

*Master of Philosophy in Visual Cultural Studies*

# **Collective Agency and Living Well**

## **Activism, Community Involvement and Poetics in El Alto, Bolivia**



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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

In a seemingly peripheral corner of one of the many dusty brick house neighbourhoods of El Alto, a line up of armed police stands in a protective line in front of a building. In front of them women are sitting on the pavement talking and knitting and by them a small crowd has gathered. The crowds' slogans can be heard from a distance where alteños<sup>1</sup> recognise them as part of the everyday "sound picture" of the city:

- *Comrades what do we want?*
- *The work to be done!*
- *What do we want?*
- *The work to be done!*
- *When?*
- *Now!*
- *When?*
- *Now!*

The women on the pavements, who have sat down for a little rest, join in when the slogans are being called out. They've been there for hours waiting for the government officials of district eight in El Alto to come out and answer their questions. The members of the parental boards of district eight are here to push the local government to keep their promises for more school equipment this year. I ask a lady if she can introduce me to one of the leaders of the parental boards, and she turns out to be one of them. "Can I ask you some questions?" I wonder. "Oh no", she says, "I am no good speaker, ask the vice-president of our school council, Marcelina, she knows how to speak". So I did. The vice-president of the local school of Barrio Cuatro, El Alto, was eager to speak to me. She turned to the camera and explained what the demonstration was about:

*The mayor isn't working [hard enough]. They're forgetting about education. They're not completing the projects they promised. Because the mayor comes from the working or peasant class... he thinks he has our confidence and that we can be silenced. But people*

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<sup>1</sup> People from El Alto.

*from El Alto are fighters. When the work isn't being done, there will always be demonstrations. We will always keep it up (...) Like that time when we made president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada step down (...). That's why we say: "El Alto on its feet, never on its knees", we have that saying here.*

Since the “gas-war” of 2003 this has been El Alto's public slogan, and even a small protest like this one is linked to the grand identity of El Alto people as fighters. Protests like this are everyday matters in this city. The fighting identity of people in El Alto has long historical roots, but took on a whole new dimension in October 2003 when thousands of *alteño* protestors took to the streets demanding control of Bolivia's gas resources. Over a hundred people died during the upheavals<sup>2</sup>, the majority *alteños*. Two presidents eventually had to withdraw, leading up to the historic victory of Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales who won on a platform of nationalization and constitutional reform. From that moment, the people of El Alto knew they mattered.

This thesis is an attempt at understanding what this heightened sense of agency is about, how it is produced and reproduced, and what it means to the people who experience it.

## ***1.2 Clarification of Concepts***

I will discuss the concept of agency in the theory chapter, but may here note that by agency I understand two things. The first is “*actions of individuals or groups, and their capacities to influence events*” (Allen and Thomas 2000: 189). When I say many people in El Alto have a high sense of agency it implies that they have a sense of influencing events. It should be noted that what is so special about El Alto is that, not only do they have *a sense of influencing events*; they have really had important influences on Bolivian politics. However, this thesis will focus more on their sense of influencing than on their actual influences. The other definition that I find fruitful is more existentially oriented. In an article presenting a phenomenological study of empowerment in collective action, agency is understood as *being a subject rather than an object of other's actions* (Depret & Fiske in Drury et al: 2005: 312). When I say *alteños* have a sense of agency – a sense of

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers from Amnesty International:  
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR18/006/2004/en/6d422eab-d595-11dd-bb24-1fb85fe8fa05/amr180062004en.html> Downloaded 30th of September, 2012



influencing events – this also entails the existential experience of being a subject rather than an object of others actions.

By *activism* I mean *intentional action to bring about social and political change*.

However, in El Alto protests, meetings, and marches are part of every-day life to such an extent that it is not just activism; it is also a way of life. Sometimes being involved in the community is a more crucial reason for going to a demonstration, meeting or a march than the activism of it. Thus, sometimes I will refer to these activities as *community-involvement* rather than as activism. Going to demonstrations is usually, however, simultaneously about activism and community-involvement.

### ***1.3 The City of El Alto***

4000 meters above sea level, just above the Bolivian shared capital of La Paz lies the young migrant city of El Alto. It started out as a district of the city of La Paz, but gained status as a city in 1988 (Lazar 2008:47). Still many people in El Alto refer to La Paz as “the city”. More and more people are however getting jobs in El Alto and the image of “a sleeping city”, where people sleep to work in La Paz, is slowly changing. It is the second biggest city in Bolivia with around one million inhabitants, the majority identifying themselves as Aymara. It is the largest indigenous city in Latin America. In Bolivia as a whole 55 % identify as indigenous, one of the highest numbers in Latin America<sup>3</sup>. However, since colonization the whites and mestizos<sup>4</sup> have had both economic and political power in Bolivia (Klein 2003, Webber 2010). It is a country with a long history and a continued reality of strong racial hierarchies, and even if the majority of *alteños* are Aymara, “race” is still something that matters a lot to people. Additionally, many people who live in El Alto work in La Paz where the racial hierarchies are more evident. My two main informants went down to La Paz on a regular basis for work or for political activities.

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<sup>3</sup> These are the numbers from the 2001 census. There is a new census going on at the moment and it is expected that the percentage of people identifying as indigenous will go up, as indigenous pride has risen with the Morales government. Estadísticas e Indicadores Socioeconómicos de Municipio de El Alto, available at <http://www.ine.gov.bo>.

<sup>4</sup> Mestizos – of mixed race between European and indigenous decent.

The current population of El Alto is largely a result of three big waves of migration<sup>5</sup>, the last one linked to neoliberal restructurings and lay-offs in the public sector in the 1980s, particularly the mining sector (Lazar 2008:47). According to the national census of 2001<sup>6</sup> 70 % of *alteños* live below the poverty line (Webber 2010:233). The working situation is characterised by informal labour, small industries and temporal work. The majority are traders, as well as workers. Many also own a spot of land in the countryside where they produce both for self-sufficiency and sale, as one wage seldom is enough (Webber 2010). The city is divided into nine districts. The districts are then divided into zones. Each zone has their own neighbourhood council called the *junta vecinal* that meet regularly to discuss problems in the zone. Participation in neighbourhood groups, unions and committees is characteristic of the city. On a city basis all the *juntas vecinales* are gathered in the federation of neighbourhood councils (Federacion de juntas vecinales – FEJUVE). Parents also meet regularly in school councils, *junta escolares* (Lazar 2008). In many of the zones the meetings are on a monthly basis. Many are also organised in trade unions. These collective organisations exist parallel to the state, sometimes substituting for it, sometimes interacting with it (Lazar 2008). The organisations are popularly thought to model the old Aymara *ayullas* - ancient political and social units in the countryside characterised by rotating leadership and consensus-democracy (Lazar 2008). The neighbourhood is both a political unit and a social unit, and as we shall see, it is because of the latter that the former works so well.

The “gas war” of 2003 had not been possible had it not been for Bolivia’s long history of social and political mobilisations, and following from that, the high degree of political and social organization in the migrant indigenous city of El Alto. Many former miners<sup>7</sup> have migrated to El Alto giving the city a strong working class image. The majority of the citizens of El Alto also have strong connections to the countryside and many travel frequently to help out relatives on their land in the rural highlands.

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<sup>5</sup> The first wave was connected to the agrarian reform of 1953, when former serfs where free to move, and the land they were given was usually not enough to live from. At the same time there was a big drought in the altiplano. The second wave of migration was linked to the construction boom of Hugo Banzers dictatorial regime in the 1970’s (Lazar 2008:47).

<sup>6</sup> A new national census is being undertaken at the moment and will be ready by the end of 2012. Estadísticas e Indicadores Socioeconómicos de Municipio de El Alto, available at <http://www.ine.gov.bo>.

<sup>7</sup> Minors in Bolivia are historically known for high levels of political consciousness and for strong marxist influences (Webber 2010, Taussig 1980).

Anthropologist Sian Lazar (2008) has argued that the high level of everyday community organisation and community involvement in the city was what enabled key organisations – such as the Federation of Neighbourhood Councils, the FEJUVE El Alto, to get so many people out in the streets for the crucial protests of 2003. It was possible, she argue, because of “the ability of such groups to construct collective and relational senses of selves among their members, against the pull of individual interests and factional conflicts” (ibid: 3). So for 2003 to happen the “infrastructure of class struggle”, as political scientist Jeffery Webber calls it (2009: 23), had to be there already. Protests like the one described above are part of that infrastructure. Protest of different sizes has been a normal part of everyday life in El Alto for decades and is about more than politics; a high degree of community organisation and community involvement is a way of life in El Alto. Many say they miss the countryside<sup>8</sup> and organising in neighbourhoods becomes important substitutes for the countryside collectivities. What is new is not the political protest, neighbourhood meetings and community involvement, but the heightened sense of agency people of El Alto felt after 2003. Their image as “a fighting people” who can’t be “messed with” was strengthened, along with the experience of being a people who have given their blood for change.

Following the election of Morales the local administration in El Alto has been dominated by the government party MAS (movimiento al socialismo, movement towards socialism), and due to MAS initial support from El Alto and Bolivia’s many social movements there is the idea that MAS politicians have come “from the people”. The protest described above was my first meeting with Marcelina who would be one of two main informants. As a political engaged alteño she here did what most alteños do when talking about political and social mobilisations: emphasize the critical consciousness of the people of El Alto. Even now that the leaders are “from the people” people express that they are watching them to make sure they do their work. Marcelina is herself a dedicated member of the MAS party, but that didn’t stop her from emphasizing that the governments not “safe” just because they’ve had peoples support earlier. Rhetoric focusing on El Altos “fighting spirit” is to be found everywhere in the city’s political and civic life: among community organisations, civil groups and at the local municipality level.

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<sup>8</sup> In a census Lazar (2008) conducted in the neighbourhood where she lived in El Alto, she found that the majority said they preferred the countryside to the city. Also, Aymara intellectuals often talk about the countryside as the best place for practicing indigenous democracy forms. I also heard many people in El Alto talk favourable about the countryside versus the city.

My other main informant is Don Emilio. He had a prominent role in the “gas-war” of 2003 as a member of the political committee of the FEJUVE. He is also a respected leader in his neighbourhood. He is a self-declared Marxist and belongs to a more government critical group than Marcelina, arguing that the “agenda of 2003” has not yet been fulfilled and that the Morales government doesn’t really represent much change. But even if their positions are different, they both promote and act out a “revolutionary identity” that surrounds the El Alto high sense of agency.

Some time after the school demonstration Marcelina tells me they’ve promised to speed things up at the municipality to give the schools what’s been promised to them. “If we hadn’t mobilised that day at the local government office, maybe we hadn’t got it”, she says. “If the authorities doesn’t respond to the people it’s a problem. But [you may achieve] everything with demonstrations here. “I think you can get anything in El Alto by mobilising people” (...).

Little or big issues – street mobilisations and communal meetings are the way they have learnt they can bring things forward. The activism and communal involvement are however also an important part of *alteños* identity and, I argue, part of what constitutes “good living” in El Alto.

### ***1.4 Research Questions***

My research questions are:

**What are the characteristics of the *alteño* agency? How is it produced and reproduced? And, lastly, what does it do for the people who experience it?**

The thesis is divided into six chapters. In chapter two, following this introduction, I present the most important theoretical perspectives influencing my analysis, and in chapter three I deal with methodology. Chapter four and five are the main chapters where I analyse material from my fieldwork. Chapter four, *The Poetics of the Revolutionary*, deals with how stories about the *alteño* self contributes to a revolutionary collective identity important for their sense of agency. Chapter five, *The Importance of Communities*, argue that involvement in communities is essential for *alteños* agency. Towards the end of this chapter I discuss the Andean concept of *Suma Qamaña* (“living well”) in relations to

agency. The last part of this chapter deals specifically with my last research question of what this kind of agency actually may do for the people who experience it. Chapter six is the conclusion. As the theory chapter will have hopefully provided a further understanding for the questions of this thesis, I will get slightly back to the research question towards the end of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Perspectives**

In this chapter I will focus on the concept of “agency” as that is the central theme of this thesis. I will also present the theoretical notion of “combined oppositional consciousness” describing a certain type of political consciousness that exists among activists in El Alto. Further theoretical perspectives are integrated in the main chapters where I present material from my fieldwork.

### ***2.1 Agency***

The concept of agency has been popular within mainstream development discourse for some time. In a report prepared for the United Nations Human Development Report in Latin America and the Caribbean, Emma Samman and Maria Santod has reviewed “concepts, indicators and empirical evidence” of agency and empowerment.<sup>9</sup> They view two models for agency and empowerment that has been widely used in development institutions. Empowerment is understood, in both models, as “increasing poor people’s freedom of choice and action to shape their own lives (Narayan 2005:4 in Samman and Santod 2009)”. In the first model, agency plus opportunity structure is thought to be what enables empowerment. The authors criticize this definition for using a too wide definition of empowerment, as it may as well be the definition of “development” (Samman and Santod 2009: 4). The other approach is influenced by Amartya Sen’s work on agency and empowerment. Here agency is defined as *what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important* (Sen 1985, in Samman and Santos 2009), and empowerment is understood to be the enhancement of that agency.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/OPHI-RP-10a.pdf> , Downloaded 15th of September 2012.

Thus empowerment in this model is basically “a lot of agency”. I agree with this perspective in not separating agency from empowerment because a separation between them entails that agency is only a means for the result of empowerment. Although this second model claims to also see the intrinsic value of agency, they both define agency to be about capabilities or freedom to pursue certain goals. But when I say *alteños* feel a high sense of agency it does not necessarily entail that they feel free to choose, or feel that they achieve, whatever life they may want to live (as in both definitions in the UNDP rapport). Activists may say they are hindered by many factors in their everyday life in order to live the life they may wish for, but they may still experience a high sense of agency. Within the scholar literature on agency in development one can find a broader perspective than the “freedom to choose the life one may want to live” perspective common in the applied branch of development studies. It is here I find the first part of the definition of agency that I use in this thesis. As mentioned earlier, Thomas and Allen (2000:189) define agency as *actions of individuals or groups, and their capacities to influence events*. When I say *alteños* experience a high sense of agency I mean that they have an experience of influencing events. They may experience to influence events and at the same time think that there are many factors that contribute to them not being able to live the life they may want to live. Thus agency is about influencing events, not about being free to choose whatever life you may want to lead.

However, from the way Thomas and Allens writes about agency it is clear that they view it as efforts to “ameliorate” problems (Allen and Thomas 2000: 189), that is, as means to the end of development. I don’t disagree with this, but I find the means ends perspectives - though perhaps inevitable in the field of development studies - insufficient to understand what agency is about on a level of human experiences.

If agency is understood as a means to achieve development, it misses the point of agency as a goal in it self. It is not just about wanting events to develop in a certain manner; it is also about the experience of influencing in itself. When my informants talk about problems in El Alto they focus more on what is not fair and how the powerful don’t care about them, then they focus on the problems in and of themselves. This is not to say that concrete problems such as lack of good public health services and what is considered quality education are not experienced as problematic in themselves. They certainly are. But, what they react most to is the experience of not being listen to, of being degraded and

of not being respected. Within this lies also the experience of not being respected for wanting alternative developments to the neoliberal capitalist model that has been so influential in Bolivia during the last decades.<sup>10</sup> Alteños react strongly to what they have come to understand as plain robbing of Bolivia's resources, and at the same having their own development models defined as inferior.

The existentially oriented anthropologist Michael Jackson has some insights that are relevant here. Jackson talks about human existence as a struggle for “striking some balance between being an actor and being acted upon” (2005: 182). Being acted upon is not necessarily about any sort of brute force, but about others deciding for you, about others having influential “power of definition” that affect you, or about forces you cannot control strongly influencing your life. Saying that people in El Alto felt an increased sense of agency after 2003 is to say that they felt that their actions upon the world mattered in a way they had never experienced before. It is because people in El Alto earlier have experienced that they have not hit this balance - that they have been too much acted upon - that their current experience of agency is so significant. Taking these more existentially oriented remarks into consideration I add to the definition of agency that it is about *being a subject and not an object of others actions* (Depret & Fiske in Drury et al: 2005: 312). I take this definition from a phenomenological article in social psychology. This definition captures more of the value of agency in itself, rather than agency only as a means for something else.

