

The Lettered Indian of the Bolivian Andes

Keynote Address

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Drawing from a chapter in her prize-winning book, *The Lettered Indian. Race, Nation, and Indigenous Education in Twentieth-Century Bolivia* (2024), Brooke Larson traces the early twentieth-century roots of Aymara peasant activism, which transformed alphabetic literacy, archival documents, and rural school initiatives into potential tools of collective Indigenous empowerment and resistance against the injustices of the neocolonial state.

Keywords: Bolivia, Aymara, Indigenous movements, rural schools, vernacular literacy, Warisata

Basándose en un capítulo de su libro galardonado, *The Lettered Indian. Race, Nation, and Indigenous Education in Twentieth-Century Bolivia* (2024), Brooke Larson investiga las raíces de principios del siglo veinte del activismo campesino aymara, que transformó la lectoescritura alfabética, los documentos de archivo y las iniciativas de escuelas rurales en herramientas potenciales de empoderamiento colectivo indígena y de resistencia contra las injusticias del Estado neocolonial.

Palabras clave: Bolivia, Aymara, movimientos indígenas, escuelas rurales, alfabetización vernácula, Warisata

Inspirando-se em um capítulo de seu livro premiado, *The Lettered Indian. Race, Nation, and Indigenous Education in Twentieth-Century Bolivia* (2024), Brooke Larson traça as raízes do ativismo camponês aymara do início do século vinte, que transformou a alfabetização, documentos arquivados e iniciativas escolares rurais em potenciais ferramentas de empoderamento coletivo indígena e resistência contra as injustiças do Estado neocolonial.

Palavras-chave: Bolívia, Aymara, movimentos indígenas, escolas rurais, alfabetização vernacular, Warisata



Photo by Diane Johnson

Thank you for the opportunity to present some of my recent work to you this evening. Quite frankly, I would have loved to listen to Professor Arthur Whitaker, the distinguished diplomatic historian, give the keynote address tonight on the precarious state of hemispheric affairs at this trying political moment. On the other hand, quite by accident, the topic of my talk tonight resonates with this year's MACLAS conference theme, "The Pedagogies of Possibility." It draws from my recent book, *The Lettered Indian. Race, Nation, and Indigenous Education in Twentieth-Century Bolivia* (2024).

A brief word about the book's origins. It's hard to admit this, but this book was conceived some four decades ago! (So, a word of encouragement to some of you: it's never too late to return to a long-lost project you've always wanted to complete!) My own story behind the origins of this book began around 1989, while browsing in the library stacks of Columbia University's Teachers College. There, I stumbled on a richly documented memoir written by a Bolivian *indigenista* educator named Elizardo Pérez, who chronicled his involvement in the origins of Warisata, an Indian school that was cofounded with local Indigenous people in 1931 (Pérez [1962] 1992). Humble though it once was, this Indian school struck me as a remarkably precocious experiment in (what we might call today) *decolonial* community schooling, which had flourished on the Bolivian Altiplano amidst escalating agrarian conflicts. It arose in that hostile environment some thirty or forty years before the movement of liberation pedagogy and popular education swept through parts of Latin America, thanks in part to the theories and grassroots work of radical educators like Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, and others.

Once I began reading everything I could find on Warisata (which, at the time, wasn't much), I caught the fever. But there were everyday obstacles to overcome. Already facing two book contracts, family obligations, and a busy university schedule, I knew I was in no

shape to take up yet another full-scale book project. On the other hand, I realized that if I didn't get back to Bolivia ASAP, I had little hope of interviewing some of the elders who had lived through Warisata's formative years. So, with my two little kids in tow (but no partner, since he had a biology lab to run in NYC), and a blessed semester's leave, I rushed back to Bolivia in 1990 to try to capture on tape the testimonies of key participants in this school's early history. I also began archival research, which would continue intermittently for years to come.

