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Graduate School of Development Studies

**HIP HOP: THE RESPONSE FROM THE STREETS?:  
Youth Cultures and Politics in Bolivia**

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## ABSTRACT

In an era driven by neoliberal and globalizing values and characterized by widespread youth distrust in the institutionalized politics, one could make the hypothesis that young people are finding alternative channels to voice their discontent and to challenge a society that is increasingly marginalizing them. These channels are more in agreement with XXI century youth's codes and are untranslatable to the institutionalized political logic. It is the intention of this paper to test this thesis in Bolivia and more concretely is concerned in analyzing the particular case of the hip hop movement in the marginalized city of El Alto. The deprived situation of the population of El Alto is the result of Bolivia's history of colonialism, repression exclusion and poverty that has been worsened with the long years of high debts, hyperinflation, dictatorships and structural adjustments. This condition has changed the social and familial dynamics, pushing some of the youth inhabitants into the street reality where young people underwent new forms of socialization. This process of socialization has led young people to engage to the hip hop subculture. Hip hoppers have found in hip hop culture not only a source of identification but also a space from where they can voice their concerns. Moreover, the hip hoppers' discourses and symbols, which are public in their exercise and in their ends, clearly show a challenging position against the dominant culture and thus, hip hoppers are aiming to change the existing power relations. Consequently, the participation of young people in the hip hop culture by being context-driven and by countering the marginalizing hegemonic culture in a public sphere, constitutes a political response to the changing and unequal local, national and international context.

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## GLOSSARY

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**Alteño:** A person who was born in the city of El Alto

**Altiplano:** It is an elevated plateau situated in the Andes of Argentina, Bolivia and Peru. It is a dry, cold area situated, as well as the city of El Alto, in the west of Bolivia

**Aymara:** It is an indigenous culture that as all the indigenous cultures in Bolivia, has been focus of discrimination and marginalization.

**Chola:** It is an urban woman that has roots and bonds with the indigenous- Andean world and that dress in a distinctive manner. Usually this term, when used by middle class people, carries a negative connotation that denotes discrimination.

**Democradura:** This term, invented by a young men from El Alto who experienced the events of October 2003, makes reference to a experience in which under a supposed democracy, people are living a dictatorship reality, in English this could be expressed as *demotorship*, demo (democracy) –torship (dictatorship).

**Gringo:** It is a word that makes reference to a person that does not speak Spanish and has different skin and hair colour (usually refers to a North American citizen) and that most of the times embodies a negative connotation

**Kimsa:** Number three in Aymara

**Maleantes:** A term used to designate someone as robber, liar or even violent

**Marka:** Word in Aymara meaning town or city

**Maya:** Number one in Aymara

**Movidas:** They are the presentations (concerts, sometimes accompanied by graffiti and break dance demonstrations) the hip hoppers give in different places.

**Pandilleros:** People who belong to a gang

**Paya:** Number two in Aymara

**Politiquero:** It is the politician that (re)accommodates his/her discourses according to the current context in order to please the audience and get support.

**Pollera:** It is the typical skirt that the Cholas wear

**Purak Tambos:** They are cultural encounters created by the Wayna Tambo, that move from one place to another within the city of El Alto, giving messages related with varied social topics with the help of different artistic groups.

**Pusi:** Number four in Aymara

**Ukamau y Ke:** It is a mix between Aymara and a slang of Spanish, which means “It is like this, so what?”

**Wayna Tambo:** Aymara expression that means Place of Encounter for young men.  
Wayna: Young men, Tambo: Place of encounter.

**Wiphala:** It literally means flag and refers to the multicolour squared flag used by the aymara culture as an iconography of the aymara revendication



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### ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

Acronyms	Name	Category
PNUD	Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo – United Nations Development Program (UNDP)	International Organization
SEMAPA	Servicio Municipal de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado - Potable Water and Sewage Municipal Service	Public Enterprise
PIEB	Programa de Investigación Estratégica en Bolivia – Strategic Research Program in Bolivia	Research Organization
MAS	Movimiento al Socialismo – Movement to Socialism	Political Party
UDP	Unidad Democrática Popular – Popular Democratic Unity	Political Party
MNR	Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario – Revolutionary Nationalist Movement	Political Party
IMF	International Monetary Found	International Organization
WB	World Bank	International Organization
UDAPE	Unidad de Análisis de Políticas Sociales y Económicas – Unity of Economic and Social Political Análisis	Research Organization
NPE	Nueva Política Económica – New Economic Policy	Policy
ISS	Institute of Social Studies	Educational Institute
UCB	Universidad Católica Boliviana – Bolivian Catholic University	University
UN	United Nations	International Organization
ICT	Information, Communication and Technology	
TLC	Tratado de Libre Comercio – Free Trade Agreement	Policy
ALCA	Area de Libre Comercio de las Américas- Free Trade Area of the Americas	Policy

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introducing the Paper

This paper is based on two different but interconnected considerations. The first consideration is that young people are usually regarded as irresponsible and individualistic, and are criticized because of their presumed lack of commitment and political indifference. This is taking place without any historical contextualization and without taking into account the possibility that young people are not politically apathetic but are just reducing their interest in the traditional channels of political participation. The second consideration is that since youth is determined by its time and context, we need to recognize that in the XXI century the incentives and the ways that youth express themselves and participate are marked by a scenario of economic and social marginalization, neoliberalism and globalization. These forms of expressions and participation, which are artistic-related, are usually seen just as a form of recreation or as a result of inadequate socialization. However, without denying the entertaining function of these cultural forms, it is important to acknowledge that more insights about the role of cultural expressions and production are needed if we pretend to understand the (re) constructions of youth identities and the youth responses to social inequalities.

Therefore, one could make the hypothesis that young people are finding alternative channels to voice their discontent and to challenge a society that is increasingly marginalizing them. These channels are more in agreement with XXI century youth's codes and are untranslatable to the institutionalized political logic.

It is the intention of this paper to test this thesis in Bolivia and more concretely in the city of El Alto. I have chosen this city basically because of four reasons. First, young people in this city share a distrust and lack of interest in the traditional politics and politicians, but not in politics in the broad sense of the word (Samanamud *et al*, 2007). Second, the recent political and social changes that Bolivia has been undergoing in the last years have been closely experienced by this city (Mamani, 2003). Third, young

people in the migrant city of El Alto, experience a triple discrimination: socioeconomic because they live in a poor marginalized city; cultural because they are primordially indigenous; and generational because they are young (Rodriguez, 2002). Last but not least, El Alto has been experiencing an increasing emergence of cultural centres, activities and groups in the last 15 years (Rodriguez, 2004). This paper is concerned in analyzing the particular case of the hip hop movement in the city of El Alto, and more concretely the group of hip hoppers that frequent the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo. This is because among the youth cultures in El Alto, this specific group has become more notorious in the last 5 years, both in the media and in the artistic world in general. Thus, this paper aims to analyze and understand, on one hand, the reasons behind the engagement of young people in the hip hop movement in the city of El Alto, and on the other, the possible political character of this cultural movement, both of them in relation to the changing socio-economic, cultural and political context in Bolivia.

This paper is divided into five chapters. This chapter aims to give an overview of the changes in the socio-economic and political context in Bolivia, which becomes relevant in achieving the objective of the paper. It also contains on one hand, the research questions and on the other the methodology which not only explains the methods but also elucidates the research process. The second chapter introduces the analytical framework that is embedded in the field of youth culture, politics and social change and aims to guide the analysis. Chapter three shows the role that the unequal context played in the engagement of young people in the hip hop culture. Chapter four seeks to interpret the discourses and symbols adopted by the hip hoppers in order to decide if they are agents in a political arena. Finally, chapter five presents the conclusions that synthesize the content and the analysis of this research paper.

## **1.2 Contextualization: Outcomes and (re)actions in Bolivia**

Bolivia nowadays is undergoing “more a historical social change than a circumstantial political change” (PNUD, 2007: 29, translated by author). This process has gained strength in the last seven years, period that has been characterized by popular protest movements which became the symptom of the incapacity of the institutionalized

channels to satisfy the population demands and needs; moreover they are an indication of the weakening of the neoliberal model (Rivero, 2006; Daroca, 2002). The first sign of what was to become a series of social struggles took place in the city of Cochabamba on April 2000. This eight day popular protest, headed by a population tired of high rates and unfulfilled water-related promises led to the cease of the privatization of SEMAPA by the foreign enterprise, Aguas del Tunari. The movement ended not only with the expulsion of the foreign company but with one dead (a young boy of 17 years), many injured people and high costs for the city and country economy (Daroca, 2002). After that public demonstration, a rain of social demands and protests started to take place, coming especially from the peasants in the *Altiplano*; however none of them would have an impact as large as the 'Blacks February and October'. The announcement on February 11, 2003, of the wage taxes increment in order to reduce the public deficit, by the president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, brought with it a violent confrontation between the police force and the army, and a dissatisfied population. This general dissatisfaction led to a series of violent and illegal acts that resulted in the destruction and robbery of Ministries buildings and big companies since both represented the tokens of the neoliberal model and government corruption that have being benefiting just a small portion of the population.

Although all Bolivia was affected by this episode, with 31 fatalities and 189 injured, young people were the ones who directly suffered from it since the confrontation was initiated by students of a public school and because "from the 31 deceased 22 were under 25 years" (PIEB, 2003: 1, translated by author), moreover a distinctive fact that cannot be overlooked is that 77% were urban *Aymara* young people; this fact gives us some insights about how Bolivians in general and young people in particular were starting to actively show their nonconformity to an unjust and discriminatory daily reality. A few months later, on October, the citizens from the marginalized city of El Alto were the protagonists of the denominated Gas War that lasted nine days, during which more than 76 people died and 400 were injured (Mamani, 2003). People fought to recover their natural resources again, however, even though, this started as a movement of sectorial claim, it ended as a national demand that not only resulted in a huge increment of income from gas taxes but also in the expulsion of the President at that time Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada and in the following election of the first indigenous president in Bolivia, the leader of the political party MAS, Evo Morales

Ayma. The Gas War therefore, is not only a social movement with economic demands, it also represents “the most relevant manifestation of the popular rejection to the gas selling, to the democratic representation system, to the transnational activities in the country and to the neoliberal model in general” (Rivero, 2006: 46, translated by author), moreover, it symbolizes an indigenous vindication (Prada, 2003). These events meant an important landmark in young people’s life since they were challenging those paradigms they were born with: modern democracy and a neoliberal economics and politics (Rodriguez, 2004).

This process that Bolivia is undergoing is the response of a history of more than 500 years, a history shared with most of the Latin America countries, one of colonialism, repression, exclusion and poverty. These difficulties have been deepened with the long years of high debts, hyperinflation and dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, and with the structural adjustment in the late 1980s and 1990s.

During the 1970s, Bolivia, as well as many of the so called developing countries, was facing an economic crisis that was the outcome of a history of primary products exportation and the sharp increase in oil international prices (Messkoub, 1992). This recession was worsened by an inefficient management of the monetary policy by the Bolivian Central Bank and the UDP government – left party- that was under internal and external pressures. This situation ended up in one of the worst hyperinflations in the history -9000%/year- (Morales, 1992). This crisis led to the Bolivian government to call for elections one year earlier in July 1985 when the votes determined the victory of MNR, which decided to knock the IMF and WB doors in order to obtain finance to keep the economy functioning (UDAPE, 1995). In 1985, the MNR put into practice the called Nueva Política Económica (NPE) that embraced the IMF and WB universal recipe, the Structural Adjustment Programs<sup>1</sup>. Even though, it is true that a macroeconomic stabilization was reached, it is also true that it carried with it high levels of unemployment and informality, moreover, women, children and young people had to leave their homes and schools seeking to participate in the precarious labor market in order to try to satisfy the household basic needs. The privatizations

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<sup>1</sup> The SAP pursued two basic points: macroeconomic measures to stabilize the economy and reduce the hyperinflation (basically by reducing the public expenditure) and then the deregulation and reorientation of the economy to the market (Rivero, 2006).

and capitalizations have incremented the rates and in many cases have not even expanded the services, which of course has had a direct impact on the health and education of the most vulnerable (Messkoub, 1992; Rivero, 2006).

In addition, in the last 30 years, Bolivia has experienced a process of disorganized urbanization that had impacted on the population in diverse manners, especially on young people because “the migration phenomenon is more than anything a youth one” (Cajias, 1995: 8, translated by author).

The urbanization process has generated, among others, the proliferation of marginal urban settlements unable to produce goods and services to respond immediately to an extremely accelerated demographic expansion. (Espinoza, 2006:3).