I want to stress that the social movements of El Alto do have concrete goals of structural reformations (such as nationalization of natural resources and the acknowledgment of indigenous democracy forms) to pursue. And I do think the type of agency that people experience in El Alto is very relevant in the pursuit for those concrete goals (and thus one could say that their agency is a means for achieving the goals “he or she may value”). But the means ends perspectives misses the value of agency in itself. Therefore, I combine the two in my understanding of the concept of agency.

In sum, Thomas and Allen's definitions of agency “actions of individuals or groups, and their capacities to influence events” (Thomas and Allen 200:), is one I find fruitful. To

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<sup>10</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s Bolivia went through a number of neoliberal economical reforms called structural adjustments. In order to get loans and aid from the World Bank and the IMF, Bolivia had to privatize state companies, reduce government spending, cut back on labour rights, and raise taxes to pay foreign debts. Thousands of people lost their jobs, prices on basic services went up, and the economic power shifted to foreign companies (Shultz and Crane Draper 2008: 2.3).

understand the experiential part of what the “sense of agency” is about I add the existentially oriented remark that the experience of agency is about “being a subject and not a object” (Drury et al: 2005).

My starting point for analysis is that politically engaged citizens especially, and many citizens in El Alto just by living in this kind of active community generally, do experience a high sense of agency. This starting point is based on the observations of other scholars, especially Lazar (2008), and Webber (2009, 2010), but also from my general impressions from El Alto after fieldwork.

## ***2.2 Combined Oppositional Consciousness***

Political scientist Jeffery Webber looks at El Alto from the perspective of its high levels of political consciousness and activism. His doctoral thesis (2009) seeks to understand the recent left-indigenous mobilisation in Bolivia with a focus on what the author elsewhere identifies as the “revolutionary period” of 2000 – 2005 (Webber 2010). One of his key notions is that of a “combined oppositional consciousness” consisting of a combined influence of indigenous liberation theory and Marxism. He found that people in El Alto draw on both their identity as indigenous and as workers in their ideology and every day practices of popular struggle. Though different people emphasise them in different degrees, he found that people mostly drew more or less equally on both and that the one often had a reference to the other. People draw on collective memories of workers fights, particularly in the mines, and of anti-imperialist struggles against white-mestizo domination and repression, and often combining the two in one story. Capitalist exploitation of natural resources and workers is associated with colonial and imperial systematic and centuries-long exploitation of the indigenous and their land (Webber 2009: 330-33). Webber argues that the two must be understood dialectically and that one shouldn’t dichotomise them as if belonging to different domain.

The theoretical notions of a combined oppositional consciousness is a way of understanding the type of political consciousness that exists in El Alto, and as we shall see, it is an important factor in the production and reproduction of agency among my



informants. The “combined oppositional consciousness” is something I recognise in my material, and I therefore find the concept fruitful.

With this theoretical background I may have another look at the research questions:

What are the characteristics of the *alteño* agency? How is it produced and reproduced? And, lastly, what does it do for the people who experience it?

In the introduction we saw a glimpse of how the *alteño* sense of agency express it self; as a conscious representation of *alteños* as fighting people and through their frequent demonstrations. However, the whole thesis will hopefully built up towards a better understanding of the main characteristics of the *alteño* agency. Chapter four and five will try to answer the next question of how the agency is reproduced and worked on. Chapter four will also look at how external categorizations represent a challenge to *alteños* agency. Towards the end of chapter five I will look at the question of what this agency may do to those who experience it. Specifically I will look at how it affects my informant’s experience of the phenomenon of poverty.

Before I turn to analysis of my material from fieldwork I will discuss methodological challenges and implications for what kind of knowledge I got during my fieldwork. The methodology chapter also serves as a description of my encounter with my main informants, and as a further presentation of them.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### ***3.1 Access and Challenges***

This thesis is based on three months fieldwork in La Paz and El Alto, Bolivia from early April until early July 2011. I got access to the field through a Bolivian journalist friend, Gregory Beltran Valdivia, whom I got to know when I was in Bolivia in 2009 as a backpacker. I lived with a Bolivian family that I got in contact with through a girl I also knew from 2009. Gregory was a key gate opener to informants in El Alto and would also be my assistant throughout the stay. As a politically engaged person he would naturally introduce me to politically engaged people in El Alto.

The family I stayed with lived in a lower middle class area of La Paz. Staying in La Paz was mostly a choice based on security, as I never knew anyone well enough in El Alto to feel secure living there. There are no hotels and the hostels are mostly meant for migrant workers, so private renting is the only option. The crime rates of the city are high (Lazar 2008: 33) and *alteños* advised me as a foreigner to not stay in the city after dawn. Furthermore, the zone of my informants was not known to be particularly safe. It only took half an hour to get to El Alto by bus from where I lived so it wasn't a big problem - except when there was the occasional road blockade. Living in La Paz and hanging around with middle class mestizos also gave me valuable insights. Although the focus of my thesis is El Alto, living with mestizos in La Paz and gaining an insight into their attitudes towards Aymara and *alteños* gave me further understanding of the *alteños* accounts of discrimination.

Whenever I couldn't meet with my informants in El Alto I did interviews with the FEJUVE (the Federation of Neighbourhood Councils), COR (the Regional Labour Federation), talked to NGOs, went to seminars, met some Norwegian missionaries and saw their work in El Alto, hung out with Gregory, and hung out with mestizo friends in La Paz. Appointments that got cancelled were a frequent source of frustration. Often I would then sit in cafes and read whatever relevant material I could find, or make notes on impressions so far. Staying in Bolivia for three months and having a daily life in La Paz gave very valuable impressions that form my interpretations of what I observed in El Alto. I went mountain hiking one week during Easter, otherwise I stayed in La Paz and El Alto.

The first time I met my informant Don Emilio, Gregory had set up an interview with him and two other leaders from the 2003 upheavals. A formal interview was a way of respecting their high positions in 2003 and asking questions in the setting they were most comfortable with<sup>11</sup>. They talked about what their fights in 2003 was about, how they managed to organise a whole city into protests that led to the fall of the president, and how Evo Morales came to power because so many people supported him, but how many now though he had failed them. After the interview I felt best chemistry with Don Emilio and he seemed the most comfortable in front of a camera. Also, as he worked as an electrician in the informal sector I figured his job situation would allow me to move around in El

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<sup>11</sup> Because of their positions from 2003 they had been interviewed many times before. They were more comfortable with a proper interview than informal conversations as they did not know who I was yet.

Alto.<sup>12</sup> Further, his working situation with short time contracts was representative for many *alteños*. So I asked Don Emilio if I could follow him to work one day, explaining the importance of showing everyday life to make their reality understandable to others. He suggested that we (Gregory and me) come and film at the neighbourhood assembly meeting they were going to have in the last Sunday of April. The meeting got cancelled due to Easter holidays and instead I met Don Emilio for lunch to ask him if he would engage in my project. It was a friendly meeting, but we had to meet one more time before he said yes to join the project. He accepted the research part, but it was the film that legitimised the project, as he was eager on telling the El Alto story of resistance.

My other informant, Marcelina, I met by chance at a neighbourhood mobilisation I went to because some other arrangements got cancelled. Emilio wasn't going to the protest, but it was the parents of his local school mobilising. I found Marcelina open and easy to talk to. Having a background as a reporter she was also very curious about who I was and where I came from. The biggest methodological challenge with Marcelina was that I met her quite late into the fieldwork and hesitated a bit to bring her into the project as she wasn't part of the same political group I originally planned to focus on; people active in the neighbourhood councils with a story from 2003 and who now found themselves criticising president Morales from the left. However, Marcelina lived in the same neighbourhood as Don Emilio and her children attended the same school as him. As a woman, as a MAS (movimiento al socialismo - movement towards socialism, the government party) supporter, and as a *campesina*<sup>13</sup> she was also a typical *alteño* resident that I thought might be a balance to the image Don Emilio gave. In terms of political activism, political consciousness and engagement in her community she was indeed relevant to the topic of political agency in El Alto. Although Marcelina was open towards me there was one important access problem that also was the case with Don Emilio: often others wouldn't let me film. It was very difficult to follow my informants to work for instance, because the

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<sup>12</sup> One thing was that I thought it could be good for the fieldwork to see more of El Alto. Another thing was that I realized it could have been risky to show up at the same street, at the same bookshop every day with a big camera. The centre of El Alto is known for robberies and I didn't exactly blend into the crowd.

<sup>13</sup> *Campesina/o* is usually translated as a farmer peasant, but it has more to it. According to the Bolivian sociologist Xavier Albó, a *campesina/o* is a person who works directly with the land. Further, it is a person that has economical relation to the rest of the country through selling her products in markets, even if she produces a lot for self-consumption. Lastly, a *campesina/o* is understood to be an indigenous person. There are however many discussions regarding how wide the definition should be, if it should for instance include those who work for salaries on a land or only those who own the land themselves; those who are "free", as Albó puts it. <http://www.sudamericarural.org/nuestra-produccion-argentina/dialogos/42?view=dialogos> (Downloaded the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2012).

bosses and co-workers said no. This was often the case also without a camera. “They are wondering what for”, Marcelina explained. Don Emilio would often tell me “the Aymara is a very closed person. He doesn’t let anyone in”. “I am different. You are lucky”, he added sometimes, as if to tell me not to push my luck.

Generally, I had more access with a camera than without as that made it more apparent what I was doing there. Participant observation without a camera was limited to a few situations. I participated without a camera in a parents and teachers party with Marcelina, in conversation with Don Emilio and his friends and on one occasion I was working with Don Emilio as his plumber assistant. There were also a couple of political meetings I could only attend without filming. The material with Don Emilio is however mostly material with a camera; he seldom invited me to participate in anything if the point wasn’t to film it. With him, it was the camera that gave me the access. Don Emilio made a good character on film, but it was difficult to get past his “rhetorical mode”. He would often make “speeches” about different issues while I was filming.

Most of this rhetorical mode of Don Emilio didn’t make it to the final film because it created a distance to him that made it difficult for the audience to connect to him and the story. However, after quite some time of analysing – and struggling - with the material I realized that the rhetorical speeches Don Emilio made to me when filming was actually quite valuable material; it gave me a different sort of knowledge than more observational material of everyday life would have given me.

When comparing the speeches Don Emilio made to me with the way he talked to his fellow neighbours at neighbourhood meetings, and to the way I heard other skilled speakers talk in different events in El Alto, I realized they were all contributing to a notion of a active *alteño* with a will and power to bring about changes, always focusing on a strong “us”. This is the subject of chapter three so I won’t go into the details here. The point is that because I got more “speeches to the camera” from Don Emilio, than observational material of him in everyday situations, I was forced to look into what these speeches were about. This directed my attention to the ways in which “stories about the El Alto self”, which these speeches concern, are part of what reproduces the high sense of collective agency that exists in El Alto. I then discovered that Don Emilio’s speaking

skills was something he had developed a very habitual knowledge of so that when getting into a argument with the doctor at the hospital he used the same skills and effectively told the same story of El Alto agency, as he did when delivering speeches in more controlled environments. Although Marcelina wasn't in a "rhetorical mode" so often when I was filming her, I did see her a couple of times in this mode of "skilled speaking" too. The way she talked to me in the demonstration described in the beginning of this thesis, was one such case of "skilled speaking". Because my relationship to Marcelina was different than my relationship to Don Emilio, his talk was otherwise more "performative" than hers. With Marcelina I developed a friendship that I think made the rhetorical mode unnatural. I felt closer to Marcelina after one meeting than what I had felt after weeks with Don Emilio. The age and gender difference between Don Emilio and me was probably an important reason for this, as well as personality. However, it might also be that their different relations to El Alto and to political and organisational work played a role.

On the surface one would think Marcelina was in a more "liminal"<sup>14</sup> position than Don Emilio because she was a recent migrant to El Alto and had never quite settled in the city. However, in contrast to Don Emilio she had not been involved in a big variety of political organisations, but had been involved in one indigenous organisation in the countryside from a young age. Her organisation was one of the main supporters of the Morales government and she was herself a member of the MAS party. She thus identified with those currently in power in a very different way than Don Emilio. Further, Marcelina has a strong connection to the countryside and was very comfortable with and connected to her indigenous identity. Her first language, in contrast to Don Emilio, was Aymara.

Don Emilio had grown up in La Paz with Spanish as his first language. He had experienced both racism and poverty in La Paz and said he was happier in El Alto. "We're like a family here in the neighbourhood", he told me. Don Emilio too was proud of his Aymara identity, but he didn't seem as confident in it as Marcelina. He had once wanted to run for mayor for the socialist party in El Alto, but had backed out because he didn't think his Aymara was good enough. He had lived his whole adult life in El Alto and had been involved in many different political groups. In his youth he had been active in a

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<sup>14</sup> From the word *limen*, meaning a treshold and entails to be "betwixt and between" (Turner 1969).

Marxist reading group and had been passionate about it ever since. It wasn't before his role in 2003, however, he really found his "revolutionary identity" in El Alto. As a member of the political committee of the Federation of Neighbourhood Councils (FEJUVE) in El Alto he had an important role in organising the upheavals. Many activists from 2003 were unhappy with the Morales government who they thought had done little of what they were promised.

Don Emilio then, in contrast to Marcelina, was still in an active "fighting mode". Marcelina shared the fighting spirit of El Alto, but as a MAS member she felt more part of "the process of change"<sup>15</sup> than Don Emilio, although he too did feel things were different now than before. The point is that the differences in positions between the two probably also influenced their ways of relating to my project and me. Marcelina had a position within the MAS party. Don Emilio had no current position and had, perhaps, more to prove and to fight for at the moment. This might also have influenced the ways in which they related to me, to the camera, and to the project.

I usually met Don Emilio for filming and his performances in front of the camera was thus the whole point of our meetings. Katrine Fangen (2004:141) makes a distinction between the kind of material you get from interviews and the kind of material you get from observation. She argues that the former brings knowledge of people's self-perception while the latter may produce knowledge about how people act. I agree that in depth qualitative interviews may get information about how people see themselves. However, the camera makes a big difference. When doing an interview on film the way people represent themselves is not only a representation, it is also an action. It is an action because it *does* something, rather than only represent something. This I think is the case also without a camera, but even more so when the person being interviewed is aware of an audience. Words as action becomes especially relevant in the context of filming politically aware citizens whose participation in the film becomes a kind of activism: Don Emilio especially was eager in telling the story of the active and critical *alteño*. For many *alteños* it also seemed important to tell the story themselves, rather than have others talk about them.

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<sup>15</sup> "The process of change" is the name of the Morales government project.

Although most El Alto citizens are somehow affected by the city's revolutionary discourse, history and continued practice of demonstrations and political-social communal involvement, there are of course a wide arrange of variations as to how active people are and how politically conscious they are. The case studies in this thesis are two El Alto citizens who are both actively engaged in politics and in their communities. Even if the case studies are of two individuals, I do of course think they represent more than themselves. My interpretations are not only grounded in the specific case studies, but also in having read other ethnographers' books and articles from El Alto and having observed a variety of social situations during my stay. My two informants experience may say something about politically active citizens in El Altos reproduction and experience of agency.

### ***3.2 The Camera Effect***

The camera always has some sort of effect, even in observational filmmaking. As the early observational filmmaker Colin Young notes:

“The idea was never to pretend that the camera was not there, (...) but to record normal behaviour. Clearly what has to be understood by this idea is that normal behaviour being filmed is the behaviour that is normal for the subjects under the circumstances, including, but not exclusively, the fact they are being filmed” (Young in Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009: 6).

