Introduction

In the text surrounding the following photos, I consider the movements between periphery and center as a visual technique, a metaphor for the work of the anthropologist, and within the context of globalization, a determining facet of contemporary human experience. The work centers on Luis, an Aymara boy whose family I have known since before he was born, and follows his growth from a child in a small Altiplano village near Tiwanaco (Tiwanaku) to a young man living in a periurban barrio (neighborhood) of El Alto, Bolivia. My images of Luis span 15 years, illustrating his movements from interior to exterior, center to periphery. These images document the growth of a young migrant and the skills he has acquired in order to sustain himself. Beginning on a farm and then moving to the city, we recognize the multiple relations affecting his decisions, and can visualize how they mirror similar experiences for other migrants caught in the same back-and-forth movement, the warps and wefts that create the fabric of their lives.

Luis was born to Basilia in her parents’ home in the Tiwanaku valley during the spring of 1996. I had met Basilia earlier during my initial fieldwork when I moved into the home where she and her two brothers (Alvaro and Guillermo) and two sisters lived in El Alto, Bolivia.1 At that time, Basilia worked in La Paz at night, selling hamburgers at a corner kiosk near the central cemetery, which is close to where she regularly attended an Evangelical church. One evening, in August 1995, she was sexually assaulted by a leader in her congregation. I remember when her brothers found the perpetrator and brought him to the house to discuss whether he would marry Basilia or not, since she was pregnant. The man refused and walked out. Despite her family’s insistence, Basilia did not want to marry him either, and she confided in me that she was thinking about having an abortion.

In the end, Basilia moved back to the campo (countryside) with her parents to help them run the farm and to carry her child to term. There, Basilia gave birth to Luis and raised him in her family’s agricultural traditions. As Luis grew older, Basilia encouraged him to attend an urban school and split his time between farm and city. Today, Luis and Basilia live together in a barrio located along the outskirts of El Alto where (having dropped out of high school) he apprentices in his uncle’s carpentry workshop. To help make ends meet, Basilia prepares lunches for construction workers, drivers, and residents in the peripheral neighborhoods of El Alto.

Background

Throughout my research, I employed photography to document the lives of Aymara migrants in El Alto as...
they move between the barrio and the campo surrounding Lake Titicaca (Crowder 2003, 2007). Particularly, I have focused my wide-angle lenses on life around the family home in El Alto and the surrounding neighborhood, photographing the mundane details of life, including eating, sleeping, washing clothes, and preparing food (Crowder 2011). Such wide angles provide the context for each subject and demonstrate the relationship I have with each person, allowing me into his or her personal space in order to make the image. Throughout this process, my camera is a part of my presence and an integral facet of my research, both allowing me to assess and analyze social and cultural dynamics in ways that words cannot, and also providing a means to return value to my research participants (Marion 2010). For instance, I return my photos to participants in albums, which have over the years generated many extensive conversations, ones I could have never had with them in the past, but with the passage of time are now suitable for discussion.

In other words, as our relationships have grown, their trust in me has also increased, so they tell me things they never shared with me before. For example, images of community functions or family gatherings depict neighbors or relatives, many of whom I did not know early on in the research, but over time became acquainted with as I learned their stories. However, only after some passage of time, and using the images as triggers, did they reveal more personal, private stories I never heard before, such as infidelities, gossip about wealth, suggestions of political power plays, and the inevitable discussion about what they really thought about me and my work when I was not present. With time as a buffer, the images served new purposes in mining further ethnographic data and provided patches to holes in the cloth of the narrative I was weaving about life in El Alto. Many of these images generated such feedback by showing what I had “seen” in a medium that invited and triggered participants’ own emotional and informational content. Photos, in general, do not come with narration. They are not linear. Instead, they invite reflection and reminiscence.

The images of Luis in this photo essay represent a much larger body of ethnographic work, and while he has not been central to my research himself, his family have been the most significant participants. While recently reviewing my collection of images, I realized just how constant Luis’s presence has been, which makes his migration story all the more compelling since I had not intentionally focused on him until now. Almost 16 years after his birth, I consider Luis in this essay because the series of images traces various threads in the family fabric, exposing wrinkles I have overlooked as they strive to make a better life in Bolivia.

The trigger for reviewing my El Alto work came as I transitioned from analog film to digital photography, and needed to scan (digitize) my collection of negatives and slides for archiving and cross-referencing with my years of field notes. During this laborious exercise, I began seeing relationships I had not considered earlier and asking new questions about the images themselves. How is Luis’s rural upbringing affected by his urban family? How has his relationship with the city evolved? How have he and Basilia worked together to change the course of their lives?

