An Instrument of Resistance:  
Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in El Alto, Bolivia

BA Thesis

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For the Course
Advanced Seminar in International Development Studies IDSD01
International Development Studies

University of Toronto at Scarborough
April 2010
ABSTRACT

Emerging out of the inner cities of New York during the 1970s, rap music and hip-hop culture became a form of creative resistance, a way in which urban youth were able to denounce and challenge forms of racism, misrepresentation, and exclusion. Hip-hop has since become a global art form that has given voice to marginalized groups around the world. This thesis closely examines the use of rap music and hip-hop culture in the migrant city of El Alto, Bolivia. Comparable to the context out of which hip-hop first emerged, El Alto is a city that is largely characterized by high levels of poverty, racism, misrepresentation, and exclusion. Within this environment, this paper argues that the hip-hop artists of El Alto have appropriated rap music and hip-hop culture as tool of cultural resistance, a tool used to reflect and respond to reality. In examining the impact of this appropriation, this paper also argues that rap music and hip-hop culture, within the context of El Alto, has contributed to the revalorization of identity, the preservation of traditional culture, and the vocalization, articulation, and participation of the youth.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my parents and my sister, thank you for your patience, love, and consistent and unconditional support through this whole process, from before leaving for Bolivia, while in the field, and back at home.

To my friends in Bolivia, thank you for your incredible hospitality, for making Bolivia feel like home, for your friendship and support.

To my friends back at home, thank you for helping me keep sane, for your friendship, for your support and interest in this project.

A special shout out to my fellow IDSers, thank you guys for everything, for your friendship, for helping me maintain perspective, and for sharing in the struggle that is the ‘T-word.”

To Philly, thank you for friendship, encouragement, and genuine interest and enthusiasm in this project.

To Alvaro Montenegro, Ana Maria Marcoui, Fernando Garcia, and Santos Moises Callejas, thank you for your valuable insight and perspective.

To Paul Kingston and Roberta Rice, both from the University of Toronto, thank you for helping me through each step of the way, for your valuable insight and feedback.

Y finalmente, quiero expresar mi gratitud a la comunidad de hip-hop en El Alto, especialmente a MC Fado, Nina Uma, MC Docene, Abraham Bojorquez, y MC Renzone. Gracias a todos ustedes por compartir su tiempo, por su disponibilidad para participar en este estudio, por su hospitalidad, y sobre todo, por compartir sus historias, experiencias, y aspiraciones por un futuro mejor.
This thesis is written in memory of Abraham Bojorquez. Abraham was one of the hip-hop artists involved in this study. While I was in Bolivia, I was blessed to have been able to talk with and hang out with Abraham. He was a truly remarkable man who worked tirelessly to build a better future for his community through hip-hop. He touched the lives of many as a rapper, an activist, a community leader, and a friend. You will always be remembered. Jallalla Abraham.
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CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

*Art is not a mirror to reflect reality but a hammer with which to shape it*
- Bertolt Brecht

Rap music first emerged from the inner cities of New York out of a context of poverty, inequality, racism, and exclusion. It has since become a global art form that has given voice to many marginalized groups around the world. This paper is about the appropriation and use of rap music and hip-hop culture in the city of El Alto, Bolivia. Not unlike the context out of which of hip-hop first emerged, El Alto is a city characterized by poverty, inequality, racism, and exclusion. Within this environment, this paper will argue that the hip-hop artists of El Alto have appropriated hip-hop as their own and have reshaped it as a tool of cultural resistance, a tool through which they have sought and fought to transform their city for the better.

This thesis, in many ways, is a reflection of my exploration of rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto. When I first began this study, I really was not sure what I would find. And, to be completely honest, at the beginning, I was not really sure what I was looking for. I had certain preconceived ideas about hip-hop. I had grown up exposed to a certain type of rap music and hip-hop culture, one defined in large part by radio playlists and TV programming. And from that perspective, from my home in Toronto, Canada, I had formulated a research plan. And then I arrived in Bolivia. After spending just a short amount of time with the artists of El Alto, my preconceived ideas of hip-hop (and the role of art in development as a whole) had been thrown out the window. Hearing and seeing the rhymes and beats performed on stage, there was no question that this 'hip-hop' was in fact hip-hop. But closer examination revealed that this was a whole other type of hip-hop, one that I had never seen or heard before.

Over the course of this paper, I will trace how this inner-city expression born out of the United States has become a global expression that has then been reworked and localized by the hip-hop artists of El Alto to reflect and respond to their reality. In doing so, this paper seeks to understand how rap music and hip-hop culture has been locally appropriated in the city of El Alto,
Bolivia. It also seeks to explore the impact of that appropriation. This paper has two main research questions. The first main research question asks: **How has rap music and hip-hop culture been locally appropriated within the context of El Alto, Bolivia?** From that question, two sub-questions emerge. The first: *How* has rap music been used in this manner? And the second: *Why* has rap music been used in this manner? Finally, the second main research question asks: **What impact has this appropriation of hip-hop had in El Alto for the youth and the community at large?**

Within this thesis, I will argue that rap music and hip-hop culture has been appropriated as an active and public form of cultural resistance. Cultural resistance is defined here as “culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure” (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5). In addition, I will also identify three different ways in which rap music and hip-hop culture has had an impact on the youth and the community at large in El Alto. I will argue that rap music and hip-hop culture, within the context of El Alto, has contributed to (1) the revalorization of identity, (2) the preservation of traditional culture, and (3) the vocalization, articulation, and participation of the youth.

### 5.2 – Methodology

For the findings of this study, I have draw predominantly from primary data obtained over the course of approximately two months of field research. There are three different methods that I used to gather the data: informal musical and lyrical analysis, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and participant observation.

*Informal Musical and Lyrical Analysis*

Before formally beginning my field research, while living in Cochabamba, Bolivia, I began collecting and listening to as much Bolivian rap as I could. This task was a lot more challenging than it sounds given the underground nature of hip-hop in Bolivia. In fact, the only way I was able to
obtain a copy of much of the music was through directly asking the hip-hop artists themselves or the recording studios where the discs were recorded. When I would travel throughout the country, I would make an effort to find new CDs and artists. And while I did not transcribe and formally analyze the lyrics, listening to the music, the messages, the beats and rhymes provided me with a valuable foundational understanding of Bolivian hip-hop. In all, I was able to collect and listen to music from approximately 20 different Bolivian hip-hop artists.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The findings of this study are primarily centered on a series of in-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with five local hip-hop artists conducted over the span of approximately two months. The artists are MC Fado, Nina Uma, MC Docene, Abraham Bojorquez, and MC Renzone. In addition to these artists, I also interviewed Alvaro Montenegro, a local recording producer who has worked with *alteño¹* hip-hop artists, as well as representatives from the Fundación Solon and the Wayna Tambo, two local NGOs involved with hip-hop from El Alto.

This study is based on information about people’s opinion, feelings, and experiences. Interviews are argued to be the most suitable method for gathering this type of information (Denscombe, 2007). Given the exploratory nature of the study, I opted for semi-structured interviews because it allows the interviewees more freedom to describe and develop their own ideas. After obtaining all the information from the field, I transcribed and translated the interviews into English. I then analyzed the data, classifying the information through coding and labeling.

Participant Observation

The third method used for obtaining primary data was participant observation. Over the course of my time in the field, I was able to immerse myself in the local hip-hop scene. In doing so, I

¹ An *alteño* is someone from El Alto
could observe the artists and their interactions with those from within and outside the hip-hop community in El Alto. In addition, I also attended a number of different hip-hop events in La Paz and Cochabamba where artists from El Alto were actively involved.

In addition to the use of primarily data, I have also draw from secondary data sources. This information has, in large part, been used for the background information sections on the subjects of rap music and hip-hop culture as well as on Bolivia.

*How am I looking at hip-hop?*

There is a tendency for those who study and write about hip-hop, whether on a local or global scale, to focus on hip-hop as simply a cultural product; this represents the ‘what’ of analysis. More specifically, interest typically centers on the commodified or commercialized cultural products of hip-hop. From this, much attention is given to the consumption of the products where the focus is on the consumer, the ‘who’ of analysis.

Drawing from the work of Walter Benjamin (1986), I wish to propose an alternative framework for studying hip-hop. Instead of looking at elements of the cultural product, I am interested in studying the process by which those cultural products are made; that is, the cultural production of hip-hop. To illustrate this point, the hip-hop scene in El Alto has in recent years received a lot of international attention for its unique characteristic of having artists rap in Aymara. And while many journalists and bloggers where drawn to this unique fusion of ‘American’ hip-hop with a local indigenous language, most failed to adequately examine why these rappers were rapping in Aymara. In my study of rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto, I wish to look at what is behind the music and the culture, not simply at what is the music and the culture. In other words, I wish to shift analysis from hip-hop as simply a cultural product to include the cultural production of hip-hop.
In doing so, my research will also shift from focusing on the **consumers** of hip-hop to the ‘**producers**’, or creators, of hip-hops; in other words, the hip-hop artists themselves. Thus, in more practical terms, my analysis centers on interviews with the hip-hop artists moving beyond just looking at the consumption of the products they have created. That being said, it is important to stress that there, of course, is a strong connection between the production of hip-hop and the products of hip-hop. This framework, however, allows for a broader understanding of hip-hop, one that is not simply centered on ‘things’ and sales.

### 5.3 - Limitations

There are two important limitations of the research that should be noted. The first is that my assessment of rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto is just a cross-section, a snapshot, of the movement as a whole. In this paper, I will be arguing that rap music and hip-hop culture has been appropriated as a tool of cultural resistance. That is not to say that all artists in El Alto have appropriated rap music and hip-hop culture in this manner. By nature of my research methods, I am unable to make generalizations from the sample to the broader population.

The second important limitation is that of language limitations. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and later transcribed and translated by the author into English. Through that process, there were occasions where it was difficult to fully capture the meaning.

### 5.4 - Thesis Outline

Broadly speaking, this paper is divided into two parts. The first half, comprised of Chapter Two and Chapter Three, will provide the reader with important relevant contextual and background information. In Chapter Two, I will examine the subject of rap music and hip-hop culture from both a local and global perspective. In Chapter Three, I will provide an overview of
some of the major themes identified within the literature on Bolivia, and on the city of El Alto in particular.

The second half of the paper will then look specifically at the case study, outlining and discussing the study’s findings. Chapter Four will closely examination how rap music and hip-hop culture has been appropriated in El Alto. In Chapter Five, I will identify three central areas in which rap music and hip-hop culture has had, and continues to have, an impact in El Alto. Finally, in Chapter Six, the last chapter, I will conclude by discussing the main findings and the implications of the study, and outlining further avenues of research.
CHAPTER 2 – Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture

Before closely looking at the use of rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto, it is important to take a step back and, from a broader perspective, examine the subject of rap music and hip-hop culture as a whole. In recent years, this artistic and cultural expression has received a lot of scholarly attention from a broad range of academic fields, including psychology, musicology, cultural studies, and linguistics. This second chapter will provide a brief overview of some of the major themes found in the study of rap music and hip-hop culture. The first section will provide an introduction to hip-hop and its evolution. The second section will look to the literature on the global diffusion of rap music and hip-hop culture.

2.1 – What is hip-hop?

Hip-hop is everywhere. Since its emergence from the inner city of New York during the 1970s, hip-hop has become a ubiquitous expression found all over the world. As Kelefa Sanneh has observed:

“Hip-hop, once a noun, has become an adjective, constantly invoked if rarely defined; people talk about hip-hop fashion and hip-hop novels, hip-hop movies and hip-hop basketball. Like rock and roll in the nineteen-sixties, hip-hop is both a movement and a marketing ploy, and the word is used to describe anything that’s supposed to appeal to young people (Kun, 2002, p. 581).

Within a few years, the scope of hip-hop has grown tremendously; it has become an expression of everything from the way you dress, to the way you talk, to even the way you walk. Its music has dominated billboard charts, its urban attire sold at record levels, its lexicon has entered mainstream culture, its image projected and adopted around the world. Once considered a short-term fad, hip-hop has since become a go-to marketing tool for companies selling products as diverse as soft drinks, shoes, and even children toys (Price, 2006). Wherever you are in the world, expressions of hip-hop culture can be found. But what exactly is hip-hop?
Hip-hop is most commonly defined in terms of its four foundational elements: DJing, graffiti, b-boying/b-girling (or breakdancing), and MCing (or rapping). These four tiers are considered “to be the roots of the movement that empowered urban youth to use music, dance, and other forms of artistic expression to describe life as they saw it” (Allen, 2005, p. 31). Rap music, the last of the four elements to emerge, has since become the most visible and dominant form of the art (Price, 2006). As hip-hop has grown in popularity, it has evolved into an authentic cultural force that now includes elements such as fashion, language, street knowledge, and even attitude (Allen, 2005). Within this thesis, I will be focusing primarily on the element of rap music. However, it is critical to look at rap within a larger framing that includes hip-hop culture. Failure to do so would result in an overly narrow analysis. As such, while my analysis will center on rap music, this study will examine the element through a holistic lens that takes into account an understanding of hip-hop as a broader cultural expression. Thus to gain a greater understanding of hip-hop as a whole, the next subsection will briefly look to its roots.