What I think is a more interesting debate than whether the camera has an effect or not, which most filmmakers and anthropologists agree that it does, is the discussion about what kind of knowledge you get with a camera. This, I think, depends on especially two things that are not in fact as separable as I present them here. Firstly, what kind of context the camera makes up. While it make up only a small part of the context in good observational films<sup>16</sup>, it makes up a much bigger part of the context in for example Cinema vérité where the camera is actively used as a catalyst. There are a number of different factors influencing “the camera effect” and what is important is to give sufficient accounts of

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<sup>16</sup> As observational filmmakers with good access, sufficient time, and sufficient trust from those being filmed have experienced, it is possible that people get quite used to the camera and almost forget about it.

those factors. The above account of how Don Emilio and Marcelina related to the camera was an attempt at clarifying what role the camera played in my fieldwork. An awareness of that role also proved relevant for further analysis. Second, the knowledge you get using a video camera depends on the filmmakers and camera operators' way of *looking*. "When we look we are doing something more deliberate than seeing and yet more unguarded than thinking (...) we learn to inhabit what we see" (MacDougall 2006: 7). Looking, in MacDougall's account, is a sensuous activity where too much thinking mustn't come in the way. Yet, "to look with a camera is to see with some purpose (...)" (MacDougall 2006: 242). Thinking is thus a very important prerequisite for looking with a camera, as a purpose and an idea of what theme you want to explore is important. What kind of knowledge you get through shots thus depends both on the choices you have made before filming regarding theme and focus; the choices you often make when about to film regarding angle and camera movements; and whether or not you manage to not think so much during shooting but rather "inhabit what you see".

The filmmakers' way of looking affects what the final film will look like and how the images work on an audience (along with other crucial factors such as the social situations captured and storytelling through editing). It also, however, influences the filmmakers' relationship to and impression of the field and its actors. Looking through a camera and "putting ourselves in a sensory state that is at once one of vacancy and of heightened sense of awareness" (MacDougall 2006: 7), may give you another experience of the field than what you get from the otherwise common anthropological first fieldwork method of observing everything and nothing<sup>17</sup>.

One example from my film is the scene with Marcelina and her son Alex. In the beginning of this scene I was very concerned with not making the camera an important part of the context and was thus talking quite much behind the camera to try to make Marcelina more focused on our connection than on the presence of the camera. This may have worked but was probably unnecessary and it also created material that I later found was a bit annoying to watch, as my comments from behind the camera seem rather mundane. However, as the scene developed I had the sense to shut up and remember the feeling of being drawn into the scene through the camera. Whenever I watch the scene I get the same feeling of

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<sup>17</sup> I certainly used this "method" more than once.



intimacy that I felt when I shot it and am struck by the playful and mundane way in which Alex and Marcelina talk about not always having enough food. I will return to this in the end of chapter five. The methodological point is, however, that had I not filmed I might not have shut up, observed and got drawn into “the feeling of the scene” in the way I experienced by observing through a camera.

The ways in which the cameraperson has managed to “embody the camera” and may film without it feeling very awkward for those present also matters. For me this varied a lot from situation to situation. The camera felt most “embodied” when I didn’t have my assistant Gregory along with me, as I could concentrate more on the filming and on my informants. The way of handling the camera, the way of looking and at the same time dealing with the people being filmed is important. This may also influence the first point about how big part of the social context the camera becomes.

To sum up “the camera effect” in my fieldwork: the camera became an important actor as Don Emilio would use it for making “rhetorical speeches” about the El Alto self, and this again lead my attention to important analytical points in the thesis. My first meeting with Marcelina also captured one such self-representation that I would not have captured without the camera. The ways in which my informants imagined an audience of the film (Arntzen and Holtedahl 2005) was important. The camera was also helpful in observing and getting the “feeling” of phenomenon in the field, as I had to look attentively while filming.

One common conceived “problem” in visual anthropology in terms of the final product of the film is that it can’t make the same kind of argument that written anthropology does. MacDougall argues that visual anthropology shouldn’t aim at making an argument through a film, but embrace the different sort of knowledge that film may produce. He argues that the cinematic imagination should be taken seriously in allowing an interpretive space for the audience. This in turn acknowledges “the fragmentary nature of experience and, by extension, the constructed nature of human knowledge” (MacDougall 2006: 246). How “understandable” a film should be and how much should be left in this “interpretive space” is a related, but separate debate. The point here is the potential film has for involving the viewer in the life worlds of the people on the screen. MacDougall writes that certain kinds of anthropological approaches has been more fit for films, and amongst them

is those concerned with showing the agency of individuals (ibid: 239). In film people are often easier to connect to and “feel”, and informants may come through as human subjects rather than as objects of anthropological enquiry. That, for me, sums up why visual anthropology is important.

## **Chapter 4: Poetics of the Revolutionary**

### ***4.1 Poetics of the Revolutionary***

Both Don Emilio and Marcelina are people *alteños* would describe as someone who “knows how to speak”<sup>18</sup>. Skilful speakers draw on available cultural resources in a way that gives respect to the speaker, while also placing him-or her-self as part of something larger; Aymara history, El Alto as a community, and the neighbourhood as a community. Skilful speak to different audiences, I argue, is an important part of the reproduction of agency in El Alto. People who “know ho to speak” reproduce a revolutionary story about El Alto that is important for *alteños* self-perception.

In his ethnographic monograph from a Greek mountain village, “The poetics of manhood” Michael Herzfeld (1985) analyses men’s storytelling as a way of “performing their manhood”. The men draw on stories and history that everybody knows, combining it with their own stories and in that way becoming bigger personalities through their stories about themselves. The masculine self, Herzfeld argues, is here confirmed through its ability to create something new and meaningful out of the available cultural resources, placing itself within history yet standing out in a way that the audience admires. The concept of “poetics” is used as a way of describing “the poetry of the self”, or the poetical performance of the self. In a similar way as Herzfeld talks about “poetics of manhood” in the Greek mountains I think it is possible to talk about “the poetics of the revolutionary” in El Alto.

Skilful speaking to different audiences in El Alto has a performative aspect that I think deserves the term “poetics”. The audiences may be the neighbourhood, school parents at a demonstration, authorities with other *compañeros* as witnesses, or imagined audiences of a

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<sup>18</sup> In Spanish: “saber hablar”.

film. Performative, I want to stress, does not necessarily mean calculated. Some of it may be calculated, but more of it I think may be more unconscious knowledge acquired over time concerning what kind of cultural resources are most relevant to draw on when “performing the poetics of the alteño self”, in order to best give an impression of a capable and respectable alteño. I call it “poetics of the revolutionary” because the skilled speech reminds people of their capacities and right to demand changes. The poetics of the revolutionary often bring in big themes when talking about seemingly small issues and thereby creating “bigger alteño personalities” and reproducing a revolutionary spirit among alteños. Their importance and agency is reproduced through skilful representations of “the El Alto self” and through a focus on the “us.

In a place like El Alto, where people - although in a varying degree - share an identity as politically aware “fighters” and where the most active citizens are very aware of their image, performative and self-conscious acts of “poetics” are more easily available to the visual anthropologist than other types of every day practices. With Don Emilio the camera usually meant that he went into his “rhetorical mode”.

In this chapter I will first present several examples of the performance of “the poetics of the revolutionary” and sum up the most important points short after each part, leaving the more thorough discussion to the end of the chapter. Towards the end of the chapter I will also discuss the relationship between the poetics of the revolutionary and the El Alto sense of agency. Although both Marcelina and Don Emilio are considered skilful speakers, Don Emilio used the camera more consciously than Marcelina, who I experienced to be less affected by it. Marcelina “used” the poetics of the revolutionary when talking to the camera in the very first demonstration described in this thesis, and on a couple of other occasions. However, the camera brought out more poetics from Don Emilio than Marcelina so the focus in this chapter will be on Don Emilio. But I will start with Marcelina.

## ***4.2 Stories about 2003***

District eight, where Don Emilio and Marcelina live, was an important place during the 2003 upheavals. Through the district runs the highway that unites La Paz with the rest of the country so it naturally turned into a strategic place for road blockades hindering

essential goods to get down to La Paz. Perhaps most importantly, in the district lies the important gas storage plant of Senkata that delivers Liquid Petroleum Gas to La Paz. In October 2003 the residents held permanent guard of the gas storage to ensure that “as long as the hydrocarbons are not nationalized, not one drop of gasoline makes it out”, my journalist Bolivian friend Gregory told me. It was the hindering of gas passing down to La Paz, and many say especially to the housewives of the government members, that led the government to send in armed troops to force the gas out. This was one of the deadliest moments of the upheavals as the army dispersed the blockades with bullets, brought out the gas, and killed protestors who tried to hinder them on their way. During the trip of 20 kilometres from the gas plant to El Alto, the military killed more than 30 civilians and 95 were wounded<sup>19</sup>.

#### ***4.2.1 Marcelina tells: Blood, pride and change***

Marcelina is a woman who makes an immediate impression, proudly wearing bowler hats and beautiful pollera skirts - typical for Aymara women in the cities - talking with confidence and conviction. Marcelina is a very political person, but in a different way than Don Emilio who is very much connected to his neighbourhood and the El Alto identity per se. Marcelina's political consciousness is strongly connected to her identity as an indigenous campesina, having been involved for a long time in a rather radical indigenous organisation (*los colonizadores*) in the countryside where she grew up. She had, however, lived in El Alto since 2003 and had thus been a part of the fatal uprisings herself.

”Every day it was boom – boom, boom –boom. This dynamite here in Senaca. All of this was done by mobilising, we had walked out on the main road. There were splinters flying over here. It was rather scary, but people were angry. Because every day people were dying. There were wounded ones. The government came in with tanks and killed. So... there was an outrage. That we should rise up as well. The people rose up, consciously everybody went out. To the point where we managed to get Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada to renounce.

I ask her how it made her feel, when the president finally had to step down.

It was good; it was kind of like triumphing. Or... what you wanted had happened (smiles). I feel proud when [I think about that] before, when I was a community leader, we walked together [side by side with those now in power]. And then to see one person from our blood... from our class, arrive at the government, become deputies, mayors. (...) A brother of mine that's not my brother, but a brother from our class, from there. And the attention today in the [public] offices is different. Before when you went around with a pollera dress like this they gave you a look, they didn't give you the attention they should, it wasn't good. Now when I go around with this dress showing my identity... they say, "Sister, come in, how can we help you?" The

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<sup>19</sup> from <http://www.internationalist.org/boliviaaflame1003.html> Downloaded the 1st of October 2012

attention is different. It's not like it used to be. (...) Regarding change, there is change. But we're not yet... managing well. The thing is that some people aren't prepared. They're entering the municipalities and they won't always know... they don't know the fundament, the ideology it was made with, the Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples<sup>20</sup>. So they manage the way they managed [before]... they belonged to different parties before, they made decisions without consulting. But with this political instrument you have to consult, an authority, the mayor should consult his people. That's the principles of the instrument, but many authorities aren't meeting the principles.“

An important part of the story here is that it wasn't anything like uncontrollable masses going crazy, but controlled action in order to achieve a goal. The people rose up, consciously everybody went out, Marcelina says. She quickly goes from talking about 2003 to what she understands as a very positive result of it: the Morales government, “people of her blood” in important political positions, and the following increase in respect for indigenous people. She thus links their protests directly with what she sees as very important changes in the country. “Seeing people from my blood, from my class” she says, linking class struggles with ethnic struggles and thus showing what Jeffery Webber calls “combined oppositional consciousness”. She describes how she may now go around in her traditional costume being respected for *who she is*.<sup>21</sup> Thus she links their power to change to her subjective experience of agency, feeling that she is now looked upon as a subject – an equal, not a object of inferiority. This existential aspect of agency is to her the most important change.

When Marcelina talks about people in the new government whom she doesn't think follows the new principles of always consulting the people, she says the problem is they don't know the principles well enough. She says they used to belong to different political parties and thus hints to that some of them are opportunistic, and that they don't really understand what the new principles are about. She thus creates a clear distinction between the old and the new government that the *alteños* have helped come to power, attributing ongoing problems to some people's lack of awareness of the new principles for governing.

So to sum up, what Marcelina does in this account is that she links *alteños* actions with radical changes. She focuses on the importance of principles and through that focus also

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<sup>20</sup> The full name of the government party is Movement for Socialism-Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the People (*Movimiento al Socialismo-Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos*), abbreviated MAS-IPSP, or simply MAS.

<sup>21</sup> Marcelina expressed a strong sense of identification with and pride of her Aymara identity and felt that this was essentially *who she was*. Lazar and other scholars have written about the possibility of “changing” your ethnicity by dressing in western clothes. Sure many of those who called themselves mestizos had done so. But racism in Bolivia is still strong and it is not simple to merely “change” your identification as many connect ethnicity to an idea of race. Also non-indigenous people often had a clear idea of ethnicity based on race. Some of the mestizos I knew in La Paz told me, for instance, “some try to change by dressing like us, but they can't change who they are”.

highlights her own moral integrity as someone who cares for the principles. She also brings attention to an “us” that consists of both ethnicity and class.

#### ***4.2.2 Don Emilio tells: The solidaric and capable *alteño****

Walking around in his red working suit, giving small lectures on Marxism to me while I’m filming him, Don Emilio is aware of himself as a working class man. “My goal is to be a revolutionary man wherever I am”, he told me once. “If I’m at work I’ll be a revolutionary man at work. If I’m with the neighbours I’ll be a revolutionary man in the neighbourhood, and if I’m in meetings I’ll be a revolutionary man there”.

Don Emilio was a central member of the FEJUVE, the federation of neighbourhood councils in El Alto, who were the central organizers of the 2003 protests. As we’re walking around the dusty roads of the neighbourhood he shows me the places where they met to organize the protests and shares with me his memories of the upheavals. As he talks to me and my camera, his hands are gesticulating, his words often seem carefully chosen and his voice and facial expression varies according to the different rhetorical points of his “speech”:

2003 was a very important social moment. We were all participating “organically”<sup>22</sup>. We made decisions in the assemblies. Deciding about blockings and marches. The whole family was part of it. Father, wife, kids. Everybody was out in the streets. It was a very important moment for the district. (...) We had people making sure the streets were safe. The shops were open one day a week and we had fixed the prices, they didn’t go up a penny. No speculation, no hiding. There was solidarity, cooperation. (...) I see that the *alteño* is a solidaric man. He stands up for justice. After two days people had the idea of making “a total change”. We had given a very concrete message about what we wanted: the recuperation of our natural resources so that we could benefit from it ourselves. Up until today, we haven’t seen the change we were expecting (...). This city is particularly abandoned. It’s not looked after (...). This city has defended the natural resources; it has given her blood, her time, her dedication. I think it will come back, this mobilisation of 2003. It will come back. Because the economical conditions are there. We’re constantly in this fight. We don’t take ideology from other places; we have our own ideology (...). We had no government [in October 2003] we were governing ourselves. That’s why I say: it’s possible. We haven’t taken down the bourgeoisie yet, those who think this country is for robbing... we will change this with time, we’re an “organic” city, every month, some more often, we meet and make political and economical analysis. At least once a month, we meet. Like going to the church. We’re faithful (smiles).

When telling about 2003 Don Emilio is particularly concerned with the solidarity shown between the El Alto neighbours and the capabilities they demonstrated during the upheavals. He is proud of what they managed to organise. Don Emilio communicates that “the El Alto person” is a thinking person, and that governments should watch out for them

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<sup>22</sup> *Organicamente*. May also be translated to “dynamically”.

because if they don't see change, they will organise revolts again. For Don Emilio and many other alteños, 2003 gave them confidence in their own abilities and potentials. A confidence that was particularly emotional for many alteños as most also has experienced stark racism, being stigmatised as “backwards” and as incapable of managing by themselves. Don Emilio often counters this idea of backwardness when he talks to me about 2003. It is the capabilities of the alteños he is most concerned with in his poetics. “We had no government [in October 2003], we were governing ourselves”, Don Emilio says with pride. “That’s why I say: it’s possible”.