Moreover, the urbanization process has implicated a redistribution of the population, which has modified economic, social, political and cultural structures, all of them in a framework of an increasing vulnerability, segregation and social exclusion, based on class and ethnic group differentiations (Espinoza, 2006).

The city of El Alto constitutes the best example of this process of fast urbanization and increasing poverty. This city is characterized by extreme urban poverty, presenting low levels of education and health provision and an illiteracy rate which is the highest of the urban areas in Bolivia (Merkle, 2003).

The migration to El Alto started half a century ago, as a response to the national revolution of 1952 that pushed the ex peasants slaves to the closest and country-similar city of El Alto (Rodriguez, 2004). Another massive migration episode happened three decades ago, in reaction to the mines relocation policy – part of the NPE model- that brought with it an increase in the levels of unemployment and poverty in the rural area that led poor individuals and households to migrate to the closest urban centre as an alternative strategy to reduce poverty and improve their situation (Espinoza, 2006). Most of the migrants in El Alto are rural Aymaras that carried with them their culture, values, lifestyles, language and traditions. Therefore the XXI century young people in El Alto, who constitute the second and third

generation of Aymaras, were born in a city “exposed to an urban, western, and modern lifestyles, particularly through the neighbour city of La Paz” (Merkle, 2003: 207), and thus, undergo a process of “dual socialization” that positions them in a situation where Aymara traditions and a globalizing reality are continually interacting.

In addition, young people in El Alto (young people considered of 25 or below), that represent more than 50% of the population of the city (Merkle, 2003; Rodriguez, 2004) are considered a more vulnerable group within Bolivia in relation to other youngsters. This is because on one side, they undergo a tension between an imaginary that claims them a life style of success while the reality is excluding them, and on the other, they suffer not only from a generational discrimination but also from a socioeconomic and cultural one within an urban migrant context. (Rodriguez, 2002)

Under this poor, unequal, multiethnic, multicultural and conflictive reality is where the Bolivian young people in general and in El Alto in particular has to live in daily, and thus, it is not surprising that they started to look for means to either escape from it or confront it. Cultural expressions seem to play an important role in this process.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

#### *Main Research Question*

Does youth participation in the hip hop phenomenon represent a political response to the changing and unequal socio-economic, cultural and political context?

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#### *Sub-Questions*

- a) How can “political responses” be understood when dealing with non-institutionalized politics?
  
- b) What are the main reasons behind the hip hoppers’ decision to be part of the hip hop culture?



- c) Does the hip hop's realm go beyond the private sphere?
- d) What is the hip hoppers' position in relation to the dominant socio-economic and political discourse?

#### **1.4 Methodology**

My first engagement in this topic originated from my personal interest in music. Since I was a child, I had close relatives who were involved in artistic activities and through my mother's influence I started listening to what can be called 'revolutionary music' which always had a large impact on me. This led me in some way, to assign music a role beyond pure entertainment - a pre-notion that I had to contend with while undertaking this research. Besides, while studying economics in college, I always felt that those models with statistic assumptions could not really help me to understand the deep causes and processes of poverty and marginalization in my country. Therefore, having a close contact with the people who were suffering from that reality seemed a much better option. These interests were some of the reasons that led me two years ago to start a research for my Master Program in Bolivia on music and development – an unfinished project but one that brought me even nearer to the youth artistic world-. I found in the hip hop group in the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo, the perfect combination of music and marginalized reality. Nonetheless, at that time I did not pay attention to the significant role of the context in development research. Despite the constant references from the hip hoppers to the events and changes that El Alto and Bolivia were experiencing I was more focus on what they said and did, and how that could be related to different notions of development. It is during my stay in ISS when I realized the importance of contextualization hence, looking at the causes and processes of the political and social changes that Bolivia has been going through in the last years became a core concern in trying to comprehend the youth cultural expressions. Based on that new concern, I thought it would be valuable for the academic world, to go deeper into the hip hoppers' lives and try to understand the possible connections between youth politics, cultural expressions and change processes.

This study has been based on a concrete case study: the hip hoppers that frequent the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo in El Alto- Bolivia. I used both primary and secondary data and within them a variety of techniques, because that allows to obtain a holistic understanding of the processes that the youth music groups undergo, and also permits an information triangulation. As I just mentioned, I have already done field work with hip hoppers in El Alto as part of the research paper of my previous master programme back in Bolivia – which I will call first stage of field work- . Then, that data is used to complement the new information obtained in the recent field work- which I will call the second stage of field work. The primary data in the first stage was collected using participatory observation and six semi-structured interviews to hip hoppers in Wayna Tambo. In the second stage, primary data collection was based on life histories of two hip hoppers and two semi-structured interviews to Wayna Tambo workers.

When using this kind of methods, although they might allow understanding social processes better than other methods, it cannot be disregarded that because of the closeness between researcher and research subject, it is almost inevitable that desires, prejudices and experiences influence the process and even the result of the research. In my case, I had to deal with the conscious and subconscious pre-notions of a young “white” woman that belongs to a middle-high class. An example of these prejudices can be found in the notes that I took just after my first meeting with the hip hoppers “ (...) It seems that the hip hop guys are a very interesting group but I have to admit that their ‘get up’, the way they talk and the fact that they come from a street reality scares me , so now I have encountered a very clear prejudice related with the general negative connotations that people have about street young people”, however the prejudices did not only come from me, “they asked me where I had studied Economics and I told them that in UCB<sup>2</sup>, they looked down, smiled and I could feel a silence rejection, it seems that prejudices come from both sides” (Field notebook # 1: 9 April, 2006). Despite this, the access to the field did not present further inconvenients, which, according to me, could be explained by the fact that I am also a young person that shares with them the interest in the musical world, and therefore, a person they could identified with at some level. Other factor that might have facilitated the field access is that I tried to approach them in the most possible honest

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<sup>2</sup> UCB is the most known private University in La Paz- Bolivia

way in terms of personality and dressing - without trying to pretend that I knew the street reality- just using some slang that would ease the communication. All this had helped me to maintain a more horizontal relationship with them, which ended up generating a more trust-based and comfortable relation.

#### 1.4.1 Primary data

a) *Participatory observation*: I did four months of field work with the hip hop group, during which I was able to have direct access to the youth music group, I could observe how they behaved among themselves, and how they interacted with other actors. The ethnographic process also enabled me, by observation and sharing, to identify the themes that seem to be essential in the youth's daily life in general and in their relationship with hip hop in particular.

After I got all the information from the field work, I transcribed it followed by a codification based on the topics (expressed by them and perceived by me) most recurrent during the field work<sup>3</sup>. After that procedure, I translated into English only the citations that I use in the analytical component of this research paper.

b) *Life History*: Even though participatory observation offers me valuable information, in order to be able to answer my research question I need to go deeper into the analysis. Life history method allows me to do so, since it helps to see the life of an individual not as something fixed but as a varied and variable process that is constantly influencing and being influenced by its environment; therefore, life history inquiry in this research helped me to understand the interaction between the hip hop movement, its members and the changing context surrounding them.

- *Research participants*: I used life history inquiry with two hip hoppers (men) that attend Wayna Tambo. Both are Aymara descendents young people, one is 23 and the other is 25. Based on the first stage of the field work I was able to have some insights about the roles each of the members play in the movement, this allowed

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<sup>3</sup> These were the topics used in the codification: reality and street, discrimination, alcohol and drugs, poverty and money, "caretear" and "posar", hip hop as culture, hip hop as a form of expression, hip hop and aymara, hip hop as an instrument for change, hip hop and black October.

me to decide which members could represent the best options to become the life history participants. Since I realized that within the group there were basically two positions in relation to how hip hop is perceived, then I thought it would be useful to have life histories of people who represent these different stances. The first chosen person is based on the perception that he is the leader of the movement and represents most of what the rest of the members think and do (Abraham); the second option (Renzy), who represents the other group's position, would offer me a different perspective, and therefore, it would allow amplifying my understanding of the movement. I did not work with more people since doing a life history requires much time and energy from the participants, and thus, I needed to do it with people who trust me and would be willing to spend many hours with me; the two people I have mentioned fulfilled these requirements<sup>4</sup>.

Similarly to the previous method, I transcribed the information obtained during the life histories conversations and I codified those transcriptions but this time not based on the most frequent subjects – in life histories inquiries the information has to follow a patron determined by the researcher, which of course do not restrict the surfacing of unexpected information- but first on topics that could explain the different stages of their lives and the process of engagement in the hip hop movement; and second based on a comparison with the content and the forms of the messages that they portray in their songs. After that, again I translated into English only the citations used in this research

*c) Semi-structured Interviews:* I conducted semi-structured interviews to six members of the hip hop group (Amauta, Tony, Grafo, Abraham, Renzy and Insano), who were the ones who most frequented Wayna Tambo, and two to people who work in Wayna Tambo (Santos and Ruben) and have close relationship with the members of the group. Specifically, from the members of the hip hop movement's interviews I gathered information about the formation of the hip hop group and how and why they chose hip hop instead of other genre, what it means to them and also what they want to express with it. The other interviews were useful to complement missing

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<sup>4</sup> To see more details about the location, duration and areas of inquiry of the life histories, please refer to Annex A

information, to obtain other people's perceptions and to learn more from the creation and aim of Wayna Tambo.

#### 1.4.2 Secondary data

*a) Historical analysis:* I looked for historical information of the socioeconomic and political changes of global and local context. Information about global and Latin-American context since the 1970s, Bolivian historical information since 1952 (national revolution) but emphasizing in the 1970s and early 1980s (dictatorships and hyperinflation periods), late 1980s and 1990s (structural adjustment period) and 2000-2007 period of socioeconomic and political changes in Bolivia.

*b) Lyrics of Hip Hop CDs:* I used two CDs. The CD number one is called 'Klanes del Alto', it includes songs composed by 15 hip hop groups whose members frequent the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo. It was the second – and last- CD that those groups recorded with Wayna Tambo production. I chose the second CD over the first one because in the first one they were asked to give specific songs while in the second they had the freedom to choose what to add to the CD. The CD number two is a 13 song CD called 'Por la Raza' from the group Ukamau y ké, in which Abraham – one of the life history participants- is the main composer. I tried to use a third CD that contains songs composed by Renzy – the other life history participant- but he had not recorded one available for the public.

I transcribed the lyrics of all the songs of both CDs excluding the ones that were just musicals and one in Aymara. Then I realized an analysis of the content of the songs: What they talk about, whom they talk about and what kind of language they use. I started my analysis based on the similitudes and contradictions, if any, between what they say and how they act in a daily basis and what they write in their lyrics. Then I went to codify them based in recurrent subjects and specific issues that were related to the concrete topic of this research.

### **1.4.3 Limitation of the research**

Since this research is based on life history inquiry and ethnographic information, it lacks the statistical generalization feature, allowing just making a theoretical generalization. This means that by doing this research, focus in a particular case I would be able to learn and have a better understanding of youth processes, its cultural expressions and its interrelation to the social structures; I would not be able to generalize the sample to bigger populations.

Another important limitation is that in the translation process of the life history conversations, interviews and lyrics of the hip hoppers, a lot of the meaning is lost since the language, the slang they use in their lyrics and in a daily basis is part of the essence of hip hop culture.

## CHAPTER 2

### ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will provide the framework that will guide the analysis of the results obtained during the fieldwork. As this study is an investigation of a particular generational and social group, i.e. marginalized youth who find expression and exert a mode of agency through the musical genre of hip-hop, their roles as social and political actors will be theorized through the Subculture theory. An emphasis will be placed in the intersection of youth culture with political and social structures.

#### 2.1 The Subculture Theory

Although the term “subculture” was not originally conceived to relate exclusively to youth, with the publication of the book *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* by A. K. Cohen’s (1956) which dealt with urban youth in USA, the term was popularized and brought into extensive and almost unique use in youth studies (Blackman, 2005). Therefore, in the subsequent subculture literature, as well as in this paper, implicit in the subculture reference is the youth condition.

Accordingly, when defining subcultures two main categories are paramount: youth and marginalization. The category of “youth,” is not a taken-for-granted one and there is great variety and debate about how to conceptualize it.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this paper youth will be defined from the sociological and anthropological perspective which conceive of youth as a relational, cultural, historical and social construction with a varied and variable condition (Alpizar and Bernal, 2003; Dávila, 2004; Tyyska, 2005). Hence it has to be acknowledged that there exists ‘youths’ and not a unique youth and therefore, a diversity of youth identities and expressions which are continually being (re) constructed by the interaction between agency and structure. Marginalization refers to the state of those who are heavily excluded from one or all of the political, social, cultural and economic spheres, either because they belong to a minority group or to another social category that does not have access to power and decision making. They are situated on the lowest rungs of the power ladder where a

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<sup>5</sup> A brief debate about youth conceptualization and theorization is presented in Annex B

dominant hegemonic society, historically and contextually constructed, occupies the top steps (Mehretu et al, 2000).