But once back home from Bolivia, in late Fall 1990, I had to face up to my busy New York schedule. So, alas, the tapes, transcribed materials, and photocopied documents I had collected in Bolivia went into a deep storage, only to be taken out again some twelve or fourteen years later! Who might have guessed it would take that long to get back to work on the project? Certainly, not me! Yet I never lost interest in the original project, and I felt a binding commitment to the people whose testimony I had gathered and to many Bolivian colleagues who were counting on my work.

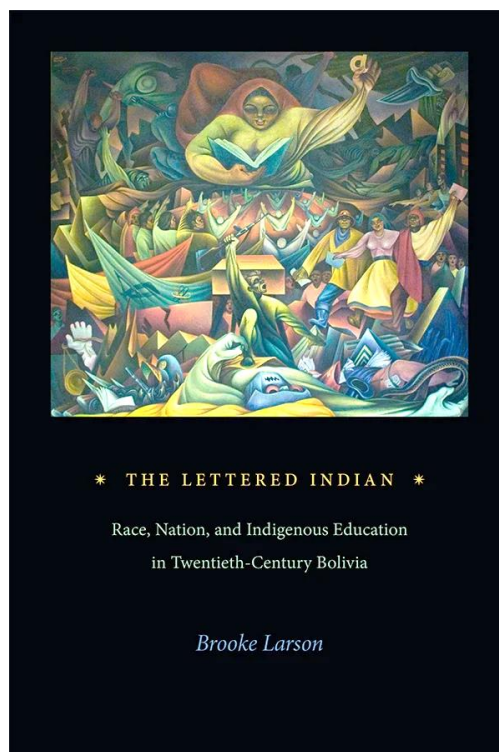
Of course, by the early 2000s, times had changed: the interdisciplinary field of Andean Studies had evolved, and Bolivia was experiencing a wave of popular mobilizations (the 1999 water war, the 2003 gas war, the resurgent *Katarista* movement, culminating in the landslide 2005 election of Evo Morales, etc.). Meanwhile, young Aymara historians and sociologists had organized collective research in their Taller de Historia Oral Andina (THOA). They did path-breaking fieldwork by excavating the voices and memories of Aymara elders about times past, and they discovered archival documents that opened a window into an earlier generation of Aymara peasant activists who had defended their rights to community land and autonomy.

All those developments, together with the passage of time, made me rethink the historiographic parameters of my original research project on Warisata. Reading widely on the theme of Indigenous education helped me to reframe the ethnographic narrative more deeply and to broaden the book's geopolitical and temporal horizons. Eventually, my original focus on Warisata became but one episode (albeit a crucial one) in my book's nearly century-long history of Indigenous-state relations, as viewed primarily through the shifting matrix of race, nation, and Indigenous education.

So, my book, *The Lettered Indian*, is a deep dive into the contested politics of political governance, literacy, and schooling in highland Bolivia during the twentieth century. Conceptually, it probes the double-edged nature of Spanish literacy and schooling in a racially hierarchical, Indian-majority country, where they served as *both* state instruments of racial uplift and cultural assimilation *and* as potential combat weapons in the Aymara cultural armory of mobilization and defense.

The book's title is, of course, an allusion to Ángel Rama's classic study, *The Lettered City* ([1984] 1996), in which imperial statesmen and urban powerbrokers deployed Spanish literacy, laws, and documentation as levers of Spain's colonial bureaucracy in the Andes and elsewhere. Although my book adapts Rama's conceptual premise to understand Liberal state-building and power relations in early twentieth-century Bolivia, it simultaneously inverts the neocolonial narrative to trace Aymara peasant strategies of appropriation and subversion of the dominant culture of letters and laws to defend their communal lands and autonomy. The "lettered Indian" (or "indio letrado," a term used by urban elites to denigrate the literate "paper pusher" or "litigious Indian") is really the hero of my story, as I hope to convince you in the next forty-five minutes or so.