Don Emilio plays on an anti-capitalistic discourse – emphasising that they had no speculation but controlled the individual interests during the period without government. He emphasises that everybody was involved in the upheavals, “the whole family”. He makes an anti-colonial point by stating “we don’t take ideology from other places”. He describes a clear and rational goal that they gave their blood for and thus expect something back from. Finally, he talks about the “El Alto man” as a revolutionary and capable person. He talks about him as solidary, reflective, always attending neighbourhood discussions, and capable of thinking for himself.

When telling about such an important event as 2003, both Marcelina and Don Emilio focused on the El Alto agency and it becomes evident that this was a very important uprising for both of them on a very personal level. Marcelina is mostly concerned with the increased respect for indigenous people during the Morales government that the 2003 upheavals paved the way for. Don Emilio is most concerned with the capacities that alteños showed. For both, the uprisings has shown them that what they do matter. However, as noted earlier, Don Emilio is in a different power position than Marcelina who is currently a central member of the ruling MAS party. Don Emilio was thus in a more “activated fighting mode” than Marcelina and would use every chance he could to give speeches to the camera about the alteños fighting capacities. Marcelina would “use” “poetics of the revolutionary” in public events such as the demonstration described in the beginning of this thesis, and when talking about such an important part of El Altos history as 2003. But generally when I filmed her, she did not seem very concerned with presenting the alteños and El Alto in a certain way. Don Emilio, in contrast, would use almost every chance he had to give rhetorical speeches to the camera about the El Alto self.

### 4.3 *The Story about the Neighbours*

One day Don Emilio was giving me a tour around his neighbourhood, Barrio Cuatro. He talks about how the zone came about and the legal fights they had with *los loteadores*, land speculators that buy up big pieces of land. The areas should be available to the community and not for the speculators, Don Emilio says. He tells me about the names of the different streets, all names of important Aymara historic figures. When we see the local school, Don Emilio stops and tells me:

This school... the neighbours have built the cement wall you see over there, we built it ourselves. No authority wanted to help out. We started with first, second and third grade. Then the school council tried to get a ministerial resolution [to get the permission to function as a school]. After two years they got it. Then the neighbourhood council tried to enlarge the building. The land speculators didn't want to. But we managed in the end. Then we got four more classrooms. So it's been a conquest, this school. The first class that started there finishes this year. We're happy. We as leaders are happy to collaborate with the people like that. We always had a vision about our kids studying here in our neighbourhood. (...) It's a place to meet, our school. In the year of 97, let me tell you about a certain situation we had. In 1998 I think it was, when I was a neighbourhood leader. The church... After we had gotten this school, the Catholic Church came with a project to make 40 classrooms. But what was the condition? (smiles sarcastically) That we had to give them space to make a church. I said: that's not possible because our school needs more space. We can give you some, but not here. (...) So after we had offered them another space they said no. "It can't be in a peripheral place, they said. It has to be somewhere central. It has to be in the plaza. The first things the neighbour see when they go out should be the church" (paraphrases with a wry smile).

"I told them that's not gonna be possible", he goes on. "The neighbours said no. We told the neighbours at a meeting and then we told the church that we didn't want their classrooms and that we would do it ourselves. (...) Many times the church has taken advantage of the needs here. "

In another situation, when we are at the local school, Don Emilio mentions the Catholic Church incident again:

(...) Sometimes we think we should have said yes to the offer because then we would have had a nice building over there. But then we would have also had a church, right. A church were we know what they do there, right. So we didn't like that. That's why it's still like this.

What do they do? I asked and Don Emilio's rhetorical mode was back.

"Well, the church is... part of the capitalist neoliberal domino right, that's the ideological part. They know that "in El Alto you've gotta change their culture"... or... you see, what their after is to change the culture of the essence of the Aymara man. That's the thing. That's why they have constructed so many churches in El Alto. But they haven't succeeded in changing [us]. They won't manage. What's important here is to live and to better the conditions of life. So they didn't manage, the church. They tried, but they haven't managed."

Again we see the "combined oppositional consciousness" at work as Don Emilio is criticizing both capitalistic speculation and (colonial) religious missionizing. In Don Emilio's stories of opposition and resistance, the neighbours have a central place. "The neighbours said no", "We talked it over with the neighbours", "We, the neighbours, have



made it ourselves”, Emilio says. I will get back to the category of the “neighbour” and the neighbourhood in the next chapter. For now, what is worth noting is the extent of local control he’s communicating; the neighbours built the school by “conquering” the land from the land speculators, then the catholic school tried to tempt them with another building in exchange for a church but they resisted. Neither capitalistic control by the land speculators or “spiritual control” by the church is accepted by the neighbours, the story goes. Don Emilio is also demonstrating his knowledge of larger structures – referring to neoliberalism and capitalism. Though categorisation of the church as part of the “capitalist neoliberal domain” might be somewhat simplistic, the point is that through this statement Don Emilio is demonstrating political awareness as well as making a point out of showing the neighbours capability and eagerness to resist attempts at “changing their minds”.

Though my camera often triggered Don Emilio to give these kinds of “speeches”, it was not always the dominant context for his “poetics”.

#### ***4.4 “On our Feet” - Speech to fellow Neighbours***

In the neighbourhood of Barrio Cuatro district eight El Alto, the neighbours have gathered for the monthly neighbourhood council. They are talking about the annual operational plan of El Alto and what they have been promised of local development in their neighbourhood. They have not gotten what the plan has promised them and several of the speakers talk about the importance of transparency and of watching the leaders. “We have to be awake. So many things have happened before and they have cheated us a lot earlier. We believe their words when they talk, we can’t do that. “We have to watch them”, we say. Many talk out against corruption, saying the money for their promised projects is there, but that it has gotten in the wrong hands. Don Emilio asks for the word:

Comrades, neighbours. Our current municipal council is irresponsible. They're not doing a good job. The other day I went to the council with the president of the zone. We asked for some information that they should give us. Unfortunately we were surprised to find out... about the new staff. They don't even know what an annual operational plan is. Or what a municipal development plan is. We were shocked. Like this we're not going to advance, comrades neighbours! We should be "on our feet". We should be alert. We can no longer permit this in the city of El Alto. Especially in the most abandoned districts. Like district eight, twelve, seven... We're lagging behind, comrades. We have to be "on our feet". I would like you to bring that message to the district assembly. President, you have to say that this neighbourhood is "on its feet".

Like Marcelina did when explaining to me what they were demonstrating for in the school demonstration described in the introduction of this thesis, Don Emilio is relating a local

problem to a larger issue. He is relating the local problem of incompetent staff in the municipal council to the larger question of the development of the city of El Alto. “Like this we won’t advance, comrades, neighbours” he says. Public speakers in El Alto usually refer to people as comrades, stressing the equality of the people present. In addressing the people present not only as comrades, but as “comrades neighbours”, Don Emilio is also emphasising the importance of the specific local community of the neighbourhood. As Marcelina did in the school demonstration, Don Emilio is referring to the El Alto slogan of being “on their feet”, telling the neighbourhood council president that he should be sure to bring the message forward that this neighbourhood is paying attention and demands proper work at the municipality office.

Don Emilio spoke many times during this meeting and often did so at the meetings he attended. He was surely a well-known and respected man in the neighbourhood.

#### ***4.5 Revolutionary Man Meets Bureaucracy***

I refer to the film for a fuller impression of this incident. One day Emilio and his son were going to the doctor and I am allowed to follow them with the camera. When they get there they have to line up in a long line and when they finally reach the desk there’s no more vouchers for the paediatrician. Emilio asks what he’s gonna do then with his sick child and the lady say he can go to the emergency office. Emilio goes to the building that the lady directs him to, asks a doctor and is directed back to the first building. From there he is directed to a third building and there he is directed back to the second building. When he’s finally on the right place the doctor tells him to sit down and wait for the other doctor. After he’s been waiting for around half an hour - an hour he talks to the doctor again. I didn’t get the first part of this on tape and didn’t hear what was said before I started filming, but I started filming once I saw there was an argument going on. I find it necessary to quote the whole argument depicted in the film to make the analytical points to be discussed later. The doctor’s lines are emphasised in italics. The argument between the doctor, Don Emilio, and another patient goes as follows:

Don Emilio: But my kid! I would like you to authorize...

Doctor: *This is the emergency ward.*

Don Emilio: Yes, exactly.

Doctor: *I don't issue vouchers.*

DE: They told me you could give an authorization for a voucher.

Doctor: *I cannot give you a voucher; it's not my job, ok?*

DE: What's your name

Doctor: *Moncada, but listen...*

DE: Moncada, ok. I'll go to the management this minute.

Doctor: *Yeah, ok...*

Another patient (lady): Excuse me doctor, they sent us...

DE: If you don't have what it takes to be a doctor you've got to go.

Doctor: *You have to leave now, Mr.*

DE: You'd have to work with something else. Make bricks. Be a shoe shiner.

Doctor: *Will you please let me do my job?*

DE: Are you still being arrogant? We have the right to health, as well. Haven't you read the constitution?

Why don't you follow it?

Doctor: *Because you have to give me a voucher.*

DE: Why don't you give me the authorization?

Doctor: *The voucher...*

Lady: Doctor...

DE: What's more important, the child or the voucher?

Lady: Doctor, they told us you would give us an authorization to get a voucher.

Doctor: *No, missus, there is no such thing.*

Lady: Give me your name and I'll call Radio Patria right now if you don't attend to us.

DE: I will personally make sure you have to go. You know what, you can't work in El Alto. You're a bad professional. Tomorrow, we want to see the back of you.

Doctor: *I'm not lying to you, look; here are the vouchers you should have.*

Yet another patient: They sent us from the desk!

DE: See? It's not like I'm the only one.

Lady: They sent us from the desk.

After this incident, Don Emilio and I were brought to the hospital director to discuss what had happened and they wanted to know why I had been filming. One of the bosses was quite angry, but luckily the top boss was a very understanding lady who said, "Listen, these things happen often. The doctors sometimes think they're Gods and treat the patients very badly. We can't hide that. What he's worried about (referring to the other angry boss) is that this hospital will look bad because this is actually a very good hospital". She said patients were treated especially bad if they spoke poor Spanish with a strong Aymara accent. I then explained what I was doing there, trying to keep it as simple as possible by saying that I was making a film about Emilio as an El Alto citizen and was following him

around the city of El Alto to get an impression of everyday life here. Don Emilio corrected me immediately. “Not only is she making a film about a regular El Alto citizen, she is making a film about an important leader from 2003”. That’s when I really understood the importance, and the vulnerability, of Don Emilio’s revolutionary identity. In all other situations I had hung out with him his identity, as a revolutionary had been obvious to all. At the hospital office, however, Don Emilio meets the bureaucracy and his revolutionary identity is no longer relevant.

His way of dealing with the doctor, and the way the other people present back him up, is still very much within the “poetics of the revolutionary” of El Alto. In telling the doctor off for not attending to him, Don Emilio is quite skilfully playing on the cultural repertoire that he deems relevant in this situation; “you should be a shoe shiner or make bricks” he tells the doctor knowing that as a person having a high status job the doctor will take that as a clear insult. Even if most people would give doctors more status than shoe shiners and brick makers this still counters Don Emilio’s equality idealism and the proud he puts into his own manual work. In other situations Don Emilio would talk positively about any kind of manual work and even praise it as a spiritual activity. But as a skilful speaker Don Emilio knows how to use the doctor’s own status-scale when insulting him. The fact that he stands up against the doctor is itself not obvious and may be connected to the wider “culture of protest” that exists in Bolivia. Upon viewing the material my professor Lisbet Høltedahl said that the contrast to the Fulani in Cameroon, where she has been working for years, were staggering, as they would never argue with the doctor like this. I have shown the material to other Bolivians who say both the doctor’s arrogance and the people’s protest is typical.

As in other situations, here too the grand El Alto identity is made relevant; “you cannot work in El Alto”, “we don’t want to see you any more” Don Emilio says implying that this is a city with certain standards and a strong “we” to protect them.

The lady says she will call “Radio Patria”, a government channel with an indigenous profile. Don Emilio asks the doctor if he hasn’t read the constitution, referring to Evo Morales new constitution of 2009 where all are granted a right to healthcare. “We have the right to health as well”, Don Emilio says implying that everybody does not acknowledge those rights, and also making the point that he belongs to a discriminated “we”. Talking to

Don Emilio about this later it becomes clear that in his eyes the doctors treatment was about both social status and ethnic discrimination.

Before I separated with Don Emilio that day he had calmed down as the doctor had finally promised to attend to his son (after we had spoken to the hospital director), but he was still angry for what he deemed disrespectful treatment and said he was going to send a formal complaint to the hospital concerning this doctor. When I met Don Emilio next time, which was a week later, he said to me almost immediately: “what we filmed last time, at the hospital... You can’t include that in the film”. “Why”, I asked, “I thought it showed an important part of life in El Alto”. “No it wasn’t good. I lost control, I have reflected upon it and I’ve come to that my reaction wasn’t good”. I suggested to him that we did an interview were he could share his reflections about the visit, and he agreed that if we included a post-doctor-reflection interview, then I could include the doctors visit in the film.

In his post-doctor-visit reflections Don Emilio stated that he is usually very humble, but had simply “lost it” at the hospital. “When you see your kid suffer you can react like that. Anyway, he treated me badly” he says. He said that the doctor treated him badly because of his social status and because Emilio is “short and brown”. However, Don Emilio says he regretted because he had come to that he was behaving just as bad as the doctor by yelling at him like that. “The Indian came out”, he joked.

As Michael Jackson notes, referring to Mary Douglas, “jokes have a subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas, the joke breaks down control” (Douglas 1968:364 in Jackson: 189). The way Don Emilio here makes a joke of the uncontrollable and wild Indian who lost is certainly an example of that. Obviously, it is significant that he himself makes the joke; when he makes the joke it has a liberating effect as he takes control of the stereotype, if someone not “an Indian” made the joke it would be considered quite offensive.

#### ***4.6 Poetics of the Self, Poetics of the Us***

We have seen that the poetics of the revolutionary are performative representations of the El Alto identity that focuses on the powers of the *alteños*, their active engagement in changing their community, their concern with principles, their focus on the collective, and their capacity for bringing about change. The “poetics of the revolutionary” is performed in a way that highlights the speakers subjectivity through the very act of successful storytelling, yet always expressing humility towards ones place in a group.

In both Marcelina’s and Don Emilio’s story about 2003 we see Jeffery Webbers notion of “combined oppositional consciousness” as both class and ethnic identity is made relevant. In both accounts the “we” is stronger than the “I”. The only point in Marcelina’s story where she talks about herself as an individual is when addressing the change she has experiences as an Aymara woman at public offices. She is talking about an embodied experience of being met with more respect than before. Otherwise she talks about “the people” and about “us”. Don Emilio too mostly talks about “we” rather than “I”. At the hospital he did, however, stress his individual self when reminding me of his status as an important leader. This was a situation where his identity as a respectable individual was strongly challenged. However, in his way of talking to the doctor he efficiently creates a strong “we”.

In the story about the neighbourhood Don Emilio is also showing a combined oppositional consciousness in his rejection of both capitalist speculators and churches “who want to change the Aymara mind”. He even makes a direct link between the two in stating that the church is part of “the neoliberal capitalist domino”. In this story it is the “we” of the neighbourhood that is in focus. The neighbourhood is however, as I will get back to in the next chapter, an important community for the El Alto identity as a whole.

