

# AYMARA MIGRANTS IN EL ALTO, BOLIVIA: A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, I have conducted fieldwork in the Bolivian city of El Alto, investigating the effects of urbanization on Aymara migrants who move from the countryside (*campo*) to the capital in search of employment, education, and a better life. El Alto is perched above La Paz, spreading out across the high plain (*Altiplano*) and increasing in size by nearly 10% each year. Although neighborhoods (*barrios*) in El Alto are often defined by geographic boundaries and population density, I argue that the concept of community is based upon trust (*confianza*). In El Alto, one's lineage eclipses heritage, as residents are more apt to define their "community" as those they trust rather than those who live near them or friends from the *campo*. For two years, I lived with Alvaro and his extended family at the periphery of El Alto, in the *barrio* of *Huayna Potosí*. Over time, he introduced me to other migrants, such as Teófilo, Pablo, and Marcelo, and their families, each of whom originated from different provinces near Lake Titicaca. In essence, migrants have similar bucolic backgrounds and skills which they implement in the city in order to survive, heightening competition for employment and suspicion between neighbors.

As a visual ethnographer, I use photography to elicit conversation about migrants' lives in the *barrio* as well as their history from the *campo*. These

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images illustrate facets of the urbanization process by depicting migrants' search for economic subsistence, utilization of the environment, and dependence upon family and friends. However, without their community, urban survival would be impossible. Community for Aymara migrants, like other urban migrants around the world, is made up of those they trust, be they immediate kin, extended family, or close friends – these are the people they go to for support and knowledge, allowing them to navigate the urban milieu and establish themselves.

Throughout my time in El Alto, I have continually photographed Alvaro, his family, and his friends. Frequently, I shoot with wide-angle lenses to capture the context of the moment, placing them in their environment, and providing the audience with a perspective on urbanization that would otherwise be impossible to describe or know. Moreover, these images demonstrate our established relationship as I have become a part of their community, someone of *confianza*.

When I first began this project, photography was only a method for learning more about the people, providing them with images as a means of reciprocity – shooting graduations, weddings, baptisms, funerals, and other special events. As I became more accepted, I was able to make images of everyday life and document what it means for migrants to live in El Alto. In 2000, I put together an exhibit called *Sueños Urbanos* and opened it in Houston, Texas, in the United States. I invited local migrants to view the show and discuss it with me, learning that the images reflected their own trials and tribulations as migrants in Houston, too. They spoke of their “community” of trust as being the bedrock upon which they build their lives and how fundamental it is for them to maintain multiple levels of trust beyond the scope of the neighborhoods and throughout the city. Their identification with the Aymara web of social support reflects a broader view of urban communities and how immigrants develop such networks in order to survive.

## IMAGES

(Originals in Color)

*Image 1: El Alto spreads across the Altiplano, 1995*



The periphery between city and campo is an organic boundary, constantly changing as people move into the city, expanding its circumference and impinging upon the land beyond. The hinterland of jich'u grass become streets and houses as people enter the city to start a new life. Aymara migrants may be drawn to El Alto for economic prosperity, or have been pushed out of the countryside due to restricted access to land or reduced resources on which to sustain themselves. Residents often cite their desire to make more money and escape their heritage. However, they bring with them a worldview which affects the life of the city as much as the urban milieu influences them.

*Image 2: Urbanization of the Altiplano, 1996*



On a warm February day, Alvaro walks the land where he will one day construct a home. He is celebrating Carnaval and blessing the lot by throwing streamers and sprinkling alcohol on the ground. Today, residents throughout the city adorn their homes with flags, confetti, and other ornamental decorations in recognition of this religious occasion. Alvaro and his family have only recently purchased this real estate. He, his wife, and his siblings regularly visit the property to plant crops and build adobes, anticipating the construction of their house. This location at the periphery of El Alto, in an area called Río Seco, is an excellent example of the process of urbanization in action.