In this talk I want, first, to outline the "structural context" by exploring the dramatic circumstances on the Bolivian Altiplano that produced this extraordinary Indigenous movement in "the time of the hacienda." In part 2, I shift gears from regional context to social agency, by following the paper trails of two itinerant caciques, Aymara community leaders who took up the legal defense of the *ayllu* (or, traditional landholding community) during the 1910s and 20s. And, finally (if you are still with me—maybe get that second cup of coffee?!), I cast an eye on local Indigenous school initiatives that sprang out of the broader Aymara movement for lands and justice. If there's time, I will conclude by highlighting a few features that defined Warisata's decolonial "pedagogy of possibility"—one of the culminating moments in this long saga of Indigenous struggle for letters and schools.



The Confluence of Capitalism and Agrarian Crisis on the Bolivian Altiplano

Let me briefly paint a word picture. Across the Bolivian Altiplano, the late arrival of capitalism began to dramatically alter Bolivia's ideological and political landscape after 1870. Land inflation and the growing urban market for food crops attracted entrepreneurial attention, as wealthy investors in the city of La Paz eyed Indian land and labor as potential commodities in the region's incipient agricultural market. So it was that market capitalism began to insinuate itself into La Paz's "Indian backlands," transforming Aymara ayllu lands into a scarce, valuable, and conflict-ridden commodity. Roving capitalists coveted fertile crop land and high-altitude pastures, and land speculators seized advantage of the northern Altiplano's concentration of ayllu lands, potential pools of servile *colonos*, and its proximity to the mines and booming city of La Paz.

The commodification of Indian land came relatively late to the region, but when it did arrive, it triggered agrarian upheaval and political backlash—much in the way that Karl Polanyi's classic concept of the "Great Transformation" (1944) captured the social trauma of early capitalism's agrarian dislocations in parts of industrializing Europe

On the Bolivian Altiplano, the main source of institutional violence, however, sprang from the modernizing Liberal state. Its 1874 Agrarian Reform law (known as the Ley de Exvinculación) launched a massive divestiture movement that effectively threw open traditional ayllu landholdings to urban land speculators. Probably one-third of all remaining communal landholdings were swallowed up by haciendas or parceled out to smallholders between 1880 and 1930. Hardest hit were the ayllus that had managed to survive the transition to republican rule in places in the department of La Paz like Taraqu, Pacajes, Jesús de Machaca, and in pockets of Omasuyos. Those communities were still governed by their traditional authorities (*caciques*, *mallkus*, or *hilakatas*) and their appointed representatives (the *apoderados*).

Many years later, Jesuit anthropologist Xavier Albó (1999) reflected on this bitter paradox of latifundismo flourishing in the age of Liberal modernity. As Bolivian elites praised the glories of free enterprise, the nobility of the wage-earners freed from the land, and the miracles of market capitalism, they were unleashing a tidal wave of semifeudal latifundismo. In its wake, many Aymara *comunarios* were dispossessed, evicted, or reduced to servile dependence. In its search for an agrarian utopia of modern farming estates, Albó wrote, the Liberal oligarchy had become the midwife of a grotesque rebirth of agrarian feudalism that would endure in many regions for the next several decades. This, then, was the traumatic context that catalyzed Aymara political resistance and

eventually turned the region into a zone of low-intensity warfare (punctuated by occasional uprisings).

Narratively, my Chapter 2, “Lettered Aymara: The Insurgent Politics of Literacy and Schooling,” explores the rise of a roving band of “lettered Indians”—a mobile network of rustic, self-taught men (many of them, monolingual Aymara speakers), whose work and struggle brought them into contact with the litigious routines and documentary culture of literate Spanish-speaking elites. Their immediate political demand was for the right of collective self-representation “before all branches of government,” as advertised in an intriguing 1919 newspaper item in *El Norte*, which displayed two caciques in their ceremonial garb. Deploying print capitalism, mass petitions, and lawsuits, and communicating through their “appointed representatives,” they were prepared to speak truth to power, on their own terms, in the public sphere and before the state authorities.