In both the story of 2003 and in the story of neighbourhood resistance, the speakers know that the audience is me and those who may watch the film. In the neighbourhood meeting, however, Don Emilio is talking to his neighbour more than to the camera.<sup>23</sup> In this speech anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism is no longer in focus. Rather, the focus is on the importance of making sure the leaders and bureaucrats of El Alto do their job properly. In

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<sup>23</sup> Of course I don’t know for sure how much the camera might have influenced this situation. But Don Emilio was talking a lot at this meeting and most of it dealt with so local issues that I doubt the camera was the most important context here. It is not unlikely, however, that his ”performance” was better because of the camera.

the “performances of the alteño self” to fellow alteños and fellow neighbours, the combined oppositional consciousness that political scientist Webber find is not so evident. This may be because Webber found this consciousness through interviews with alteños where they were talking to him, not fellow alteños. Anthropologist Sian Lazar, who did participant observation in a neighbourhood of El Alto for a year, found that people frequently talk amongst themselves about the corruption and failure of their leaders. Lazar (2008) argue that through talking about how leaders fail to serve the community, people create a shared understanding of the importance of putting collective interests before individual interests. Internally in El Alto, this may be more important on a day-to-day basis than anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism.

“The others”, thus, varies according to the situation, or rather, according to the audience to which the poetics of the El Alto self is acted out.

In a phenomenological study of empowerment in collective action, social psychologists John Drury, Christopher Cocking, Joseph Beale, Charlotte Hanson and Faye Rapley, argue that a central driving force for collective empowerment is “collective self objectification” (CSO), defined as “action that actualizes participants social identity against the power of dominant groups” (Drury et al 2005: 309). In accounts of empowerment people focus on knowledge of the self. In social movements empowerment is conceptualized as a narrative of self-transformation (Britt & Heise, 2000, Yuval – Davis, 1994 – in Drury 2005). The authors refer to Simon and Klandermans (2001) who has suggested an integrated model for social and psychological factors behind mobilisations. In this model empowerment is a function of politicized collective identity. This comes from the awareness of shared grievances, adversarial attribution<sup>24</sup> and the involvement of society in the dispute. The study show that “collective self objectification” is an important driving force for agency/empowerment, - the experience of being a subject and not an object, in collective mobilizations.

We may say that “the poetics of the revolutionary” is a way of reproducing the CSO – of objectifying the collective identity against a powerful out-group. The El Alto people together against the powerful, the poetics express. This out-group varies according to the situation, it may be the local politicians, it may be incapable public servants, it may be the

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<sup>24</sup> Adversarial attribution = Involving or characterized by conflict or opposition.

government or - as often when the poetics is only done in the presence of my camera and I - colonial and capitalist interests. Whatever out-group, the El Alto “we” is always present. The next chapter will go more into the details of the importance of the collective in El Alto. For now, we may note that constantly working on the reproduction of a sense of *collective agency* is important for alteños as El Alto is a city with tough competition and many individualistic pulls.

When Don Emilio went to the hospital we saw how his position as a respectable community leader was made irrelevant. But even if this was a situation he later would describe as one where “he lost control”, we saw in this his habitual knowledge of the poetics of the revolutionary. He played on the relevant cultural repertoire in order to tell off the doctor and efficiently he constructed in his arguments a strong El Alto unity against the doctor. The fact that others came up to back him up and argued with him furthers shows the extent to which the “we” matters in El Alto.

All incidents described above focus on alteño agency; their power to stand up, their will to stand up, and their demand for treatment as respectable equals. Perhaps most importantly, the poetics of the revolutionary are alteños *own* representations of themselves. When I first got to know Don Emilio I found it frustrating that whenever I was filming he was in this rhetorical mode that the poetics of the self belongs to. What I came to understand was just how important it is for many alteños to be able to present themselves, rather than be presented and defined by others. Both the poetics addressed at the conceived audiences of the film and the poetics addressed at fellow alteños, reproduce a sense of agency that external categorisations of alteños lack. In the last part of this chapter I will look at some of these external categorisations of alteños and Aymaras and discuss their effect on agency in El Alto.

#### ***4.7 The Problem with External Categorisations***

The background against which alteños do their poetics is a long history, and a continuing lived reality, of discrimination and stigmatisation in which Aymara and indigenous people are portrayed as lazy, less intelligent and backwards. By middle and upper class (and usually white or mestizo) Bolivians the indigenous city of El Alto is often portrayed as a dangerous problems city of rebels, crime and protest. Furthermore, El Alto is not very



favourable portrayed by international NGOs, missionaries and other westerners who come to El Alto for charity. The influence of NGOs in El Alto is significant as people look to them for financing when government resources are not sufficient. NGOs are thus an important part of daily life in El Alto and their negative descriptions of El Alto is something *alteños* are aware of. An extract from SOS children's villages reads as follows:

More than 70% of the El Alto's families live in poverty, life expectancy is only 62 years and more than 88% of the population is illiterate. The extreme poverty of the population leads to many children being malnourished, bad performance at school due to frequent absence, child labour as well as alcohol and drug abuse among young people and adults. Violence and families breaking up are widespread problems; every day children are abandoned by their parents <sup>25</sup>

SOS child villages describe a harsh reality in El Alto. The issues described are problems both Don Emilio and Marcelina are indeed concerned with. Don Emilio talked to me about how important he thought it was that his kids was in school instead of working even if the family needed money. Marcelina told some pretty tough stories of violence and of the economical situation many women were in as they were more exploited in the labour market than men and were often dependent on their husbands. Yet these issues are not what *alteños* usually focus their political consciousness around, and it is certainly not something they focus on when "performing the El Alto self" through different kinds of skilled speaking. The reason, I think, is that they feel as violated by these external characteristics as they do by internal problems. As anti colonial consciousness has grown, so has their unease with these characteristics.

The problem with these kinds of extreme negative characteristics of El Alto is that people are entirely portrayed as passive victims who need (western) rescue. In other words, the *alteños* in these views are the objects of other peoples charity actions, rather than subjects of interpersonal relations where their everyday struggles, successes, logics, fights and values are recognised as fully human. It is impossible to relate to someone as equals and at the same time say that they need to be saved because saviour implies a Saviour with a superior knowledge of right and wrong. Being looked upon as someone who needs to be

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.soschildrensvillages.org.uk/sponsor-a-child/americas/bolivia/child-sponsorship-background-from-el-alto-bolivia>. Downloaded 6th of January 2012

saved does something to the experiential aspect of agency, that is, being looked upon as an object and not a subject.

Furthermore, NGOs don't exist in a vacuum from international development discourses coloured by historically specific views of what constitutes good development. Both Lazar (2008) and Gill (1997) point to how many NGOs in El Alto promote individual development strategies where the object is creating "bounded individuals" capable of surviving in a free-marked economy.

I came across one such example in my encounter with Norwegian missionaries in El Alto. They showed me around their day-care centre in El Alto and during lunch a Bolivian employee told me a story she found very touching. There was this young boy who when he first arrived had said that his dream was to become a *boseador*, a person collecting the payment on the minibuses, just like his father. The missionaries had said that he should have higher goals for himself, so they had made him repeat to himself "I am a person who will have success, I will be person with money". Years later, the missionary said proudly, he had incorporated these ideas and when they now asked him about his plans he said he would be a doctor or lawyer because he was a person that was going to have success. I am not sure whether the missionaries were aware of the specific individual and capitalist development model they were promoting, focusing so directly on the importance of "becoming a person of money and success". Their views are not unique. One common example of promotion of an individualised free-marked oriented development strategy is micro-credit, increasingly popular amongst NGOs. As Gill (1997) notes, the NGO boom in Bolivia came about together with the neoliberal turn in the 1980s, and like Evelina Dagnino (2003: 8-9) notes, the charity discourse on social problems is associated with neoliberalism. Gill also criticises the many NGOs that have emerged in the neoliberal era for not working with the unions and the grassroots movements of El Alto.

Thus, not only is the experiential aspect of agency threatened by clientelistic accounts of poor *alteños* in need of help, - treating them as objects for saviour rather than subjects of complex human struggles. Also, the more instrumental aspect of agency is threatened because a radically different development - with a stronger focus on the collective and on indigenous values - is harder to promote when influential NGOs and missionaries work against them. The public discourse on development is changing with president Morales, but capitalist-oriented models and individualistic pulls are still strong.

A perhaps even stronger challenge to El Alto agency is the stark racism they have lived through for centuries. Racism may be an even stronger challenge to the experiential aspect of agency because they are defined as unable to overcome the limits defined by the inferior race they are born with. Living in La Paz and hanging out with middle class<sup>26</sup> mestizos I witnessed some of this racism myself.

Once I went to a party with some mestizo friends in La Paz. My friend Gladys said she didn't like these kinds of party's "with this kind of dance and everything". Half the people there were Aymara as it was her brother's party and her brother had married an Aymara woman. This wasn't uncontroversial in the family where marrying an Aymara clearly was seen as marrying "down". "You just don't have much to talk about with the Aymaras", she said to me. I told her that wasn't my experience and told her about Marcelina, with whom I felt I could talk to about everything from family to politics. "Yeah well you can talk to them about family and politics, but you can't talk to them about... you know, anything intellectual". When I asked for an example she said, "well media for instance", which is what she has studied, and she couldn't think of other examples. I told her I didn't experience my conversations with the woman in El Alto as any less intellectual than conversations with anyone else. "Hm" she said, then thought about it for some seconds and then concluded "you know what, I bet she's not a 100 % Aymara". "Yes she is!" I said. "Oh!" she said with a surprised face.

On a later occasion Gladys and her sister Maria were talking about their fathers new family who they didn't like that much. "They're actually jealous at us", Gladys said. Maria nodded, "you see, the thing is that we're not that bad looking, we're quite fair skinned. We're not as ugly as them, that's really why they're jealous". "You see, Ane", Gladys said turning over to me, "They haven't bettered their ra..." she stopped before she finished the word "race" as she realised my reaction. She laughed what I took to be a somewhat nervous laugh and said to her sister "Ane don't like these things, she doesn't understand it".

In racism people are defined as objects of their inferior ethnicity rather than equals. The threat to people's experience of being a subject and not an object is thus quite extreme in

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<sup>26</sup> They defined themselves, and were looked at by others as middle class mostly because of their education. They did not, however, have a lot of money.

racism.

#### ***4.8 Poetics and Agency***

The “poetics of the revolutionary” highlights the agency that these external characterisations leave no room for. Alteños own stories about themselves highlight a collective identity as fighters, critical, dignified, reflective and capable of revolutionary change with a focus on collective goods. This stands in stark contrast to the representations of the missionaries and mestizos described above where the alteños only options for betterment are thought to be through capitalistic personal advancement or, as in the mestizo perspective, physical bettering of their “race” (or rather - their children’s race, through marrying someone whiter). These threats make it even more important for the alteños to actively work at a daily basis to reproduce their own descriptive and experiential sense of agency.

The poetics reminds people to be “on their feet”, reproducing an idea of a distinct El Alto fighting identity that people take pride in, making it easier to get people to mobilise. Further, as Lazar argues about every day talk, the poetics focus on the collective may help constitute a common understanding of the importance of the collective. The poetics thus helps reproduce an essentially collectively oriented sense of agency.

The experiential sense of agency is also reproduced through poetics, most strongly for those who perform the poetics themselves. Through these public stories of “the capable and dignified alteño”, people take control of their own identity in a society where others definition of them has had a strong influence for centuries. Both because of the content of the poetics – focusing on the active, capable and critical alteño – and because of the very fact that they tell the stories themselves, peoples experience of being an active subject rather than a passive object of other peoples definition, is enlarged.

Poetics of the revolutionary is one of the ways in which the collective agency in El Alto is reproduced. Another important factor in the reproduction of agency in El Alto, is their constant involvement in collectivities. That is what I’ll turn to in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: The Importance of Collectivities**

### ***5.1 The Importance of the Collective***

So far in the thesis we have seen how poetics – skilful talk to some sort of audience playing on the available cultural resources - contributes to the reproduction of a sense of collective agency in El Alto. We saw how “the poetics of the revolutionary” focused on capabilities, anti-colonialism, equality and fairness, staying true to your principles, watching the leaders, and we saw how this poetics always had a notion of “the people” against powerful others.

Yet poetics in itself does not explain the collective sense of agency that exists in El Alto, and especially, the ability of neighbourhood groups, school councils, and unions to get so many people out on the street for protests and marches so regularly. Anthropologist Sian Lazar has some ideas about this that I will come back to. First, I will look at a situation from my fieldwork where I only later realised what was happening. The situation shows how poetics and praxis belongs to two different realms of reality and how I misunderstood the praxis because I was blinded by “the poetics”. When I understood the praxis it revealed something to me about the importance of the collective in El Alto. This, in turn, says something about the kind of collective (sense of) agency that exists in El Alto.

### ***5.2 Don Emilio, the Local School, and the Neighbourhood***

One Friday my assistant Gregory and I were filming Don Emilio working in his house early in the morning. While Gregory was hanging around and taking pictures I was filming Don Emilio working, asking a few questions here and there about his work. Somebody knocks on the door and Emilio tells his son he will go out in a minute. After some time he goes out to open, I follow him with the camera. I ask if it's ok that I film and they say it's no problem, then Don Emilio introduces me as “a Norwegian missionary making a reportage”. Obviously, Emilio knows I'm not a missionary. The guy accepts and then turns to Emilio who has already guessed why he's there and says, “What's new? You see I wasn't able to come the other day”. “Yeah that's why I'm here,” The guy, Don Ronez who's the head of the parental association at the school, says. “Well... I'm here with the missionary, we're making a small reportage” Don Emilio says as he introduces

me to the visitor. Then he continues saying “well, I couldn’t come, to the meeting I was with lots of activities but now we could talk a little bit with... (he nods his head in my direction), so we can coordinate when we come to the school.” He confirms that we will come to the school later.

Back inside I talked to Don Emilio about he not having attended the parental meeting. He says that he couldn’t go because he had some work, and since the work was always temporal it was from a certain date and time and he couldn’t miss it. He says that he had sent his son, but that they didn’t think it was good enough. “But now we’re gonna go, right?” he says, looking at me with a smile.

A bit later we head towards the school. Don Ronez – the head of the parental board – comes up to us and waits for Don Emilio to finish the conversation with my assistant Gregory. Don Emilio says to me that he would like me to talk to Don Ronez so he can make some requests (peticiones). At the time I didn’t understand this word so I didn’t realize that they were asking so directly for me to donate money. Don Ronez talks about the school and what it misses and Don Emilio mentions a new school building they want to construct, as they will soon be more kids enrolling. I ask about mobilisations and Don Ronez says that because of these lacks they are always mobilising and when they don’t get what they need sometimes they build and paint themselves. He talks about how slow things are with the municipality and he hints more at me with sentences like “so I was wondering maybe... because our kids are suffering”. I was a bit uncomfortable with the situation because I had experienced Don Emilio as a person who didn’t like charity and who liked the idea of making a film about their struggles and life instead of some westerner helping them with money. Also, classrooms and good equipment is expensive and I didn’t have that amount of money just like that. I thought I had communicated that to Don Emilio earlier. I didn’t understand why Don Emilio had introduced me as a missionary and I wasn’t sure how to handle the situation.

Don Ronez showed me a bit around. While we talked the kids were all playing in the schoolyard. They were supposed to be having class, but they had to cancel the morning lessons because they were lacking professors that day. He continued to talk about what they were missing. I didn’t respond much to his hints for help so he finally asked me

directly: “so I don’t know if your institution could do anything...we would appreciate any help”. I then explained to him that I’m not a missionary but am here to make a film and I say that all I can do is to tell the story, I explain that I come from a University. He asks if it would still be possible to do something, to help with some resources.

We then met up with Gregory and Don Emilio again. Don Emilio was just in the process of getting some papers from the headmaster and was joking around with the kids. After he’s gotten what he needs from the teachers and has walked away from the office he decides to make a final “speech” directly to the camera and me. Here’s a short extract:

”So, now you have been able to see the situation that our kids are in. We hope that ... the public opinion in the world where they can see us... can testify with these images that... that our life conditions are not... the most optimal... they’re inhumane conditions... but we have the will, we have the idea of reversing this situation. We hope that we can change this very soon because one... one hurts, right, to see one’s kids in these conditions and that... its something that concerns us a great deal. I, especially, don’t accept this. I don’t accept that there are unequal treatments. So let’s hope that with our leaders and the neighbours the whole population can find better days. The conditions of our country... despite that we’re supposedly in a country ”that is flying” (i.e. “going forward”); it’s not like that. You have been able to see that we are living in times very backwards; right... you can see it here... and in many things. So this is something we hope to change. We hope that... our idea isn’t that... that you have compassion with us (gives me and the camera a wry smile) neither are we looking for gifts (*dadivismos*<sup>27</sup>). What we want is that the people truly solidarize with our way of thinking. And with our way of acting. That’s what we want. That is... That they don’t look at us like beggars or anything like that, no, [we want them to see] that we’re people with... people with very important human values, that’s what we want people to acknowledge in us, the people of El Alto. That we’re not beggars, [but] that we’re people who are looking for equality between everybody and that’s why our everyday task is too look for better days for our kids. (...)