The Emergence and Proliferation of Hip-Hop

Hip-hop is a cultural expression that emerged out of a context of poverty, marginalization, racism, and alienation (Kitwana, 2004; Kun, 2002; Rose, 1994). For the youth living in the inner city of New York, hip-hop became “a creative means to try to escape poverty and oppression while commenting on it” (Basu & Lemmele, 2006, p. 23). Much of the study on hip-hop in its early days in the United States centers the use of the art form in challenging forms of marginalization, oppression, and misrepresentation (Dyson, 2007; Kitwana, 2004; Price, 2006; Rose, 1994). Emmett Price (2006, p. 1), for example, argues that hip-hop emerged as “a means and method of expression thriving on social commentary, political critique, economic analysis, religious exegesis, and street awareness while combating long-standing issues of racial prejudice, cultural persecution, and social, economic and political disparities.” Tricia Rose (1994, p. 21), one of the leading scholars on
rap music and hip-hop culture, similarly argues that hip-hop is "a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community." In focusing on hip-hop as an expression of black culture, Rose identifies hip-hop as a form of ‘creative resistance’ that has allowed urban African Americans to denounce and counter forms of oppression, discrimination, and misrepresentation.

But by the end of the 1970s, hip-hop began to really evolve. One of the central catalysts behind this was the mega-success of the 1979 release of Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper's Delight”, the first popular widespread recorded hip-hop track. For one, it allowed the once-local musical and cultural phenomena to spread nationally and internationally. But, moreover, it offered an opportunity for hip-hop to be seen, not just as a cultural expression, but as a possible marketable commodity (Price, 2006). What began as an inner city expression of creative resistance increasing became defined by its “commercial manifestation” (Kitwana, 2004, p. 116). In the years that followed, the global popularity of hip-hop exploded.

By the turn of the century, many, both within and outside the hip-hop community, had begun to question what hip-hop had become. Some of the most vocal critiques of hip-hop have come from hip-hop artists themselves. For example, Afrika Bambaataa, one of the fathers of hip-hop, began to advocate for a ‘fifth element’ which consisted of knowledge, culture, and ‘overstanding’. In doing so, Afrika Bambaataa sought to renew a collective awareness of hip-hop's origins. The co-option of hip-hop by the music and entertainment industry, he argued, had created a hip-hop that lacked much of its original context and content. In his opinion, compromises had taken place that “subverted the initial intent of the culture, creating a breeding ground for artists in pursuit of financial opportunity instead of activism” (Price, 2006, p. 37). More recently, in 2006, Nas released his controversial rap album, boldly proclaiming in it that ‘hip-hop is dead’. He became the latest of series of hip-hop artists who have openly questioned the art form’s evolution. As Nas
rhymed, “Everybody sounds the same, commercialize the game / Reminiscin’ when it wasn’t all business / They forgot where it started / So we all gather here for the dearly departed.”

Within the media and in academia, the contradictor nature of hip-hop has since become a central topic. Is hip-hop “a voice from the margins” (Rose, 1994, p. 1)? Is it a “commodified object of African-American cultural expression” (Kun, 2002, p. 581)? Or is it “a disgusting display of violence and misogynistic music” (Stephens & Wright, 2000, p. 23)? The consensus, overwhelming, is that hip-hop is all of this. Best and Kellner write of rap music:

“At its best rap is a powerful indictment of racism, oppression, and violence that calls our attention to the crises of the inner cities and vividly describes the plight of African-Americans... At its worst, G-rape is itself racists, sexist and glorifies violence, being little but a money-making vehicle that is part of the problem rather than the solution (Caldwell, 2008, p. 17).

The central point that I wish to make here is that there are multiple interpretations of what hip-hop is. Hip-hop does not exist in a single form; it is in fact a very fluid art form. In the study of hip-hop outside of its original context, this point is of great importance. Hip-hop in the United States, as seen above, has transformed over time. And, as will be discussed shortly, research looking at hip-hop from a global perspective has shown that the art form is constantly being reworked according to the local context.

Within this thesis, I will be arguing that hip-hop has been appropriated in the context of El Alto as a tool used to bring about positive change. In doing so, by no means do I wish to suggest that all hip-hop does the same. There has been a lot of scholarly attention given to the negative impact that hip-hop can have, particularly on youth. But at the same time, it is important to recognize hip-hop for what it is. As hip-hop scholar Dyson (2007, p. xvii) has argued, “hip-hop is still fundamentally an art form.” Like all art, hip-hop is very flexible, adaptable to multiple interpretations and uses; it can be used in both constructive and deconstructive manners. This quality is therefore a central reason for closely examining and studying the artistic expression. Dyson (2007, p. xv) articulates it well:
It’s true that those who fail to wrestle with hip hop’s cultural complexity, and approach it in a facile manner, may be misled into unhealthy forms of behavior. But that can be said for all art, including the incest-laden, murder-prone characters in Shakespeare’s Macbeth and King Lear. It makes no sense to stop critically engaging an art form or cultural movement because some kids think it “cool” that 50 Cent got shot nine times. In fact, that’s even more reason to clarify what an art form does well, and what it does poorly.

This thesis will thus try to provide insight into this subject. In closely examining and studying how the youth of El Alto have appropriated hip-hop and the impact of that appropriation, a greater understanding of what the art form does well, and what it does poorly, will be achieved.

2.2 – The ‘Glocalization’ of Hip-Hop

As quickly as hip-hop spread across the United States, it spread around the world; it has since become a truly global expression of youth culture. Within the literature on the global diffusion of hip-hop, there are two important findings that I would like to highlight.

Global Commonalities and ‘Connective Marginalities’

The first finding is that despite the diversity of social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which hip-hop can now be found, there also exist important commonalities among the members of the global hip-hop community. At the most basic level, the global hip-hop community is united by an understanding of the elements of hip-hop, and the creation and consumption of these elements; these are, after all, the defining characteristics of hip-hop itself. But beyond this, it is very common to find that there is also a shared experience of marginalization and oppression. In other words, the examination of the diffusion of hip-hop worldwide has shown that those individuals who tend to be part of the culture of hip-hop represent marginalized sectors of their own respective society (Basu & Lemelle, 2006; Motley & Henderson, 2008; Osumare, 2001).
Osumare (2001) provides a framework for understanding this, which he has termed ‘connective marginalities.’ Linking together culture, class, and historical oppression among a young global generation, connective marginalities “are social resonances between black expressive culture within its contextual political history and similar dynamics in other nations” (Osumare, 2001, p. 172). He argues that, “Hip-hop, as an extension of African American popular culture...becomes a global signifier for many forms of marginalization” (Osumare, 2001, p. 173).

In their examination of the global hip-hop Diaspora, Motley & Henderson (2008, p. 243) echo the above as their findings suggest, “that the core essence of hip-hop is shared by marginalized groups.” Thus, what separates hip-hop from other musical genres or sub-cultures is it gives a voice to marginalized and oppressed groups who may otherwise have little voice. They note examples of African-Americans in New York City, North Africans in France, and indigenous people of New Zealand (Maori) that “on the whole might be viewed as at the fringes of their respective societies, historically oppressed and members of connective marginalities that are perhaps connected by hip-hop culture” (Motley & Henderson, 2008, p. 246).

As discussed above, authors such as Rose (1994), have identified hip-hop as a means by which African American youth were able to counter the oppression, marginalization, and discrimination they felt in the inner-cities of the United States. The global spread of hip-hop has now seen numerous groups in a great diversity of countries closely relating to the plight and experiences of African American youth. In his book, *Fight the Power: Rap, Race, and Reality* (1997, p. 57), Rapper Chuck D from the group Public Enemy writes:

> In my travels around the planet, I’ve continually heard stories of oppression and stories of the rich trying to beat down the poor. Black people suffer globally from white supremacy because we’re easily identifiable, so we’re used as pawns in the game. But I’ve witnessed other pawns in the game. In countries where there’s not a large population of Black people, they find a way to make people scapegoat based on religious, ethnic, or cultural differences.
He goes on quoting a Public Enemy fan in Zagreb, Croatia as saying, "For some, Public Enemy is just a very good group, for good fun, but for me they have a powerful political statement, especially when we connected what they were saying with the war in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Croatia" (Chuck D, 1997, p. 58). Despite living worlds away from Long Island, New York, where Public Enemy is from, this Croatian fan is able to closely connect to the struggles of oppression and marginalization that Chuck D raps about. As Motley & Henderson (2008, p. 247) write, “The consumption experience in the global hip-hop community is a shared one and includes a sense of marginalization, frustration, and the examination of battles against oppression, either real or perceived.”

The ‘Localization’ of Hip-Hop

The second finding that I wish to highlight is that hip-hop, as it has spread around the world, has not been merely a replication of the American model but rather has been appropriated and adopted to the local socioeconomic and political context. Case studies from around the world have clearly demonstrated that hip-hop is localized, reworked with local expressions of culture, language, lyrical content, music, and ethnic symbols, reflecting lived conditions, experiences, and grievances (Basu & Lemelle, 2006; Motley & Henderson, 2008; Osumare, 2001). The results are unique sounds and statements that are locally authentic (Motley & Henderson, 2008).

Central to this is that the creation and consumption of hip-hop allows for much flexibility. This attribute has greatly facilitated the spread of hip-hop, as it is able to easily crossover into numerous different contexts. Its malleability allows it to have multiple authentic renderings and meanings among various host cultures; “it becomes uniquely theirs, and represents their pains, struggles, and political issues” (Motley & Henderson, 2008, p. 246). The genre, throughout the world, is imbedded with “markers reflective of local environments” (Motley & Henderson, 2008, p. 248).
Thus, as many hip-hop commentators have noted, through the localization of this global culture, hip-hop itself can serve as a valuable lens through which local issues and grievances can be examined and better understood (Kalyan, 2006; Stephens & Wright, 2000). This becomes particularly important when one notes, as discussed above with the paradigm of connective marginalities, that those who are part of hip-hop culture tend to represent marginalized sectors of their society, those who may not have much of a voice through more ‘traditional’ means of representation.

The ‘Glocalization’ of Hip-Hop

Taken as whole, the study of hip-hop as a global phenomenon has demonstrated two important elements. The first is that there exist global commonalities of connective marginalities as well as commonalities in the understanding, creation, and consumption of the elements of hip-hop. The second is that hip-hop is not simply cut-and-paste from the American model but rather is locally appropriated and adopted to the local context. Thus together, hip-hop is a hybrid of both a global and a local form. This fusion is described as glocalization. It is important to highlight that the study and discussion of glocalization extends far beyond that of hip-hop. Nevertheless, hip-hop represents a textbook example of this phenomenon, exemplifying is various attributes.

Lull (2000), and his examination of media, communication, and culture, provides valuable insight into better understanding the idea of glocalization. He argues that the symbolic representations of culture globally diffused via mass and micro media technologies are “never simply received, digested and acted upon in any uniform way by their global audiences,” but rather “are mediated critically and appropriated socially and culturally in the contexts they enter” (Lull, 2000, p. 235). Lulls also puts forward the concept of cultural reterritorialisation which is used “to describe the view of cultural products as malleable resources, reworked and inscribed, with new meanings relating to the particular contexts within they are appropriated”(Malone, 2007). Hip-hop
as a global culture can thus be understood as a *glocalized* form of *cultural reterritorialisation*; it is an American inner-city expression that is mixed and blended with global expressions of local culture, music, language, and lived experience, forming a hybridized global youth culture. As Potter has written, “It is increasingly clear that hip-hop has become a transnational, global art form capable of mobilizing diverse disenfranchised groups...its *locus* is simultaneously local and global” (Kalyan, 2006, p. 249).

Thus, having seen that hip-hop is a very flexible art form that has both global and local elements, in examining the hip-hop movement in El Alto, an important question that can be put forward is how has rap music and hip-hop culture been locally appropriated within the context of El Alto? Before closely addressing this question, the next chapter will take a closer look at the local context of El Alto.
CHAPTER 3 - *The Context*

In order to begin to closely examine the hip-hop movement in El Alto, it is critical to understand the context out of which the movement has emerged. This third chapter will provide an overview of some of the major themes identified in the literature on the subject of Bolivia, and on El Alto in particular. The first section will look specifically at the city of El Alto. It will highlight elements that characterize the city as whole as well as elements that pertain specifically to the youth of El Alto. The sections that follow will then examine the context from a broader perspective. Section 3.2 will look at resistance in Bolivia from a historical perspective. Finally, Section 3.3 will provide a brief overview on the revalorization of indigenous identity in Bolivia.