Youth, whether or not the category refers to those who are politically and socially marginalized, has been socially constructed in such a way that more often than not suffers from a negative connotation. Youth has been depicted as being a problem (Hacket, 2004), a deviant from the “normal”, “good” images and/or at risk, therefore in order “for society not to suffer, youth needs to be subjected to a number of control mechanisms” (Tyyska, 2005: 5) based on a guided socialization by the family and schools. Delinquency, drugs, prostitution and teenage pregnancy are some examples of the negative connotations that emerge when referring to young people. At the more macro level, youth is also considered to be a development problem, where un(der)employment, migration and low educational levels are the primary focus to manage when trying to relate young people with development (Alpizar and Bernal, 2003). However not all young people become part of a subculture. It is more likely that youth from groups distinguished by some kind of marginal or minority status, whether grounded in ethnicity, gender, social class, or location, and certain experiences such as rural-urban migration, are all conditions that provide the backdrop for why youth become involved in subcultures.

Therefore the subcultures are composed of marginalized youths that, according to the subculture theory<sup>6</sup>, in their attempt to find a sense of self in an excluding reality, create their own space, where they can share constructed beliefs, behaviors, symbols, discourses and identities becoming this way, a social group that is distinct from but related to the dominant culture (Blackman, 2005). In this sense subcultures offer marginalized youth a “way to deal with both structural and individual problems” and a space that “can be used to test out questions about their world and their relationship with it. Identities and ideas can be experimented with, and possibilities for social change considered” (Brake, 1990:26).

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<sup>6</sup> The subculture theory is, as all the sociological concepts, centre of debate within different thinking schools. From the Chicago school, passing to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) until the postmodern perspective, subcultures have been focus of critiques, approvals and transformation. Based in the different perspectives, in this paper, I propose my own interpretation and use of this theory.



Subcultures are not the result of inadequate socialization as described by Bawly (Blackman, 2005), they just respond to changes in the environment which lead to situations of exclusion; after all the “main characteristic of any emerging subculture is that it captures the social, political and economic spirit of the time” (Garrat, 2004: 144) working this way as a mirror that reflects the power inequalities within the society (UN, 2005). This signifies that the most vulnerable youth actually has the potentiality to perceive surrounding inequalities and problems and thus, reflect and contest them.

Youth musical expression has historically represented an important site of dissent. Subculture theory provides a way to theorize the political and social significance of youth musical and artistic movements (Marin and Muñoz, 2002; Blackman, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2005) and illustrate how, through lyrics and rhythms, youth express their dissent and dissatisfaction with the establishment. Musical subcultures provide not only a source of identity, but represents a “thermometer for a society’s political climate” (Garrat, 2004:146) and thus a space from where to act politically.

Consequently, “politics” when used in the context of youth culture and subculture is understood in a much broader sense than the traditional and more commonly accepted understanding of institutionalized politics where voting and belonging to a political party constitute the keystones of the democratic-representative political system. In this formal construction of politics, politicians and civil servants are society’s principle political actors and dominate the channels and forms of political action. In this paper politics will be understood in a much more fluid way since it takes into consideration non-formal actors and social processes that occur outside formal institutions. Thus, the difference between formal and non-formal politics in this paper is not so much in reference to the concept but to the channels, forms and the actors that participate in it. In this construction politics includes actions that take place in the public sphere (public exercise and/or ends) with the aim of changing power relations through formal or informal channels (more specifically cultural and media-based channels) and by any individual or group who decides to do so (Thiele, 1997).

Indeed, because of widespread youth distrust in the institutionalized politics and the increasingly domination of neoliberal and globalizing values, youth in these times are

finding new forms of political involvement in the domain of leisure and consumption activities (Vinken, 2005). In these realms, art, from music, literature or theater to graffiti, could be considered a mechanism of dissent and protest (Romo, 2000). Moreover, as stated in the United Nations report on youth, cultural forms and expressions are interpreted as having an inherently political content, particularly when they are seen to deliberately counterbalance, criticize and contest prevailing power structures (UN, 2005).

In a globalizing world the media and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have become the most important means by which young groups have access to the masses and immediate information and communication in a non-hierarchical channel, and have also become part of a new bidirectional process of socialization. The internet is a good example of ICT that could be used as a political instrument, since “politically, the promise lies in its potency to give a lucid voice to alternative political agencies, repertoires and targets” (Vinken, 2005:151-52).

In this sense, subcultures, within a reality that is increasingly marginalizing them, are not only interrogating, but also transgressing and even transforming dominant cultural forms (Hesmondhalgh, 2005), but with new channels and using forms and codes peculiar to them and not to the dominant institutionalized system.

The subculture theory is analyzed under the umbrella of the Cultural Politics perspective that deals with the political dimensions of culture. The realm of Cultural Politics is related on one hand, with power inequalities among different groups, within which identity and subjectivity are shared, and on the other hand is concerned about how these groups will support or challenge the dominant structures in society. Thus, Cultural Politics<sup>7</sup> will allow analyzing youth cultural forms not as youth aesthetics expressions immerse in an art vacuum, completely independent of the socioeconomic and political events and models but actually as a possible reflection and response to those events and models.

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<sup>7</sup> For details about Cultural Politics, please refer to Annex C

My analysis chapters will analyze the hip hop youth phenomenon in El Alto- Bolivia based on the subculture theory in order to have some insights about the hip hoppers' possible political role within a changing and unequal context.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE HIP HOPPERS JOURNEY: THE PRIMACY OF THE CONTEXT

The objective of this chapter is to illustrate and analyze the experiences that led the hip hoppers in El Alto- Bolivia to first approach and then stick with the hip hop phenomenon, and to exhibit the relevant role that the unequal socio political and economic context played in this process. The first section shortly explains the origin and some general characteristics of Hip Hop and how it quickly spread globally. The second section presents two life histories as a way to understand how, and under what circumstances, young people in El Alto came across with this musical genre. The third section underlines the main roles that the identity and subjectivity play in explaining how and why, after the first contact with it, young people decided to be part of the world of hip hop, not only as consumers but mainly as producers. Finally, the last section attempts to briefly show how the events of October 2003 in El Alto- Bolivia affected the hip hoppers' discourses about their role in the change processes.

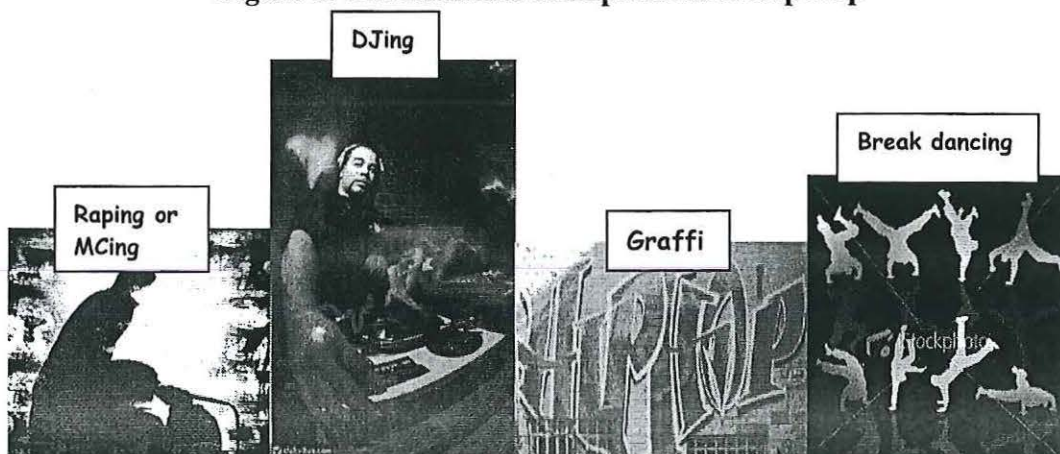
#### 3.1 The Origin: A Brief *Hip*story of Hip Hop

There are many debates in relation to the source of hip hop in terms of where it originated, when it came onto the scene and who created it; some claim it is specifically a black American cultural phenomenon, while others imply that it has a multi-ethnic urban base (Kennedy, 2005). Pretending to solve the debate would imply a deep study and analysis that might not even bring any definite outcome, therefore it falls outside the scope of this research; the paper will make reference to the place and time of origin most accepted.

Hip hop, geographically, made its first appearances in the South Bronx, New York in the mid-1970s where at that time the population consisted largely of African American and Latinos, who became the precursors of this culture. This region was undergoing high levels of unemployment, criminality and drug addiction and an increasing appearance of gangs; moreover it was a marginalized territory whose inhabitants, after the deaths of Malcom X (1965) and Martin Luther King (1968), were experiencing apprehension which at the same time was awaking desires of change (Marin and Muñoz, 2002).

Hip hop combines four basic elements of expression. Rapping or MCing<sup>8</sup> is the vocal element that at the beginning was born as a way to enliven the audiences, but ended up developing and being recognized as the urban poetry (Forman, 2004). The DJing<sup>9</sup> is the playing and technical manipulation of records that consists of lengthening the break parts of a song, allowing the DJ not only to mix music but to create a new one. The Graffiti is the aerosol art that is expressed on the walls of the cities combining a great painting skill with usually protest-sarcastic messages. The Break dancing, the competitive and acrobatic component, is the last expression to be born in response to the breaking - beats art created in the DJing, hence it means “dance on the break”. It is a way of claiming the streets with physical presence and body symbolisms (Banes, 2004). Although all the elements evolved into an urban cultural outlet, it is MCing that has been increasingly used by the hip hoppers. This is, on one hand, because MCing is an artistic form easy to perform, as opposed to the other elements of hip hop that are high skill demanding, and on the other hand, because it allows young people to freely express their thoughts and feelings in an uncensored language. Moreover, due to its versatility it can easily be broadcasted through radios and spread through piracy and therefore, captures a wider audience susceptible to be influenced by it. It is for these reasons as well as the social and political manifold representations attributed to it<sup>10</sup> that it became the focus of both criticism and praise from a large line of actors that go from politicians to the academia (Dyson, 2004).

**Figure 1: The Elements of Expression of Hip Hop**



Source: Own creation using pictures from internet

<sup>8</sup> MC means Master of Ceremony

<sup>9</sup> DJ means Disc Jockey

<sup>10</sup> Rapping has received different depictions that represent it from a form to express and cause violence to a truly tool to resist domination through the use of language (Dyson, 2004, Kitwana, 2004)

These four artistic manifestations were quickly accepted and absorbed by the urban youngsters because they offered them something that no formal politics or religion seemed to provide before: just the right combination of aggressive-entertaining creativity and a source of identification that reflected the life experiences of its creators. In addition, “white” middle-class young people started to increasingly admit and enjoy this music genre, however in this case it was more a fashion-driven interest. Hence, hip hop was destined to be part of a leisure economy almost since the beginning (Forman, 2004).

Hip hop was widely expanded to cities and countries all over the world. In the era of globalization, many groups of young people who suffered from marginalization, usually in an urban context and under the migration stigma and effects, found in hip hop a form to search for authenticity (the case of India in Maira, 2000; the case of white New Yorkers in Cutler, 2003), to combat stereotypes and empower themselves (the case of Dar es Salaam Tanzania in Perullo, 2005), to denounce the injustices (Colombia, in Marin and Muñoz, 2002) and even a form of cultural resistance (the case of Singapore in Kong, 1995). Nonetheless hip hop nowadays, especially in the USA, is far from being only a form of identification or youth social and political protest, it is also a multimillionaire industry<sup>11</sup> trapped in a marketized society. Therefore, it is always in a “pull between its commercial vitality and its striving to be a meaningful source of youth empowerment and social change” (Watkins, 2005: 10). Beyond what hip hop represents, being this internal contradictions or amalgams between ludic, commodification and resistance, there is no doubt that it has become a transnational, global art form (Potter, 1995).

For the purposes of this study, the specific geographical place where the first lyrics were sung, the first graffitis drawn and the first break-dance performed is not as important as the socio- economic, cultural and political reasons behind the creation and assimilation of this trend. An understanding of these factors will allow the identification and comprehension of the characteristics and processes that make hip hop a universal phenomenon yet with the capacity to be incorporated and recreated in specific contexts.