### ***5.2.1 Charity as a tool, but rejecting its possible implications***

The “poetics” of his speech to the camera is similar to what I had heard from him earlier; emphasising their hard work for better conditions and a ideological focus on equality and respect, not charity. The special thing about this speech is of course that it may very easily be interpreted as a contradiction to what had been going on just a minute earlier where they did ask me for “charity”. I represent a specific chance of getting funding for the local school and as we will soon see, this is about more than the concrete help. In order to make that happen, however, Don Emilio has to take advantage of an imbalanced power relationship - me as giver and them as receivers – a relationship that he is ideologically very much against. Don Emilio’s “speech to the camera” and use of poetics in this

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<sup>27</sup> I understand this word to have a similar connotation to ”charity”, though in a slightly more negative sense. It could also be translated to “give aways”.

situation, I think, shows that he is aware of this apparent contradiction. His speech to the camera, thus, becomes a way of rejecting the inherent values in “charity”, as a way of taking control of the interpretation of what they had just asked me for. “We do not want charity”, he says with a wry smile that tells me charity is no positive word in his mind. “We are looking for people to solidarize with our way of thinking”.

Many people I knew in La Paz questioned the alteños morality based on the fact that some expected money from me. The missionaries, for instance, said people in El Alto didn’t really want to develop, they only wanted handouts as they had gotten so used to receiving. Given the large amount of community-built infrastructure and the high degree of community participation in El Alto that description seems particularly unfair, but it is true that private NGOs are influential in El Alto and that citizens may “use them” for what they’re worth and perhaps not always in the way the NGOs wants<sup>28</sup>. From the actors point of view this, however, has nothing to do with not wanting to progress. It is simply a way of using the “resources “at hand in a way that makes sense locally. Don Emilio, I think, is aware that not all have positive ideas of people from El Alto, and he therefore stresses ideals, capabilities and hard work.

In his poetics he emphasises that what he reacts most to is the unfairness in the unequal distribution of resources. This focus, coupled with the emphasis on how hard they work, may be interpreted as a rejection of the idea that they are poor because they don’t work hard enough or have somehow deserved it (an idea I often heard expressed among mestizos in La Paz). The message is that they are hard working and capable people whose rights to good life conditions are being rejected. Begging – a relation based on ‘somebody’s good will to give to needy and passive human beings in need of charity - does not fit this image.

But even with this high level of consciousness Don Emilio has no hesitations actually asking me for help. That, I realised, is because poetics and praxis are two different things. “The poetics” are often attempt at taking control over how things are interpreted. Michael Jackson writes about how language can be a way of changing ones experience of relationships that affect you but that you cannot act directly against (Jackson 2005: 182).

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<sup>28</sup> Lesley Gill (1997) has some examples of this.



For Don Emilio he experiences that the need for charity is something he just has to accept, but he doesn't accept the imbalanced power relationships often inherent in charity, so he "tells a story" to the camera that counters any possible interpretation of what had just happened as a quest for charity. The poetics is a discursive attack on those who might look at them as beggars, while the praxis of actually asking me for help is simply about using the resources at hand in ways that makes sense locally.

What become increasingly clear when revising this material was that Don Emilio was using me as a direct way of compensating for his missed obligations to his community. Going to meetings is seen as an important obligation in El Alto. Don Emilio didn't have the opportunity to come to the school board meeting. As compensation, however, he brings a white westerner assumed to have access to money, to the local school. This interpretation came first from my teacher upon watching the visual material. "He didn't come to the meeting, but he has you", my teacher commented. Upon revising the visual material myself I found that this is a very viable interpretation. For instance, directly after the school board president has said why he's there Emilio answer by introducing me to him. He then again mentions that he couldn't come to the meeting and says "but now we can talk a bit with the ..." <sup>29</sup> and then nods at me, before he confirms that we will come to the school later. Also after Don Ronez has left and I talked to Don Emilio about he not having attended the parental meeting he says "but now we're gonna go, right?" looking at me with a smile.

Through this and similar situations I discovered how important obligations to the neighbourhood and the community was for Don Emilio.

Lazar (2008: 83-88) writes about the importance of *obras* ("works" referring to community projects such as school buildings and pavements for the main roads) in El Alto. In the eyes of the neighbours the number of obras a leader has achieved in the community is an important criteria for being a successful leader. It may thus be a reasonable interpretation that both Don Emilio and the head of the parental board, who was new in his job and therefore in particular need of proving himself to the community, saw an opportunity in me to get money for a local project and thus feed on their own

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<sup>29</sup> His exact words in spanish are: "Ahora podemos hablar un rato, si es posible, con la...".

status in the community as somebody who was responsible and successful in finding financing for obras. The fact that Don Emilio is a former leader and a potential leader in the future may make this even more important for him.

Appealing to me may thus be a way for Don Emilio of constituting (or contributing to) his respectability locally. At the same time he is aware that this may jeopardize his respectability in the eyes of those watching my film as they might think of the alteños as beggars. He attempts to resolve that risk, by doing a speech to the camera.

In other situations too, there seemed to be a particular status associated with finding money for community projects, or contributing. On one occasion Don Emilio's eagerness to get financing for a local school project was something that struck me because it was a kind of eagerness I associate with someone expecting something really exciting for themselves. This kind of eagerness was directed at a local school project that neither seemed urgent (he didn't talk about the detail of what was needed, that didn't seem to be the point) nor would it affect him directly. I had mentioned that I had met some Norwegian missionaries and he straight away asked if I thought they could help them out. Later in the same conversation he told me about a book project he was working on with a group of leaders from 2003 about how they organised during the gas-war, and he asked me if I could help find financing. I told him that if they made a project proposal and a budget I might be able to help them in some way to find financing, but I stressed that I couldn't promise anything. Next time we met he said that he had told the group he had found financing, whereupon I again said that I couldn't promise anything and that the first thing they would have to do is write a budget. "No, I know, no problem", he said with a smile. He explained that he just had to tell them that – that he had found financing, but it wasn't a problem that I couldn't guarantee it. I got a feeling that the most important part wasn't really the financing (especially since the project where currently "on ice" for a number of different reasons) but that he showed to the group that he had made an effort to contribute. For Don Emilio his status in the community might also be particularly important as a former leader, an active citizen and perhaps most importantly, as a potential future leader.

### ***5.3 The Importance of the Neighbourhood***

The fact that Don Emilio is so concerned with contributing to his neighbourhood is about local respectability ideals that are connected to service towards the group. It also has something to do the ways in which people's identities in El Alto are connected to the collective. The fact that it is considered an important value to contribute to the collective is an important part of the type of political agency people in El Alto experience, because it contributes to the feeling of a strong "us". Lazar (2008) argues that collective organisations in El Alto, such as neighbourhood councils and school committees, show an "ability to construct collective and relational senses of self among their members, against the pull of individual interests and factional conflicts" (ibid: 3). This is what makes it possible for these organisations to get so many people out on the streets for political protests, she argues. But how exactly are these "collective and relational senses of self" and the concern with collective goods that Don Emilio demonstrate above, created?

In the beginning and end of the film accompanying this thesis we see *alteños* marching together in a parade. In another scene we see *alteños* standing together in protest shouting slogans outside a local government building, demanding school equipment that has been promised to them. Lazar argues that participation in marches and demonstrations has strong elements of rituals (focus on discipline and neat lines, moving through space in a unified way, saying slogans together) and are thus important bodily practice through which the neighbours experience collective citizenship (Lazar 2008: 189 - 195). Non-political activities such as neighbourhood parties and social activities are also important ways in which peoples sense of self is connected with the collective. One time I got invited to a teacher's party, celebrating "the day of the teachers", with Marcelina at the local school of Barrio Cuatro. Marcelina was there as the vice-president of the parental board. After some speeches and dinner prepared by the students to honour their teachers, the students went home and the teachers and the parents from the parental board sat in a ring to have beer. Marcelina insisted to treat me with beer arguing that I could treat her next time. Everyone's glasses were filled up very regularly. Before you drink you have to spill some beer on the ground as a tribute to the *pachamama*, mother earth. This is called to *ch'allar*. I had luckily heard about this before the party so I knew it was expected. The fact that I said yes to drink with them and that I did *ch'allar* with the beer seemed to

lighten the scepticism towards me that some of them had in the beginning of the event. Lazar writes about how reciprocal arrangement around the buying of alcohol and collective experiences of drinking, along with offering to the *pachamama*, creates reciprocal ties to Gods, the physical place and other neighbours. This, Lazar argues, is also part of what constitutes collective and relational senses of selves where humans, place and Gods are all part of the net (Lazar 2008: 144 – 171).

The experience of being together in demonstrations, parades and parties are important ways in which peoples identity is connected to the collective. These experiences of being together are often connected to the neighbourhood, as there are neighbourhood meetings, meetings at the local school, neighbourhood social events, and also neighbourhood fiestas with dances. I did not witness these neighbourhood fiestas as they didn't take place during my stay, but Lazar argues that the dances in the fiestas make up the most intense experiences of community – that she identifies as examples of Victor Turner *communitas*. The fiestas are "being in the world experienced as being-with-others through dance" (Tamisari 2000 in Lazar 2008: 127).

Don Emilio was impossible to contact on Sundays, either because he was sleeping after a local party on Saturday or because he was out playing football with the neighbours. "Every Sunday we play football here with the neighbours", "I never miss out on it. It's beautiful", he told me. Being with the neighbours is important to Don Emilio. We have seen earlier how important he thought it was to have the school in the neighbourhood. "The school has turned into a place where the neighbours meet, an important place in the community," he told me. He also talked about how the neighbours themselves had contributed to building the school, as they were waiting for support from the authorities. Lazar points to this as yet another way in which the neighbours connect to their neighbourhood and their zone. They have participated in very concrete ways of physically building the zone together, paving roads, painting schools, and even building constructions as the municipality is most often very slow on its promises<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> In Don Emilio's zone at the neighbourhood meeting I attended, this was however a big discussion as many community-made projects wasn't of very good quality. They finally decided to let a company do it, but then to make sure to pay close attention to their contractors work.

The neighbourhood and the idea of “the neighbour” has political significance exactly because it is about so much more than the political; as people live their everyday lives in the neighbourhood and do so many things together with the neighbours their identity is connected with the neighbourhood collectivity, and it is thus easier to mobilise on behalf of that collectivity. Political scientist Jeffery Webber found that activists use the idea of the power of the neighbours, *los vecinos*, in El Altos social movement to express popular control, self-organisation, and self-activity (Webber 2010: 316). Webber writes that the “*Vecino*, in this sense, resembles what scholars in another context refer to as “a model of heroism and possibility,” whose task it is to “transform the nature of power through popular insurgency and organizational forms of control from below” (Roman & Velasco Arregui 2007: 263)”. Directly translated vecino means neighbour, but the notion, as we see, has more to it. The identity of the vecino comes out of collective concrete struggles for basic services, and from local reciprocal bonds, as Lazar (2008) shows in her ethnography. Activist and journalist Gonzalo Gozalves (2005 in Webber 2009: 315-316) suggests that the vecino “has condensed the indigenous and the miner. Out of the neighbourhood form has grown this political, ideological, cultural content of the neighbourhood councils”.

For Don Emilio the description of “el vecino” and the neighbourhood as “a model of heroism and possibility” is especially fitting after 2003, as it was through the neighbourhood councils the central organisations took place and as he himself had a central role in the FEJUVE of the time. It is through the neighbourhood organisations Don Emilio has experienced “revolutionary feelings “ of both brotherhood and massive agency, as their efforts actually did lead to important changes.

#### ***5.4 Conflicting Communities***

The collective agency and what Lazar calls “the creation of relational senses of selves among the alteños” demands active engagement in the neighbourhood and a constant focus on the distinct “El Alto identity”. Being a part of the neighbourhood is an important part of the enactment of the El Alto identity. Yet alteños are often part of multiple collectivities and one of the collectivities many alteños have felt a belonging to since 2005 is the government party MAS (movement towards socialism) and the indigenous

community it has its strongest support amongst. Even if El Alto organisations have criticised the government increasingly and take proud in taking an independent position, most *alteños* have strong family connections to the countryside where the MAS party is still strong. Recently, however, there has been increasingly criticism from many of the party's indigenous support groups over a controversial high way project, so it should be noted that things might develop quickly and in many directions in Bolivia. However, for the time of my stay the MAS party still had very important support in El Alto.<sup>31</sup>

Since Evo Morales inauguration the MAS party has been associated with indigenous rights and anti-colonialism. We saw that when Don Emilio and other patients argued with the doctor at the hospital the government was drawn into the argument, rhetorically on their side. "I will call radio patria", the woman said referring to the indigenous oriented state channel. "Haven't you read the constitution?" Don Emilio asked the doctor, referring to Bolivia's new constitution of 2009 – very controversial among the opposition parties – granting everybody right to health care, but also generally focusing more on indigenous systems and values. One of my mestizo friends in La Paz told me that her uncle, who had married a Aymara woman despite the family's disapproval, once had brought a MAS party flag to a family dinner and put it in the middle of the table. The MAS flag, to everybody present, signified indigenous pride and was seen as a very clear way of making a provocative point.

The indigenous support for the MAS party is increasingly seen as a problem among El Alto civil organisations such as the FEJUVE, the federation of neighbourhood councils, as they have become increasingly critical of the governments "process of change" arguing that it is not different enough from the earlier neoliberal governments. The organisations are still demanding "the agenda of October", referring to the 2003 movements demand of full national control of the countries national resources.

In this regard Marcelina represent what some *alteños* see as a threat to the critical voice from El Alto: she is more active in the governments political party MAS and her community in the countryside than in her neighbourhood in El Alto. She is part of the neighbourhood and is incorporate into the revolutionary discourse of *alteño* activists, but she doesn't draw her primary collective identity from the neighbourhood. Marcelina is

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<sup>31</sup> There are no new numbers on this, but the MAS has majority in the municipality. At the time of my stay key organisations such as the Central workers union was also supporting the MAS party. Within the FEJUVE there were more discussions going on.

also in a somewhat different position than Don Emilio because she has recently migrated to the city and doesn't have as strong feelings about El Alto as Don Emilio does. She says that if it wasn't for having married a man from El Alto and having her kids in a school here – a school she says is a lot better than the school in the countryside – she would love to move back.

### ***5.5 Marcelina and the MAS Community***

Marcelina comes from a rural community in the green valleys of Los Yungas, north of La Paz. There her family grew rice, coca, and some fruit. She grew up with a father who was active in what was then called “the colonizadores”, an indigenous group known for its politically and ideologically conscious members. “The colonizadores” was a political group initially working for “the sovereignty of the indigenous nations of the country”, now known as the intercultural communities CSCIB (The Confederación Sindical de Comunidades Interculturales de Bolivia). CSCIB was one of the important organizations behind the creation of the MAS party. Not having enough money to study, Marcelina joined “the colonizadores” and it was, as she says “a way of educating my self”.

She travelled with the colonizadores; they took her to seminars and courses, and after a while she got trusted with important positions. As Don Emilio had his most important political experiences of being part of something revolutionary from the neighbourhood councils and the FEJUVE, Marcelina experienced these feelings with the colonizadores. As a member of the CSCIB she was part of the initial formational meetings of the now governing party MAS. “They taught us about the different laws that affected us, why they weren't good. This whole issue of capitalization<sup>32</sup> it wasn't good. Nothing good about it. (...) So we figured we should form our own party, that we as poor people would try to come to the power ourselves”, she tells me.