In confronting the lettered city, those Aymara-speaking protagonists raise fascinating questions, both substantive and methodological, for the researcher. How did the caciques (few of whom could independently read or write) navigate the interstitial spaces between orality and literacy? Improvise a set of vernacular literacy practices? Incorporate colonial documents and other lettered artifacts into their community’s ritual life and oral memory? Use script and print media to circulate news, broach legal questions, mobilize mass petitions, or elaborate covert plans of action?

Such questions are usually the purview of Andean ethnographers and social linguists, on whose work I have drawn extensively in my study. But as a social historian, I have found it possible to elicit answers to some of those ethnographic questions from the archival documents that were either produced, or provoked, by Indigenous people at the height of their documentary campaign to derail the Liberal state’s assault on their land claims. Their vernacular literacy practices become more evident for the period after 1910, when local land disputes scaled up into inter-regional strategies of political and legal contention. Ayllus began pooling their meager resources and entrusting their legal cases to a sprawling network of “caciques-apoderados”—an informal guild of Indian activists, most of whom were self-taught specialists, adept at navigating the labyrinths of Bolivian law, bureaucracy, and notarial culture.

Here, I focus briefly on the ayllu land question because, as many historians have shown, it cuts to the core of this cacique movement, as it mobilized and began to threaten the very legitimacy of the expanding hacienda regime on the northern Altiplano.

Ironically, two rather minor judicial decrees from 1881 and 1883 provided the catalyst for organized resistance. They technically granted legal reprieve to Indians who could “prove” to the court that they were the direct descendants of the original owners of lands (*tierras*

de origen), once granted by the Spanish crown. Legal proof would require a notarized and ratified copy of the original colonial title-deed (*título de composición y venta*), issued by the Spanish crown centuries earlier. In the wake of those decrees, the inflationary value of colonial title-deeds and other notarial documents spiked, spawning an underground network that trafficked in peasant political paperwork.

By 1900, as latifundismo spread aggressively into traditional ayllu areas, this new breed of lettered Indians began scouring the archives, notary offices, and local community archives for colonial title-deeds (or any old documents, for that matter), which might serve as ammunition in their community's lawsuits. Eventually, as the paperwork piled up, cacique petitioners began to demand that *all* existing land-titles and disputed property boundaries (including the false title claims of landowners) be subject to a formal government review (*revisita*).

To take but one case: a 1926 Indian petition was delivered to Congress, signed by “the humble caciques of the nation.” It basically demanded the “restitution of our original lands.”¹ Despite the document's conciliatory tone, there was no mistaking its radical implications. Indeed, by the 1920s the cacique movement was challenging the very legitimacy of Bolivia's private landholding regime.

A Tale of Two Caciques-Apoderados, around 1914–1915

Shifting gears, I want to follow the paper trail of two Aymara caciques-apoderados, who participated in this frenzied search for archival documents in their larger effort to halt the annexation of communal lands.

My first case focuses on the intriguing origins of the cacique-apoderado movement by tracking Martín Vázquez's expedition to the archive in Lima and the political aftermath during late 1913 and early 1914. My discussion in this section draws from a 1915 criminal court case and other documents, housed in the departmental Archivo de La Paz.²

Briefly, the story of Vázquez's archive expedition goes like this: hailing from the ayllu of Illata (province of Pacajes), in late 1913, Martín set out across the high plateau and trekked down through the mountains to the coastal city of Lima (a journey of some 1500 kms, or, about two weeks by foot). His mission was to gather colonial title-deeds and other documents from Lima's archive on behalf of the Illata ayllu. Traveling by mule train in the company of two mestizo lawyers, Vázquez arrived in Lima, where he gathered archival

¹ Archivo Histórico del Honorable Congreso Nacional de Bolivia, La Paz. 12 November 1926.