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<sup>11</sup> According to the 1999 Documentary “The years of the hip hop” the hip hop is now worth 4 billion \$us a year

### 3.2 The First Approachment: What Life Histories Have to Tell

The phenomenon of hip hop arrived in Bolivia at the beginning of the 1990s, gave its first steps, in terms of own production, in the seat city of La Paz but quickly found its core in the city of El Alto. Nonetheless it is valid to affirm that it does not seem a coincidence that this phenomenon that talks so vehemently about social injustices makes its first appearance in Bolivia 20 years after its creation in the streets of the Bronx, just when the social effects of the structural adjustments were being felt. According to Crisp and Kelley (1999) the poverty in Bolivia between the beginning and the end of the 1980 decade increased 5 percent. In the 1990s the relationship between the richest and the poorest quintile was 1:90, which makes Bolivia one of the most unequal countries in the world (Rivero, 2006).

**Image 1: The City of El Alto**



Moreover it cannot be merely by chance either that this movement gained strength in a relatively new, poor and marginalized city such as El Alto and not in the better off city of La Paz where it first arrived.

Source: Picture taken by Jonas Topooco obtained in the internet

This could be explained by arguing that the hip hoppers are following the steps of their migrant parents, steps of a path full of discrimination and poverty but also, in many cases, of rebellion. This idea is supported by one of the hip hoppers from El Alto, who while explaining where they use to display their *movidas* said that “we have done it [movida] in Santiago Segundo, in Alto Lima, in Sencata, they are warrior neighbourhoods that were in the black October, in Santiago Segundo they are even more warriors, there are miners’ sons that are doing hip hop following that warrior line that characterize the miners”. As Santos, a 42 years old man, and one of the creators and current manager of the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo<sup>12</sup> pointed out, it

<sup>12</sup> The Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo, an autonomous cultural organization, was created 12 years ago, in 1997 in response to a crisis that the called Movement for Life – movement with national character that was formed by different cultural and youth cultural movements- was undergoing. The crisis took

might also be that “in the case of La Paz, hip hop has not been able to build a movement, a proposal with roots of their own (...) and if one looks who are doing hip hop in El Alto, they are migrant kids, migrant’s children, then their link to the root is much more cultivated (...)”. The city of El Alto encompasses distinctive socio-cultural and economic characteristics and thus, trying to understand the possible role that this context played in bringing young people close to the hip hop world becomes relevant. Moreover, analyzing and understanding the national and international context is also important since individuals’ lives are the best manifestation and reflection of the social situation that surround them.

Even though hip hop phenomenon is generally and rightly linked to a specific social class, indigenous group or other discriminated social category, I think the best way to understand the formation of the hip hop movement in El Alto is to comprehend the process of initiation and decision of each individual to be part of this trend. This process varies and depends on their personal experiences which at the same time undoubtedly, are influenced or even determined by the socio- economic, political and cultural context. In order to understand how this inter-relation between individual and context take place, I believe it is indispensable to go beyond the theoretical writings and actually listen to the hip hoppers stories, after all hip hop is exactly that, “the word that all of us have” (Abraham<sup>13</sup>), “the voice of the unheard” (Grafo<sup>14</sup>).

In a growing and diverse city as El Alto, the life stories of Abraham and Renzy can illustrate our understanding about hip hop. Each hip hopper has a distinctive trajectory, but in both cases, poverty-related problems were the beginning of the road that led them to their involvement in the hip hop world.

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place, as the creator of the Cultural Centre expressed, in a moment where the neoliberal model in Bolivia was consolidating. At that time some of the local movements, like the case of the one in the city of Santa Cruz, felt that the best way to reach the proposed objectives was through a formal political intervention. The movement in La Paz and El Alto thought otherwise and decided to continue in the cultural field since, as Santos said, the cultural sphere is the optimum means to use if one pretends to transform the youth world.

<sup>13</sup> Hip hopper of 25, whose life will illustrate this section

<sup>14</sup> Hip hopper of 23 that frequent the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo



Renzy is a hip hopper of 23 years that participates in 'Street Corner', the hip hop Radial Program of the radio created by the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo. When he was around 14 years, the industrial music became a significant step in his ascendant ladder to the hip hop genre. He participated in industrial music-based dance competitions where he met young people who were engaged in break dance groups and who introduced him to this visual and bodily element of hip hop, illustrating the importance of the images and entertainment as a means of attracting young people into youth cultures. After four years approximately and once he found in the lyrics of hip hop a source of identity, he participated in a radial program in an 'underground radio' as he called it – basically an illegal radio- which offered him the possibility to be in control and be part of non-hierarchical relations; this kind of media constituted the first sparkle of hip hop in El Alto. In January 2002 he participated in a hip hop workshop organized by Wayna Tambo and became an assiduous visitor of the Cultural Centre because as he pointed out, it offered him the possibility to reach more people and to find people with common interests and tastes.

After 12 years in the formal education system, in 2001 Renzy finished high school, by which he showed certain indifference, underlying that school would only gain some importance if it would teach the children about the natural resources and the ethnic diversity of Bolivia. He said "that is what lacks in the schools because when one gets older the television only teaches you that you should be a *gringo*, I have seen many cases like that, when in the buses people of the same colour discriminate each other, it is ridiculous". In addition, he also studies Law which according to him would allow him help other people "to know what is forbidden and allowed, so when somebody wants to exploit you, you will know what to say (...) especially the police, which are the most corrupt".

Renzy is a second generation migrant in El Alto and he is the youngest of five brothers and sisters. Their parents were teachers who as many of those who were working in the mine centres in the 1980s, had to migrate after the mine relocation policy; they chose to migrate to the *room-city*<sup>15</sup> of El Alto. Renzy's paternal grandfather died in the

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<sup>15</sup> Many times the city of El Alto has that denomination because people only spend the nights in their homes in El Alto while go to work in the city of La Paz

Chaco War<sup>16</sup> leaving his wife alone with their children, whom she had to support working as *palliri* or mineral grinder woman, work that demanded long hours and hard physical effort in exchange for an income of misery; she died when Renzy's father was 4 years old. His maternal grandfather owned his own transportation business, however after the hyperinflation struck he lost everything and had to "start from scratch" as Renzy pointed out. That period of time was not undemanding for him and his parents either, "we had to queue to get bread and water (...) they gave you two pails of water for the whole day" was what Renzy's father used to tell him. After a few years of living in El Alto, in the mid 1990s, when the Bolivian population in general, and certain vulnerable sectors in particular, were suffering from the high levels of unemployment and informality – according to Rivero (2006) in the 1990 decade the unemployment suffered an increase of 7 percent, from 6 to 13 percent, while the labor has become more and more precarious leading to an increasing informal labor that represented almost 70 percent of the total labor market- mostly the outcome of the structural adjustment. Renzy's family was experiencing economic problems that brought with them consequences in a family level, since both of their parents and the older brother had to work in order to obtain the necessary money to satisfy their needs. This situation pushed him into the streets and its reality including the gang experience, which, as Renzy's answers illustrate below, became important factors that brought him closer to the hip hop world.

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<sup>16</sup> The Chaco war, took place from 1932 to 1935 between Bolivia and Paraguay for the control of the Chaco Boreal region, which was assumed had big quantities of oil and would allow Bolivia to have access to the sea. After many deaths the government reached an agreement in 1938 that was very unsatisfactory for Bolivia since it only kept 1/3 of the territory in dispute.

Figure 2: Renzy's Life History



R: And how is being the youngest one?

Re: It is ugly

R: Ugly? why?

Re: You feel lonely (...) maybe that is why I am a rapper, I was on the streets, there I found my friends, we grew up together, like brothers

R: And what about your parents?

Re: They were working, we needed the money (...) so I studied during the day and then in the afternoon and night alone I was, in the streets with the friends.(Renzy (Re))

Source: Picture obtained in Renzy's web page

Abraham's story represents the second life history that will illustrate this section. He is a 25 year hip hopper member of the group *Ukamau y Ke*. Like Renzy, Abraham participates in the radial program 'Street Corner', however he also has a part time job in the Wayna Tambo working in the musical production section. After a few months of going for the first time to the Wayna Tambo, Mario – the creator of the Cultural Centre- offered him to join them in the *Purak Tambos*, itinerant cultural encounters, offering that was followed by a work proposal. Abraham accepted, as he said because the Wayna became this comfortable space where he could freely be and express what he had in mind. This might be mainly explained because, as Santos pointed out, the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo "is an open space where people come in and out, that is why I would say that those movements are autonomous, there is no registration or inscription, so it is like the streets"<sup>17</sup>.

Abraham is the youngest of 4 children; his father, truck driver, was born in La Paz and decided to move to El Alto because of the low land and house prices, there he met his mother, a merchant who had migrated from the rural area. His familial

<sup>17</sup> For an illustration of this point from the hip hoppers' perspective please refer to Annex D

situation was affected by economic problems which at the end, as Abraham himself explains below, pushed him to run away into the streets where he would come across a new socialization pattern.

**Figure 3: Abraham's Life History**



A: For example I run away when I was very young, when I was 12 I went to Brazil, so I've always lived by my own, I've always been away from my family

R: And why did you escape?

A: Problems, first the economic problem of my parents that could not give me money anymore, they got mad at me you know? Why did I have this baby? , so I felt bad, they even treated me badly; they used to hit me until I decided to escape from home (...) then the streets are the solution, you get friends, it is hard that you get rich friends, the street is the street, there are a lot of people surviving in the *cement jungle* (...) many times the parents are violent with their children (...) it should be because of the environment where you live in the society, the work, the money, the poverty (...) (Abraham (A))

Source: Picture taken by Noah Fridman, obtained in the internet

Without the economic support of his parents he had to drop out of school- until he took it up in Brazil, where he experienced the gang life for a short period- which did not seem to bother him greatly since according to him school "is the most superficial thing I could ever do", it would never offer him the 'wisdom' that the 'hip hop school' would later provide.

(...) for me hip hop is a school where you auto educate yourself, it is a way to reform yourself, if you are in a gang or in drugs, it is a therapy, you can take out those vices for the vice of hip hop, but the vice of hip hop is healthy (...) (Abraham)

After a year on the streets of la Ceja<sup>18</sup>, where he stole and begged to buy alcohol, and where fights were something common, he heard from some street friends that a couple of Bolivians arrived from Brazil looking for children that could be interested in working abroad. With nothing to lose, and actually escaping from the poverty and insecurity of the streets of El Alto, Abraham decided to go to Brazil, where, naturally he ended up being object of exploitative working conditions. He worked in two places as an illegal baker and sewer, sometimes even 18 hours a day with a salary that was hardly enough to cover his daily needs. Even though sometimes he asked himself “how could I handle it”, he does not regret his decision to leave Bolivian land because, according to him, that journey allowed him to see beyond the obvious.

(...) for one side it helped a lot to value the life, to see the other, see your brother, see friends, see how they are suffering, see the other reality that usually is not seen in the media (Abraham)

Two and a half years later he decided to escape again, this time from the house of those who had taken him to Brazil. He looked for another job as a sewer and he started to gain a better salary, through which he was able to rent his own room; it was at that time, from young neighbours he met on the streets of Brazil, when he experienced hip hop for the first time. Although it seemed his life was improving as he himself mentioned, he had to come back to Bolivia because of ‘street hang ups’ as he would call them that started when he decided to defend other Bolivians that were the focus of a Brazilian drug dealer’s anger who was “racist and had issues with Bolivian immigrants” Abraham explained; he even had to carry a gun because he was afraid he would be shot during night. Once he returned to Bolivia he found a job in a jewellery store and he run into old and new friends that were already immerse in the hip hop world. That fact plus the increasing hip hop CDs piracy that popularized the North Mexican and American hip hop led him to reconnect with this phenomenon that, as he indicated, has become his escape from all the problems he has.

The street experience that both young people underwent was context-driven and happened under circumstances closely related with social and economic inequalities

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<sup>18</sup> La Ceja is where the city of El Alto begins and is usually considered a very dangerous and violent place

that resulted in the marginalization of the hip hoppers and their families. This is important to take into consideration when trying to understand and analyze the process and circumstances through which they experience and internalize hip hop.

### **3.3 Identity and Subjectivity: The Engaging Factors**

The previous section seeks to give an overview of the poverty-related circumstances that have led young people in El Alto to experience their first contact with hip hop but it does not elucidate how and especially why young people in El Alto would choose to stick with it not only as consumers but predominantly as producers. In this section I argue that the identity and subjectivity are the most relevant factors that led those young people to decide belonging to the hip hop culture, moreover to decide to appropriate it. Whereas identity implies a conscious sense of self, subjectivity encompasses unconscious and subconscious dimensions of the self, and implies contradictions, process and change (Jordan and Weedon, 1995: 15).