Marcelina, got increasingly important roles in CSCIB. At the age of 27 she married a man from El Alto and moved with him to the city. They settled in the neighbourhood of Barrio Cuatro, district eight in El Alto and Marcelina got involved in the local school committee. At the time of my stay she served as the vice-president of the committee.

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<sup>32</sup> Capitalization was the title Sanhed de Lozada, the neoliberal president of 2003, had given the government's privatisation programs.

Even though she had been living in El Alto for eight years at the time of my fieldwork, she felt more at home in her home village in Las Yungas. She goes back there as often as she can. At the time of my stay Marcelina was still an important community organiser in her home village Teoponte, doing the legal work in the city required for agricultural projects they had started. Travelling back so often she also sees many of the government projects directed at the countryside, whereas people in the cities say they feel more abounded by the Morales government. This is especially so in El Alto as people there know they have given their blood for change. Marcelina herself says the most important changes this government has done has been directed at *campesinos* in the countryside.

Though Marcelina likes the civic and political activities of the city, and is proud of the *alteño* “fighting spirit”, she is not generally very impressed by the people of El Alto’s sense of unity. As a person who has moved to El Alto for marriage and is still more connected to her community in the countryside, she is more critical than Don Emilio of the collaboration among people and groups in the city. “People are more united in the countryside,” she says. “The city makes you think in your self. There (i.e. in the countryside) you have to work on the land your living on, if you want to keep your land that’s just the way it is. (...) And if the community needs a school you get together and mobilise for it, even if you don’t have children. Here the school committee works for themselves and the neighbourhood committee works for themselves. (...) And if you have kids in another school in another part of town you won’t bother working for your neighbourhood”.<sup>33</sup>

As Lazar notes, the bodily experiences of being together in demonstrations and marches are important ways in which individual selves are connected to collectivities. The political group Marcelina has been socialised into and has experienced the most intense feelings with – organising resistance, going to demonstrations, learned from, experienced strong political agency with – have been the colonizadoras and the MAS party. After having moved to El Alto, the community of the neighbourhood has not replaced that for her.

In the same way that I had taken Don Emilio’s revolutionary poetics so seriously that I was surprised when he wanted charity from me, there was one situation with Marcelina where I found myself disappointed over her lack of principles. Upon reflection I think this

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<sup>33</sup> This was probably also one of the reasons why it was so important for Don Emilio and the neighbours to get a school in the neighbourhood.



situation too says more about the importance of being loyal to the community most important to you, than it tells of opportunistic behaviour. Now to be clear, there are definitely lots of opportunistic practices in El Alto, but for several reasons that I will come back to soon, I don't think opportunism is the primary explanation for the situation I will now turn to.

### ***5.5.1 Marcelina, coca and troubled trust***

One of the aspects of the Morales government that Marcelina deemed especially important was his outspoken policy of always consulting the people. During my stay there was one case that seemed to challenge her trust in Morales and the government project. Morales had passed some laws Marcelina deemed unjust to her coca leaf-growing district, and she simply couldn't understand what he was thinking. The coca law separated between three categories. The first was illegal coca growing areas assumed to produce mostly for international drug trafficking. The government wanted to eradicate this whole category. The second category was not deemed illegal, but unsustainable and the government had a long-term plan for step-by-step eradication of this category too. The third category was legal and promoted by the government as of cultural, and potentially economical<sup>34</sup>, value. Marcelina was certain herself that her district should belong to the legal group. The government, however, placed them in the second category and wanted to eradicate. When she found out she simply could not believe Morales was doing this on purpose. "He must not have understood the consequences", she said. During the period I was there she was working hard to get an audience with the president on the issue, and even suggested that I focused my film on the coca-issue. Of course, the fact that Morales was himself a *cocalero* (i.e. a coca farmer) played a part here. He would for sure know what the coca meant to her. During my stay Marcelina used her contacts to try to get the case heard, attended and organised meetings about the issue and argued strongly for the continued need for coca growing in her region.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The government is working internationally for the recognition of the coca, so that tea and other legal products from the leaves may be sold. This legal category is however only a part of the total coca production in Bolivia.

<sup>35</sup> Some of her arguments were for instance that coca is very well adapted to the local soil, has good harvest and that it's easy to carry long distances in order to sell in markets. In addition, she argued for its cultural value.

One day, towards the end of my stay, she hadn't talked about it for some time so I asked her how the coca-issue was going. They will eradicate, she said calmly. "What?" I replied, quite shocked to hear her talk so matter-of-factly about it. "Yes, they will eradicate, but they will give us economic compensation and help us grow other valuable crops, so it's ok. They're helping us." I couldn't understand that she had given up so easily considering how important this case seemed to her. Earlier she had argued against the possibility of economic compensation saying that it was too difficult to start growing something else as the coca was locally adopted for centuries and it was light to carry long distances for sale, something very few other products had the advantage of. Economic compensation would also miss the cultural point of coca, Marcelina had argued some weeks earlier.

### ***5.5.2 Understanding Marcelinas sudden shift***

Now, I don't know the details of what motivated her sudden shift in opinion. Later on she got a job in the government working for alternatives to coca, and further down the line she got an important position in the MAS party itself. It is of course possible to interpret her sudden shift as "playing the game of politics" as Don Emilio might have termed it. But the difference between the usual party political games that are certainly common in Bolivia, and her involvement in the MAS party is that the MAS party was more than a party for her. It was an important community. Her involvement with MAS and the indigenous organisation that was part of its formation had been a life long involvement and I have a strong impression that she felt the MAS party and the government was a genuinely different party than earlier governing parties. Among many Bolivians there was a genuine sense that this was a different party as it had emerged from many of the countries social movements. People's political party affiliations usually shifted frequently according to strategic and clientelistic concerns (Lazar 2008: 92-117). The MAS, however, was for many people more than a party; it was an expression of indigenous pride that involved people's feelings in a more profound way than earlier party politics had. It is of course also possible that she simply changed her mind, but given her fierce argument against coca-eradication and her long history as a coca-grower, I find it difficult to believe that she would simply change her opinion like that. What I think this does say something about, is the importance in El Alto of having harmonious relationships with the communities you belong to.

Just as obligations to the neighbourhood was Don Emilio's prime priority when there was a conflict of interest (as there was when he on the one hand saw an opportunity to use me to get resources for the local school while on the other hand risked jeopardizing the impression he was building up towards me and my camera), Marcelina, I think, didn't want to jeopardize her place within the collectivity that was most important to her, politically and identity wise, namely the MAS party. When there was a conflict between her own opinions and her place within the MAS party, she ended up choosing her place within the MAS party.

I realised later that I had not understood the depths of her affiliation with the MAS party and the government project, and that "harmony" with this group was very important to her.

In the article "An Anthropology of 'The Good Life' in the Bolivian Plateau" (2008), Melania Calestani, writes about alteños conceptions of "the good life". She writes that "there are two local terms that are used to talk about the good life or well-being: Suma Jakaña and Suma Qamaña. (...) Suma Jakaña is 'the good life' at the individual and household level; my informants considered the individual and the household as the same thing. On the other hand, Suma Qamaña is the 'good life' at the community level, which is the concept favoured by Aymara intellectuals" (Calestani 2008: 145). Calestani found that in both the concept of Suma Jakaña and Suma Qamaña there was a strong focus on the importance of having harmonious relationships with others. Avoiding or repairing conflicts that disturbed the harmony at family or community level was thus essential ways of securing the good life. She argues that Andean cosmology focusing on reciprocity and harmonious relationship between, people, Gods and nature also plays an important role.

Bearing this in mind, and bearing in mind the MAS community importance to Marcelina, I find it more plausible to interpret Marcelinas sudden shift in opinion as a way of preserving her relationship with an important community, than to interpret it as primarily being about individual interest maximizing.

Having local ideas of wellbeing in mind, and Lazars observations about alteños sense of self constantly being linked to the community, the situations described above with Emilio and Marcelina may be interpreted as expressions of the importance of service towards the collectivity, even if it means jeopardizing personal opinions. There is a potential conflict

in the fact that *alteños* experience their strongest loyalty to different communities, and many *alteños* do point to it as a problem that so many support the MAS party in whatever they do. But at the same time, both those who feel most connected to the MAS community in El Alto and those who feel a stronger connection to the neighbourhood and the independent political unit of the FEJUVE play on “the poetics of the revolutionary” described earlier in this theses, thereby also reproducing the shared El Alto sense of critical agency. As we saw in the school demonstration, Marcelina’s strong feelings for the MAS party didn’t hinder her in taking part of the El Alto rhetoric’s of being critical of and watching ones leaders.

What both Don Emilio and Marcelina share is that their strong sense of agency is connected to their involvement in a community that is more than political as it involves their whole person; it is not only about political belief it is also about a sense of belonging. Their political (and social) community grants them with trust and demands their commitment; it gives them a feeling both of personal significance and of being part of something bigger than themselves. There is certainly an element of force in these communities, as communal harmony may be prioritized before “personal freedom” and I don’t want to romanticize *alteños* focus on the collective. But the focus on the collective, reproduced through both poetics and frequent involvement in a community where people have bodily experiences of marching together, demonstrating together, partying together and playing football together, is exactly what makes their sense of collective political agency so strong; the experience of being part of a community is an essential part of their agency. One thing is that Andean ideas of the good life focus on the importance of community. Further, being a part of a community that one feels has revolutionary potentials -as especially Marcelina feels at the moment as her party runs a majority government - has big effects on the experience of agency. As Michael Jackson notes, “to feel that one is part of a mass movement, to embrace a cause, or yield to the will of others may increase ones sense of significance every bit as much as striving to stand out from the crowd” (2005: 182).

## ***5.6 Suma Qamaña and Agency***

Engagement in communities creates, as Lazar notes, “relational senses of selves” and an experience of being as essentially about being part of a community. Calestani refers to Diener and Suh (2000 in Calestani 2009: 54) who “write about the importance of self-actualization and autonomy in North America for the majority of individuals; they describe a highly independent adult as someone able to transcend the influences of others and society”. Calestani contrasts this with her own finding in El Alto “where individuals stressed the importance of relations for the construction of the self, for his/her aspirations as a human being. In El Alto a person exists and functions in relationship to others” (Calestani 2008).

The Aymara concept of Suma Qamaña – living well – is as I have already mentioned a philosophy that focuses on balance and reciprocity between all living things; animals, plants, mountains and Gods included. Suma Qamaña is also an active life where you engage in communal life and actively contribute to relationships to others (including to Gods and non-human being).

The idea of the good life being about reciprocity between all living things is not a specific Andean notion and Suma Qamaña is perhaps better described as a philosophy rather than as an account of a specific cosmology. The philosophy of Suma Qamaña resembles anthropologist Michael Jacksons descriptions of how intersubjectivity is universally experienced in terms of relations of reciprocity (2005:36). What Suma Qamaña adds to Jackson’s accounts of intersubjectivity is that it extends it to also include non-human beings (that is however beyond the scope of this thesis).

Don Emilio explains Suma Qamaña as being a “dual condition between material life and spiritual life”. The material conditions must be there, but it is only a part of it. As he once told me:

It’s bad spoken to say a person with a lot of material wealth is rich. I am rich. Spiritually I’m rich. I’m rich because I talk with people, I’m rich because of my daily activity, I’m rich because of my family. Wealth is relative. You can’t concentrate it around one thing. So I say, I’m rich. Because I know how to live. It’s relative. Now economically.... That’s a whole different story.

It should be added here that in Quechua and Aymara, the definition of being poor is “to be without kin and social relations” (Widmark 2003 in McNeish 2006: 124). Notice that

when explaining in what way he is rich Don Emilio focuses on two things: his relations to other people, and his activities. Both relationship to others, and being active are important parts of Suma Qamaña (see for instance Harris 2007). Calestani (2009) notes how alteños view Suma Qamaña as something you have to work actively for, whether through social protest, sharing with others, or offerings to the gods.

Active engagement with others in communities and the experience of being active rather than passive may also be an experience of agency. Thus, the experience of agency may also be interpreted as part of Suma Qamaña. Further, the more means related aspect of agency that focuses on individuals or groups abilities to influence events, may also be seen as a way of working for Suma Qamaña. Let me elaborate. Alteño activists say they want a more equalitarian society (Webber 2010), and they work hard to influence it in that direction. When Don Emilio talks about what they are missing in el Alto, he often contrasts it with what people have other places. For instance, he explains; “While other [kids] are in schools where they have everything... here there’s nothing... this preoccupies us. That’s why we’re going to the marches and more”. He reacts more to the inequality, than to the problems of the school in and of itself. In light of the philosophy of Suma Qamaña, the problem with inequality is that it disturbs the intersubjective balance that is necessary for a good life.

Having a high sense of collective agency in El Alto may on the one hand be understood as a means to achieve Suma Qamaña as it entails working for a more balanced society. Furthermore, as a high sense of agency is brought about through active community involvement, an experience of agency may also itself be an experience of Suma Qamaña.

Marcelina and Don Emilio are both actively engaged in their communities, they both have a strong political consciousness, and they both experience a strong sense of agency – though to different degrees. In the last part of this chapter, before I turn to concluding remarks, I will look at what this sense of agency actually may do to the people who experiences it. I found that politically engaged active citizens in El Alto such as Don Emilio and Marcelina experienced a sense of personal and collective agency that actually altered their experience of certain phenomenon. I will now look at how I found that to be the case with a long-time widespread phenomenon in Bolivia, namely poverty. I will contrast Marcelinas experience of poverty with a mestizo friend in La Paz who also struggled economically.

## ***5.7 Two Experiences of Poverty***

### ***5.7.1 “Why us?” – poverty among mestizos in La Paz***

One early afternoon I was sitting at the kitchen table with my mestizo friends in La Paz, Maria. We were having a long lunch and the conversation eventually turned to personal matters. Maria talked about how difficult she experienced the situation she and her little family was in. A year before Maria had to go through an expensive medical operation and it left the family with a big debt. In addition they were caught in some long lasting and expensive bureaucracy to get the papers right after having to sell their car. Whenever I went anywhere with Maria she made sure to wear fancy clothes and make up, and if people asked how things were she would say she was working and doing fine. The truth was she'd been at home after her injury and that her husband had three jobs so they could pay the bills. Some time before we had attended a party, but Maria had no money for a gift. The solution was breaking her sons piggy bank.<sup>36</sup> Another time, when I told her I had gotten to know some people she knew too, she said “If they ask you how I'm doing, make sure to tell them I'm doing well”.

This afternoon Maria shared her frustration about the whole situation. “I know things will turn out ok, I know that finally God will give us what we need. But sometimes it's difficult to understand... we're good people. Why is this happening to us? What have we done wrong?”

Maria and her family kept their poverty too themselves and made sure nobody caught suspicion about their problems. Poverty, in their eyes, was a situation you had somehow deserved, as they believed God was always just. They just couldn't understand what they had done wrong and Maria seemed to think they were punished for not being good enough people. The shame associated with poverty, and the personal blame and moral questioning Maria suffered from it, was something I had seen among many mestizos in La Paz. It was not, however, something I had seen among socio-politically active alteños.

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<sup>36</sup> This put me in a dilemma as I had just given the family some money (beside my rent) for paying some debt. Finding the balance between being a friend – which I genuinely felt I was with this family - and being a westerner who could often say “I can pay” was sometimes quite challenging. My budget wasn't that high either. I didn't end up giving money in this situation, but made sure to buy many things for the house soon after this incident.

### ***5.7.2 Another experience of poverty***

The following scene is depicted in the film and it should be seen for a whole impression. Marcelina is sitting in the sofa peeling potatoes. I am filming her, but the conversation is random and it is one of those few situations where I felt the camera wasn't really influencing what was going on. The two kids are playing outside and she comments on their small quarrels.

