-mestizo intellectuals and most of their Marxist counterparts negated the historic connection of 1952 with 1781, a time of the massive Aymara insurgency that aspired to destroy Spanish colonialism and create a world, where "Indians alone will rule" (Thomson 2002, 2003). The relationship between Aymara anticolonialism and nationalism of the popular masses is, in the words of Hylton and Thomson (2007), like "a charged encounter that brings together two distinguishable parts of an Andean community" (xxiii). It could be somewhat controversial to consider 1781 to be Bolivia's first revolutionary moment as Hylton and Thomson do. As many Aymara intellectuals (Macusaya 2019; P. Mamani 2017) argue, Aymara anticolonialism of 1781 represented an Indian power rejecting all aspects of the colonial rule that privileged criollos. From the Aymara anticolonial perspective, "Bolivia" is a category that subjugates indians to a colonial nation invented by criollos. 1781 has been a baffling historical problem for criollo and mestizo intellectuals as well. As Thomson (2003) himself underscores, intellectuals of the MNR viewed 1781 as a dangerous time of indian extremism that sought to exterminate everything seen as q'ara and set up an Indian rule:

> The severed head of Túpaj Katari could find no convenient niche in the nationalist pantheon. Yet even if ethnic and class antagonism were downplayed···there was still the awkward problem of Indian rule, whether over themselves or over others. Ultimately then, despite the different strategic recourse available for historical representation, there was no natural and straightforward way to reconcile the anticolonialism of 1781 with the nationalism of 1952 (130).

The reconciliation of 1781 with 1952 became possible in the unsettled moment of indigenous-popular insurgency in 2000-2003, which simultaneously confronted neoliberals and q'aras. On September 8, 2003, when Aymara peasants of the CSUTCB, students of the UPEA, and workers from the COR marched together in La Ceja, they sang, "*Despierta Bolivia despierta. Los gringos quieren el gas. Obreros y campesinos, unidos defenderemos el futuro de Bolivia*". These lyrics written by Roberto de la Cruz, according to "Mallku" Quispe (2013), are "very 'Bolivian nationalist' (*bolivianista*) and 'classist,'" which does not necessarily harmonize with Aymara

anticolonialism (27). Quispe alludes to the "two Bolivias," whose relationship is structured by internal colonialism. The Bolivia criticized in Quispe's discourse is what Fausto Reinaga ([1970] 2001) calls "the white-mestizo (*cholaje blanco*) Bolivia" that has enslaved the Indian Bolivia. In this discourse, Indians constitute a distinct nation/race with its own vision of national-racial emancipation, which rejects both MNR nationalism and the Marxist notion of class struggle (Kim 2020). Nevertheless, the Bolivian nationalist and classist lyrics of De la Cruz, "help[ed] us heal the neoliberal sickness, and the fatigue of the [colonial] domination, exploitation, oppression, and racism" (Quispe 2013, 37).

The articulation between 1781 and 1952 in 2000-2003 was a complicated process that had to do with diverse popular experiences of the political crisis from the Water War to the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada. Pablo Beque Párraga, a member of Wayna Tambo in Villa Dolores in El Alto, says, "what happened at that time" related to people's "everyday things in life" even if "the people at that time came together…also for something national" (interview, November 18, 2016). "Many young people died at that time," said Nelson Ticona, Alteño from barrio Santiago II. "The government killed our future" represented by those young people. These were people who "worked every day for their families. They were our brothers and sisters, our friends, our neighbors, who walked with us" (interview, February 6, 2017). Ticona expresses a strong sense of identification with the victims of state violence. Those victims are like family, friends, neighbors, comrades, and other people, with whom Alteños intimately interact in their everyday lives. In that sense, their experience of the state violence in 2003 was a highly personalized event that disrupted the normal rhythms of daily life in a destructive and violent way.

During the liturgy that was held two days after Death Sunday in homage to those killed by the armed forces, Father Modesto Chino, parish priest of barrio Senkata, said:

> The only thing we ask for is justice. When people are deceived or someone lies to them, they become angry. The pueblo is fighting for a dream, hoping for better days (*El Alteño* 2007)

As Nelson Ticona (interview, February 6, 2017) comments, "we [Alteños] came here to the city" with the hope that "we have access to education, electricity, potable water" and basic rights guaranteed to citizens but denied to "us." State violence in October 2003 caused a violent rupture in the history of "our city" that was a historic product of "our struggle" for

those rights. The ideological discourses of the pueblo's struggle against neoliberal looting and colonial oppression aptly resonated with Alteños, whose personal struggles for better life were persistently obstructed by systemic racism and their persistent marginalization in society. In this context, the state signified an illegitimate system of oppression that trampled on the people's lives and had to be replaced by a legitimate form of political participation and representation. While microgobiernos barriales temporarily governed El Alto during October 2003, the city's demand for an alternative organ of governance was soon articulated with the national call for the Constituent Assembly that would rewrite the National Constitution and lead to the creation of the Plurinational State (Gutiérrez 2008, 280; P. Mamani 2010 [2005]; Schavelzon 2012).