3.1 - *El Alto, Bolivia*

It was May 14, 2008 when I first arrived in Bolivia, my new home for the next 10 months. My plane landed early that morning at the international airport in the city of El Alto, one of the highest cities in the world. The high elevation and the cold, fresh mountain air left me winded the moment I stepped out of the airplane. I collected my luggage, a task that left me gasping for air, and made my way through immigration. As I left the airport, driving en route to the neighboring city of La Paz, the sun broke free from behind the surrounding snowcapped mountains, revealing the city in full light. The sights, sounds, and smells of the city left me silent and in amazement. Most visibly striking to me was the extreme level of poverty that characterizes much of the city. According to the 2001 census, 48 percent of *alteños* live in moderate poverty, 17 percent in extreme poverty, and a quarter of the population on the verge of poverty (Lazar, 2008). The great expanse of flat land on which the city is built suddenly ended as we arrived at the edge of the *altiplano*\(^2\). Below was a steep-sided bowl-like crater within which lay the vast and beautiful colonial city of La Paz.

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\(^2\) *The altiplano* is the inter-Andean plateau occupying parts of Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru
Driving along the steep and windy roads, we began to descend down the mountainside. The contrast as the elevation dropped was truly remarkable. The grey, dusty landscape increasingly turned green as trees and carefully manicured lawns and gardens appeared. The bumpy streets gradually became smoother. The cold *altiplano* wind resided as the temperature noticeably warmed. The faces of those walking the streets whitened. As we travelled across the *Prado* in downtown La Paz towards the *Zona Sur*, Burger Kings and BMWs appeared. The adobe shacks in El Alto had slowly been replaced by low-rise buildings and, eventually, gated mansions. Over the course of the 45-minute drive and some 500 meters in elevation, I felt as though I had travelled through a number of different worlds. Within the first hour of arriving in Bolivia, the class and racial hierarchies found in the twin cities, and throughout many parts of Bolivia, had become incredibly evident. The visual contrasts from one city to the other, and even within each city, were powerful demonstrations of the prevailing socio-economic divisions and inequalities.

Much of the discussion on El Alto, from both the media and academia, has centered on El Alto as a marginal city characterized by high levels of poverty, social inequality, racism, and discrimination (Crabtree, 2005; Dangl, 2007; Lazar, 2008). At the heart of this discussion have been the indigenous peoples, over 74 percent of the population in El Alto, who have long "suffered at the bottom of a wickedly steep social hierarchy that whitens in accordance with class privilege" (Webber, 2005, p. 34). But at the same time, as will be seen shortly, El Alto has also become a symbol of the power of the people, a city where its residents have long fought for justice and equality. And as I will argue later, hip-hop has become a powerful tool through which the youth of El Alto have continued in this fight, using the art form to bring about positive change to their communities.

El Alto is a young city, officially becoming a separate municipality in 1988. Before then, El Alto was a peripheral neighborhood of the city of La Paz. In 1950, El Alto was home to only 11,000,
serving primarily as the site of an airport and various factories. It wasn’t until the early 1980s that its population began to grow rapidly. There were two central forces behind this. The first was the occurrence of droughts that forced many from the rural countryside to the city in search of a better future. The second, under pressure from the World Bank and IMF, was the adoption of neoliberal polices. The closure of state-owned mines by President Victor Paz-Estenssoro led to the migration of thousands to El Alto (Dangl, 2007). By the end of the 1980s, El Alto had grown to approximately half the size of La Paz (Fathering, Arbona, & Kohl, 2008). Over the following years, El Alto began to grow exponentially. It is currently the fastest growing urban area in Bolivia, and one of the fastest in Latin America. With an estimated annual growth rate of over 5 percent, one in every ten Bolivians currently lives in El Alto (Crabtree, 2005).

Given the above, El Alto is now characterized as a ‘city of migrants’ where most of the residents are first to third generation migrants. This, in turn, has been central in shaping the political structures of the city. El Alto is highly organized where many of the organizing structures from the experiences of miner unions and community groups in rural areas have been transplanted into city life (Dangl, 2007). These organizations have played a central role in filling “the void of the state to build and maintain public infrastructure, make political and economic decisions, and represent residents” (Dangl, 2007, p. 139). For the majority of alteños, it is the membership with these different organizations that shapes much of their political action and relationship with the state (Lazar, 2008). In 2003, the organizational capacity of the city become an essential tool in directly challenging the state and forever transforming the city in what became known as the ‘Gas War’.

The Gas War

In October of 2003, the attention of the international community was instantly drawn to El Alto, a city that previously was largely unheard of. For weeks, the city's residents took to the streets
in protest, defying their government, and eventually bringing it to its knees. The demonstrations and confrontations, paralyzing large parts of the country, ultimately resulted in the resignation of the highly unpopular President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (Crabtree, 2005).

The uprising initially began as a protest against new local tax administration procedures, known as the ‘impuestazo’ (Lazar, 2008). But as quickly as it began, the protest developed into an all-out conflict against the government. Eventually the mobilization became known as the ‘Gas War’, since a central source of public discontent was the government’s decision to export Bolivian gas to the United States via Chile. And while this issue became a key unifying focus, the underlying factors behind the protests were multiple and complex. They included factors such as “the social costs of the application of orthodox neoliberal economic policies, the control of strategic sectors of the economy by transnational capital, and the loss of legitimacy of the nation’s democratic political institutions” (Arce & Rice, 2009, p. 92). As Arce and Rice (2009, p. 92) have argued, “The October 2003 uprising was an open expression of the failure of the state’s democratic institutions to adequately represent the people’s interests and of the neoliberal economic model to resolve the nation’s pressing needs.”

The broader implications of the Gas War will be discussed in detail in Section 3.2. What is important to note, however, is how the toppling of the Sanchez de Lozada administration forever changed the city of El Alto. Before 2003, the political importance of the city was more than often overlooked; many of the residents I talked with described El Alto as ‘an invisible city’. Since October 2003, however, that has change significantly, as it has become a city that is hard to ignore. Moreover, the events of October 2003 “came to represent an important reaffirmation of ‘people power’ in Bolivian politics” (Crabtree, 2005, p. 1). It became a catalytic moment that shifted the balance of power between social movements and the state, giving a powerful voice to a marginal city (Dangl, 2007).
In studying the politics of ‘people power’ within the context of El Alto, an important demographic that has received increasing attention within academia have been the youth. Within the study of hip-hop in El Alto, this group is of particular importance given that they are the demographic most engaged in the cultural expression. What is it like to be a youth in El Alto? How are the youth engaged in Bolivian politics? The next sub-section will address these questions.

*The Youth of El Alto, Bolivia*

In Bolivia, there are approximately 1.6 million youth between the ages of 20 and 29 making up 17 percent of the total population. Of the 2.6 million Bolivians who identify themselves as being indigenous, 26 percent are youth between the ages of 20 and 29. Within the municipality of El Alto, 94 percent of youth identify themselves with an indigenous ethnic group. Of those, 74 percent identify themselves as Aymara, 6 percent Quechua, and 1 percent as other (Yapu, 2008).

The youth of El Alto represent a segment of the Bolivian population that is at particularly high risk for marginalization (Mendez & Perez, 2007; Merkle, 2003; Yapu, 2008). As Merkle (2003) argues, the marginalization and discrimination that the youth of El Alto face is multidimensional and complex, deriving from economic, cultural, and social factors. In arguing so, he identifies a number of aspects of marginalization. One of most dominant aspects is the economic factor of poverty, the impact of which is very complex, having both direct and indirect implications for the youth. A second very important source of marginalization and discrimination is the cultural origins of the youth. As noted above, El Alto is characterized as a city of migrants where most of its residents still maintain strong connections to their cultural roots. Thirdly, the youth also face marginalization because of their age. This aspect, in many ways, is universal, faced by youth all over the world. However, in El Alto, this factor has been identified as being particularly important in deterring youth from participating in local neighborhood organizations. As was noted above, these neighborhood organizations are a central means through which *alteños* can actively participate in
the political system. Thus, age becomes an important factor in deterring youth from participating via this political channel (Yapu, 2008). This issue will be discussed in detail shortly.

In understanding the marginalization that the youth of El Alto face, it is important to step back and note that El Alto, as a city, in multiple ways, is marginal within the larger Bolivian context (Lazar, 2008). The youth of El Alto, who are often marginalized within their own respective society in El Alto, when they step out of El Alto, often face even greater levels of marginalization and discrimination. This is particularly the case when they are in the more affluent neighboring city of La Paz.

*Political Participation of the Youth*

Within the literature on the subject of youth in El Alto, one major theme that emerges is the characterization of *alteño* youth as has having low levels of participation within the formal political system (Merkle, 2008; Samanamud, Cardenas & Prieto, 2007; Yapu, 2008). Merkle (2003) offers some insight on this matter by identifying a number of constraints to political participation for youth of El Alto. At the society level, he argues that the most important constraint has been the loss of confidence in politicians, parties, and state institutions. Largely stemming from past political experiences, in the eyes of many of the youth in El Alto, the formal political system lacks legitimacy and credibility. Concurring with Merkle’s findings, Samanamud, Cardenas, and Prieto (2007) provide a bit more insight in understanding this subject in their extensive study of youth and politics in El Alto.

First and foremost, one central finding noted by Samanamud, Cardenas, and Prieto (2007) is that the youth of El Alto have a good understanding of how politics work. They recognize, for example, the central role of neighbourhood organizations in politics in El Alto. This finding directly challenges arguments made by other researchers who have argued that the youth of El Alto lack the education and understanding to adequately participate in the political system. For the youth of El
Alto, the neighbourhood organizations are seen as an expression of the collective, an entity that represents the community. But despite that understanding, the researchers found that the youth, in large part, are still not engaged in that system of politics.

Samanamud, Cardenas, and Prieto (2007) argue that one of the central reasons for this is that the youth have a lack of confidence in the political system; among the youth surveyed, the two most common descriptive terms from politics in El Alto were ‘dirty’ and ‘corrupt’. A second important factor identified was the lack of voice the youth have in the neighbourhood organizations. Among those surveyed in the study, 55.4 percent felt they had ‘little influence’ on the decisions made by the neighborhood organizations, 38.1 percent felt they had ‘no influence’. There was a similar lack of connection felt between the youth and the political parties. For example, 61.1 percent of the youth surveyed did not identify themselves with any political party.

In noting the findings above, the authors stress the importance of looking at politics from a broad and holistic perspective. The study demonstrates that while the youth may not be actively involved in a ‘formalistic’ form of politics, they are still very much involved in politics but a politics that operates outside of institutionalized channels. In other words, the lack of active involvement in formal politics is not to be confused with apathy. What the researchers found was that the youth are involved in a form of politics “that is rooted in the redefinition of cultural and national identity” (Samanamud, Cardenas, & Prieto, 2007, p. xii). Through, for example, music, youth organizations, and church groups, the youth of El Alto are actively seeking to bring about change to their community through the redefinition of their identity, one that serves as a new base for political action. This final point is of particular importance in the study of the use of hip-hop by the youth in El Alto. I will return to this subject in detailed in Chapter 4 and 5.

In understanding the context out of which the _alteñio_ hip-hop movement has emerged, the final two sections of this chapter will look at the subject from a broader perspective to identify relevant
factors and processes that are present, not only in El Alto, but in Bolivia and in the region as a whole.

3.2 – The History and Transformation of Resistance in Bolivia

Campesino! Your poverty shall no longer feed the master!
– Tupak Amaru

One of the central arguments made in this paper is that rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto has been appropriated as a form of resistance. In suggesting the above, it is important to situate that argument within a broader context of resistance in Bolivia. In recent years, Bolivia, and El Alto in particular, has received a lot of international attention as being a center of resistance, “a flash-point of protest” (Forero, 2005). However, this element is not something that is new. In fact, there exists a long history of resistance that can be dated back to the 1781 siege of the city of La Paz that was led by Aymara leaders Tupak Katari and Bartolina Sisa. Tupak Katari, formally Julian Apaza, took on the name in homage of two previous indigenous leaders whose footsteps he sought to follow: Tomas Katari and Tupac Amaru II (Dangl, 2007). From March to October 1781, the anti-colonial indigenous insurrection laid siege on the city of La Paz from their base in El Alto. In the end, however, lacking urban allies, they were unable to successful seize the colonial city (Farthing, Arbona, & Kohl, 2008). Nevertheless, the symbolic importance of this event has had a powerful legacy that has, and continues to, resonate loudly, particularly among Bolivia’s indigenous populations.

And while there has been a strong tradition of resistance, it is important highlight that the forms and central actors behind the resistance have changed over time. Therefore, to gain a greater understanding of the current forms of resistance, it is helpful to take a step back and examine the transformation of resistance in Bolivia.
Since the period of the Bolivian revolution in 1952, one of the most powerful social actors in Bolivia was organized labor (Arce & Rice, 2009). In particular, two of the mains sources of opposition were the Confederacion Obrera Boliviana (Bolivian Workers’ Confederation; COB), the country’s union confederation, and, within it, the miners’ federation, known as the Federacion Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia (Union Federation of Bolivian Mineworkers; FSTMB). For decades, these two actors were the strongest opposition to successive governments (Arce & Rice, 2009; Crabtree, 2005).