"The kids are fighting. (...) They fight sometimes. My daughter says, "You have to listen to me because I'm the oldest". And the boy says: "I'm the guy, so you have to listen to me.""

"He learns quickly", I laugh<sup>37</sup> and Marcelina laughs too about her six-year-old sons macho attitudes, but it's not something she worries about. She's proud of the way he takes care of himself and tells me about his independence. Alex jumps around his mother and smiles up at her while she talks about him:

"This boy is very, how can I put it... independent. He changes his own clothes... and when nobody's here, he finds his own food."

"How nice, you know how to manage Alex", I say.

"Yes. I do, my sister doesn't," Alex replies. "You "win" over your sister, don't you?" his mother says. "Yes" Alex replies confidently. He pulls his mother's clothes and wants her attention. "Some say "give me food, give me food"", Marcelina says to me, "but he doesn't. If he's hungry he finds food [in the kitchen]. If we have any." Alex listens to his mother and then asks her with a smile: "And if there isn't any?". "Yes, what do you do then?" Marcelina asks him back. "Nothing", Alex answers nonchalantly with his playful little smile intact. "You take some soft drinks, don't you?" Marcelina asks. "Yes", he says. Marcelina laughs. "I just have a soft drink. With a piece of bread", Alex continues, proud of his ability to find himself something even if there isn't any real food in the house. "With bread, right?" Marcelina repeats. "Yes", Alex says, "if there's no food." They both smile and continue their activities.

Not always having proper food is an everyday matter in El Alto and it's not even made a point out of it; what Alex and Marcelina really is talking about here is his independence, the food is just used as an example for that.

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<sup>37</sup> This part is not in the final version of my film.



At the time of my stay, Maria and Marcelina's income levels were quite similar. The main difference between Maria and Marcelina isn't the extent of poverty they live in, but the ways in which they understand it. I argue that these differences are not just a matter of individual differences, but of experiences shaped by two different discourses on poverty. The discourse on poverty that is widespread in El Alto is informed by on the one hand oppositional consciousness that politicise poverty, and on the other hand a focus on the collective and an involvement in collectivities that constructs a community around the poverty so that its not a source of social exclusion. In studies of the experience of poverty social exclusion is sited as one of the factors that makes poverty so painful (for instance Merwe 2006).

Maria considered herself middle class and felt shameful about the position she and her family were in. She had a strong personal faith and was certain that good people would be blessed with prosperity. She had never been involved in politics, community organisations or any other collectivities that politicised poverty in any way. She read newspapers though, and were aware of the debates going on about neo-liberalism, nationalisation and standing up to foreign "robbing" of Bolivian resources. She had herself voted for president Evo Morales as "he seemed different". But in her everyday life and in her primary social group poverty was not connected to exploitation and unfair structures. It was very important to her that others didn't see her poverty as they might think bad of her, and she herself felt bad about herself for being poor.

Marcelina had been politically active from a very young age and involved in the creation of a party that had, as she put it, "the idea that we the poor should create our own party". "We learned about all the laws that weren't good, the "21060" we learned about, it wasn't good at all that law". "21060" is a supreme decree from the early 1990s understood to be the law that for real brought neo-liberalism to Bolivia.<sup>38</sup> Marcelina described El Alto as a place of fighters "since so many people are poor here". In other words, her understanding of poverty lied within a discourse that connected poverty to a dignified fighting spirit for changing unfair structures. Maria, in contrast, understood her poverty within a discourse that connected poverty to personal failure and lack of heavenly support.

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<sup>38</sup> Supreme decree 21060 was promulgated by President Víctor Paz Estenssoro in 1985. The decree meant "devaluation of the Bolivian currency, elimination of producer subsidies, deregulation of interest rates, and repressive actions against labor unions to prevent higher demands for wages" (Shultz and C. Draper, 2008: 124-125)

Marcelina told me about many of the struggles she had in her daily life and it was evident that poverty made life a lot harder for her. But it wasn't a source of shame for her. Her sense of dignity and agency was so grounded in her involvement in her political-social community – a community where poverty was not a source of shame, but rather a sign of humility and a source of a strong fighting spirit – that the poverty was not an attack on her experiential agency as it was for Maria.

Not everybody in El Alto is, of course, as little affected by negative ideas of poverty as Marcelina. Don Emilio seemed more affected by the discourse that associated poverty with inferiority and money as representing skill. He talked with pride, for instance, about how many Aymaras in El Alto actually had managed to become really rich. There are certainly many people that are, as Don Emilio, aware of and affected by the different discourses on poverty even if they are themselves involved in a political community that understands poverty as political rather than as a matter of personal qualities. But the fact that there exist different practices and ideas about wealth is just an indication of the inevitable complexities that exist in any society. The overall discourse on poverty in El Alto however, makes very little connections between poverty and shame. Rather the contrary, as personal wealth often is portrayed as immoral because it disturbs the equilibrium ideal central in the concept of *Suma Qamaña* (Castani 2008: 59).

It seems to be the case that the stronger sense of collective agency the less painful the experiences of poverty. A strong sense of agency, I think, is related to hitting a more or less successful balance “between being an actor and being acted upon” (Jackson 2005). As we have seen, two important factors that contribute to a strong sense of collective agency are strong relations to others and to a community, and the experience of being active rather than passive.

## Chapter 6: Concluding Summary and Remarks

Social movements in Bolivia have a long history of both class struggles and indigenous revolts. El Alto has gained a distinct identity as a revolutionary indigenous city. During the “gas war” of 2003 the whole city was organized in revolts and *alteños* experienced to really influence events in Bolivia. Since then, many *alteños* have experienced a heightened sense of agency (Lazar, Webber). For 2003 to happen there already had to be “a infrastructure of decent” (Webber) in El Alto, consisting of a neighbourhood councils, school councils, and unions that where already frequently getting its members out in the streets for protests and marches. Webber (2010) found that *alteño* activists have a “combined oppositional consciousness”, consisting of a combined influence of indigenous liberation theory and Marxism. In her long-term ethnography from El Alto, anthropologist Sian Lazar explored what it is that makes it possible for these organisations to get so many people out on the streets for political protests, and she finds that “it has to do with the ability of such groups to construct collective and relational senses of self among their members, against the pull of individual interests and factional conflicts” (Lazar 2008: 3). My analyses build on these works, and the insights from Lazar have been particularly fruitful.

My starting point for analysis in this thesis has been the high sense of agency that exists among many *alteños* after 2003. Through the case studies of two individuals involved in political-social organisations and communities, both with a high degree of political consciousness, I have attempted to say something about the nature of this agency among active *alteños* and some of the ways in which it is reproduced. I have only gone into phenomenon that I, through reading other ethnographies and through my stay in Bolivia and El Alto, believe represent something more than the individual cases.

Let me get back to my research questions. My questions were: What are some of the characteristics of this high sense of agency? How is it produced and reproduced?

The two questions are related but I will try to separate them for analytical clarity.

In this thesis I have understood agency to mean *the actions of individuals and groups and their capacities to influencing events*. Further, agency is about *an experience of being a subject, not an object of others actions*. When I have talked about “a sense of agency” I

have referred to *a sense of influencing events and of being a subject, not an object of others actions*.

First, let's look at some of the characteristics of the alteño activists' sense of agency, identified in this thesis.

My informants' individual sense of agency is inevitably connected to a collective sense of agency and membership in political-social groups that they feel a belonging to. Don Emilio's most important group through which he experienced a revolutionary identity is the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood council, and formerly the FEJUVE of 2003. Marcelina's most important socio-political group is the countryside and the MAS party. She currently has a central position in the MAS party and still has the experience of being part of a significant mass movement. Don Emilio's sense of agency is currently more fragile. He expresses what many alteños express; an increasing frustration over not getting what they were promised after 2003. Having given their blood alteños think that they should get something back. Many alteños use the word "abandoned" to describe the city of El Alto and feels the Morales government in practice shows an indifference to them that they did not expect. However, through stories about the El Alto self and through a commitment to his primary collectivity of the neighbourhood, Don Emilio is constantly working for the reproduction of collective revolutionary agency in El Alto.

Thus the first answer to the first question is that the agency in El Alto is essentially a collective agency. It is experienced very varied among its citizen, but an important factor contributing to a sense of agency is the extent to which you are involved in a community that you feel is influencing events. After the election of president Morales El Alto social movements and civic organisation gave their support to the new government who they had helped to power. However, in the last years criticism have increased and many told me the former revolutionary organisations of El Alto such as the FEJUVE and the COR (the workers union) have been "captured" by government supporters. Don Emilio shares this opinion and does not, at the moment, experience the same degree of agency that he did around 2003. The demands of 2003 are, however, increasingly debated in El Alto and critical voices such as Don Emilio's are more prominent. In 2010 the Federation of Neighbourhood councils (the FEJUVE) in El Alto, came with a public resolution that stated that El Alto has been abandoned and fooled by the Morales government and that the demands of the people of El Alto from 2003 has not been fulfilled (Congreso Ordinario

FEJUVE – EL ALTO 2010: 10- 11). This particular congress, it should be noted, voiced unusual sharp critique of the Morales government and after this there has been ongoing conflict in the FEJUVE over what position they should take towards the MAS government. However, the explicit focus on the revolutionary demands of the people of El Alto is something also MAS supporters adhere to. Whether in support of the government or not, critical voices are rising from the left of Morales in Bolivia<sup>39</sup>. At all levels in El Alto, in the FEJUVE, in local neighbourhood councils, in the central workers union (the COR), in the school councils, and in many everyday situations, the revolutionary identity of El Alto is constantly brought into focus, reminding both themselves and the government of peoples continued demands for radical changes.

Thus, a further answer to the first question of what kind of agency this is is that it is a collective agency informed by revolutionary demands for change. Even in small protests and meetings discussing seemingly local problems, the grand identity of El Altos as fighters is brought into focus arguing that *alteños* do not accept poor treatment. Further, local problems are connected to big structures by arguing that central authorities abandon El Alto, or that they are exploited by capitalists and threatened by “the system” in itself<sup>40</sup>.

I now turn to the next question of how the collective agency is produced and reproduced.

I have argued that two important ways in which *alteños* reproduces a collective agency is through a) what I called “poetics of the revolutionary” and b) constant involvement in and focus on communities.

The poetics are performances of the El Alto self that focus on revolutionary capabilities, demands, and a strong us. The poetics are important for agency both on a collective level and on an individual level.

For Don Emilio, and I suspect the same to be true for others who share his experiences in El Alto, the poetics may provide a way of “acting upon the world”, in situations such as the current where many feel their revolutionary community doesn’t have as much power to influence events as they experienced earlier. As Jackson notes, “though one may not be

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<sup>39</sup> For a long time the only criticism have come from the political right of Morales. Critiques from the left say they are often accused of “helping the right” when they criticise.

<sup>40</sup> People may for instance explain individualism and corruption by referring to a highly competitive system that makes you think only of yourself. This is also noted by scholars (Lazar 2008: 180). Another common perception is that the city makes you think of yourself. The city is often contrasted to the ideal Aymara community in the countryside.

able to act directly against alienating conditions, one can always act indirectly, through the resources of imagination, thought and language, and thereby change ones experience of ones relationship to the external forces that bear so heavily upon one” (Jackson 2008: 182).

On a collective level, the poetics are however not just an indirect way of acting against alienating conditions. The poetics is also a more direct form of action because constant stories about the revolutionary El Alto self reproduce a radical collective identity that is important in order to have the power to influence events in Bolivia in a more radical direction (as most socio-political organisations of El Alto say they wish)<sup>41</sup>.

On both an individual and a collective level, an important aspect of the poetics is that they are stories about and performances of the el alto self *told and enacted by alteños themselves*, not by others. The very aspect of standing up for yourself against powerful others whose actions affect you is an important part of alteños sense of dignity.

However, if poetics is to work as a mobilising force for radical changes it has to be connected with involvement in important collectivities as members’ bodily experiences of being together is important for their collective identity. The two ways I have identified as important for the reproduction of collective agency are thus very closely connected.

Another reason why the poetics of the revolutionary contributes to the reproduction of collective agency in El Alto is that it focuses on a strong, capable and revolutionary “us” against powerful others. In more theoretical terms, it produces CSO – collective self-objectification. Collective self-objectification defined as “action that actualizes participants social identity against the power of dominant groups”, is as an important way in which the experience of agency and empowerment is created (Drury et al 2005). “The dominant others”, against which the alteños objectify their identity in their revolutionary self-representations, varies according to the situations. In many local demonstrations “the others” are El Alto leaders. However, in representations of the alteño self to outsiders, such as myself, the dominant others are imperialistic white-mestizos and foreign and national capitalists. These are also “the dominant others” in Jeffery Webbers notion of a

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffery Webber has collected a number of “freedom dreams” from activists in El Alto, and has categorized the findings “along 4 principle lines: (i) equality, the end of poverty, and the abolition of social classes; (ii) a future free of racism; (iii) dignity, social justice, and basic necessities; and (iv) socialist and indigenous-liberationist democracy” (Webber 2009: 214).

combined oppositional consciousness based on notions of both class and indigenous repression. Even if “the dominant others” may be more varied in performative representations of the El Alto self to fellow alteños, Webbers’ notion is still very relevant for understanding the type of political consciousness that exists in El Alto. Firstly, it is the way El Alto has mobilised against forces outside El Alto that has given it its status as a political significant city. In mobilising to outside forces, the combined oppositional consciousness has been central. Their concern with big issues and structures beyond El Alto is the reason why their oppositional identity may be termed revolutionary. In all public presentations of El Alto from El Alto organisations (except some NGOs), this revolutionary identity is focused<sup>42</sup>. Secondly, there is an important difference between “the others” inside El Alto, and the more distant “others”. The difference is that they often get something back from the local leaders some time after the demonstrations. The more abstract category of “the capitalist colonial whites and mestizos” is somebody they never experience to get anything from after having demonstrated against them. Thus, the “capitalist imperialist white-mestizos” may be seen as more dominant “powerful others”, against which alteños actualize their identity, than local leaders in El Alto.

However, there are many challenges to the collective agency of El Alto. As most cities, El Alto is a city with a lot of factionalism (Lazar 2008) and peoples commitment to the different communities are varied. Some central activists from 2003 told me that the commitment to the neighbourhood groups and their monthly meetings was nothing like it used to be. After the election of Morales there have been some tensions between those who think El Alto should keep an independent position, and those who think they should support the government. Crucial for the further developments are the collectivities alteños engage in, and whether “the dominant others” may include an indigenous government or not.

In this thesis we have also seen that a strong sense of collective agency surrounded by a revolutionary discourse may alter the experience of certain phenomenon. We saw that Marcelina’s experience of poverty was less existentially painful than the mestizos in La Paz, because she had a strong sense of mattering and did not blame herself for the poverty. Further, Marcelina was surrounded by a community that did not see poverty as shameful.

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<sup>42</sup> Have a look, for instance, at the municipality of El Altos way of presenting itself: <http://www.elalto.gob.bo/index.php/ciudad-de-el-alto.html> . Accessed the 3rd of October 2012

Lastly, we have seen that collective agency in El Alto may be interpreted in light of the philosophy of Suma Qamaña. This is the case both in the perspective of collective agency as means, and in the perspective of agency as a value in itself. Within the collective agency – as – means –for – revolutionary – change - perspective, we may say that the intersubjective balance so important in Suma Qamaña is hindered by the inequalities and discriminations that the alteños experience. They have the experience of “the dominant others”, in particular, exploiting and disrespecting them in a way that does not correspond to the ideal intersubjective balance between all living beings. Their activism may be interpreted as a quest for intersubjective balance and for Suma Qamaña.

At the same time, we have seen that being active in communities and actively engaging in creating and shaping your own life is also part of the Andean concept of Suma Qamaña. Thus, not only is alteños activism a means for achieving certain goals and achieving a good life. Knowing that your actions upon the world matter, and taking part in the active, political, reflective, communally oriented life is itself part of what constitutes ‘good living’.



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