² For sources and details, see *The Lettered Indian*, 81–88.)

documents, hand copied them, packed the papers in his saddlebags, and then headed back to Bolivia.

What happened next must be extrapolated from court records, a tricky proposition at best, but there are a few intriguing clues. On his return to the city of La Paz, Vázquez (who apparently could not read or write) worked with a local scribe to compose and dispatch a printed circular (*boletín*) announcing that “ancient and authentic titles from the time of the King of Spain” had just arrived from Peru. Furthermore, notarized copies of said documents could be purchased for just “a few centavos.” In the 1915 trial, Vázquez was accused by the court of collecting “huge sums of money [that Indians spent] on . . . useless publications.”

What, we might well wonder, are we seeing here? The market inflation of phony “contraband papers” circulating in an underground Andean peasant market? Or, the tactical deployment of vernacular literacy practices and archival documents to mobilize a far-flung network of Andean activists in opposition to the Liberal oligarchic state? Interpretively, the evidence cuts both ways.

The story continues... As the news of Martín Vázquez’s archive expedition spread, caciques and their apoderados began converging on the city of La Paz. Violating the city’s discriminatory laws, clusters of Aymara men gathered on city street corners to examine or purchase copies of the documents. But this spontaneous activity was no mere commodity market in which mestizo scribes reproduced boilerplate colonial documents to sell to gullible Indians.

This was an Aymara project of collective self-empowerment through appropriation and subversion of the archive, notary, and documentary record in the name of Indian justice and retribution. The potential value of those circulating documents prompted Vázquez to convene an ad hoc “textual community”—a term I borrow from the medieval historian Brian Stock (1990), by way of ethnohistorian Joanne Rappaport (1990)—which opened an oral / literate space in which to negotiate the interpretive meanings and political implications of those documents. Indeed, the Aymara assembly, held in the city of La Paz in early March 1914, was also the site where the collective interpellation of the archive documents was generated *in the collective act of writing*. For, the caciques began drawing up a mass petition (later described in court as a rebellious “manifesto”) that spelled out some of their demands and concerns. But the very act of drawing up a manifesto was a dangerous enterprise in the eyes of the oligarchy, all the more so amidst escalating land conflicts.

Around midnight, the Indian assembly was busted, Vázquez arrested, and the documents confiscated. Among them was the assembly’s unfinished manifesto. We might never have

known what the clandestine Indian assembly was up to, had the seized manifesto not surfaced “as prime evidence,” a year later, in the 1915 court case. The *assembleístas* had apparently drawn up a partial list of collective demands, including the abolition of colonial tribute (which was still collected in many regions) and *corvée* labor obligations (digging irrigation ditches, clearing roads, carrying mail, etc.).

Yet there was a curious elision in the Aymara script: apparently nothing was said about the restitution of *ayllu* lands. Had the authors decided to withdraw this most radical of demands? Or, was the land question left off the list of Indigenous demands simply because the manifesto was seized by police before it was completed?

We’ll probably never know, but what seemed to alarm the court most was the power of the Aymara communal memory to invoke the letters and laws of colonial archive. The profusion of copied or notarized paperwork was viewed by the court as proof that the *caciques* were stoking the fires of Indian rebellion. On the basis of that hearsay evidence, Vázquez was charged with committing “crimes, tumult, and chimerical vindications,” and sent off to prison.

The other narrative thread profiles the famous *cacique-apoderado*, Santos Marka T’ula, a man who stepped into the breach after the arrest of Martín Vázquez. Indeed, things only escalated after 1915. Over the next several years, the Bolivian Andes were crisscrossed with archival paper trails, as Marka T’ula (now entitled as a hereditary “*cacique-apoderado general*”) took up the mantle of collecting colonial title-deeds, not only to replicate the papers seized and confiscated in the police raid, but to amass and circulate a variety of new documentary material.