This all changed in 1985 when economic restructuring resulted in the closure of most of Bolivia’s nationalized mining operations, resulting in the loss of over 25,000 jobs (Crabtree, 2005). This had a devastating impact on the FSTMB and, consequently, crippled the COB, thus greatly contributing to the disarticulation and demise of organized labour in Bolivia. The FSTMB’s and COB’s loss of power and voice is consistent with the impact of neoliberalism throughout the region (Barr, 2005). But rather than simply having the effect of depoliticizing or demobilizing civil society, as many have argued would have been the effect of market-oriented reform, Bolivia has clearly demonstrated how neoliberalism has in fact “repoliticized collective political activity” (Arce & Rice, 2009, p. 98). In other words, it has had the paradoxical effect of “simultaneously [debilitating] certain types of popular resistance and [activating] others” (Arce & Rice, 2009, p. 89). This is clearly seen in the most recent cycle of protest in Bolivia, which will be examined shortly.

However, the period of neoliberal hegemony, between 1985 and 2000, as Webber (2005, p. 36) writes, “clearly represented a historic defeat of the left and seemed to inculcate profound sentiments of loss within popular sectors that otherwise may have been able to mount some resistance.” The demise of organized labour helped to elevate the profile and role of political parties and electoral politics (Crabtree, 2005). During this period, a series of coalition governments dominated the political system, which greatly contributed to the establishment of political stability. These same coalitions, however, also “served to effectively shut out the opposition from access to
the decision-making process” (Arce & Rice, 2009, p. 91). Rather than linking society and state, it has been argued that Bolivia’s political parties during this period instead acted primarily to advance the interests of their own respective leaders (Crabtree, 2005). By the end of the 1990s, the dissatisfaction and frustration of the Bolivian people with a political system characterized with having strong barriers to genuine participation began to clearly manifest itself in a number of ways, reflected in electoral results, public attitudes, and, most notably, in social unrest (Barr, 2005). In 2000, this dissatisfaction manifested itself in a manner that forever changed Bolivia’s political landscape.

*The Politics of the Street: From the Water Wars to the Gas War*

The city of Cochabamba is Bolivia’s third largest city, located in the heart of the country. Since the early 20th century, the problem of water availability and the difficulty of managing its equitable distribution has been a central political and social issue in the Cochabamba valley (Crabtree, 2005). Rapid population growth in the city and the surrounding municipalities in recent decades has further exacerbated these problems. In 1976, the population in Cochabamba was 200,000. By the end of 1999, when the Water Wars began, the city’s population had grown to over 500,000. In the year leading up to the conflicts, only 60 percent of the city residents were part of the public water network (Dangl, 2007).

On September 3rd, 1999, the Banzer government, under pressure from the World Bank, officially signed a contract to privatize the public and communal water system of Cochabamba, selling it to *Aguas del Tunari*, a subsidiary of the American multinational Bechtel Corporation. From the very beginning, the privatization of this vital resource was met with great controversy and resistance. However, the catalyst for the months of mass protests that ensued was the announcement that *Aguas del Tunari* would be raising water tariffs between 100% and 300%. In addition, despite its promises, the US subsidiary also failed to provided new local investments
(Crabtree, 2005). For many of the residents of Cochabamba, where the monthly minimum wage is $60, paying $15 to $20 each month for access to water was simply impossible (Dangl, 2007).

On November 4th, 1999, groups of residents began responding via popular mobilization as protests and roadblocks were formed, closing off access to the major arteries in and out of the city. What initially began as a 24-hour protest, transformed into a series of ‘water wars’, spanning several months. A central actor in all this was the Coordinador del Agua y Vida (Coordinator of Water and Life), which was established on November 12, 1999 by a very broad coalition of groups. This umbrella organization became a pivotal force through its role in organizing and coordinating protests and blockades, as well as serving as a central actor in negotiating with government officials (Crabtree, 2005; Dangl, 2007). Over the course of several months, the protests and demonstrates grew in size and in intensity. In addition to anger towards the issue of water privatization, the government’s repressive response to the popular protest fueled greater outrage, thus spurring on further protest. As time went on, the mobilizations increasingly become more heterogeneous in its social make up. The issues at hand brought together actors from various social, political, and economic sectors (Crabtree, 2005; Dangl, 2007). After months of protests, confrontations, and negotiations, late afternoon on April 10th, 2000, a deal was made in a meeting held between government officials and leaders from the Coordinadora to reject the contract (Dangl, 2007). The Bolivian people, in the end, through protest politics, successfully reversed the privatization of their water system, ousting the multinational Bechtel Corporation.

This catalytic moment in Bolivia’s history was of great importance. As Webber (2005, p. 37) writes, “The Water War signaled the first rupture in the fifteen-year-old neoliberal fabric exposing the failure of the economic model to produce the wonders promised by a series of governments, and it breathed life and organization into existing societal discontent.” In doing so, it also strengthened the confidence of new social actors, reaffirmed the power of the people and,
consequently, marked the beginning of a new wave of protest in Bolivia. In the following years, that wave of protest ultimately culminated in the Gas War of El Alto in 2003, described in Section 3.1.

Taken as a whole, Bolivia’s latest wave of protest that began with the Cochabamba Water War, in large part, can be understood as representing the exhaustion of neoliberalism in Bolivia. More than just failing to fulfill promises of better living standards and economic prosperity, neoliberalism is also strongly perceived by many in Bolivia as benefiting the socially, economically, and politically powerful while the poor disproportionately bear the costs (Arce & Rice, 2009; Crabtree, 2005). The association between economic liberalization and the propagation of inequality, seen statistically and in day-to-day life, has been foundational in spurring on the resurgence of popular resistance (Crabtree, 2005).

And while much attention has focused on the anti-neoliberal nature of these protests, a fundamental underlying factor has also been the problem of representation (Arce & Rice, 2009; Barr, 2005; Crabtree, 2005). As Crabtree (2005, p. 109) has argued, the “bouts of confrontation” that have occurred during Bolivia’s latest protest cycle were ultimately “rooted in a sense of inequality, exclusion and discrimination, and in a political system that – despite some of the reforms passed – still had strong barriers (formal and informal) to genuine participation and negotiation.” Frustrated groups have consequently resorted to operating outside traditional political channels via protest (Arce & Rice, 2009).

And while some of the motivating factors for mobilization and protest echo those of the past, the central actors behind the resistance in the most recent wave of protest in Bolivia are quite different. As discussed above, the weakening of organized labour through the proliferation and implementation of neoliberal policies also created spaces for new social actors to emerge (Barr, 2005). Rather than being led by specific sectors of society, as was traditionally the case in the past, the most recent wave of protest has joined together a variety of sectoral organizations and civic
groups: these including neighborhood associations, students, intellectuals, artists, workers, and religious groups. In addition, one of the most important voices that have taken center stage has been that of the indigenous peoples (this is a subject that will examined in Section 3.3). Uniting this diverse group of actors has been the opposition towards the state’s economic neoliberal model and the dissatisfaction with its democratic institution to adequately represent the needs and interests of the Bolivian people (Crabtree, 2005). The hip-hop movement in El Alto emerged out of this context. As will be argued and discussed in detail in Chapter 4 and 5, the hip-hop artists of El Alto, through the appropriation of hip-hop as a tool of cultural resistance, can thus be understood as being part of this diverse group of actors that have sought to challenge and transform the current social, political, cultural, and economic structures in Bolivia.

Beginning with the Cochabamba Water War in 2000, the political stability that characterized much of the 1980s and 1990s in Bolivia was broken as ordinary Bolivians began to rediscover the power of the people. The events of October 2003 further reaffirmed this, as “it pushed the boundaries of what people believed was possible through sustained mass mobilization” (Dangl, 2007, p. 151). During my time in Bolivia, a saying I heard time and time again from people of all walks of life was, “Individually, we have no power. Together we can do anything.” The most recent wave of protests resulted in a definitive shift in the balance of power between the state and the people that marked the reemergence of the ‘politics of the street’ (Dangl, 2007).

As noted above, the indigenous peoples of Bolivia have recently become a central force within Bolivian political, particularly in light of the transformation of resistance in Bolivia. In fact, this is a phenomenon found throughout Latin America. In the final section of this chapter, I will look at the rise and revalorization of indigenous identity in Bolivia and throughout the region.
3.3 – The Rise and Revalorization of Indigenous Identity

Within the literature on Bolivia, a final theme that I wish to highlight is an ongoing process that has been described as an “indigenous awakening” (Canessa, 2006, p. 242) or a “rearticulation” of indigenous mobilization (Lucero, 2008, p. 140). This is something that is occurring not only in Bolivia but throughout Latin America. From Chiapas to Chile, in recent years, indigenous movements have moved from the periphery of the political arena to center stage (Lucero, 2008). As Canessa (2006, p. 243) argues, “After decades and centuries of contemporary indigenous culture being represented as anachronistic, backward and retarding the progress of the nation, ‘the indigenous’ is now increasingly seen as being iconically national.” In the case of Bolivia, this has most evidently been seen in the 2005 election victory of Evo Morales, the country’s first indigenous president.

Explaining this resurgence, scholars have focused on “the political and economic context that allowed the indigenous communities to scale up protests in unprecedented ways” (Lucero, 2008, p. 141). As was discussed in Section 3.2, the implementation of structural adjustment and the political turn towards democracy provided new social actors with a space to emerge and develop: “the political opportunity structures became more permissive at the very moment that economic pressures were getting more oppressive” (Lucero, 2008, p. 143). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, supported by third parties such as missionaries and NGOs, indigenous peoples throughout the region were able to scale up, building strong regional and national organizations, thereby giving themselves a powerful political voice (Lucero, 2008). Replacing the old social movement based on class, this new social movement effective resulted in the “ethnicisation” of political protest, one centered on ethnicity (Canessa, 2006, p. 245).

Within Bolivia, as part of this ‘indigenous awakening’, scholars have observed that more and more Bolivians, particularly from urban centers, are identifying themselves as being indigenous. Numerous studies have demonstrated how it is very common for indigenous peoples to stop
identifying themselves as indigenous when they migrate to urban centers. In the face of racism and weakened communal ties, the effect of urban migration more than often results in separation from traditional indigenous identification. It is therefore interesting to see that the case of Bolivia directly challenges this preconception, where half of those who currently identify themselves as being indigenous live in urban centers (Canessa, 2006). Within El Alto, a city that is uniquely characterized as being indigenous, this phenomenon is particularly evident. What is observed, then, is a rise and revalorization of indigenous identity, particularly within the country’s cities (Lanzar, 2008). And while this process is regional in scope, I will argue in Chapter 5 that hip-hop has been appropriated in such a manner that it has become an important tool used by the youth to contribute and further advance the collective rearticulation and revalorization of indigenous identity.

Over the course of the past two chapters, a survey of the literature on the subjects of hip-hop and Bolivia were provided. In Chapter Two, it was seen that hip-hop is locally appropriated, reworked in response to the local context. For the case study of rap music in El Alto, that local context was closely examined in this chapter. Bringing together these elements, how then has rap music and hip-hop culture been locally appropriated within the context of El Alto? The follow chapter will address this question in detail.
CHAPTER 4 – Hip-hop as a Tool of Cultural Resistance

This forth chapter seeks to answer the question: How has rap music and hip-hop culture been locally appropriated within the context of El Alto, Bolivia? The chapter will argue that hip-hop has been locally appropriated within El Alto as a public form of cultural resistance. Cultural resistance is defined here as "culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure" (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5). The first section of this chapter will look at the appropriation of hip-hop from the point of view of the artists. The second section will explore how hip-hop has been used as a tool of cultural resistance. Finally, the third section will examine why hip-hop in El Alto has been appropriated in this manner.

4.1 – From the Perspective of the Artists

To begin to understand how rap music and hip-hop culture has been locally appropriated in El Alto, this first section will look to the hip-hop artists themselves and seek to answer, from their point of view, what is hip-hop within the context of El Alto? For them, how is hip-hop understood? How is it defined? How has it been appropriated?

Beyond the universal understanding of the four elements, when asked, ‘what is hip-hop to you?’ overwhelmingly the responses of the hip-hop artists in El Alto identified hip-hop as an instrument or a tool through which change could be achieved. This is the first major theme that emerged from the data that I wish highlight. For MC Fado, for example, hip-hop is more that just saying what one wants to say. “Hip-hop,” he defines, “is to search for change. It’s making proposals. What do I want for my society? What do I want for my life? It’s liberation.”³ Nina Uma similarly defines hip-hop as “an instrument for fighting.”⁴ In contrast to many of the other artists I talked with, her use of hip-hop is almost entirely purpose driven. She notes, “Its not just about hip-hop as

³ MC Fado, author interview, La Paz, January 17, 2009
⁴ Nina Uma, author interview, La Paz, February 25, 2009
hip-hop. You are going to find among the hip-hoppers various visions, ‘Hip-hop is the best, and I am going to continue to do hip-hop and I’m going to flight and give life to hip-hop.’ My vision is not that one. No. For me, it is about taking ownership of hip-hop and making hip-hop advance for me.”