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRACY AND POPULAR REBELLIONS IN EL ALTO

In El Alto's history, October 2003 was a unique moment, when the city's organizations set aside their sectoral differences and came together as a coherent bloc to wage a civil war against the national government. In his letter of resignation, Sánchez de Lozada insisted that he, as constitutionally mandated president, wanted to protect Bolivian democracy (*El Alteño* 2007), but his view of democracy was irreconcilable with those of El Alto, which were rooted in daily experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and popular struggle. His constitutional mandate did not matter much once the existing constitutional system itself became discredited to the eyes of the indigenous-popular majority who demanded an alternative to it. Democracy in this context was articulated as a form of insurgent politics to remove the president seen as a representative of the colonial-neoliberal oppression, and as a popular force that would play an important role in rewriting the Constitution through the Constituent Assembly in 2006-2009. This plebeian-insurgent democracy made Bolivia in 2000-2003 a revolutionary site of the articulation of a political process that generated a legitimate possibility of eliminating the colonial-racist social structure and of empowering the historically dominated indigenous-popular pueblos. As one Alteño (personal communication, October 19, 2016) noted, El Alto's central role in that process was what made the city "a capital of the revolution."

Raquel Gutiérrez (2008) argues that the indigenous-popular force, unleashed in El Alto during the Gas War, converted the city into a space

of radical democracy determined by "emancipatory capacity of the [popular] movements of insubordination" against global capital and the state (264). Creating and maintaining that capacity is, according to her, indispensable for what she calls "communitarian-popular" process of social emancipation, which produces "autonomous forms of collective coexistence and political self-regulation" (347). The massive indigenous-popular rebellions in Bolivia in 2000-2003 generated a genuine possibility of social emancipation through "communitarian actions of resistance and struggle to transform social, economic, and political relations," which allowed for "autonomous collective decision and social regulation" by historically marginalized sectors of Bolivian society (41). In Gutiérrez's analysis, October 2003 was "one of the most decisive points of···social antagonism" that had been accumulated since the Water War and intensified through the Aymara blockades in the altiplano in 2000 and 2001. The communitarian-popular struggle against the colonial-neoliberal state had reached the point of "a generalized civil war" by 2003, when the state itself no longer represented a legitimate polity of governance and the political force of El Alto generated "a kind of *de facto autonomous interregnum" (interregno autonómico fáctico)* that created "*open possibilities*" of social emancipation in Bolivia (264-265; 269-270).

Gutiérrez's theory aptly explains the centrality of diverse local actors across the altiplano and Cochabamba to the political process leading up to the Gas War in 2003. Several anthropologists examine how that process related to distinct forms of non-liberal citizenship rooted in ethnic belonging, and/or collective organization (Lazar 2008; Postero 2007). As Lazar (2008) notes, "a kind of direct democracy" ruled El Alto in October 2003, when "the common will against a government" determined the forms of legitimate politics for the Bolivian pueblo. The "victories" of the pueblo "would not have been possible without the mundane experiences of collective democracy that are part of Alteños' day-to-day lives" (257). By "collective democracy," Lazar means a form of political participation in a range of civic associations and neighborhood organizations, which sets daily rhythms of the people's everyday lives regarding housing, mutual support, public safety, and dealing with the state. Authoritarianism and corruption are prevalent in El Alto's civic associations and neighborhood organizations. Nevertheless, many Alteños believe that political processes in their civic associations and neighborhood organizations are "much more democratic than liberal representative democracy" (237). As Pablo Mamani ([2005] 2010) suggests, this form of democracy, in October 2003, "was articulated" as "complex and unified whole of small territorial governments in each

district and barrio in order to mobilize strategies of collective action and urban Aymara-popular identities" in opposition to the colonial-neoliberal state and "the dominant white-mestizo groups" (228).