Although he could neither read nor write, Marka T’ula soon became the principal author and signatory on many mass petitions during the 1920s. He would often listen to a document being read aloud and translated by his scribe, Leandro Condori Chura, and then dictate the contents of his own political ideas. He carried within himself memorized fragments of key colonial title-deeds, laws, and decrees. Remembering back to their collaborative work, Marka T’ula’s scribe recalled how they jointly read and composed notarial Spanish-language documents—navigating the oral / scribal divide as if they were two individuals folded into one.

This collaborative act of reading and writing documents proved ever more risky, however. After 1915, Marka T’ula too became a marked man in the outlying provinces around La Paz. Closely watched, stalked, and persecuted, this *cacique-apoderado* (and his bodyguards) moved stealthily by night, along mountainous backroads, while he smuggled contraband papers between the state archive, notary office, and courthouse. Arrested and imprisoned in 1914, 1917, and 1918, Marka T’ula often resorted to smuggling documents

with his trusted messengers (*chasquis*) through rural back channels. And following his release from prison in late 1918, Marka T'ula continued the “work of reconstructing his documentary holdings,” as he scoured the land for “all the ancient deeds belonging to” Indigenous claimants.

The caciques’ incessant search for old papers, and the reverence with which they were guarded and read, reminds us that those heirloom documents were not merely inflated currency in escalating court battles over land. Anthropologists have studied the centrality of the local archive in the internal cultural workings of community governance, social norms, and ritual life of rural Andean villages. As ritual artifacts, local archival documents also provided the symbolic markers that kept alive the collective memory of community—its past obligations to the colonial state, chiefly lineages, history of legal battles, rotational communal labor (*faenas*), and/or ancient territorial claims.

Remembering back to the “times of the caciques,” the *escribano* Leandro Condori Chura described how he and his kinsmen routinely blessed their documents (“*hay que hacer wilancha*”—ritual sacrifice, they would say). Before the cacique would appear in court to defend the ancestral lands, for example, the community might pay homage to their colonial documents, sometimes by sacrificing a sheep or llama and sprinkling its blood on the sacred site, where the documents were ritually extracted from the local vault to be read or recited aloud. No less important, ritual worship of the village archive itself was meant to stave off the danger of collective cultural amnesia, to prevent the community from losing its ontological moorings in times of great disturbance or rapid social change.

In such times of disturbance, as I have argued, the cacique archive could be forged into a community instrument of combat. At the height of his powers, yet subject to frequent harassment, Santos Marka T'ula turned not to ritual sacrifice, but (perhaps ironically) to the promise of Bolivia’s National Archive, where provincial authorities could not steal or confiscate Indigenous paperwork. On several occasions in the early 1920s, Marka T'ula and his entourage transported bundles of old documents, mostly gathered from villages and local archives, to the city of Sucre (a classic example of Rama’s colonial “lettered city”). There, he entrusted his documentary treasures to the National Archive, to be kept safe from the ubiquitous document thief (or “paper snatcher”). To this day, the Archive’s documentary collection, *Tierras e Indios*, contains hundreds of documents, some of it tangible testimony to the cacique movement and its lettered crusade for justice in the early twentieth century.³

³ The National Archive has undergone massive reorganization in recent years, so the fate of that documentary collection is unknown to me.

From the Archive to the School

There is a final twist to this story, as I shift the focus back to the issue of Indian education—a somewhat brighter topic. For, if the archive’s patrimonial documents offered the false hope of justice, it was the humble rural schoolhouse, *la escuela de primeras letras*, that promised to deliver the power of literacy to the next generation of Aymara leaders.