For Nina Uma, hip-hop is used first and foremost as a vehicle for achieving social change. For Abraham, hip-hop is “a new form of doing politics.” He explains, “I think we try to appropriate hip-hop, appropriate it with a sense that it be an alternative. That it be an instrument of denouncement. That it be a means of communication, always trying to reflect the truth.” For MC Renzone, hip-hop is understood as tool for ending cycles of poverty, discrimination, racism, and inequality; “we need to make the people conscious to achieve a real change.”

Among all the artists surveyed, in understanding hip-hop has a tool, there is a very strong commitment to use hip-hop as a means to achieve positive change. Rapping isn’t just done for the sake of rapping; rapping is done for a purpose, a means to a further end. For each artist, that end is a little different. Nevertheless, there exists a drive to bring about change that will benefit their community. In Section 4.3, I will identify and closely examine the motivating factors for why the hip-hop artists of El Alto ‘do’ hip-hop. As a whole, however, the data shows that it is that broader context within El Alto, one characterized by poverty, inequality, racism, and discrimination, as discussed in the previous chapter, that is the force behind the purpose driven use of hip-hop.

A second major theme that emerged from the data is that for the hip-hop artists of El Alto, hip-hop is also understood as being the voice from below. Abraham describes hip-hop as “the voice of the people, the voice from underneath...from the social bases,” the voice of those that “don’t have the opportunity to be heard.” MC Renzone explains, “Rap doesn’t have a flag with little stars. It doesn’t have a Bolivian flag. It doesn’t have a Chilean flag. It doesn’t have borders.” Rather, he

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5 Nina Uma, author interview, La Paz, February 25, 2009
6 Abraham Bojorquez, author interview, El Alto, February 27, 2009
7 MC Renzone, author interview, La Paz, March 11, 2009
8 Abraham Bojorquez, author interview, El Alto, February 27, 2009
argues, “it’s flag is poverty and the streets and the low barrios.” Hip-hop does not belong to any one country. It doesn’t belong to any one race (a contrasting view to that of writers such as Rose). For the hip-hop artists of El Alto, hip-hop is a global voice of the marginalized. According to MC Doncenc, “At the world level, in any country, any person who has...been born without sufficient resources, that has that rage inside of them, each of these people can do hip-hop.” It is in that light that many of the rappers surveyed explicitly noted a strong connection to the plight and experiences of African Americans in inner city New York and the expression of that struggle through hip-hop. Despite living words apart, the hip-hop artists of El Alto are able to closely relate to those issues of poverty, inequality, and, in particular, racism.

This finding ultimately reflects and links back to what research at the global level has found, as described in Chapter Two in the discussion of connective marginalities. Despite differences in language, culture, or country, it is the common struggle of being discriminated against for the colour of their skin or for their cultural roots or for their age or for their socio-economic status, more than a universal understanding of the elements of hip-hop, that unites the global community of hip-hop artists. Within the context of El Alto, in the face of poverty, racism, and discrimination, rap music and hip-hop culture is thus understood, from the perspective of the artists themselves, as a tool that is used to give voice to the marginalized and bring about changes to broader political, economic, and/or social structures. Abraham sums it up explaining:

“We know very well that hip-hop is not ours, but we have taken ownership over it in one form or another. Not only in Bolivia but in the world. Hip-hop is all over the world. It’s a new form of doing politics. And more conscious and its more real. More from the streets, more from under, the social bases.”

9 MC Renzone, author interview, La Paz, March 11, 2009
10 MC Docene, author interview, La Paz, February 26, 2009
11 Abraham Bojorquez, author interview, El Alto, February 27, 2009
In studying and better understanding how hip-hop has been locally appropriated, it may be helpful to identify a way in which hip-hop has not been appropriated. One of the most salient characteristics of hip-hop in El Alto is that hip-hop has not been appropriated as a commodified and commercialized cultural product. In fact, there exists tremendous resistance towards that. Among the artists surveyed, this was identified as the foremost problem with hip-hop around the world. As MC Fado puts it bluntly, "I say they want to prostitute themselves."12 There is a strong commitment to ensuring that hip-hop is not driven by profit. A united understanding exists, as articulated by MC Docene, that “true rappers don’t want to be commercial.”13 It is therefore not surprising that there is a lot of strong criticism towards mainstream hip-hop from the United States. Referring to other rappers in El Alto, MC Fado argues, “They have a reason for fighting. The others are only fighting for money.”14 This characteristic of hip-hop in El Alto is of critical importance, the implications of which will be discussed shortly.

4.2 - How has hip-hop been used in this way?

Having seen from the point of view of the hip-hop artists in El Alto that hip-hop has been appropriated as a form of cultural resistance, how does that translate into the day-to-day reality of rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto? That is, in more practical terms, how exactly is it that hip-hop has been used as a tool of cultural resistance in El Alto? This next section will address this question. First, I will take a step back and, from a more global and theoretical point of view, examine how hip-hop in general can be used as a tool of cultural resistance. Specifically, I will highlight the works of Tricia Rose, James Scott, Paulo Freire, and Augusto Boal. In doing so, I will then return to the case of El Alto, linking the theoretical to the practical. Finally, I will conclude this

12 MC Fado, author interview, La Paz, January 17, 2009
13 MC Docene, author interview, La Paz, February 26, 2009
14 MC Fado, author interview, La Paz, January 17, 2009
section by highlighting three examples that show hip-hop being used as a tool of cultural resistance in El Alto.

\textit{Theoretical Framing}

In her seminal work on hip-hop in the United State, Tricia Rose (1994) provides important insight into understanding how hip-hop can, and has, severed as a form of resistance, particularly in the case of African American youth. Rose draws from the work James Scott (1990) and his cross-cultural study entitled \textit{Domination and the Arts of Resistance}. In it, Scott provides a framework for understanding how marginalized groups are able to challenge power relations through social transcripts. He makes an important distinction between 'public' and 'hidden' transcripts. The public transcript, Scott (1990, p. 2) argues, is a "shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate." As such, it represents a transcript of power that perpetuates the established social order. In contrast, the hidden transcript is one of resistance and describes "discourse that take place ‘offstage,’ or in disguised form" (Scott, 1990, p. 2). Created by subordinate groups, a hidden transcript represents "a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (Scott, 1990, p.xii). That it should be hidden, argues Scott, "is in large part by design – a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power" (Scott, 1990, p.183). These hidden transcripts thus act as "vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct" (Scott, 1990, p. xiii).

Using this framework, Rose suggests that, in many ways, rap music is a hidden transcript through which oppressed African Americans are able to exercise a form of resistance. She argues that rap music "uses cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities" (Rose, 1994, p. 100). As Rose (1994, p. 100) notes, Scott’s analysis “points to the critical role language and other modes of communication play in the
sustenance, destabilization, and struggle over power.” In this way, hip-hop culture and rap music can act as a counter-hegemonic force thus acting as “a contemporary stage for the theatre of the powerless” (Rose, 1994, p. 101).

Given the above, can this framework be applied to the case of El Alto? In close examination, the data suggests that while some elements of resistance are hidden transcripts, overwhelmingly the rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto is characterized as being a public transcript. Study of the rap music and discussions with the artists have demonstrated that, in large part, the use of rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto does not occur ‘offstage’ or in ‘disguised form’ but rather is, in fact, very public and very direct. And while Rose’s groundbreaking analysis provides important insight, I wish to suggest that the differences in the understanding and practice of hip-hop between the United States and El Alto, Bolivia means that this theoretical framing is one that does not adequately reflects the case of El Alto. Nevertheless, the work of Rose and Scott does bring to light an important characteristic of hip-hop in El Alto that contributes to our understanding of how it has been used: the rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto, in large part, operates as a public transcript, that is a social transcript that critiques power, not while hiding behind anonymity, but openly and directly.

While still taking the above into account, I wish to propose an alternative framework for understanding how hip-hop can be used as a tool of cultural resistance. This framework draws from the work of the Brazilian educator Pablo Freire.

In his classic work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire (1970) proposes an alternative approach to education that is based on critical pedagogy. He advocates for the importance of a model of education that centers on the active participation of the students in their education. This is in contrast to the ‘bank’ concept of education where people are seen as containers into which knowledge can be deposited. Education, according to the critical pedagogy paradigm, “should
encourage students to think critically, to analyze social conditions, and to evaluate information – particularly information related to power, identity and representation” (Howard, 2004, p. 217).

“This pedagogy,” argues Freire (1970, p. 48), “makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation.” Rooted in the lived experiences of the participants, this approach to education generates understanding and promotes transformation through the active agency of the people. According to Freire (1970, p.49):

“In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action.

Broadly speaking then, Freire’s proposed pedagogy is composed of two distinct elements: the first involves a process of critical reflection and awareness (‘conscientization’) that has the power to transform reality; the second element involves ‘liberating action’ where the oppressed emancipate themselves from the oppressors.

Linking back to the case of El Alto, in the study of rap music and hip-hop cultural, this dual process of reflection and action is clearly seen. In this sense, Freire’s proposed pedagogy is a way in which one can understand how rap music and hip-hop culture is used, broadly speaking, as a tool of cultural resistance: rap music and hip-hop culture provides a means for both critical reflection and action.

As was noted above, hip-hop has very much been appropriated as a public transcript. In this sense, hip-hop, and rap music in particular, can be understood as a public means of communication that the youth of El Alto can use to express and articulate their thoughts and desires. As Abraham
puts it simply, “Hip-hop is a tool one can use to be heard”\textsuperscript{15}; it is a channel used by the youth to openly respond to their reality. The hip-hop artists of El Alto are therefore able to contribute to change by actively using rap music as a medium to make their voices heard; ultimately, it is an means of action.

That being said, the study of rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto has shown that there is another very important element that is present: that is the element of critical reflection. This is something that is often overlooked. Hip-hop is not just a speaking tube for the youth of El Alto, although that is an important element; hip-hop, as a cultural expression, also provides a ‘space’ where the youth are able to critically think about, analyze, and evaluate their social, political, cultural, and economic reality, both individually and collectively. Duncombe (2002, p. 35) writes that culture provides “us with ideas of how things are and how they should be, frameworks through which to interpret reality and possibility. They help us account for the past, make sense of the present and dream of the future.” Hip-hop, thus, understood as a culture itself, provides this “sort of ‘free space’ for developing ideas and practices” (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5). “Hip-hop,” as MC Fado puts it, “inspires us to search for solutions.”\textsuperscript{16} As Freire (1970, p. 47) has argued, “To surmount the situation of oppression people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.” In discussion with the artists of El Alto, hip-hop, through both its creation and consumption, is a means through which this can be achieved.

As a whole then, the data from El Alto has shown that hip-hop, as a cultural expression, provides a space where the youth are able to critically think and reflect about their own reality; in addition, as a medium of communication, it also provides a means to react to that reality, a public transcript through which the youth can become agents of change. In arguing the above, by no means do I wish to suggest that without hip-hop the youth of El Alto would not be engaged in this

\textsuperscript{15} Abraham Bojorquez, author interview, El Alto, February 27, 2009
\textsuperscript{16} MC Fado, author interview, La Paz, January 17, 2009
process of reflection and action. I do, however, wish to draw attention to the important role of this
art form in these processes.

This dual process of reflection and action is something related to hip-hop as a whole; it is
not something that is really all that unique to the case of El Alto. In order to really understand how
El Alto differs from other hip-hop case studies, particularly in the use of hip-hop as a means of
action, I will now look to the work of theatre director and writer Augusto Boal.

Drawing heavily from the work of Freire, Augusto Boal (1985), and his work titled Theatre
of the Oppressed, focuses in on the division between actors and spectators. And while his analysis is
linked to theatre, Boal does provide insight that can be applied to hip-hop. His book shows in both
theoretical and practical terms how “the theater can be placed at the service of the oppressed, so
that they can express themselves and so that, by using this new language, they can also discover
new concepts” (Boal, 1985, p. 121).

In his analysis of the poetics of the oppressed, Boal begins by discussing how the ruling
classes took possession of theatre and constructed dividing walls between actors and spectators. He
then looks at how those walls can be broken down, a process whereby the oppressed people are
liberated themselves. Boal (1985, p. 122) writes:

“...the poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to
the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself
assumes the protagonist role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans
for change – in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theater is not
revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution.

He later adds, “I believe that all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the
people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves may utilize them. The
theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it” (Boal, 1985, p. 122).
Unlike many other musical forms, at its core rap music is incredibly accessible. As Ana Maria from the Fundacion Solon, an NGO based in La Paz who has worked with *alteño* rappers, points out, “It is interesting because you don’t need to know a lot to do hip-hop. I see some of the kids that we worked with and they are doing very well and they have, let’s say, an artist position without having studied music.”

For other genres of music, issues of poverty often limit opportunities for certain groups to obtain musical training thereby limiting their ability to participate in the creation of music. For hip-hop music that is not the case. Rapping does not require any musical training. And, as Nina Uma points out, to make a beat, one can simply beat box and made sounds on a table.