*Image 3: Urbanization of the Altiplano, nine years later, 2005*



By 2005, Alvaro, his brother Wilfredo, his sisters, his children, and his friends were living in Urbanización Bautista Saavedra, in Río Seco, along the highway to Tiwanaku, Guaqui, and Desaguadero. This photograph was taken in nearly the same location as the previous image and demonstrates the rapid growth of the city in such a short period of time. Since 1996, Alvaro and Silvia have spent their time building this house with their own hands, along with those of trusted family and friends. Outside the small room, Alvaro points back towards Wilfredo's house where they operate a small store and offer photocopying services. "One day soon," he says, "I will have a store here as well, right alongside the highway to get lots of business."

*Image 4: El Alto trash, 2000*



Sanitation in El Alto is improving, although progress is slow. While potable water is available for the residents of Huayna Potosí, adequate sewage and waste disposal have been lacking for more than a decade. Like life in the campo, Alteño residents graze sheep and pigs on available land, allowing them to eat the trash that accumulates over time. Here, boys shepherd their animals while simultaneously watching a soccer game. Like the burning refuse, these are everyday spectacles of life on the edge of the city.

*Image 5: Market 16 de Julio, 1995*



This famous marketplace is the driving force of El Alto, providing residents with a means of selling and acquiring the goods they need to live. The largest public market on the Altiplano, nearly anything can be found in 16 de Julio – whether locally produced or illegally imported. Potatoes, grains, wool, and other indigenous items are available, as well as furniture, bicycles, automobiles, animals, clothes, prepared food, TVs, radios, musical instruments, and hardware. Alteños joke that there may be more people trying to sell goods in 16 de Julio than people wanting to buy them. Each vendor rents his or her particular space from the municipality, securing the venue for each week. This photograph represents only a fraction of the streets and venues filled with people and traffic in the barrio of 16 de julio each Sunday.

*Image 6: Corner store, Huayna Potosí, 2000*



These family-run stores sell everyday products to neighboring residents and reflect their means for coping with difficulties of survival in the city. Stock for these stores often comes from the gray market, purchased in La Paz and brought to the barrio for resale. Of those products available, over-the-counter type medications (OTCs) have become more prolific in the past 10 years. The influx of these medications into an underdeveloped and underprivileged city has given residents the means to treat illness and forego more sophisticated, immediate health care. This woman owns and operates her store in her house. When she is not there, her children tend to it, providing neighbors with individual goods as they need (can afford) them, e.g. a single cigarette or aspirin.



*Image 7: Fuel delivery, 2000*



One of Bolivia's greatest resources is natural gas, a hot political topic today because of the way in which Bolivians disagree on its exploration and exportation by foreign companies. The national government refines petroleum in the eastern lowlands and ships it to cities like El Alto, where it is sold to residents as propane for cooking fuel. Trucks, like this one, ordinarily drive through the city streets, blasting their air-horns, notifying residents to come out and trade their empty tanks for full ones. Each day they exchange nearly 200 tanks (garafas) in fewer than eight hours, visiting barrios across the city supplying fuel for cooking, heating and cooling, electricity, and transportation.

Victor, the young man in this photograph, distributes garafas to residents in 10 different barrios within one single afternoon. He and the driver develop relationships with their customers, creating networks across the city. Along their meandering route through the barrios he recognizes his regular clientele of bakers, restaurateurs, managers of public ovens, and individual people. In order to subsist in El Alto, they all depend upon Victor to deliver their fuel.

*Image 8: Santo's compound, 2000*



Santos, his wife Maria, and their children live in a compound five blocks from Alvaro. He does not own the land, but has built a house, which also doubles as his workshop. When the children are not at school or watching over their pigs and sheep, they play in the yard, making toys from old electronic parts and discarded items their father no longer needs. Santos and Alvaro are political allies, sharing responsibility of organizing party members in northern El Alto. Their political association became a social relationship, which was solidified in *compadrazco* (godparenthood), a fictive kin relationship, signifying a level of trust equal only to that of family.