In hindsight, of course, this axiom seems rather obvious. Yet until the 1980s and 90s, most Bolivian scholars who studied the history of education rarely looked beyond church and state educational policies and debates, particularly *indigenista* discourses oriented around ideas of “national pedagogy” that invariably promised to solve Bolivia’s so-called “Indian problem.” Lost to view in this prevailing state-centric historiography is the premise that rural communities might well have harbored ulterior motives and become a driving force behind school expansion, beginning in the 1910s and 20s (uneven and tenuous, though it was).

Narrow Eurocentrism gave way in the 1980s, however, when a few Bolivian scholars began to excavate the voices and experiences of rural Aymara elders who were alive when the first literacy instructor came through their villages. Several Bolivian scholars gathered Aymara testimonies from old men who remembered out loud how, “in contraband, we had to educate our children.” Or, how “we learned clandestinely . . . to read and write.” Or, how “we founded our school” (see Larson 93–94).

Thanks to those earlier ethnographic studies and my own archival research, I began to piece together a picture of the prosaic “alphabet school” as a potential site of subversive literacy and political activism within the larger narrative of the caciques’ legal battle over their ayllu land rights. A few archival documents hint at this countervailing, subaltern story: rural schoolhouses, founded by communities, which became targets of violence during the 1920s. That subplot may be extracted from the national and provincial archives through multiple Indian petitions demanding legal protection (*amparo y garantía*) from the state, in the face of mounting landlord violence to their school endeavors. The value of literacy and schools increased over the 1920s, so that by 1928 and 1929, Indigenous petitions for “ynstrucción pública” were beginning to eclipse the earlier cacique campaign for the restitution of ayllu lands.

Beyond some anecdotal evidence, we have few reliable stats on the scale of this “underground” Aymara school movement, but there are intriguing clues. In 1927, for example, the Ministry of Education reported a profusion of independent (“private”) village schools—“hundreds of school establishments” that were founded during the 1920s. A 1931 report estimated that 187 Indigenous schools existed in the Omasuyos province

alone and as many as 500 schools in the vast department of La Paz. Trying to explain this feverish pro-school activity, an official school inspector reported what Indians had told him during his tour: “We want schools,” they had said, “so that our children will know the laws and thus will not permit any abuse.” Another person added: “so that our children are not the victims of the lies and injustices that we must suffer.”

A couple of years later, an official from the Ministry of Education tried to interpret for his peers the Indians’ fervent desire for education: “The Indian does not promote the education and the instruction of his race to improve his conditions and natural tendencies. . . . His concept [of education] is different. He sees in the Indigenous READING MAN [*EL INDIO LEÍDO*] the means to defend his interests. . . . For the Indians are convinced that they are the main victims of the parochial judges and corregidores and other lettered officials [*letrados*] in their ordinary life” (see Larson 98–101). A revelation to the contemporary urban school inspector, it is hardly surprising to us that, in ethnohistorical hindsight, the cultural power and practice of literacy lay at the heart of Aymara aspirations for formal education.

Warisata

It was in this political climate, following two decades of Aymara political struggle for land and schools, that we see the emergence of a remarkable intercultural experiment in Indian schooling, erected in the heartland of the Aymara Altiplano. I am referring, of course, to the Escuela-Ayllu of Warisata, which was founded in 1931 by an Aymara literacy teacher named Avelino Siñani and a progressive white educator, named Elizardo Pérez. The Indigenous school center flourished during the 1930s—through the trauma of the Chaco War, the postwar regime of military socialism, and the flowering of a radical movement of socialists and *indigenistas*, many of whom became involved in this communitarian school project.

The Lettered Indian delves into this school’s remarkable history at some length in chapters 3 and 4. But in the few remaining minutes, I’d like to simply highlight three institutional achievements which, to my mind, distinguish Warisata as a landmark pedagogical experiment in Latin America’s history of progressive and popular education.

What structural elements turned the Escuela-Ayllu into a beacon of light in a dark age of ethnic violence and racial discrimination on the Bolivian Altiplano?