And while the creation and consumption of hip-hop is theoretically accessible to anyone, when defined in commercialized terms, the accessibility to the creation and consumption is limited; a dividing wall is created. Those who wish to ‘consume’ (read: partake) in hip-hop culture must now be able to ‘consume’ (read: purchase) the cultural products. And in order to create quality commodifiable hip-hop cultural products, the creators of hip-hop must have access to the means of production of hip-hop, whether it be access to recording studios or to musical samples that have copyrights. This can be understood as a sort of “enclosure of the commons” where art, and hip-hop specifically, becomes the voice of a “privileged sector of society, as opposed to the public in general” (Haupt, 2008, p. 102). Within a commercialized framework of hip-hop, the result is the construction of a strong division between the ‘spectator’ and ‘actor’, or ‘consumer’ and ‘producer’ of hip-hop.

In sharp contrast, the rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto does not have this strong division between spectator and actor, consumer and producer. In fact, everyday that dividing wall is increasingly being broken. There are a number of factors contributing to this. Arguably the most important is that hip-hop is not defined as a commercialized cultural product. This understanding of hip-hop allows for greater widespread accessibility for those who wish to create hip-hop.

Throughout the city, in recent years, there has been a proliferation of free or very affordable hip-

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17 Ana Maria Marcou, author interview, La Paz, February 27, 2009
hop workshops that have given the youth of El Alto the opportunity to step up to the mic and learn to rap. MC Renzone, for example, has created is own studio and opened the doors, allowing local rappers to record there free of charge. A local radio station based out of the Wayna Tambo cultural center similarly provides a means by which local artists can diffuse their work free of charge. Technological changes also further erode the dividing wall. Online file sharing, for example, has allowed access to free hip-hop beats and audio editing software (though, of course, not always legally). In addition, the songs of most of the local artists are freely accessible on websites such as myspace.

This blurring of the divisions has been central in providing the youth of El Alto a means by which they able to act. The accessibility of hip-hop means that anyone in El Alto, regardless of socio-economic status or musical training, is able to use hip-hop as a vehicle of change. Drawing back to Boal, rap music and hip-hip can thus be understood as a poetics of the oppressed, a poetics of liberation. As Boal (1985, p. 155) writes of theatre, “the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action!” In much the same way, hip-hop, as appropriated in El Alto, is action! As Duncombe (2002, p. 6) writes, “the very activity of producing culture has political meaning.” Walter Benjamin, echoing the authors above, argues that is the conditions of a culture’s production rather than the content of the culture that makes it radical. Benjamin saw, “that the most radical of content could be assimilated and thus neutralized if presented within the context of high art or commercial entertainment” (Duncombe, 2002, p. 67). Therefore, he argued, truly radical culture was one that could “transcend the specialization in the process of production” of capitalism (Duncombe, 2002, p. 68). The use of hip-hop as a means of action, through the erosion between actor and spectator, producer and consumer, is thus one of the ways in which rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto can be understood as being a source of cultural resistance.
From a theoretical point of view then, it has been seen that hip-hop is used as a tool of cultural resistance through processes of reflection and action. In linking theory to practice, how exactly is hip-hop operationalized in this manner in El Alto?

As an artistic expression, the research has demonstrated that hip-hop culture and rap music is not just a form of cultural resistance but a form of *creative* cultural resistance. In Chapter Two, the flexibility and adaptability of hip-hop was discussed. All over the world, hip-hop has been, and continues to be, reworked and reshaped. In much the same way, the artists of El Alto, on a regular basis, continue to think of new ways of reworking hip-hop. Ultimately, it is clear that, in a practical sense, there is no one-way to use hip-hop as a tool of cultural resistance. To try to identify just one method would be to miss the point. The power of hip-hop really lies in the creativity of its user, the ability of the artist to challenge the status quo by reworking the art form, using it to reflect and to act, incorporating new sounds, rhymes, languages, and/or cultural expressions. Furthermore, the erosion between actor and spectator makes hip-hop that much more accessible to the masses, allowing more and more people to appropriate and use hip-hop in their own creative manner. Taken as a whole then, it is the *flexibility* (as an artistic expression) and *accessibility* (understood through the work of Boal) of hip-hop that allows it to be used in a wide variety of ways.

Within the case of El Alto, I have seen those who have used it as a tool to reflect, vent, and protest. Others have used it to educate, communicate, and mobilize. Others still have used it to build community, united in the creation and consumption of hip-hop. To illustrate in more practical terms the different ways in which hip-hop has been used, the final part of this section will highlight three examples of how hip-hop out of El Alto has been used as a tool of cultural resistance. As a whole, these examples show the use of hip-hop in a more formalized and institutionalized manner.
Practical Examples

The first example is a series of hip-hop workshops given by Abraham in the San Pedro Prison in La Paz. After having performed a concert at the prison, Abraham decided he would run a series of workshops for a group of youth there. The youth in San Pedro Prison, arguably, are among the most marginalized members in Bolivian society, having committed serious offences, including murder. In addition to teaching the youth the history and the elements of hip-hop, the workshops centered on teaching the ways that hip-hop could be used to improve their lives. “How can you be heard? How can you denounce what is going on here?”, Abraham would ask them. As part of the workshops, the participants would create their own rap songs, first writing down a couple rhymes and then, as a group, forming verses. Eventually, as the participants gained more confidence, they would rap their lines. “Crazy things began to come out, very interesting, that in one form or another reflected life within the prison.” As Abraham described the workshops to me, he noted that it was “a question of reflection and reorientation... To be able to say, ‘F***, I've made a mistake. I’ve made a mistake. And I truly want to change.” From his own life and from his experiences running the workshops, according to Abraham, “hip-hop is a therapy... Hip-hop can rehabilitate you.” And while the participants of the workshop never made it onto a stage to publically proclaim their rhymes, the process of creating and writing those lines was very much a constructive experience. Hip-hop, in this example, is thus seen as a tool of reflection, a way in which the participants of the workshops were able to use rap music as a way to critically think their own reality, whether it be about mistakes made in the past, their present situation as inmates, or their future. Moreover, in articulating those thoughts through rhymes, the participants were able to use rap music as a tool to vent and protest. Collectively, then, rap music served as a tool of empowerment for the participants of the workshop, providing them with an outlet of creative resistance.18

18 Abraham Bojorquez, author interview, El Alto, February 27, 2009
This first example can be linked to a growing body of literature on the subject known as Hip-Hop Therapy (HHT) (Allen, 2005; Stokes & Gant, 2002; Tyson, 2002). HHT can be understood as “an innovative, culturally-sensitive technique” fusing hip-hop with established therapeutic approaches such as bibliotherapy (a poetry therapy technique that utilizes literature), behavioral therapy (an approach to facilitate behavioural change), narrative therapy (where clients construct their own stories), and music therapy (Allen, 2005; Tyson, 2002). Throughout the world, the use of hip-hop in this manner has gained widespread popularity, reflective of its value.

A second example is the use of hip-hop by the Fundación Solon as a tool to communicate, educate, and raise awareness about various issues. The Fundación Solon is local NGO based in La Paz that uses art, culture, and creativity to flight for social justice. They work with artists to address key local issues in Bolivia. Recently, the NGO collaborated with a group of rappers from El Alto to use hip-hop as a way to address a number of social issues. According to Ana María from the Fundación Solon, the central motivating factor for using rap music was the issue of getting information out to the people. “We have formal documents with a lot of information available... But for people who are not interested, how can we reach them? You have to find alternatives.” Rap music was one such alternative that has been very successful for the NGO.

The Fundación has, for example, invited rappers from El Alto to be part of various conferences they run across Bolivia has a way to reach out to the masses, particularly the youth. It has become a very effective medium for engaging participants at the conferences. Most recently, the Fundación Solon has produced a hip-hop CD with the rappers, called Arusa Chamapa: El Poder de Nuestra Voz, on the subjects of racism and cultural diversity.

The CD does a great job of showcasing the ways in which the artists’ of El Alto shape and rework hip-hop to use it as creative form of cultural resistance. As an example, one of the tracks on

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19 Ana Maria Marcou, author interview, La Paz, February 27, 2009
the CD is called *Mira lo que somos* (‘Look at what we are’), written by Nina Uma. The beat of the song is a sample from a type of music that is known as *chicha* music. As Nina Uma explained to me, it is a genre of music that is commonly discriminated against, as it is associated with the poorest sectors or rural, indigenous people. In writing her song on discrimination, she decided to use *chicha* music as her beat.

Nina Uma told me a story of a time when she was invited to perform at a pub in *Sipocachhi*, a middle- to high-class neighbourhood in La Paz. The DJ asked which beat to put on and Nina Uma decided to give him the song with the *chicha* music. Shocked, the DJ refused to play the CD for fear that people would walk out and/or that he would be physically harmed. Finally, near the end of the night, after much deliberation, the DJ reluctantly played the song. Once she started rapping on the beat, she was an instant hit. The owners later invited her to perform again the next night. Laughing, she added, “The lousy worm that didn’t want to play what I wanted to sing had his face to the floor.”

This example illustrates exactly what the goal is of the CD, and the work of the *Fundación Solon* as a whole. It is about raising awareness and creating dialogue about issues through art, in this case rap music, and, ultimately, some creativity.

Finally, a third example is the *Wayna Tambo*, a cultural center/radio station in El Alto. The *Wayna* has become one of the central spaces for both the creation and diffusion of rap music in El Alto. The center has played a very important supportive role in spurring on and strengthening the work of the local artists over the years. For example, it was one of the first centers in El Alto to offer workshops on hip-hop for the youth. Out of these workshops, in 2003, a group of rappers, together under the name *Wayna Rap*, recorded a CD by the same name. For many of the hip-hoppers in El Alto, this disc marked an important moment in the evolution of rap music in El Alto; it served as a

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20 Nina Uma, author interview, La Paz, February 25, 2009
real catalyst for the movement’s development, a sort of blueprint of *alteño* rap. In addition, the
*Wayna Tambo* has regularly hosted hip-hop performances, providing the artists of El Alto a physical
space where they are able showcase their work. The center is also a radio station where, through
hip-hop programs such as *Pachacuti Rap*, local artists are able to diffuse their music free of change.

In this final example, hip-hop, and rap music in particular, has become a way to reach the
youth of El Alto and support them in their use of hip-hop as means to achieve change. Moreover
though, out of the space provided by the *Wayna Tambo*, a very strong community of hip-hoppers
has emerged. Duncombe has described culture as something that is shared; “it becomes a focal
point around which to build a community.” The example of the *Wayna Tambo* exemplifies this
where the culture of hip-hop, fused with elements of the local culture, has created a very tight-knit
community, a place to network and “build new positions, new perspectives, new dreams.”21 Thus in
this sense, hip-hop has been used as a tool for *building a community*, a space where rap music can
be used in a variety of ways to bring about change.

In having seen from the perspective of the artists that hip-hop has been appropriated as a
very public, active form of cultural resistance, this section has addressed the question of how hip-
hop is been used in this way. In addition to this question, however, a second very important
question emerges. That question is why? *Why has rap music and hip-hop culture being appropriated
in this way?* The final section of this chapter will answer this question.

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21 Nina Uma, author interview, La Paz, February 25, 2009
4.3 – Why has hip-hop been used in this way?

This section argues that the local appropriation of hip-hop as a tool of cultural resistance is ultimately a reflection of the context in El Alto. In other words, the social, political, economic, and cultural environment has been pivotal in shaping the different characteristics of the local hip-hop scene. In this sense, hip-hop can be understood as being used as part of the social protest and transformation that is taking place within the broader context in Bolivia. As discussed in Chapter Three, Crabtree (2005, p. 109) has argued that the protests and confrontations that have taken place in Bolivia since 2000 can be understood as being “rooted in a sense of inequality, exclusion and discrimination, and in a political system that had strong barriers (formal or informal) to genuine participation and negotiation.” In much the same way, I wish to suggest that the local appropriation of hip-hop as a tool of cultural resistance is also “rooted in a sense of inequality, exclusion and discrimination, and in a political system that had strong barriers (formal or informal) to genuine participation and negotiation.” This becomes evident in examining the motivations of the hip-hop artists for ‘doing’ hip-hop and the impact of October 2003 on the evolution of hip-hop in El Alto. Before examining these two subjects, however, I will first briefly look at the hip-hop movement in El Alto from a broader perspective, comparing it to the broader Bolivian hip-hop movement.