Several issues had simultaneously taken place that accounted for Luis’s peripheral positioning within the research and larger set of photographs. First, once Basilia left the house in El Alto, she and Luis were not regular characters in our urban life, and I only saw them when we traveled to the countryside, thus the images are mostly farm-centered. Second, at the time I was making images, I was interested in the lives of migrants living in the city, trying to understand how their social networks and family ties affected health-care decisions (see Wayland and Crowder 2002). In the first few months, Basilia was not traveling to the city with Luis for checkups or well-woman visits. If anything, they remained in the campo, rarely visiting us in the barrio.

Last, and perhaps most significantly, Luis appeared with Basilia in the early years of my research because he was dependent upon her, and as he matured and my visits became shorter and more sporadic, images of him alone increased, but they were mostly all still rural-based. Not until Basilia decided that he was old enough to live with his cousins in La Paz for middle school did Luis’s world begin to change, and I recognized that his migratory behaviors were exactly what I was interested...
in observing, exploring, and documenting, which is integral to an image-based practice.

The following images illustrate that even ancillary photos (i.e., images peripheral to the primary research) provide context as well as cultural content (ethnographic information) that may not immediately be apparent at the time they were made. My selection of such images from Luis’s life, arranged in chronological order, unpack stories, processes, and relationships that may have otherwise been overlooked if I had not revisited the body of work with new questions generated by continued fieldwork.

Captions for the Photos

As a visual ethnographer, I want to strike a balance between text and image, although the photographer in me prioritizes the image and resolves the cultural details with supplemental paragraphs of words, which complement the composition of each image. During my selection process, I initially chose photos that were both compositionally strong and narratively expressive, and that had to have Luis in them, somewhere. I found and sorted through more than 75 disparate celluloid images and two hundred digital ones that fit these criteria, labeling the strongest ones as “keepers” and placing them in a folder for further review. From these, I looked for those reflecting a significant moment in Luis’s life or when he wanted to engage in the photo-making process. The culling continued until only one image represented an event or a period within the entire chronology.

Once in order, I began writing about each photo, reviewing field notes about specific events and places to ensure my details were correct, and developing a story arc upon which to place them. My intent was that the text would provide background and personal information to expand Luis’s story beyond the frame, and explain how many different networks of people ultimately affect his life’s path. It became apparent that some pairings of images/text did not hold together well with the others, so I rewrote the text or removed the pair altogether. What remained were 12 pairs of images with text that illustrate the relationships in the life of one Aymara boy and how these relationships have shaped him into who he is today. An exception is the final image, which I did not take, but chose to include because it illustrates Luis and his family with me in Alvaro’s house in El Alto. Doing so acknowledges my role in the research and photographic process, as well as complements our long-term relationship and mutual respect for each other. Furthermore, in making decisions about his own life, Luis chose to participate in the project and develop our own relationship.
Basilia Seven Months Pregnant with Luis in El Alto
(February 1996)

Basilia asked me to take this photo of her, alone, in the
courtyard of the house following a group photo of the
family members celebrating Carnival in El Alto. Family
photos at various celebrations had become routine since
my arrival. Often, I took photos of the individual families,
like Ines (Basilia’s oldest sister) and her husband with their
children, or Alvaro with Silvia and their daughters.
Alvaro, Guillermo (evangelical brother), and Xavier
(oldest brother who lives in the campo) wanted some
photos of just “the guys” and then some of “the girls.” As
it turned out, three of the women were pregnant at the
time: Silvia, Frederica (Xavier’s wife), and Basilia. What I
did not understand at the time was that Basilia wanted to
use this image to document the change that was about to
occur in her life. Even further from my imagination was
how these images would later affect my research and
thinking about the use of photography in ethnography.
Reviewing these images together ten years later, Alvaro
and his siblings discussed the family politics that pushed
Basilia to the farm and the perspectives various members
of the family had about that moment in time, how she may
have not been raped, her appeal for an abortion, and the
decision to keep the child and raise him with the parents.
As her pregnancy progressed, Basilia moved back to Tiwanaku to be with her parents, where she could rely on support and regular help from them and from her brother Xavier and his wife, Frederica, who lived nearby. Frederica had unexpectedly had her baby in the taxi as she and Xavier went to visit their compadres del matrimonio (godparents of the wedding) in La Paz on New Year’s Day. Luis was born naturally in Tiwanaku with Basilia’s family attending. A few months later, Luis became the center of attention for all of Alvaro’s daughters whenever we visited the campo. In this photo, taken in Basilia’s room a week after his birth, Beatrice (Alvaro’s oldest daughter) hovers over the bed with her cousin Leocadia (standing), Basilia, and Luis. This is the first image I have of Luis, since I was not present during his birth.
Luis Is Baptized in La Paz (June 1996)