*Image 9: Making a living (in Santos's workshop), 2000*



Santos hails from a small Aymara-speaking village near Lake Titicaca. When he was 14 years old, he left his community to live with relatives in La Paz. Eventually, he was apprenticed to an electrician in El Alto, learning a trade he still uses each day. Surrounded in his small home workshop by broken TVs and radios, Santos uses his technical skills to repair his clients' electronic equipment. Having lived in El Alto for more than 15 years, Santos does not maintain close ties to his campo heritage. Although he returns to visit kin only once every few years, Santos does host his family members when they come to town to visit or do business.

Like other people in El Alto, Santos and his wife Maria maintain a variety of jobs necessary to support their family. When not working in the market or at home, Maria tends to a local corner store and does laundry for people in La Paz. In the mornings, Santos's two young boys go to school, leaving him free to work without interruption.

Since this photograph was taken, Maria has left Santos and their children for another man. Santos has moved to the lowland city of Santa Cruz to find steadier pay and someone to help him raise his family.

*Image 10: Alvaro swaddles his new born daughter, El Alto, 2000*



In May 2000, I returned to live with Alvaro and his family in El Alto. Silvia was pregnant with their fifth child and was expecting any day. The oldest daughters, Maria and Tina, came to my room at 3:30 am to ask me to help their parents with the birth. Being with this family at this time was exhilarating and extraordinary, as everyone there was watching and waiting for the baby to join them. Alvaro assisted Silvia while the daughters supported their mother. Ruben entered the world feet-first and with his umbilical cord wrapped around his neck three times. Without hesitating, Alvaro massaged his wife's belly and made sure both feet exited simultaneously. Alvaro saved the placenta in a black towel, which he wrapped in old clothes and placed under his bed. This photograph was taken three days later, following Ruben's first bath. After bathing the newborn, we buried his placenta in the patio space of their home – to ensure that the baby's spirit would never leave the compound.

*Image 11: Rutuch'a in El Alto, 1995*



A combination of Catholic and indigenous religious practices, the first haircut usually occurs after a child's baptism ceremony. Alvaro and his immediate family invite extended family members and trusted friends to their home for food, celebration, and the *rutuch'a* (haircut). In this photograph, Alvaro and his wife Silvia watch as their neighbor Pablo wields the scissors to give their daughter her first trim. The godfather, Don Jorge, conducts the ceremony, inviting guests to take a turn cutting the little girl's hair. This responsibility is accompanied by a monetary gift to the girl's family to help provide for her future educational or other needs. Such participation and reciprocity between host and guest illustrate the strong relationship and mutual concern between the two parties. A *rutuch'a* celebration is an opportunity for Alvaro and his wife to reaffirm their ties with family and friends. The attendants are not necessarily neighbors, but rather those the family most trusts. The placing of confetti in each other's hair identifies the celebrants and the importance of such bonds. With the blessing of friends and family, and a libation to the Pachamama, the fiesta will continue well into the night.

*Image 12: Alvaro near Caluyo, 2005*



During my short return visit to Bolivia last year, Alvaro and I took a day to visit his family in their hamlet called Caluyo, in the Tiwanaku valley (about 45 minutes by minibus). After spending the day in the country, reuniting with his parents, sisters, brothers, and their children, eating potatoes, and taking photographs, we stand together along the brim of the asphalt highway, as we have many times before, waiting for a bus back to El Alto. We look back at his family's land and their homes – his parents', his brother's, his uncles'. For generations they have lived off this land and in this space one understands what life means for Alvaro. Here Alvaro buries his trust in the soil, and like an anchor he is tethered to it, destined to return to find the essence of his identity and the bedrock of his family. Regardless of his tenure in El Alto, Alvaro's connection with his family is through this land, as they continue to harvest crops and husband animals to supplement their urban livelihood.