Alteño Hip-Hop vs Bolivian Hip-Hop

In studying the hip-hop movement in El Alto, it is important to recognize that the appropriation of hip-hop as a tool of cultural resistance is, in many ways, unique to El Alto; it is not something that is characteristic of Bolivian hip-hop in general. To be sure, there are a number of artists outside of El Alto who have appropriated hip-hop in a similar manner. But when one surveys the hip-hop scenes in other cities in Bolivia, in general, the movements are clearly different compared to El Alto. Broadly speaking, outside of El Alto, the rap is far less social and far less
political. Musically, it has more of a reggaeton feel. According to those surveyed, the hip-hop outside El Alto is more about fashion, making a name and profit. “You bring a hip-hopper from Santa Cruz here [El Alto] and he is weak, he doesn’t have the punch,” argues Alvaro, a local sound engine who has worked with rappers from El Alto. Alternative, he notes, if you take an artist from El Alto to Santa Cruz, “it’s not going to work, it way too political.”22 The factor explaining this difference, according to all the participants, is context. In the other cities in Bolivia, the levels of poverty, inequality, and discrimination found in El Alto are not the same. As Renzone observes, “They don’t live our reality, how are they going to sing about it... It’s not because it is not important to those in Santa Cruz or those in Cochabamba but it is because they don’t feel it, they haven’t lived it.”23 To gain a greater understanding of how the context has shaped the local hip-hop scene in El Alto, the next part of this section will look at the motivations of the hip-hop artists of El Alto.

Motivations

When one examines the motivating factors for why the hip-hop artists of El Alto do what they do, it is extremely clear that it is, in large part, a response to the context in which they live. As discussed above, hip-hop has been locally appropriated as a tool of cultural resistance. It is used as an instrument to change the existing social, cultural, economic, and political structure. Why is that the case? It is because those structures are ones that have often led to the creation and/or exacerbation of poverty, inequality, and racism.

Every hip-hop artist surveyed discussed the struggles faced living in El Alto. “No one cares about the lives of the poor in this country,” Renzone lamented to me. “And because of that I began to do rap. Because of the anger brother. Because of the anger.”24 Nina Uma was similarly motivated. While describing her volunteer experiences with street children in El Alto, she asked me, "Why are

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22 Alvaro Montenegro, author interview, La Paz, March 11, 2009
23 MC Renzone, author interview, La Paz, March 11, 2009
24 MC Renzone, author interview, La Paz, March 11, 2009
There people that have to suffer like this? Why are there people that pass through such difficult things?”25 It was out of that experience that her commitment to act and find solutions was born. She explained to me that it is that context of poverty that makes one react. MC Fado talked about the importance of social responsibility, about being a good role model towards his changitos, the younger kids. "How can I reach this chango? Through hip-hop.”26

This finding ultimately links back to what research at the global level has found. As discussed in Chapter Two, researchers studying hip-hop movements around the world have shown that hip-hop is reflective of the local environment. For the rappers of El Alto, like most other rappers, they rap about what is real to them, about their lives, their struggles, their realities. As Fado puts it, “Hip-hop is like air, you breath out what is inside of you.”27 “Everything is seen, everything is heard, everything is felt, everything is lived and that is captured in rap,”28 remarks Renzone.

In understanding hip-hop as a reflection of the context, it is important to recognize that Bolivia’s context is, of course, a dynamic one, one that in recent years has seen tremendous transformation. When examined in this light, hip-hop can also be understood as a reflection in that the growth and proliferation of hip-hop in recent years has directly benefited from broader contextual changes occurring in Bolivia. Arguably, one of the most important contextual factors reflected in hip-hop in this sense has been the transformation of resistance in Bolivia, as discussed in Chapter Three. This can clearly be seen in the impact that the events of October 2003 had on the hip-hop movement in El Alto.

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25 Nina Uma, author interview, La Paz, February 25, 2009
26 Chango is slang for youngster
27 MC Fado, author interview, La Paz, January 17, 2009
28 MC Fado, author interview, La Paz, January 17, 2009
29 MC Renzone, author interview, La Paz, March 11, 2009
October 2003 and the Evolution of Hip-Hop in El Alto

The events of October 2003, as seen in Chapter Three, were catalytic for the people of El Alto. Forever transforming the city, it is not surprising to see that the events also left a clear mark in the evolution of hip-hop in El Alto. For one, since 2003, the popularity of hip-hop in El Alto has exploded. According to those surveyed, the events of October 2003 are central in explaining this. For many, such as MC Renzone, the events that unfolded in October 2003 fueled anger and rage, thus spurring on the desire to pick up the mic and speak out. For many other hip-hop artists, the changes brought on by active participation inspired the youth to do the same through hip-hop. “Sanchez de Lozada’s departure”, writes Dangl (2007, p. 151), “opened up not just a series of new political opportunities and uncertainties, but it also exhibited the power of the Bolivia people.” The events of October 2003 clearly demonstrated the potential that people had in transforming their context, for all Bolivians, including the hip-hop artists.

It is also interesting to see that the messages and meanings of the songs radically transformed with the events of 2003. Before 2003, the central theme of the songs centered on addressing the discrimination felt against the hip-hop community, particularly for their style of dress. It was more about issues that directly impacted them as hip-hop artists. After 2003, the focus shifted to addressing issues that affected their community at large, issues such as poverty, injustice, and discrimination:

“Since October, my songs are more radical and are a bit more social. Before, I wanted to talk about my life, about what I’ve lived in my youth, about that which I don’t want others to go through. But because of the events that took place, I have become conscious and I have seen that it’s not just about me, there are others also. Because of that, I also want to write lyrics that do not just talk about me but that talk for everyone. (Interview with “Amauta”, alteño hip-hop artist, April 6 2006) (Samanamud, Cardenas & Prieto, 2007, p. 72)

As discussed in detail before, the latest wave of protest that began with the Water Wars in Cochabamba emerged as a result of the failures of the social, political, and economic system.
Through the reaffirmation of the power of the people, these struggles led to the rise and strengthening of a great number of new social actors. Close study of rap music and hip-hop culture suggests that, given the way in which hip-hop has been locally appropriated, the hip-hop artists of El Alto represent an example of the new aforementioned social actors. The local appropriation of hip-hop as a tool of cultural resistance can thus be understood as being a reflection to the context, a means through which the hip-hop artists have responded and sought to correct the weaknesses and failures of the social, political, economic, and cultural structures found in El Alto.
CHAPTER 5 – The Impact

Having identified and examined how rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto has been appropriated as a public and active form of cultural resistance, what impact has this appropriation or interpretation of hip-hop had in El Alto for the youth and the community at large?

The previous chapter has demonstrated how the flexibility and adaptability of rap music and hip-hop culture has allowed it to be used in a number of ways. It is therefore not surprising to see that the study and exploration of the impact of rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto has shown that the impact has been both widespread and complex. When this study first began, the focus was on studying the impact that hip-hop was having on the youth of El Alto. But very quickly it became evident that the impact reached far beyond the youth and the immediate hip-hop community. As the data suggests, it is the message of hip-hop that has been critical in breaking barriers with the non-hip-hop community, particularly those from older generations. Alvaro remarks, “Personally, I think a bridge that communicates to the generations is the political message. In another way, the parents and grandparents are talking about the same. They are talking about the marginalization, of the exclusion, racism; there is a point of contact there which is important.”

Thus given its scale, rather than providing an exhaustive evaluation of hip-hop and its impact, this section will highlight three central areas in which rap music and hip-hip culture has had, and continues to have, an impact in El Alto.

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30 Alvaro Montenegro, author interview, La Paz, March 11, 2009
5.1 – The Revalorization of Identity

“*I want to break apart all that discrimination that exists*”
- MC Renzone

One of the most powerful and evident ways in which hip-hop is actively contributing to change is through the revalorization of identity; that is, the process of giving back value to one’s identity. This is occurring at multiple levels.

First, hip-hop has been seen to give worth and value to the identity of the youth themselves. Through processes of reflection and action, hip-hop has helped change how many of the youth see and value themselves. As discussed in Section 4.2, through both its creation and consumption, hip-hop provides a space for critical reflection and awareness, a process of ‘conscientization’. Among the artists of El Alto, in the face of racism, discrimination, and misrepresentation, this reflection has more than often centered on the issue of identity. Moreover, hip-hop has provided a means to respond to that reality. Many of the youth have used hip-hop to denounce and challenge misconceived perceptions of what it means to be indigenous, or to be *alteño*, or to be a youth. In doing so, whether through rapping in Aymara, using Andean musical elements as part of their beats, or wearing wiphala on the back of a hoodie when they perform, hip-hop has become an outlet through which these young *alteños* are making powerful statements declaring and affirming that this is who they are.

Secondly, how the youth see and value themselves also influences how the others in the *alteño* community see and value themselves. As an example, many of the artists interviewed described experiences of performing at festivals or events where those outside of the hip-hop community would come and watch the youth perform. Adults and grandparents would see these youth on stage with baggy clothes and tilted hats. And then they would start rapping, not in English or Spanish but in Aymara! When for so many years, these adults and grandparents would not teach

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31 MC Renzone, author interview, La Paz, March 11, 2009
32 The wiphala is the pan-indigenous flag of Andean peoples in Bolivia
their children their mother tongue for fear that they would be discriminated against, to hear these youth stand up in a public square and, on their own, rap in Aymara has a powerful impact on the adults. As Santos, one of the coordinators at the Wayna Tambo, notes, “What is being said to them is, ‘You don’t have be embarrassed of who you are. Look at me. Look at me! I’m not embarrassed.’” As Nina Uma describes it, “You know you are communicating with the people. That you are advancing, that you are doing resistance. And that you are not alone, because in communicating with the people and seeing that, perhaps, the people are identifying themselves with you.” Thus, in this sense, hip-hop has the impact of reaffirming a collective identity within the broader community.

Thirdly, as Santos points out:

“...at the same time, that aspect of looking at myself, that change in subjectivity, that’s not only going to take place within me because it will also change the relationships I will have the ‘other’, with those who are different, with those who are distinct. I am going to look at him one to another. I’m going to look at him in the eye. I’m going to see him face to face. I’m not going to hang my head. I’m not going to deny where I’m from or who I am. I’m going to raise my head and be proud of who I am.”

The impact transcends far beyond the immediate hip-hop community and even the extended community in El Alto; it influences the relationships with those in the society at large.

As a whole then, hip-hop can be understood as being part of a decolonization process; one that is breaking apart preconceived ideas and understandings, particularly as it pertains to identity. Abraham observes, ”Little by little, the people are starting to rethink, reexamine at a personal level what is happening... Little by little, the structures are breaking.” This process, it is important to stress, is not only an external decolonization process but also an internal decolonization process. That is, it not just about changing the way that others see you, but also how you see yourself. As

33 Santos Moises Callejas, La Paz, March 24, 2009
34 Nina Uma, author interview, La Paz, February 25, 2009
35 Santos Moises Callejas, La Paz, March 24, 2009
36 Abraham Bojorquez, author interview, El Alto, February 27, 2009
Santos notes of the context in El Alto, "this issue of discrimination, this issue of racism wasn’t only imposed by force, but it was incorporated by ourselves in our own subjectivity to deny who we are."37 Linking back to the work of Freire (1970, p. 63), it has been argued that the self-depreciation of the oppressed "derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing...that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness." Within El Alto, this can be observed; “many have now internalized that we, ourselves, are not able,”38 notes Santos. But through processes of reflection and action, and through expressions such as hip-hop, this way of thinking has begun to change. Abraham observes, “So many people would deny their identity. But today, it’s the complete opposite. Many people, including with hip-hop, feel more pride to say that, ‘I am from El Alto. What! I’m from the street. And what! We are from the barrio’...I think many structures have begun to be broken." As Abraham sees it, echoing many of the artists surveyed, hip-hop is giving back worth and value to a people “that for more than 500 years, have been stepped on, humiliated."39 Through the use of rhymes, language, cultural symbols, and dress, hip-hop has provided a way in which the youth of El Alto can reflect and speak out and, in so doing, given back worth and value to their own identity and that of their community.

In arguing the above, by no means do I wish to suggest that hip-hop is the sole source behind this process of revalorization. As discussed in Chapter 3, this process is something that is occurring at a regional level. The impact of hip-hop in this manner is thus reflective of a much broader course of social change. In this section I do, however, wish to highlight and emphasize that hip-hop has and continues to play a catalytic role in this process, particularly among the youth.

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37 Santos Moises Callejas, La Paz, March 24, 2009
38 Santos Moises Callejas, La Paz, March 24, 2009
39 Abraham Bojorquez, author interview, El Alto, February 27, 2009
5.2 – The Preservation of Traditional Culture

*You may be an urban Aymara but you are Aymara.*
*And that is something very difficult to remove.*
*And imagine, after 500 years, they have not been able to remove it*
- Nina Uma⁴⁰

A second way in which hip-hop is actively having an impact in El Alto is in the preservation of traditional culture. This impact is closely linked to the first but nevertheless is critically important on its own.

There has long existed an important debate over the implications of the domination of international media by the West. Research demonstrating the one-way flow of cultural production diffusing out from the ‘developed world’ to the ‘developing world’ sparked the emergence and advancement of the *media imperialism thesis,* which became a dominate view during the 1970s (Chadha & Kavoori, 2000). Adherents of the media imperialism thesis argued that the flow of cultural production from the Global North to the Global South led to “a situation whereby the media of advanced capitalist economies were able to substantially influence, if not actually determine, the nature of cultural production and consumption within Third World countries” (Chadha & Kavoori, 2000, p. 416). In other words, it is argued that by having control over the trade of international media, Western countries were able to transmit specific cultural and economic values to other countries around the world. This, in turn, would result in the conversion of indigenous cultures towards that of the dominant Western culture in a process of cultural homogenization (Chadha & Kavoori, 2000).