The streets constitute a place of encounter, of socialization of young people that usually belong to families that undergo intra-familial problems, frequently an outcome of social and economic difficulties. It is on the streets where these groups of young hip hoppers “established a set of standards in order to overcome shared social conditions” (Garrat, 2004: 150). This process allowed them to build subjective differences with other groups and thus to achieve an identity in a hegemonic culture that increasingly marginalize them. Therefore in a society that position them in a complex mosaic of conflictive interrelation between the Aymara and western cultures, they could not fit completely and consequently opted to adapt to it through the creation and belonging of an alternative ‘society’, one that according to them does not belong to any country, it is part of every person that has experienced and shared a marginalized reality which is usually street-related. Renzy’s and Amauta’s, another hip hopper that frequents Wayna Tambo, interviews illustrate this statement.

(...) hip hop is born in each of us, it is born because you have thought about it, because you have lived in the streets, you have lived all the shit that this world has put in front of you (...) (Amauta)

hip hop does not have a place or country of origin it was born in the streets, it does not have a flag, does not have frontiers (...) (Renzy)

One form that hip hop uses to differentiate itself from the mainstream culture is expressed by the way hip hoppers dress: wide and big clothes. Young people in El Alto found in this careless appearance a way to generate a new identity that allows them to distinguish themselves from the ‘others’, those who have not experienced the street life or the ‘non-indigenous’, ‘middle-class’ people. This new physical characteristic was object of discrimination, an outcome of an ascribed identity<sup>19</sup> which imposed over them the label of criminals or *pandilleros* since rappers became a synonym for gangs and ‘wide clothes’.

Even though it is true that most of the hip hoppers in El Alto do not belong to a gang or participate in lawless acts anymore<sup>20</sup>, it is relevant to acknowledge that the label of *pandilleros* that people who wear wide clothes receive do not come only from the ‘outsiders’. As Renzy’s statement illustrate, this label is also accepted by some of the hip hoppers themselves.

Because everybody knows, even me, when I see a guy with wide clothes, I know he might want to steal from me, everybody fears the ones with wide pants, because they are sometimes *maleantes* and *pandilleros*. (Renzy)

It is so because the ascribed identities are not necessary false and actually (are) influence(d) (by) the achieved identity<sup>21</sup> since the identity formation is a fluid and contextually driven process that is constantly being (re) constructed (Suarez-Orozco,

<sup>19</sup> An imposed identity either by co-ethnics or by members of the dominant culture (Suarez-Orozco, 2004)

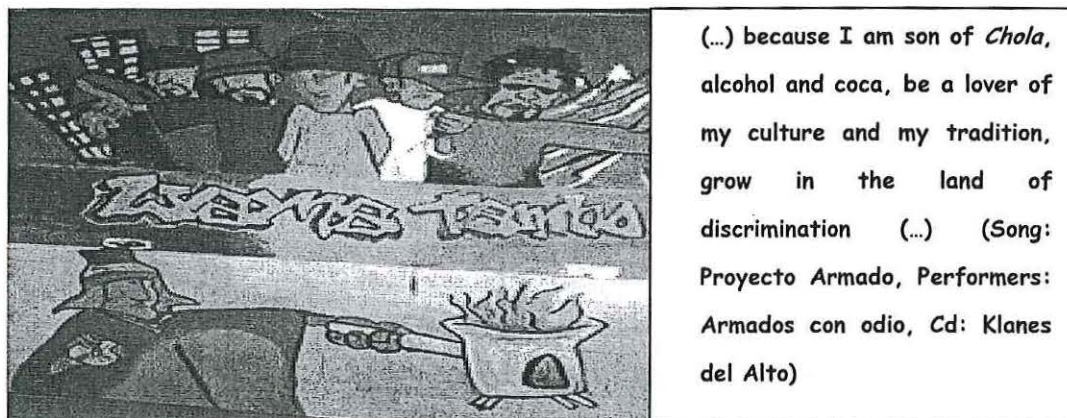
<sup>20</sup> Most of the hip hoppers have experienced the gang life which constituted a relevant and even necessary street-related experience in order for them to be legitimized as hip hoppers.

<sup>21</sup> The extent to which an individual achieves a sense of belonging, auto-identification (Suarez-Orozco, 2004)

2004) ; therefore the auto-identification does not only depend on the individual decision but actually strongly reflects other people's expectations and perceptions. Moreover, who and what you identify with is not always an objective act, it is also associated with perceptions and experiences and thus it is subjectivity-related. In addition we need to acknowledge that all the movements that emerged from a marginalized reality and are based in cultural expressions may have strong internal contradictions, and thus, "rap's pedagogy, like (...) all pedagogies of oppressed people emerges incomplete, contradictory and struggling for coherence" (Lusane, 2004: 361).

The hip hoppers in El Alto also face discrimination because of their Aymara roots that are always in a dynamic process of struggle and fusion with a dominant western society. This fact made them vulnerable to marginalization but at the same time gave them a sense of partaking, in this case, to a group that suffers a indigenous-driven discrimination. This could be depicted in the songs of the CD *Klanes del Alto* that the hip hoppers recorded in 2005 with Wayna Tambo productions.

**Image 2: Graffiti Made in the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo**



Source: Picture taken by Benjamin Dangl obtained in the internet

The young people immerse in the hip hop world not only share their preference for music, or the way of dressing but also the linguistic expressions and in many senses the way they see and express the reality. If we accept the believe that the "culture allows seeing the reality in other way and think about the place each of us have in it", and that "to belong to the same culture means to share the same interpretation of the world and the same linguistic and conceptual universe" (Morduchowicz 2003:39,



translated by author) then we could hardly deny that hip hop is a culture, an idea that is strongly supported by the hip hoppers *alteños*

Hip hop is a culture, why? because you live hip hop, you touch it, you live it on the streets, you feel it, that is why it is a culture, it is not because it is a music style, it is just because you live it, and if people say that hip hop is just a music genre, ok for them it is just that, but for the ones who are immerse in the hip hop, then hip hop is culture, it is art. (Amauta)

Hip hop for many hip hoppers in El Alto is more than a culture, it is a way of being, it is an essence, as Renzy would say “you do rap, but you are hip hop”.

Much of what they mean when they refer to hip hop as a culture or essence is that hip hop lyrics reflect what they, and many other young people, lived and continue living. That is why the content of the lyrics is so powerful because they become the proof that they are not alone, other people are experiencing what they do. Hip hop in general and the lyrics of the rap songs in particular carry with them the stories of many young people all over the world that express their own experiences which although are context-specific, have common grounds based on a shared urban marginalized reality; this is why hip hop has become an universal phenomenon, one that talks about familiar stories, one that is capable of providing many young people a sense of belonging.

Since the first time I've heard it [hip hop] I have identified with it (...) because the hip hop said many truths, even when I was younger it seemed that it knew my life (...) it talked about poverty, the streets, the discrimination (Abraham)

Other type of identification is the one that comes from the artistic and energetic music world so favored by the youth. This fact becomes an important factor that makes of hip hop a youth culture in expansion since the phenomena based in music are able to provide the dynamism, the sound, the images and the aesthetics that young people are so anxiously looking for in these times where the media and speed-driven relationships are ubiquitous. Therefore, that “the music be the ideology can not be surprising if we understand the agglutinating character of the music and its capacity

to take in elements of diverse nature: perceptive, gesticulating, cognitive and linguistic” (Marín and Muñoz 2002:197, translated by author).

The energy, creativity and sounds characteristic of the music phenomena offer the young people in El Alto an important source of identity. But more crucially it is the discrimination and poverty-based identity and subjectivity in which they recognize themselves, peculiar of an unequal society that comprises an important aspect the moment they opt to stick with the hip hop culture.

### **3.4 Black October: A New Baptism for the Young Hip Hoppers**

The previous two sections provide background for understanding the circumstances that lead certain young people in El Alto to make a first contact with the hip hop world. They are also useful to comprehend why hip hop culture is a source of identity capable to make hip hoppers decide to be part of this phenomenon. It is the aim of this section to explain the impact that the events of October 2003 had in the young hip hoppers, one that left a deep mark and that conveyed the hip hoppers’ actions and discourses beyond a ‘street’ revendication towards a more ample social horizon.

Even though it is true that Bolivia was experiencing important changes at least since the year 2000, October 2003 represented a unique icon for the city of El Alto. Black October actions symbolized a fissure between El Alto and the rest of Bolivia that constituted a verification discourse that El Alto was a relegated city and therefore discriminated (Samanamud, 2007). Moreover this experience uncovered the synthesis between dissatisfaction and rebelliousness ever present in the *alteños*’ minds and that was vividly reflected in the deaths of relatives and friends, including the hip hoppers’.

Even though, the events of October, 2003 were full of contradictions and brought with them a considerable number of deaths, they represented as well the beginning of a possible change. This incident has marked the youth *alteña* in a permanent manner, showing them a reality that was not familiar for them beyond the stories heard by those who experienced the dictatorships in the late 1970s and early 1980s; however

those stories were becoming more vivid in a period in which, as Harold<sup>22</sup> wrote, the *alteaños* seemed to be living a *democradura*.

The incidents of October were not disregarded by the young hip hoppers, moreover most of them participated in the protests that took place the first two weeks of October which, according to Rodriguez (2004), meant a baptism act for many young people in the city of El Alto, a rebirth, an unerasable mark in their lives. For them the army acts were unjustified and cruels, according to Abraham, the high number of deaths could have been avoided if the President of the Republic at that time, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, would have agreed to debate and negotiate instead of initiate the confrontations between army forces and social groups.

Say that it was a war would have been right if we would have been armed and would have fought with them under the same conditions, bullet to bullet, but this has been a massacre (...) many innocent people died just because they were claiming their rights (Abraham)

To closely experience these events generated in the hip hoppers, a feeling of frustration and impotence due to the impossibility to assist family and friends who died in the denominated “War gas”, nonetheless, at the same time, it awakened in them the desire to contribute in order to avoid that situations as those would occur again.

**Hip hop is protest, and that protest did not exist here until that black October (...) my rebellion was born there, by having voice but not being able to do anything, but by seeing that together we could do more the idea of doing lyrics with protest came to my mind (...) because it really hits you to see people dying next to you, and you ask your self what can I do to make the unheard voice heard (Grafo,)**

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<sup>22</sup> Harold is one of the young people who lived the Black October in El Alto that participated in the publication of the book “Todo Comenzo de Nuevo, Memorias de Octubre” (Everything Started Again, Memoirs of October) which contained writings of the students of the Instituto Normal Superior Simon Bolivar (Superior Normal Institute Simon Bolivar)

Thus, a new mixture of anger, pain and hope was born, and that was also mirrored in the hip hoppers' lyrics as the song *Estamos con la Raza* (We are with the race) written by Abraham (Annex E)

Many analyses and interpretations could be done when debating about the importance and causes of the denominated black October. It could be said that the October events were a reflection of many years of oppression, poverty and marginalization that indigenous people in Bolivia have been undergoing since the time of the colony, and that in the last years were strongly condensed in the city of El Alto because of its demographic, economic, social and cultural characteristics. Others would say that these occurrences were a social response to the effects of a neoliberal model that was increasingly widening the gap between the richest and poorest. On the other hand, people could also propose that what had been displayed in October was full of contradictions, moreover it could be stated that behind the social mobilizations were political and economic interests that were strategically using people's desires of change in order to determine their actions. Maybe it is an amalgam of all the mentioned, but at the end of the day what the common young citizen in El Alto in general and the hip hoppers of that city in particular lived and felt truly affected the way to interpret their reality, and the role they see for themselves in the processes of change.

## CHAPTER 4

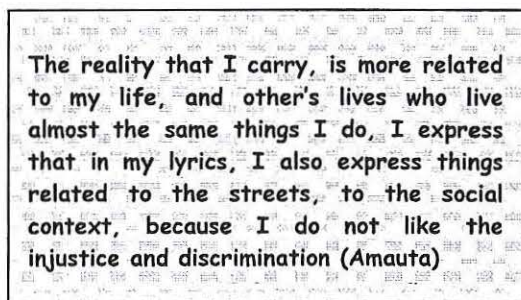
### THE STREET DISCOURSES: COUNTERING THE HEGEMONY

Until now the analysis has showed on one hand, how an unequal context that has constantly marginalized young people in El Alto, has led those who have experienced a street reality and have shared an identity source to be part of the hip hop culture, and on the other, how this culture has reacted before changes in the social and political spheres in Bolivia. This evidence offers insights enough to at least consider the possibility that hip hop culture is not only an outcome but also a response to the marginalizing dominant culture. Nonetheless, we cannot conclude the former before analyzing how, why and who the hip hop discourses, through their lyrics, symbols and daily speech, are directed to. In addition, the previous analysis does not bring enough evidence either to determine the possible political character of the movement when reacting to the discriminating environment. Therefore, it is the intention of this chapter to decode the discourses and symbols that are adopted by the hip hoppers in order to understand the hip hop's realm and meanings and thus, decide if it is attempting to change power relations within the marginalizing society. The first section is divided in two parts. The first part shows the 'street reality' as understood by the hip hoppers, and how the perception and depiction of this reality by the hegemonic culture is criticized and contested by them. The second part describes and deciphers the importance and role that authenticity, in terms of way of dressing and Aymara origin, plays in their discourse against the discrimination, commodification and co-optation by the dominant culture. The second section depicts on one side the critical position of the hip hoppers against the traditional channels of political participation and social representation, and on the other, the debate about the possible political nature of the hip hop culture.