Luis is held by a “Gringa” while being baptized in La Paz (where all of the other children in the family of that generation have been baptized). Basilia asked the Gringa researcher to be her “co-madre” because she thought the Gringa would have the means to help her support Luis over the years, as is appropriate for godparents to do. The Gringa agreed in order to cultivate trust with the family, and so that they would help her develop further contacts within the community and expand her social network. Once she completed her research, however, the Gringa did not maintain contact with Basilia or Luis, although they have tried to contact her many times (and thus her image is intentionally anonymized to protect her identity). 5

Only a few close family members who live in La Paz attended Luis’s baptism, but many other guests traveled to the campo for the following celebration. 6 Baptisms and other family-based rituals are excellent opportunities for ethnographic photography as immediate and extended family members usually attend and expect to be photographed or videotaped (depending upon expense). While at the church, I only photographed our family as to not irritate the photographers there trying to make a living; however, once at the house, I was given free rein to document everyone enjoying the festivities.
Just as Luis’s cousins stood over him after he was born (see “Basilia and Her Nieces with Luis (April 1996)”), here Luis, his cousins, and Uncle Guillermo visit the newest child born to Xavier and Frederica, their seventh child. The parents will not baptize this baby until they find someone to sponsor him through fictive kin ties—compadrazco, which may take some time, since they have only baptized half of their children up until this point. David stands on Luis’s left; the two children are only three months apart in age and are inseparable at this moment in time. Growing up together in the campo, they are given joint responsibility of looking after sheep and helping their parents with small chores. Only later will Luis move to El Alto to attend school, while David will remain with his parents in the campo and finish school in the village.
In the early winter months, just after the late harvest, the crops are prepared for storage. This is the season for making chuño, as the nights on the Altiplano become bitter cold, perfect weather for freeze-drying potatoes. Fava beans are another staple of the Andes, but unlike chuño, these require minimum preparation, mostly threshing. Even though he is only three years old, Luis is already helping his mother and family with processing the fava beans, beating the hulls with a fashioned stick that is a cross between a broom and a spatula. Basilia sits nearby, further separating the beans, teaching Luis about the agriculture that supports their family.

Luis did not hesitate to be in the photographs. He was intrigued with “the Gringo” who visited them in Tiwanaku, as this was the first time he had met me, and did not quite know what I was doing out there. (Even though I have known him since his birth, this was the first opportunity for us to work together.) I made a number of other photos of him “working” in the fields with his grandparents, aunts, and uncles, but this image demonstrates his constant relationship with his mother—she was there with him, directing and teaching him.
Luis and David (June 2005)