The indigenous-popular victory in Bolivia in 2000-2003 and the subsequent "process of change" under the MAS (*Movimiento Al Socialismo*) provoked intense debates on decolonization and indigeneity (Cameron 2013; Canessa 2006; Fabricant 2013; Hylton and Thomson 2007; Hylton et al. [2003] 2005; P. Mamani [2004] 2010; Postero 2007; 2010; 2013; 2017; Rivera 2010; Schavelzon 2012). In those debates, democracy means not simply the electoral process of popular voting, through which a set of leaders is elected to govern supposedly on behalf of the people and governing institutions of the state acquire a formal legitimacy. The Bolivian government during the first presidency of Sánchez de Lozada amended the Constitution to redefine Bolivia as a multiethnic and pluricultural nation. The constitutional amendment officially incorporated the notion of "ethnic citizenship" (Montoya 1998) into the national system that promoted neoliberal multiculturalism implemented through a series of reforms, including the Intercultural Bilingual Education Law, the Law of National Institute of Agrarian Reform, and the Law of Popular Participation. Nancy Postero (2007) argues that "indigenous actors embraced the democratic potentials of th[ose] reforms and contested the exclusions inherent in them" (6). In the process, indigenous-popular groups "forged alternative repertoires of representation, participation, and leadership," which opened "a new era of citizenship practices and contestation focused on redefining the state and popular access to it" (6).

Here citizenship is not "purely a legal status consisting of the individual ownership of a set of rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the state" but a political practice "to resist and transform racialized structures" on the part of marginalized indigenous citizens (Lazar 2008, 3; Postero 2013, 114). This citizenship is a mode of "politics as a process of emancipation," which is actualized in concrete forms of popular contestation of "the existing order" upheld by a codified set of sociopolitical control and regulations (Postero 2017, 17). As James Holston (2008) argues in his study of "insurgent citizenship" in urban peripheries of São Paulo, "democracy" for the marginalized masses "disrupts established formulas of rule and their hierarchies of place and privilege," which are legitimized by the legal systems of state institutions (14). In the Bolivian context, democracy needs to be understood as a form of politics against "the seemingly natural order" of things, and entails citizenship that "undermin[es] and confront[s] the unequal and power-laden worlds" (Postero 2017, 17;

Roseberry 1994, 357). Decolonization and indigeneity became central components of the Bolivian "language of contention" (Roseberry 1994), which the MAS shrewdly incorporated into its ideological discourse. "[T]hose" historically "excluded from power bec[a]me legible political subjects…to decolonize, develop, and refashion their country as a plurinational indigenous state" (Postero 2017, 17). El Alto's central role in creating that state made the city a center of Bolivian democracy that challenged the legally entrenched system of discrimination.

Evo Morales justified his controversial run for fourth presidential term by invoking the indigenous pueblo. "It's not Evo, but the pueblo…I don't want. But neither can I disappoint my pueblo…I don't look for positions, the pueblo looks for me" (Pardo 2017). His government identified his power with that of Bolivia's indigenous-popular pueblo. Indigeneity here functioned as a symbolic language to represent the Bolivian pueblo in a way that legitimized his grip on power. This use of indigeneity created many problems that diluted the democratic possibility generated during 2000-2003. The Morales government shifted its focus from indigenous rights to economic development through what Eduardo Gudynas (2010) calls "progressive neo-extractivism," after it promulgated the Plurinational Constitution in 2009. "[T]he 'indigenous' government consolidated power over decision-making about national development and natural resource extraction," which often clashed with indigenous actors with their own agendas about land, territory, and community rights (Postero 2017, 93). In dealing with dissident indigenous groups, the Morales government often denigrated them as proxies of foreign NGOs, the right-wing oligarchy, and/or the U.S. empire, which "resented" having their sectoral interests set aside by a greater national agenda of decolonization (García 2011; 2013). It argued that it embodied "the synthesis of the common interests" of the pueblo and that indigenous nations mostly supported its policy of national development (García 2011, 117). This was the logic, which it used when it violently repressed the marches against highway construction penetrating territories of the Moxeño, Yuracaré, and Chimane nations in TIPNIS (*Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécure*). Indigenous marches in defense of the constitutionally guaranteed territorial rights in TIPNIS defied the state that bestowed itself with an authority to determine the range of acceptable forms of indigenous politics, or what Charles Hale (2005) denominates "authorized indians" (*indio permitido*). The Morales government did not hide its intention to monopolize the use of critical concepts, such as decolonization and indigeneity, which provoked criticism of many feminist, indigenous, and leftist activists and intellectuals (Galindo

2013; Gutiérrez 2017; Lewis 2012; P. Mamani 2017; Rivera 2015). In this context, those concepts became increasingly associated with the partisan interests of the MAS, and "lost much of [their] original emancipatory meaning" in Bolivian political debates (Postero 2017, 93).