## 4.1 Contesting the Dominant Culture

### 4.1.1 Hip Hop: Showing the *Other Reality*

The hip hop constitutes a means through which youth can express the observed, encountered and undergone facts that are inherent to a street reality. They see and perceive this reality as their own; the street reality and their own life experience are comprised and expressed in an amalgam



The reality that I carry, is more related to my life, and other's lives who live almost the same things I do, I express that in my lyrics, I also express things related to the streets, to the social context, because I do not like the injustice and discrimination (Amauta)

of messages and rhythms. Moreover, hip hop is contesting the beliefs and myths that have always shaped the perception and discourses of *reality*, a reality that is either remote from the daily street experiences of the relegated suburbs, or portrays the El Alto migrant environment as problematic, criminal-like and even dangerous.

Therefore, hip hoppers, as they themselves have explained, have decided to “tell their side of the story”, to tell about the “*other reality*”. They, as well as the common depiction of the city of El Alto, talk about issues related with criminality, drugs and violence, however, they emphasize the duality of this representation, where corruption, discrimination and deprivation represent the other side of the coin, the catalytic factors that become the cause of such image and actions. This interpretation can be well illustrated by a fragment of the fourteenth song of the CD *Klanes del Alto* in Annex F.

Besides the lyrics' messages, the hip hoppers also make use of a tough lingo that has the objective to echo the harsh reality they experience. Therefore, hip hop opens them up the possibility to make “commentaries on social and personal conditions in an uncensored language, and hence, fostering the ability to transform hurt and anguish into art” (Dyson, 2004: 64). Furthermore, by telling the “truth”, they are “waking up” other young people from the “fantasy world” they live in. In relation to this, Abraham's state can be useful “I tell in my lyrics what I have lived, I saw the killing of my people, so I write about it, and then reality is rough, what can you do? You

cannot hide from it". Consequently, hip hop becomes a revealing icon that makes clear that for these young people the "time for naïve idealism is past, that the world is in a non-stop state of emergency that no amount of rose-colored rhetoric can amend" (Potter, 1995: 8). Maybe that is why hip hoppers so intensely criticize the music that they called 'commercial', which has become a synonym of music without content, that only refers to topics related with diversion, alcohol and girls; it is perceived as an empty music that according to Amauta "is a music that does not let people to see how is the reality, that hinders you, it hinders you because it makes you so stupid that it will make you follow all that shit". Thus, hip hop is portraying the necessity to accept the *reality* in order to confront it: "we live in poverty and in poverty will continue to be unless we acknowledge it and do something to change it" (Grafo).

The acceptance that there is a unique *reality*, a unique factual truth that surrounds all of us is ubiquitous, especially among those who cannot or do not want to look beyond. It is a granted *reality* that has been historically constructed by the elite, and now, in a globalized world, increasingly more by an influential media. It is a construction that on one hand depicts, as universal social desired model, an image of youth as successful and beautiful, and on the other hand penalizes youth that does not fit into that mould presenting them either as a social failure or as criminal-like, fruit of an inadequate socialization. Moreover, according to the hip hoppers, the media portrays the information that is required by and benefits the political and economic powerful people's interests. An illustrative example of this could be a fraction of an answer given by Abraham in an interview in which I asked him to explain the reasons behind the rough and even violent hip hop lyrics.

We cannot sing those commercial musics that have nothing to do with our reality, that is just fantasy, that is what the media want now, that you live in the fantasy world, (...) we need to *shoot* with lyrics to the bad people, to the bad governants, for what? To make people be aware of what is going on, because people quickly forget, a clear example is October right? I mean here it was difficult that the media misled us because the killings were here, but for the East [referring mainly to the city of Santa Cruz] people the media was able to manipulate the information (Abraham)

The hip hoppers fill its music with precise images of the contemporaneous urban reality and through it generate and broadcast information from the *ghetto*, a counter information (Marin ad Muñoz, 2002). If the media and/or the elite create and transmit ‘otherness constructions’ that advantage the interests of the more powerful, then the hip hop will produce its own news agency, it will work as an alternative media that contests the dominant discourse.

#### 4.1.2 The importance and role of authenticity

##### 4.1.2.1 ‘Real’ hip hoppers are not on sale

Since the streets constitute the physical and ideological mainspring of hip hop creations, then for the hip hoppers it is fundamental that those who called themselves hip hoppers have to have experienced the street life, being this life gangs, poverty and/or discrimination-related. Therefore, as is illustrated in Renzy’s commentary, hip hop attempts to comprise an urban culture that values the consistency between thought, discourse and action.

**Image 3: Picture of Renzy**



(...) the typical *sons of daddy* come and say I am a rapper, but the rapper is born in the streets, there is where one learns everything (...) those guys who say I am a rapper, get my lyric, but at the time of the truth they do not do anything, first you have to do what you say and not just talk and talk and do not do anything  
(Renzy)

Source: Picture obtained in Renzy’s web page

The authenticity discourse is evident as well when hip hoppers strongly expressed their discontent and disapproval for those young people who wear *wide clothes* as a fashion icon; icon that has been conveyed by a globalized music industry which has



commodified the main youth urban culture. The fashion-driven young people have received the denomination of *caretas*, which literally means mask. According to one of the integrants of Area Restringida (Restricted Area), a group of hip hoppers that frequent Wayna Tambo, the *caretas* are “those people who dress wide pants just because it is a fashion, because they can sell records, but they do not have the real feeling, they are just *caretas* guys who do something but say something else, those guys do not live hip hop”. Moreover, the meaning of the *wide pants* or *tolas*, as they are currently called, becomes so relevant because they are not only visual aesthetic representations that distinguish a hip hopper from one who is not, which they also are, but they portray as well a more relevant significance. They, on one hand, represent a symbol of the origins of hip hop, the liberty struggles that the poor African American from the Bronx dealt and continue dealing with in an unequal socioeconomic context. On the other hand they symbolize, and I could not find a better way than Abraham to elucidate it, a form “of youth rebelliousness, it is a treat to the system that says I do not have money so I am dressing like this, so what?”. Consequently, the use of *tolas* has become a means by which hip hoppers make visible their confrontation against the opinions and values of those who have never showed interest in their worries or needs.

The condemnation that the hip hoppers portray to the fashion factor exhibits as well the censure to the commercialization of this art. Pretending to make profit out of it would imply “to live from the hip hop instead of living for the hip hop” (Grafo), which would mean that they are “selling themselves” since hip hop, according to Abraham is “who they are, it runs in their veins”. In addition, none of them pretend to realise with hip hop, for them it is still an underground art that should not be an article of trade for the music industry; this position places the hip hop movement in El Alto still far away from the marketized hip hop abroad. The fact that Abraham rejected a proposal to participate in a credit card commercial from which he would have obtained, in a three - second appearance, six times what he earns in a month of work, supports this analysis. What is more, when he said that he “preferred to stay poor but in the battle”, he was explicitly making reference of his challenging position against the mass commodification and commercialization characteristic of the neoliberal markets. Convincing as this argument sounds, it is essential, nonetheless, to acknowledge that this depiction could be also explained by the fact that this creator

movement is still very novel and therefore, has not yet suffered from the mutations that youth musical cultures tend to undergo. Further, it is important to recognize that the Bolivian music industry is almost nonexistent and thus could not give an incentive neither to the hip hop *alteño* to be part of a profitable industry.

Whether it is they are talking about the importance of street origins, the reasons for their dressing or the rejection to the commodification of their art, 'authenticity' constitutes a vital factor when contesting the dominant culture.

#### 4.1.2.2 Aymara revendication: Resisting the co-optation

Hip hop also grants a high value to the creation of a self style, where the cultural roots become the cornerstone of this differentiation. In the case of the hip hop *alteño*, the Aymara culture constitutes that keystone that helps to define what it means to be an *alteño* young Aymara (Aymara descendent) in the XXI century. Hence, the hip hoppers attempt to reinvigorate the aymara in order for people, especially young people, to value their roots, and thus, Aymara culture would become a symbol of pride and not, as has historically been, of embarrassment. They do it by making use of the language, the native instruments and by portraying images and symbols of the Aymara culture in their lyrics. This can be exemplified by a Grover commentary, a 27 hip hopper that participates of the radial program Street Corner, and by a fraction of a song of the Cd Klanes del Alto.

I think it is very important to use the aymara in the lyrics because in many provinces people feel ashamed of it, they 'have ashamed us' actually (...)(Grover)

Hip hop with *altura* in Bolivia, it is culture showing diversity, *maya, paya, kimsa, pusi*, with unity, proudly raising the *Wiphala*, I say to these people that the culture they cannot throw it in the garbage, and if you get rid of what is my charango, my *Wiphala* and my *quena*, that is a disappointment (...)  
(Song: Kallajtamapi, Performer: MLU, CD: Klanes del Alto)

This is a discourse that has gained potency because of the events that have been taking place the last years in Bolivia (Samanamud, 2007) and that is closely related with cultural revendications, strengthened by the fact that Bolivia is currently governed by the first indigenous president in the history of the country.

Furthermore, it is a cultural phenomenon that reclaim the more than 500 years of destitution that started by the cultural mutilation and subjugation of the indigenous people by the Spanish forces and interests during the colonization time. A subjugation that has been perpetuated by the elite and by a more recent neoliberal model that widen the gaps between the poorest and richest, where most of the aymara people lay in the category of the former. Therefore, as is well depicted by the song *Estamos con la Raza* in Annex G, the hip hop lyrics and discourses portray a renewed historicism that aims for a revendication of their cultural horizon against the current system.

This analysis challenges those who think that hip hop, because it proceeds from the USA, promotes the lost of the autochthonous (Marin y Muñoz, 2002). Moreover, it could be proposed that hip hop, in its search for identity and revendication, urges young people in this particular context to become Aymara griots, to search for their own cultural roots, developing this way a local, native-based expression and self-construction.

Nonetheless, this motivation is not unanimous among the hip hop group. There is a non negligible number of members that do not share the same ideology, they believe that the aymara is something sacred and therefore cannot be “used” by a rough and more earthly essence like hip hop.

I do not like to use my roots, I do not like to use, because it is that, ‘use’, why I do not rap in aymara? Because for me it is sacred and use it would be like using the Bible to reach the people (...) (Renzy)

In addition, they state that those who proclaim the use of Aymara in their songs are doing it without a deep knowledge of the culture and therefore, by showing their disagreement with this fact, they are portraying another important feature of the value they grant to authenticity; someone cannot write a lyric about a topic they are not

strongly familiar with. As we can see in the statement below, Amauta is one of the hip hoppers who have this kind of philosophy.

I see that nobody tries to know more about Aymara, they just say I am Aymara, but they don't even know what that is, I mean they defend their culture with what? with nothing. I do not try to send lyrics in aymara, I have been raised by my grandma who wears *polleras*, but I do not know how to speak aymara very well, and even if I knew, I have to know where all that come from in order to use it in my lyrics (Amauta)

Further, the use of Aymara, in the last time, has been so increasingly applauded by older people and academia that might be already being perceived by these hip hoppers as becoming part of the mainstream fashions of the dominant culture (Boyd, 2004). Since hip hop has always tried to be characterized by its dissimilarity from the conventional paradigms then it would not be surprising that this opposition to the use of Aymara be an attempt to move away from them.

Despite the internal existing differences within the hip hop group, all of the hip hoppers share the respect for their roots, respect that is expressed in their challenging and defending positions, one against the historical domination of the elites and the other against the co-optation of their art by the mainstream culture.

#### **4.2 Politics: Its Role in the Hip Hop's Resistance Discourse**

As most of the XXI century young people all over the world, especially from the developing countries (Balardini, 2000; Perea, 1998), the hip hoppers, as Renzy's answers illustrate below, do not show any interest in participating in the institutionalized political channels like voting or belonging to any political party.

R: And did you vote?  
Re: No, I do not like to vote  
R: Why?  
Re: I do not like to be part of that vicious circle  
R: What vicious circle?