Upon returning to visit the family in the campo, the kids immediately asked me to photograph them, and subsequently everyone else present. Over the years, we have documented our relationships in images, taking group shots as well as individual ones at family gatherings. The kids would take their turns posing for me, the girls together, then the younger boys, and then the older siblings and cousins. Luis and David were now nine years old and I did not even recognize them when I first arrived! They were in the middle of separating oca (a tuber), a task they did not mind postponing to have their photo made. Now older and in school, Luis and David had had their photo taken before, usually by authority figures. With that in mind, they stood at attention, rigid with hands by their sides, solemn. Like soldiers, these young boys were taught to obey their teachers, memorize their lessons, and stand at attention for photographs. I thought about asking them to relax, or telling a joke to make them laugh and smile, but realized I was imposing my understanding of what makes a “good” photograph, so I snapped the image and thanked them for indulging me. When we were done, they all crowded around me, and we scrolled through the images on my small digital camera. I would make prints of these images when I returned to La Paz, and if I could not personally deliver them shortly, I would give them to a family member who would.
Before we ate lunch, Luis joined Alvaro, Guillermo, and me in their parents’ room as we talked about the family, the farm, and their neighbors. We sat on the beds and chatted, drinking soda and catching up. Luis wanted to know what had become of his “madrina” (the Gringa), since he had not heard from her in years. The room became rather still as they all waited to listen to my answer. I realized that the gravity of the situation required an answer I did not have for them, since I had lost contact with “the Gringa” as well. In the Andes—like other places in Latin America—compadrazco is a means for extending one’s support network through a family-like relationship. When Basilia asked the Gringa to be godmother for Luis, Basilia held certain expectations that she would help provide Luis with an education, clothes, or anything else he may need throughout his life. Even though asking a foreigner to hold a position as madrina is often risky—because he or she is not immediately available for help when needed—Basilia asked her anyway, assuming she would be attentive when possible. For Luis, knowing someone is there to support and help him, beyond the boundaries of his immediate home, augments his sense of security whether it is intermittent or not. As a padrino myself, I am often called upon to purchase clothes, books, and food, as well as make donations to family purchases. For anthropologists, these are mutually exploitative/beneficial relationships, as we gain access to people’s lives while being an exclusive resource in theirs.
Late one night, I arrived at the farmhouse to find Luis and his mother hastily preparing a poultice before going to bed. Basilia mumbled that she was not feeling well, pointed at her head and rolled her eyes, like she was crazy. As Luis beat the egg whites with a fork, he explained that his mother had just fallen down the stairs outside, from the second story, and had bruises from her head down her neck, back, and around her chest. I did not know what to do, help them or photograph the process, as I immediately saw this as both medical anthropology in action and a humanitarian moment. I opted for the camera and positioned myself while they laughed at my incessant desire to make images of their lives. After a series of shots, I put away the camera and helped Luis dress Basilia’s wounds.

They worked silently together, tearing strips from saved newspapers, spreading them across the floor, and painting them with the whipped egg whites. Covering her in papier-mâché, I helped Luis place the strips on his mother’s back, neck, arms, and head. Luis picked at Basilia’s hair near her left temple. Before he dashed her with a piece of wet newsprint, I pulled the hair back to see she had a severe laceration across her scalp.

“In the morning the bruises will be gone,” Luis explained. “These cold, wet eggs will suck the heat out of them [the bruises], they should feel better tomorrow.”

Together we placed two more dressings on her face and then wrapped her head with a wool scarf, fixing it with safety pins to her sweater. Now it was time to sleep. When I saw Basilia the next morning, she had removed the dressings and placed a coca leaf on each of her temples and forehead, explaining to me that these would continue the healing process.

For this image, I used a wide-angle focal length and filled the frame with Luis and Basilia working together in the context of their living area; I positioned myself very close to, and at the same level as, the subjects because I wanted the viewer to feel like a part of the situation. The inevitable trade-off with such a lens choice is its distortion, creating an unsettling aesthetic. This is the same room in which “Basilia and Her Nieces with Luis (April 1996)” was taken 11 years earlier.
Luis the Butcher (May 2007)

Luis’s successful urban existence depends upon his mother’s rural subsistence. Basilia has little money to support Luis in El Alto (where he lives with his cousins and goes to school), so sometimes she has to cash in one of her four-legged, cloven-hoofed savings bonds to help him meet his expenses and potentially give her a return on her investment. Early one morning, Basilia walked to the family’s corral and perused the flock; selecting one sheep by its ear, she guided it back to the house with her. Luis and his grandmother held the animal to the ground while Basilia slit its throat.

They expeditiously prepared the animal’s carcass, removing the feet, skin, head, and entrails, saving each part, systematically, resolutely. Luis was asked to prepare the organs, drain the blood, and clean up the site. Later in the afternoon, Basilia divided the meat, and Luis took a portion of it with him to the city where he sold it at his aunt’s store. Basilia figured that such sales would provide Luis with enough money for his expenses and leave some left over for her when he returned the following week.

Given my experience with butchering animals in the campo, I had not previously witnessed a child participate to such an extent as this before, so I was not prepared to make an image like this. Therefore, I had to work quickly and capture Luis using the knife within the context of the courtyard of the farmhouse. Luis and I talked about what he was doing and how he learned such skills while I fired off a sequence of frames (capturing his pose and gaze), which he wanted to see afterward. I selected this image for the essay because the wide angle provides surrounding context for the activity, and each element of this image helps describe the role of a young boy in the everyday happenings in a contemporary Altiplano farm.
Luis the Son (May 2007)

After helping his family in the fields all morning, Luis returned to the house and waited while Basilia prepared a midmorning meal of quinoa with fresh milk. He sat on the bench, where his uncles usually sat when the family ate together in this room, and talked about life with his mother on the farm.