During Morales's third term (2014-2019), the rightist opposition utilized the term "democracy" for its own partisan interest to defeat what it called "the leftist dictatorship" that it insisted promoted reverse racism against the white-mestizo minority. In the opposition's discourse of democracy, El Alto was often portrayed as a bastion of a MAS dictatorship (*Página Siete* 2019). The MAS-affiliated (*MASista*) image of El Alto was reinforced during the "wiphala rebellion," when thousands of Alteños mobilized after supporters of "democracy" burned down the wiphala (a 7-by-7 square flag of seven colors arranged diagonally; a millenarian symbol of indigenous Andean nations) in the principal plaza of La Paz in celebration of the resignation of Morales on November 10, 2019 (*Pukara* No. 160, 2019). The self-proclaimed Jeanine Áñez Chávez government (2019-2020) and other "democracy" groups criticized the MAS for instigating seditious subversive riots and forcing Alteños to march against her democratic government of transition set up in the wake of Morales's resignation. In the government's narrative, Alteños were either fanatic adherents to the leftist dictatorship, who were controlled by the manipulative MAS, or powerless citizens terrorized by MAS-affiliated agitators and vandals, many of whom were from Cuba and Venezuela. Under the democracy promoted by the self-proclaimed government and the anti-MAS civic sectors, known as *pititas*, antigovernment protests with indigenous symbols, such as wiphala, are part of a broad leftist conspiracy and need to be oppressed by any means necessary (*Página Siete* 2019). The brutal military operations in Senkata and Sacaba (Cochabamba) left dozens of citizens dead while the government celebrated the restoration of democracy and the return of the Bible to the presidential palace. In the words of Felipe Quispe (2019), "with the Bible in hand, [the government] sends [soldiers] and orders [them] to massacre in Sacaba and Senkata…For the new politics of racist right, the indian…is a danger. With the Bible in hand, it labeled indians vandals and terrorists, and burned their ancestral wiphala." The post-Evo democracy did not tolerate antigovernment protests of the people, who were legitimately infuriated by the public burning of their indigenous symbol and concerned with the government's use of colonial symbols, such as the Bible, in criminalizing them.

One Alteña (interview, January 15, 2020) said, "They talk about democracy, but why do they kill us?" From her perspective, the democracy

of "this government" has reinscribed the colonial system of oppression, under which indian lives do not matter, and serves only the white-mestizo minority. "They say we rose up [in November] because we were paid" by the MAS, "that's not true, we fought for ourselves. When whites marched [against Evo], the military and the police did not touch them. But, when we did against Áñez, they shot at us. We fought against this discrimination." A leader of the junta vecinal of Senkata (interview, January 4, 2020) commented, "It was so sad. We were so terrified by the current government that sent a helicopter and soldiers to shoot at us." As for the government's accusation of "foreign agitators," he emphasized:

> We differentiated between foreigners and our people based on skin color and the accent they used. The current government says we were instigated by foreigners. No. I as a leader respond to the demand of the base, residents of my barrio. We mobilized in response to that demand when we marched against the government. The base decided it.

In his words, Alteños opposed to the self-proclaimed government are separate from "agitators" who do not belong to El Alto. To be sure, many Alteños opposed to the government support the MAS and consider Evo Morales to be their legitimate president who share their experience of discrimination, marginalization, and poverty. Current politics in El Alto, however, needs to be understood in terms that go beyond the binary opposition between an indigenous government of Morales and a colonial fascist right. Such a dichotomy falsely identifies El Alto's politics with partisan interests and reduces the city's democracy to support for a charismatic individual leader.

The Gas War remains a central point of historical reference for many Alteños when they understand the political conflict after the resignation of Morales. Iván Apaza Calle (2019) of Jichha, an Aymara youth collective in El Alto, underscores that they are "the veterans of 2003," historically rooted in anticolonialism of 1781 and their struggle in "an Aymara city of migrants". Their criticism of the self-proclaimed government indicates their understanding of their city's history, which relates to past moments of popular resistance, such as 1781 and 2003, and their collective memory of struggle, encompassing diverse personal experiences in the urban periphery. Citizenship and democracy, articulated through their rebellion, critically defy the government's version of democracy, which they see as another deceptive politics of domination, and express a political force that is more than the MAS and its process of change. The government "mixes us up with MAS-affiliates and vandals" in its call for "democracy"

that lamentably kills people in El Alto. "It is El Alto," not the MAS, "that is struggling" against this state violence justified in the name of democracy (Apaza 2019). Many uncertainties surround Bolivian society in the current moment shaped by the crisis in November 2019, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid the crisis, democracy has become a deeply loaded term utilized by different political groups for their partisan and sectoral interests. To understand what that term means for the country's indigenous-popular majority, it is necessary to delve into that majority's experiences of struggle, which are central to the people's understanding of their rights as democratic citizens. El Alto's history of migration, urban formation, and rebellions is an important case for that purpose.

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