Re: Of that one, who knows what will happen to my vote, we do not know anything, everything is manipulated (Renzy)

This lack of interest is not surprising if it is acknowledged that hip hoppers are part of social categories – indigenous, migrants, low class and youth – that suffered and continues suffering the most from marginalization and poverty, largely perceived as outcomes of high levels of government corruption and ‘state capture’<sup>23</sup> that have been common in Bolivia since the return to democracy in 1982. In this sense, the politicians become the “thieves of tie and white neck”, the “*politiqueros*”<sup>24</sup> whose only aim is to reach the power and fulfill their economic interest. Those are the adjectives that Abraham used when he told me about the time he rejected a proposal to form a political party.

Nonetheless, this absolutist position seemed to totter when Evo Morales run for president in the December, 2005 elections. Although none of the hip hoppers gave him their complete approval, most of them described him as “the best option until now”. This could be explained because on one side, he was perceived as a symbol of indigenous participation and revendication and on the other he constituted a fresh option, one that was away from the so undesired traditional political parties.

Although hip hoppers value the principles in abstract, the application of democracy and justice are greatly disapproved. According to Renzy there has never existed democracy in Bolivia, because “it has always been in the bourgeois hands of a few families”. It is a democracy subjectivity that portrays a duality between those who own and have been benefited from the political and economic power and those who have not. The political parties constitute a good example of the former, where these channels of democratic representation are delegitimized becoming synonyms of corruption and nonfulfillment, and therefore are disregarded as means of valid political participation and representation. Justice, as well as democracy is seen as an instrument to “torture the poor and save the rich”, perception that has led Abraham to ask himself: “is justice really just or the ones who manages it, manages it wrongly?”<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Advantages for particular individuals or groups in the basic legal or regulatory framework

<sup>24</sup> For more illustrations of this point from the hip hoppers’ perspective please refer to Annex H

<sup>25</sup> For more illustrations of this point from the hip hoppers’ perspective please refer to Annex I

Politics is also strongly criticized because it is automatically linked with specific policies, which the hip hoppers do not agree with and thus, politics is identified with bad policy and corrupt politicians. Abraham's statement below can serve as example of this asseveration.

Tuto, Samuel Doria Media<sup>26</sup>, they are men that have destroyed our country, they are country sellers, Tuto has even signed to sell the water in Cochabamba during the water war (...) (Abraham)

The institutionalized channels of political participation and social representation, and more accurately what they symbolize, are clearly criticized and even censured by the hip hoppers. They are not only seen as an unable means to represent the majority of population's thoughts and interests but actually they are perceived as a main obstacle to reach social and economic equity because of their association with corruption and *politiqueria*. Therefore, they are disregarded as valid mechanisms for change.

Does the fact the hip hoppers are not interested in participating in any formal political structure mean they are politically apathetic? Would not the fact itself that they are criticizing and disregarding these means as legitimate be already a way to do politics?

Most of the hip hoppers would agree with an affirmation to the second question. From their perspective politics should be understood in a broader sense and therefore, according to them they participate politically because politics is "to have an idea that is supported by others" and one does politics "since the moment one gives his opinion, since the moment one has his point of view". What is more, they explicitly express that hip hop is "a struggle instrument" that carries a social and political content, "it is a politics that emerges more from young people, with youth movements that do not belong to any party, young people 'move', because they see that it is necessary to build things without belonging to any party colour" (Grover). Thus, hip hop is portraying a political consciousness that is manifested in manners more in agreement with youth codes, codes shared by most of the youth cultures (Marin and

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<sup>26</sup> Both are politicians that run for president in the 2005 elections. Tuto Quiroga was vicepresident in Hugo Banzer Suarez government from 1997-2001 and became president when Banzer resigned during his term of office for health reasons.

Muñoz, 2002) and that are away from the institutional logic. However, because of the uniqueness of each youth culture, determined by its time and context, the hip hop's codes, known by their rough and defiant nature, come from an specific urban, migrant, marginalized experience. One of those codes is the rap concert, which becomes "a space for cultural resistance and personal agency" (Dyson, 2004: 62) that allows hip hoppers to articulate their messages in a public sphere.

Other space that is used to transmit their messages is the cyber space, the internet and more specifically their web pages which comprise a means by which they can reach more people in an image and sound-driven and immediate manner and through a more horizontal channel. They create international nets that, as Renzy's statement below shows, generate a multidirectional socialization process which strengthens the hip hoppers' arguments and protests when they realize that they are shared by people who undergo the same experiences in different parts of the world.

We use the Internet to make the Bolivian hip hop known (...) I've created my web page to make contact with other rappers that might have the same thoughts than us and to make songs with them (Renzy)

Much of the lyrics' content carries claiming messages which are addressed to the people or institutions that are perceived to be either the cause of the social and economic problems and injustices or those who do not fulfil their duties and even take advantage of their power position. The messages refer to topics associated with their daily life as discrimination, poverty, drugs and alcohol as one side of the coin and where, national politics, government corruption, policy and army abuse become the other side. Their messages go beyond a street narrative and become a musical account and contestation of the current political situation. Hence, hip hop constitutes a challenging combination of street mentality and national politics (Kelly, 2004).

Moreover, their songs, as clearly illustrated by a fragment of one song from Ukanau Y Ké in Annex J, even convey resistance to certain social and economic values, especially those related with neoliberal principles. Policies such as capitalization and free trade agreements are seen as a source of autonomy lost and as tactics that

advantage the elite, the governments and alien interests in detriment of the social benefits for the masses.

They manage a very clear message against what neoliberalism and globalization are and represent, considered these as tools of the 'Empire', which is directly link with North American politics and interests. The content of their lyrics, as is acutely exemplified in the song America Latina in Annex K, aims to direct people's attention to acknowledge that the only objective of the 'Empire' is to keep the power relations tipped in their favour because that recognition would become the only option to challenge the system and change the power relations.

Although they condemn the globalization process and even convey to challenge it, they make use of one of its principal tools, the internet. Hip hoppers use instruments that are part of the system which is, according to them the responsible for the destitution that they suffer and that forms the substance of their contesting messages (Lusane, 2004). It could mean that they are using the system's gears to fight against it, as Abraham's statement implies "we need to know how to use what comes from the Empire for something productive". Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that this is part of the contradictions that emerge within most of the youth subcultures that pretend to resist a culture and a system they are part of, because hip hoppers do not live in a cultural vacuum and moreover, as all of us, they live in a globalized and media-tized world where codes and tools such as internet became a constitutive part of the daily life.

Even though a political aim is very frequent in the hip hoppers' songs and discourses, some of the rappers do not share the same interest for portraying an explicit political content; moreover, they opposed it because on one side, according to them and as illustrated below, it represents a step away from what is supposed to be the driving engine of the songs: the streets, and on the other, it is assumed to be the 'easy' way to get the desired results which is not in agreement with the tough street reality that demands effort and suffering from their inhabitants.

There are differences in the lyrics, (...) those who do 'contestable' rap, according to me, they have not lived in the streets, because for me the streets are the most



important, before revolution, because the revolution wants everything easy, claim and get easily, while on the streets I have learned to live, to get 10 cts, a bread, by myself, fight for that not ask and receive and that it is, one has to look for a life (Renzy)

This disapproval could be interpreted as a result of the negative connotation that the word politics entails, since it is identified, as explained earlier in this chapter, with expressions such as corruption, state capture and nonfulfillment. Also, and more revealing, is the possibility that, as was applied to the Aymara divergent discourses, the hip hop that explicitly portrays a political aim is passing to be part of the mainstream discourse, and therefore, contradicting the opposing essence of this youth culture. Thus, it would be being “undermined by hip hop’s own internal logic that often privileged constant stylistic innovation, both in narrative and musical content” (Neal, 2004: 377), as a response to its co-optation by the dominant culture.

Nonetheless, although they are claiming an apolitical position, and effectively their songs do not postulate a social and political change explicitly, by showing their discontent with a reality based in unequal power structures – illustrated in the song fraction in Annex L- where they are excluded from the mainstream culture and therefore, from their benefits, they are implicitly contesting the power structures and thus, becoming agents in a political arena.

Consequently, hip hop would constitute a political expression that aims to explicitly or implicitly change the power structures that maintain and reproduce the socio-economic and political inequalities in a local, national and even international level.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

The answer to the research paper's question "Does youth participation in the hip hop phenomenon represent a political response to the changing and unequal socio-economic, cultural and political context?", as you would hopefully agree, is yes. Let me put all the pieces together to illustrate this affirmation.

Bolivia's history of colonialism, repression exclusion and poverty has been worsened with the long years of high debts, hyperinflation, dictatorships, and especially with the structural adjustments' effects since the mid 1980s. It is a history that has positioned most of the Bolivian population in a depriving situation; however, some cities have suffered more than others. The poor, marginalized, migrant city of El Alto constitutes a good example of the latter. This condition has changed the social and familial dynamics, pushing some of the youth inhabitants into the street reality where, as Renzy and Abraham's stories illustrated, a combination of local poverty and gang-related experience with an increasingly globalized and media-tized society has generated new forms of socialization. This process of socialization has led young people to engage to a culture that is related yet different from the dominant culture: the hip hop subculture. Hip hoppers have found in hip hop a source of identification based on common street-related and indigenous-driven discrimination experiences. Moreover, hip hop offered them, on one hand, the energy and entertainment of the rap music and on the other, a space where they could voice their concerns about the shared experiences. These concerns are a reflection of the surrounding unequal environment and hence, change according to it. This is evidenced by the fact that the events of October 2003 drove the hip hoppers to look beyond a 'street' revendication towards a more macro socio-political horizon. But why are the hip hoppers not resolving these new concerns through the formal political channels? Why have they decided not to vote in the elections? Or why has Abraham rejected the proposition to form a new political party? Very simple, they, as a large proportion of the population in the world I would dare to say, do not trust the institutionalized political channels since they have become synonym to corruption, state capture and nonfulfillment while the politicians have become the "thieves of white neck". In addition, hip hoppers have

found in hip hop a space more in agreement with their vigorous youth condition, from where they can not only talk about their lives but actually can contest the formal politics' channels and actors they are moving away from.

Moreover, the hip hoppers' discourses and symbols, in spite of the intra-group differences and the internal contradictions peculiar of every youth culture, clearly show a challenging position against the dominant culture. First, the careless way of dressing and the tough language they use in their lyrics are transgressing the mainstream values and thus, becoming a form of delegitimization and contestation to the authority of those who discriminate them. Second, they defend the Aymara culture through the use of reclaiming messages, the Aymara language and native instruments in their songs, and thus, they are contesting the historical domination and abuse by the "white" elites. Third, by censuring the fashion-driven commodification of hip hop they are resisting the co-optation of their art. Fourth, they condemn the manipulation of the media by and for the most powerful people's interests. The content of their songs become their very own news agency that aims to "show the other reality", the reality of those who have experienced the street life, the reality that the elite cannot or do not want to see. Lastly, they censure the neoliberal values and the globalization process since they only advantage the elites, government and alien's interests in the detriment of the social benefits for the masses.

Therefore, hip hop, by challenging the dominant structures, is aiming to change the existing power relations and hence, it constitutes a counter-hegemonic movement. On the other hand, all hip hoppers' discourses are public in their exercise and in their ends. The messages are transmitted by public spaces such as rap concerts, their radial program Street Corner and by internet in general and their web pages in particular. The daily discourses and those expressed in their lyrics deals with topics related to discrimination, poverty, corruption, and inequality and hence, all are concerned with common interests' issues for the marginalized people, and thus, it portrays a public end.

Consequently, based on the previous analysis and in the conceptualization of politics in the analytical framework, the participation of young people in the hip hop culture by being context-driven and by countering the marginalizing hegemonic culture in a

public sphere, constitutes a political response to the changing and unequal local, national and international context.

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## Appendix

### Annex A: Location, Duration and Areas of Inquiry of the Life Histories

- *Locations for life history inquiries:* All the conversations took place inside or close to the Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo because it was the place chosen by the participants.

- *Duration and number of conversations:* The information I needed to obtain was gotten in 3 conversations with each of the participants, where each conversation had a duration of 1 hour in average.

- *Areas of inquiry:*

+ Family life: Family size, relationship with extended family, employment and education of parents, story of migration, historical memory of parents, opportunities and social mobility

+ Participants schooling: what types of school, how they performed, subjects they liked and disliked, relationship with school authorities

+ Relationships: How is their relations with close family (especially parents), the socioeconomic and cultural features of the friends, leisure life, relations with authority figures in general and relations with women.