First, Warisata was an intercultural community-based school, founded on the principle of Indigenous self-governance and based on the traditions of ayllu reciprocity and democracy. It was co-governed by the Parlamento de Amautas, an assembly that gathered each week to tend to the school’s administrative issues, as well as to discuss matters of

grave concern, for example, the crisis of the Chaco war, in which Aymara and Quechua Indians were being conscripted into the army to fight their Guarani “brothers” on the other side of the border with Paraguay. In later years, the governing assembly confronted the growing threat of *gamonal* violence against the school. As such, the assembly became an oratorical safe space where Aymara-speaking elders could talk openly about racial oppression, sometimes in the presence of a visiting government official. But the exercise of free speech was intrinsically dangerous for Aymara leaders, perennially accused of stirring up a “race war.” And as political and agrarian tensions deepened over the 1930s, local landowners and conservative statesmen warned of a brewing conspiracy to create, not just a school, but an Indian “*republiqueta*” on the Altiplano. By 1940, the school was condemned as a nest of communist teachers and organizers.

Second, during its heyday, Warisata became a regional enclave of Indian emancipation. Its spatial outreach and reciprocal relations with small outlying villages up and down the mountainous landscape reimagined an ethnic geography (an alternative inter-ayllu “free zone”) within the heart of Omasuyo’s hacienda zone. Had the Escuela-Ayllu contained its outreach, it might well have survived (or else died a natural death of institutional atrophy). Instead, its pedagogy of Indian liberation spread to outlying areas, where small villages voted to join the school experiment through relations of mutual dependence and reciprocity. Over the decade, Warisata’s influence spread far and wide, drawing visiting delegations of Indians from other regions, as well as a stream of progressive white teachers from the city, as well as from Peru, Chile, Mexico, and other Latin American countries.

Finally, just a word about Warisata’s progressive “pedagogy of possibility,” which ruptured the neocolonial divide between the state’s policy of separate rural schools (designed to train up an Indian workforce in agriculture or menial labor) and urban schools (designed to prepare white and mestizo youth for skilled work or mental labor). Warisata’s educators repudiated that entrenched educational policy by designing a full “active” curriculum that integrated physical labor in construction and farm work, artisanal crafts, and intellectual classroom study, including bilingual literacy in its elementary school program. In its day, this progressive curriculum challenged Bolivia’s segregated school policies, neglect of rural schooling, and brittle racial order.

I elaborate these achievements, not to enshrine the history of Warisata, because it finally did find its place in Bolivia’s nationalist and Indianist iconography in the late twentieth century, and particularly under the plurinational state of Evo Morales. Yet today, its iconic status in Bolivia is uncertain. With Bolivia’s recent rightward electoral turn, the value of

Warisata's cultural capital is sinking, just as the MAS's pluriethnic educational reforms are now under attack by the new governing regime.⁴

But on a wider scale, I think it is important for scholars and teachers to recognize, particularly in the context of this conference's theme, that there is a rich genealogy of innovative, liberatory school efforts, not only in the Bolivian Andes, but across other parts of Latin America. They didn't begin with Paulo Freire's noble work in the 1970s, but often sprang up at the margins of society, among Indigenous and African-descended people engaged in their own quiet quests for the dignity of basic literacy and schooling.

That Warisata flourished on the Bolivian Altiplano for almost ten long years, against all odds, owed much to its cacique forbears, who had fought for their rights to land, literacy, and schooling during the early 1900s. The Escuela-Ayllu was a striking legacy of that broader Indigenous struggle for social justice. But that Warisata was assaulted at its height, and then dismantled and desecrated by the conservative oligarchy in the early 1940s, is powerful testimony to the fragility of emancipatory pedagogies under racially stratified, authoritarian regimes.

Is this history perhaps a cautionary tale for "pedagogies of possibility" in our own turbulent times?

Thank you.

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⁴ MAS: Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement for Socialism) party that elected Evo Morales in 2005 and remained in power until the 2025 elections.

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