These arguments of media imperialism and cultural homogenization have become a central issue for many indigenous populations around the world, including in Bolivia. For many in El Alto, the international proliferation of Western culture has been recognized as a significant threat to

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⁴⁰ Nina Uma, author interview, La Paz, February 25, 2009
local cultural identity. Abraham argues, “The person who does not have a cultural identity is like a person without a name.” Given the above, what role does hip-hop play in this matter?

There are some who have argued that hip-hop represents yet another means through which the West has been able to transmit cultural values around the world, particularly among the youth. In other words, it is suggested that rap music and hip-hop culture is a tool of Western cultural imperialism. As such, one may hypothesize that the prevalence of hip-hop in El Alto would threaten the indigenous cultures. In exploring the case of El Alto, it is therefore interesting to see that rap music and hip-hop culture, rather than threatening traditional cultures, has in fact been reinforcing and protecting them.

According to many surveyed, central to explaining this phenomenon is an understanding of culture as being dynamic. One late evening, walking down the Prado in downtown La Paz, an avenue jammed packed with contrasting cultural expressions, where Burger Kings burgers are sold next to salteñas, Santos provided his take on the subject. He began, “I think that human beings, societies, cultures are in a constant process of change and modification. But it is the collectives themselves, the groups of people who define their own singularity, their own characteristics which differentiate them from others.” He then provided a Bolivian example. The señoras de pollera, with their hats, shawl, and pollera have become a universally recognized symbol of Aymara culture: an expression that is uniquely theirs. However, when one looks back historically, the pollera was not something that was originally theirs. It was imposed on them by the Spanish colony. “You see,” Santos explains, “what has been imposed has later been accepted as a sign of identity, ours, our own... When I adopt those expressions, I don’t adopt them from a vacuum. When I adopt other expressions, I do so from a foundation and that foundation is my culture.”

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41 Abraham Bojorquez, author interview, El Alto, February 27, 2009  
42 Salteñas are a type of Bolivian empanada  
43 Santos Moises Callejas, La Paz, March 24, 2009  
44 Señoras de pollera are women who wear a pollera, a pleated skirt worn by indigenous women  
45 Santos Moises Callejas, La Paz, March 24, 2009
As Nina Uma put it, “The Aymara don’t say, ‘No, I am Aymara and reject the rest’. What is it that the Aymara do? They grab it, they take ownership of it, they form it, they re-release it but with their own touch, with their own thinking, with their own form of seeing things.” She later adds, “You may be an urban Aymara but you are Aymara. And that is something very difficult to remove. And imagine, after 500 years, they have not been able to remove it.”

Through the fusion of hip-hop culture with local culture, rap music has thus become a vehicle used by the youth of El Alto to reconnect with their cultural roots in a new way. The youth of El Alto have not simply replicated the ‘American model’ of hip-hop; they have adopted it from a foundation that is their own culture. As such, when they rap in Aymara, when they wear traditional indigenous clothes on stage, or when they incorporate traditional music elements as part of their beat, the youth of El Alto are, in their own way, affirming and preserving their cultural roots. In appropriating hip-hop as their own, they have actually lessened cultural homogeneity and in fact promoted cultural diversity, thus directly challenging the media imperialism thesis.

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46 Nina Uma, author interview, La Paz, February 25, 2009
5.3 – The Vocalization, Articulation, and Participation of the Youth

_How can you be heard? How can you denounce what is going on here?_

- Abraham Bojorquez⁴⁷

_The participation of youth is indispensable for a societal change and for deepening democracy. They are the leaders of tomorrow. They are not a problem to be solved, but problems solvers themselves_

- H Rudolph⁴⁸

The third way in which hip-hop is actively contributing to change is in giving what is arguably one of the most marginalized groups in Bolivia a powerful voice, not only locally but also internationally.

The hip-hop movement in El Alto has draw attention from bloggers, authors, researchers, and journalists around the world. With that attention has come an increased global awareness of the issues and struggles that the youth are facing. For a sector of society that has traditionally not had a strong voice, hip-hop has allowed the youth of El Alto to vocalize and articulate what they wish to say to a widespread audience. It has become a speaking tube for the youth.

This voice, in turn, has provided an avenue through which the youth can actively participate in improving their social, political, economic, and cultural environment. As discussed in previous chapters, the appropriation of hip-hop as a tool of cultural resistance can be understood as being a response to the local environment, one characterized by poverty, social inequality, racism, and exclusion, as well as a political system with barriers to genuine participation. Specifically for the youth of El Alto, it was seen that the aspect of age is a major factor that limits the ability of the youth to participate in neighbourhood organizations (a central means through which _alteños_ actively participate in the political system). Moreover, research has demonstrated that the youth have a general lack of confidence in the Bolivian political system, a critical factor deterring the youth from participating in the formal political system in the first place.

⁴⁷ Abraham Bojorquez, author interview, El Alto, February 27, 2009
⁴⁸ Cited in Merkle, 2008, p. 205.
Through expressions such as hip-hop, the youth of El Alto have found alternative channels through which they are able to participate and become active agents of change. Rap music and hip-hop culture, appropriated as a tool of cultural resistance, can thus be understood as a means of breaking barriers to participation.

It is also interesting to see how social and political actors outside of the hip-hop community have begun to use hip-hop as a way to reach out to the youth. Numerous politicians, for example, have started using hip-hop as a way to get their message out. It is not uncommon to turn on a radio in El Alto or La Paz and hear a political message being rapped. And while there has been a fair bit of criticism by the local artists towards the ‘misuse’ of hip-hop in this manner (where hip-hop is used to create a social or political ‘jingle’), hip-hop has become a way in which the youth can be included in discussions of social, political, cultural, and economic issues. As a whole then, hip-hop can be understood as a way to counter what has been described as “voice poverty”; that is “the inability of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making” (Salazar, 2009, p. 508).

Bringing together some of the arguments of this thesis, it has been seen that hip-hop within the context of El Alto is a reflection of change. But as this chapter has demonstrated, hip-hop is also very much an active source of change. Through its appropriation as a tool of cultural resistance, hip-hop has contributed to the revalorization of identity, the preservation of traditional culture, and the vocalization, articulation, and participation of the youth. Rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto is thus more than just a mirror of reality; it is also an important source of personal and societal change, a way to respond to that reality. Taken together, as both a reflection and a source of change, hip-hop can thus be seen as operating in a mutually reinforcing, iterative process.
CHAPTER 6 – Conclusion

6.1 – The Main Findings

This thesis has argued that rap music and hip-hop culture has been appropriated as an active and public form of cultural resistance. Cultural resistance has been defined as “culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure” (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5).

This thesis began by looking at the subject of rap music and hip-hop culture from a broad perspective. Emerging out of the inner cities of New York during the 1970s, hip-hop became a form of ‘creative resistance’, a way in which urban youth were able to denounce and challenge forms of oppression, racism, misrepresentation, and exclusion. Hip-hop has since become a global art form, one that has given voice to marginalized groups around the world. In the study of the global diffusion of hip-hop, research has demonstrated that rap music and hip-hop culture is not simply cut-and-paste from the American ‘model’ but rather is locally appropriated and adopted to the local context; it is reworked with local expressions of culture, language, lyrical content, music, and ethnic symbols, reflecting lived conditions, experiences, and grievances. In this light, hip-hop is understood as a global and local (‘glocalized’) form of culture expression.

In Chapter Three, the context of El Alto, Bolivia was closely examined. This major urban center located in Bolivia’s altiplano has been characterized by poverty, social inequality, racism, and exclusion. As a uniquely indigenous city, the marginalization that its residents face is not only economic and social but also cultural. In the face of this environment, through events such as the Gar War in 2003, El Alto has become a symbol of the power of the people, a city where, though collective action, its residents have fought for justice and equality. The Gar War represented a new form of resistance in Bolivia, one that began with the Water War in 2000. Unlike past forms of resistance, this new wave of protest joined together a variety of sectoral organizations and civic
groups. Uniting this diverse group of actors has been the opposition towards the state’s economic neoliberal model and the dissatisfaction with its democratic institutions to adequately represent the needs and interests of the Bolivia people. It was out of this context that the hip-hop movement in El Alto emerged.

Thus given that research around the world has demonstrated that hip-hop is locally appropriated, reworked in response to the local environment, and given the context of El Alto, Bolivia, how then has rap music and hip-hop culture been locally appropriated within the context of El Alto? In Chapter Four this question was addressed.

From the perspective of the hip-hop artists themselves, it was seen that rap music and hip-hop culture has been appropriated as a tool that is used to give voice to marginalized groups and bring about change to broader political, economic, and/or social structures. Drawing from the work of Paulo Freire, I argued that through processes of reflection and action, the hip-hop artists of El Alto are able to use hip-hop in this manner. Moreover, extending the arguments proposed by Augusto Boal, the erosion between ‘spectator’ and ‘actor’ within the *alteño* hip-hop movement has made rap music an accessible means through which to act and respond to reality. In the last section of the fourth chapter, it was argued that it is the context of El Alto that has ultimately shaped the appropriation of hip-hop in this manner.

The fifth chapter of this thesis then identified three central areas in which rap music and hip-hop culture has had, and continues to have, an impact in El Alto. I argued that rap music and hip-hop culture, within the context of El Alto, has contributed to (1) the revalorization of identity, (2) the preservation of traditional culture, and (3) the vocalization, articulation, and participation of the youth.
6.2 – Future Research

As a whole, the hip-hop movement in El Alto has received very little attention from the academic community. There are still a number of different avenues of research to be explored within this very interesting subject. This final section will explore areas of future research.

For this study, I have focused on the element of rap music. Within El Alto, however, other elements of hip-hop, most notably graffiti and breakdancing, have also gained widespread popularity. How do these elements of hip-hop compare to the use of rap music in El Alto? How have they been appropriated? And what kind of impact has that appropriation had?

Another area of study is looking at the role and use of technology in the creation of rap music in El Alto. Drawing from the work of Augusto Boal, one of the major topics of discussion in this paper was how the erosion between ‘actor’ and ‘spectator’ has made hip-hop so accessible. What role has technology played in eroding this division between actor and spectator? Could increasing access to the ‘means of production’ of hip-hop be a way to allow for more youth to become involved in hip-hop, not only in El Alto but around the world?

From a broader perspective, it would also be interesting to see how the hip-hop movement in El Alto compares with other hip-hop movement in Latin America and around the world. Just how much does the role of context play in shaping the way that hip-hop is appropriated?

And finally, from a developmental and practical perspective, research needs to better examine the role of hip-hop in development. How can development practitioners support existing hip-hop movements? How can they use hip-hop in development analysis and practice?

6.3 – The Implications: Hip-hop and development?

What are the implications of this paper’s findings? Looking to the broader field of international development, what can this case study on rap music and hip-hop culture in El Alto teach us about development?
As a whole, the findings from this thesis support an understanding of development that is ultimately rooted in the active participation of the people. In the past, much attention within the field of international development has focused on the role of actors in the Global North helping those within the Global South ‘develop’. It was through the implementation of developmental models conceptualized from the outside that development was put into action. The case of Bolivia exemplifies this. During the 1980s, for example, Bolivia implemented a neoliberal model of development under pressure from outside actors such as the World Bank; as Dangl (2007, p. 79) argues, Bolivia became a “lab rat” for neoliberal economics. As discussed in Chapter Three, the most recent wave of protest in Bolivia was spurred on in large part by weaknesses in this model of development. Through protest politics, the people of Bolivia have stood against and directly challenged the implementation of neoliberal policies.

In recent years, the way we think about development has begun change significantly. Increasing attention has, for example, been given to the importance of allowing local actors to shape the meaning of development, allowing it to be rooted in local contexts and knowledge. This understanding of development has been described as “development as self-determination” (Salazar, p. 504). Authors, such as Amartya Sen (1999), have advocated for a type of ‘human development’ where the people are not only the object of policy but also the major instruments of their own development.

Within this understanding of development, I wish to suggest that, given the findings discussed above, hip-hop can thus be understood as a instrument of ‘development as self-determination’; a tool that can be used to expand the ‘capabilities’, or the substantive human freedoms, of people; a means through which the people themselves can determine and begin to construct their own vision of development. The hip-hop movement in El Alto was something that was not conceptualized in the Global North. The hip-hop movement in El Alto is very much a grassroots movement, one that quite literally emerged out of the streets of El Alto. Sen (1999, p. 11)
writes, “With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programs.” The case of hip-hop in El Alto exemplifies this. Through the appropriation of hip-hop as a tool of cultural resistance, the youth of El Alto have taken a global cultural expression and reshaped it, ultimately using it to build a better future for their community.


PHOTOS

Note – All photos property of author

Figure 1 - The author (left) with Abraham in the booth at the Wayna Tambo

Figure 2 – MC Fado

Figure 3 – Nina Uma