+ Economic and political issues: where they live, work opportunities and conditions, money problems, their perception of the formal channels and actors in the formal politics, what they think about the changes that Bolivia is experiencing

+Hip Hop: why hip hop; how, when, influenced by who did they start with hip hop; how, when and where was Wayna rap formed; what they want to say in their lyrics, to whom; when, how and who created their radio program; what do they do in the program, what music they play, by whom; what are their

youth codes and symbols (i.e. their clothes and the way they speak) ; which spaces they use (public, private, virtual)

## **Annex B: Theorizing Youth**

### **Youth: homogeneous and heterogeneous category**

Youth has a heterogeneous feature but at the same time share certain characteristics on a global scale. Youth is gendered, classed and differentiated by ethnic group, therefore we can talk about “youths” (heterogeneous feature); nonetheless all young people who become “youth” undergo the same process (homogenous feature): Young people become “youth” during those instances when “significant numbers of young people develop and express a consciousness of themselves as ‘youth’ and act upon this consciousness across various lines of division” (UN 2005: 117).

Certain dimensions of age – including human capacities, the need for protection, legal and citizenship rights and responsibilities and rites of passage - are ubiquitous (ever present). In other words, while the exact ages at which certain kind of rights are extended, statuses are attained, and dependence and protection are replaced by autonomy will vary across time and space, these processes are universal. (UN 2005: 117).

### **Notions of youth**

There is no a unique way to conceptualize youth. The debate about it, (at least in the West) has started in the late IXX century with the contribution of the North American psychologist Stanley Hall (Alpizar and Bernal, 2003; Côté and Allahar, 1996; Davila, 2004; Griffin, 2004) who “created” the notion of adolescence as an universal phenomenon characterized by biological and psychological changes, especially related with sexuality, that generates a break between childhood and adulthood, and that shows adolescent stage as a dramatic, unstable age.

A more recent notion appeared in the second half of the XX century, which introduced youth as a socio demographic data (Alpizar and Bernal, 2003; Davila,

2004). In this sense youth is considered a homogenous group integrated by all the people that coincided in a determined age cohort.

Other conception presents youth in generational terms, locating young population in significant historical events that are useful to identify the immediate referents to young people of a specific time (Alpizar and Bernal, 2003).

Even though the previews approaches could offer interesting and useful understandings of youth, they hardly recognize the youth heterogeneity and by not taking into account the variety of contexts and realities that different groups of young people experienced they make invisible other youth categories. In response to this inaccurate conceptualization, the sociological and anthropological youth studies propose that youth is a relational, cultural, historical, social construction with a varied and variable feature (Alpizar and Bernal, 2003; Dávila, 2004; Tyyska, 2005). This stance highlights the diversity of youth identities and expressions that are continually being (re) constructed by the interaction between agency and structure.

### **Vision of youth as “being” and “becoming”**

The mainstream perception of youth is related with a transitional condition, where young people are seen as “incomplete and not capable of fully responsible action and rational judgement” (UN, 2005: 111); this vision is related with the notion of youth as a “problem”, “deviant” or “victim” therefore young people need to be protected and guided in order to successfully undergo the socialization process. The aim of this socialization is to make young people efficient and prosperous adults that will eventually convey benefits to themselves as well as a contribution to development. In this sense youth is visualized as an adult in making.

Youth can also be seen in a state of “being”, a view under which young people are recognized as actors in the present that have the potential as well as the right to have a voice and vote. Thus here the emphasis is to present young people as citizens with agency in the face of the structural constraints governing their lives, and are valued for their current characteristics, which give them the status of valid actors for development now.

In this research I will focus in the notion of youth as social construction and as agent in the present (“being” perspective)

### **Annex C: Information about Cultural Politics**

Since there is no consensus about a specific concept of cultural politics, and it is understandable because of its wide theoretical scope, then I will be focus more on the realm, central concerns of cultural politics.

In general we could say that Cultural Politics “deals with the political dimensions of culture, or more specifically with the influence and role of culture within politics” (Kamrava, 1999: 15). Moreover culture could be seen as a key site in the political struggle to reproduce and transform power relations (Jordan and Weedom, 1995). In this sense, first we need to define what we mean by culture.

According to Taylor (cited in Kamrava, 1999: 12), culture could be understood as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Even though I believe it is a concept that covers most of what culture signifies, I also think that we need to divide it into more specific meanings.

Raymond Williams (cited in Jordan and Weedom, 1995: 6-7) states that there are four concepts of culture:

1. A general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development
2. A particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group – a way of life that is informed by a common spirit
3. The works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity
4. The signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored

Although the research will probably refer to culture in all these dimensions, it will be focus especially on the concepts 2 and 4.

The realm of Cultural Politics is related on one hand, with power inequalities among different groups, within which identity and subjectivity are shared, and on the other hand is concerned about how these groups will support or challenge the dominant structures in society.

The legitimation of social relations of inequality, and the struggle to transform them, are central concerns of cultural politics. Cultural politics fundamentally determine the meanings of social practices, and more over which groups and individuals have the power to define these meanings. Cultural politics are also concerned with subjectivity and identity, since culture plays a central role in constituting our sense of ourselves (...) the forms of subjectivity that we inhabit play a crucial part in determining whether we accept or contest existing power relations. (Jordan and Weedom, 1995: 5-6)

Moreover “for marginalized and oppressed groups, the construction of new and resistant identities is a key dimension of a wider political struggle to transform society” (Jordan and Weedom, 1995: 5-6)

#### **Annex D: Abraham’s Comment on Wayna Tambo**

**Image 4: Cultural Centre Wayna Tambo**



To the Wayna we went because a friend that saw us in a bar singing, because we used to play there, most of the time people did not like us, they preferred danceable music, cumbia, reguetón, but we did not do that. So that friend told us what a good music! You have to keep doing it, there is a space where you can sing, they will listen to you there (...) there is an alternative space, a cultural centre where you are going to have the opportunity to be heard (Abraham)

Source: Picture obtained in Wayna Tambo web page

## Annex E: Song Fraction about Black October

I have a tattooed wound in the hart that has stayed very marked  
I still remember that day when my people was shot from an helicopter  
killing the brother peasant and miner that were claiming their rights  
instead of giving a solution they just left more deaths, broken harts

Here we are present, immortals, very tough, comrades of the dark suburb  
Telling this history so you will not forget and you will keep it in your memory  
Around here they told me that we have to respect the police and the army  
Why then they have pointed in my people's heads with a gun?

A burst of bullets, tells the voice of the working and fighter people

Tens of bodies are already silenced in the dry breathe of the death  
They are already bled, shots are seen everywhere, crossing fire,  
people dead in every corner, now again the killer gun sounds... taz taz  
still this evil walk around, but we are conscious of the goal that illuminate us  
To love, to fight for the freedom, you are the living force that can change or annihilate  
this evil

(Song: Estamos con la Raza, Performer: Ukamau y ke, CD: Por la Raza)

## Annex F: Song Fraction about Reality Duality

I have my hands mudded with poison, understand, I could not look beyond

My dreams were just hallucinations

Because of lack of money I take these decisions

In the streets I learned fears and passions

My only inheritance poverty and violence

My youth refuged in delinquency

I am a prisoner of this misery, under silencing witnesses and stars

To survive I look for dark ways, poverty, misery reflection delinquency

(Song: Aruma Sarnakiri, Performer: Wayna Klan, Cd: Klanes del Alto).



## Annex G: Song Fraction about Aymara Revendication

We are the incarnation of the immortal *Pachamama*, here the calm for the traitors is over (...)

Here, Tupak Katari comes back as millions of native people immortals  
We are real warriors, the miners are ready for the fight, blood of guerrilla  
Here the street chaps are supporting the movement, uniting forces with the miner brothers (...)

I want to say to you what's up, we are sons of *chola*, we have well dressed the *tolas*  
Breaking the scheme of this monstrous system and there have appeared more *bartolina*  
women, firm women peasants with pure anger

Tupak Katari is coming back, we are already here, real natives that keep expanding every year to Bolivian territory, we are already many like the Commander Che Guevara, revolutionaries, *pijchando* the coca leave to get rid of these people that provoke us  
Here we are and we are not leaving, we represent the culture, always with harsh hand  
It seems you are doubting, fire up with my race and you'll see it will torture the same

(Song: *Estamos con la Raza*, Performer: Ukamau y ke, CD: *Por la Raza*)

This fragment portrays many symbols from the Aymara culture and from the revolutionary history. The Pachamama is the mother land for the Aymaras. Tupak Katari was an Aymara leader that fought against the colonial forces at the end of the 1770s. He was captured, executed and cut into pieces but before dying he pronounced the very famous phrase: You can kill me now but tomorrow I will come back and I will be millions. Bartolina Sisa was Tupac Katari's wife, she fought as well against the colonial forces and was also murdered after her capture. Nowadays, when someone wants to refer to a brave woman, one refers to her as a bartolina. The Commander Che Guevara was one of the leaders of the Cuban revolution that used the guerrillas as an instrument to fight against to what he proclaimed was an unjust economic – political model. After his murdered by Bolivian army in 1967 he became one of the most important symbols of justice and struggle all over the world. Pijchar coca means to chew coca leaves and to keep them inside your mouth swallowing their juice, which is stated to give strength and keep people awake. It was, and still is, used by the miners in order to bear the long and hazardous hours of work.

## Annex H: Abraham's and Renzy's Comments on Formal Politics

The politics that the politicians make is not politics anymore, it is politiqueria because unfortunately they use strategies for their own interests, not for the people, they even 'use' people, they manipulate them and once they get the power they completely forget about them (...) (Abraham)

The politicians do not do anything, they just talk (...) they always make propositions during the campaigns but then nothing (...) you have to do things instead of just talking (Renzy)

## Annex I: Song Fraction Criticizing Formal Politics

Image 5: Picture of Abraham



Don't talk about equality, don't talk about freedom  
Seated in the indifference, assholes that simulate to ask  
clemency for the people  
Don't crow either that you'll end with the malice while  
you're walking all over the altar of the justice  
(Song: Estamos con la Raza, Performer: Ukamau y ke, CD:  
Por la Raza)

Source: Picture taken by Benjamin Dangl obtained in the internet

## Annex J: Song Fraction about Neoliberalism Condemnation

The bell of Bolivia *Marka* is already ringing  
We don't want anything with the TLC or ALCA  
We need to change the neoliberal model that cause unemployment, social upheaval  
Let the capitalism fell into the abysm because it only wants to obtain more profit  
Looting the natural resources with its regime of violence, they asked for patience  
State puppets, the president and the general, they let that the imperialist countries  
manipulate them  
Getting orders of massacre and hierarchy from thugs  
Those traitors that have sworn to change are still with the big market  
All what they find in their path have been privatized, even the time of the people is being  
transformed in merchandise

(Song: America Latina, Performer: Ukamau y ke, CD: Por la Raza)

## Annex K: Song Fraction about Capitalization Censure

The capitalism is an unjust organization, of huge expropriation that scares the people,  
because they have monopolized the means of production where many peasants have  
suffered the expulsion from their own land, this is what the globalization wants, keep  
maintaining people under oppression with super exploitation (...)  
We are living under a capitalism dictatorship, the game of the imperialism that moves  
all over the world like an earthquake, saying that this is terrorism fault

(Song: America Latina, Performer: Ukamau y Ké, CD: Por la Raza)

## Annex L: Song Fraction about Implicit Contestation of Power

Fucking reality, pure cruelty, I live with evil, noise in the streets, discrimination,  
corruption in my nation, I continue with this life so divided, kids on the streets without  
destiny or future watching garbage without censorship, kids without tender, the election  
is just a fraud, just a shit. Because of discrimination, contamination, poverty, much  
corruption, ignorant who talk with out reason, they do not have hart, here devastation,  
sign with action, addicted kids, because of the way I dress, the way I speak

(Song: Dura Realidad, Performer: Devastación, Cd: Klanes del Alto)

## **Annex M: Scope of the Research**

The evidently broadness of an analysis about the relation between culture and politics in general and consequently, about hip hop and political participation in Bolivia in particular made that many relevant and interesting topics fall outside this paper's scope. Two of these topics were identified during the field work and I would like to mention them in order for them to be included in future researches. One is the gender relations within the hip hop world, where women represent the minority and seem to be delegitimized as "real" hip hoppers. The other is the extent of the influence that hip hoppers could exert in their audience and society in general, and thus in the processes of change. The present paper will focus only in the intra-group relations where the group under analysis is only composed by men, and on how the hip hoppers might have the aim to change the context but not the actual influence on it.

Additionally, I would also like to mention that the intention to realize a development research from a sociological perspective, although interesting, turned out to be a highly challenging for not saying painful process. Even though I am the first to recognize that the present paper has flaws, for say the least, I hope this attempt inspires other development researches to merge these two perspectives that, in spite of their common grounds, seem to have been away from each other for so long. I believe that, as academicians and development workers this merging will be extremely useful to first understand the visible and latent inequalities and then to try to change them.