He shrugged, saying, “I see my mom nearly each week, either she visits me or I see her here, sometimes she comes with grandpa to church, but usually I come back out after school lets out. Now that I’m eleven she says it’s time for her to return to El Alto and find a job. Life here is hard, but there it’s expensive.”

The photo was spontaneous, made with the light entering the small, usually dim room after his uncle and grandfather opened the short, metal door. Luis’s intense gaze into the camera has multiple interpretations, but for me it confirms our ongoing project, his interest in my being interested in him, and in the partnership expressed through my relationship with his mother and his family, and now through him too. This is the first of three images I made, and as soon as I took them, he jumped over toward me and asked to see them on my camera’s small screen.

“¡Qué chévere!” he exclaimed.

Indeed, I thought to myself: very cool.
I heard from Alvaro that Luis and Basilia had moved from the village to an El Alto barrio where other members of the family had purchased land and built homes over the past 15 years. Luis and Basilia’s small adobe house backed up to one of the sister’s houses, whose husband runs a carpentry workshop next door. Luis had dropped out of high school to apprentice with his uncle to become a woodworker, a career he felt would generate money that he needed to support his mother and himself. Soon after, when I saw Basilia, she mentioned how upset she was that Luis decided to forgo school and take up a trade at such a young age.

“He will need his diploma in order to advance in life,” she said. “But he does not seem to be bothered by that idea.”

I did not respond, and only listened as she continued.

“Luis does not seem to care . . . will you speak with him about the need to go to school? He may listen to you.”

Early one morning, I found Luis at the workshop, preparing pieces for a large order of doors that they had been commissioned to make. We exchanged salutations, and I asked why he was not in class as other kids his age would be.

Without looking up at me, he replied, “My mother and I are very poor, we need money to live, and I cannot help support the two of us by going to school. Here [in the workshop] my uncle is teaching me a trade, skills with which I can make money, immediately.”

He was steadfast, not apologetic.

“I can always go back to school if I want, but now I must help my mother and become a carpenter.”

After watching Luis and his uncle, I understood how seriously Luis took his new craft, despite his mother’s misgivings. Having witnessed his mother and her family survive between field and street, Luis too embraced responsibility for providing and caring for his mother and himself, postponing his academic education for skills that would forever help him subsist whether he stayed in the city or returned to the campo.

Luis and I spent a few hours together that first morning. I made images of him at work alone, and then with his uncle. We reviewed the images on my laptop, and I asked if I could return sometime soon to take a few more. This image is the result of our second photo session in the workshop, as we both wanted an image of him working, one he could show his friends in the campo, and one I could share with my students and colleagues in the United States.
Unlike the other images in the essay, this one, taken by Alvaro, captures Luis with Basilia and her brother Guillermo sitting with me in the house after dinner. In fact, it is the night before I returned to the United States. After a long day, Luis and his mother traveled across El Alto to say goodbye. Once more, we discussed Luis’s decision to leave school and apprentice as a carpenter, considering the plusses of an immediate income versus the future payoffs of having an education. At that time, we also made a video message for the Gringa. In it they stand together, wishing her well and asking when she will return to Bolivia and visit them. Packing and preparing to depart is always awkward; friends and family dropped by to chat and pleasantly distracted me from dealing with my gear. These despedidas or goodbye visits are always sentimental and usually end with a last request, no me olvides (“do not forget me”) and regresas pronto, a command to return soon.

It is in these moments when I realize how I, too, have been woven into the fabric of their family, an off-color strand of yarn who appears and vanishes with each warp in the cloth. Through compadrazco, my contribution is both economic and prestigious, but our investment in each other yields intimate friendships that lead to projects like this one, where we share experiences and reinvest our trust in the generations to follow. Photography, then, becomes a currency of appreciation, exchanged for documentary purposes as well as personal reasons, to establish and maintain relationships between all of those who participate in the endeavor.
Ongoing Context

Luis’s story deserves consideration as a localized narrative within the rural/urban migration process. Equally important are the relationships among Luis, his mother, and the family who raised him (demonstrating the role of family in urban survival). When they review these images with me, they see them as artifacts of their lives, mementos for reminiscing, and as time has passed, their commentary has evolved from cautionary to explanatory—reflecting their comfort in our relationship.

For me, these images are an opportunity to reflect upon Luis, his family, and the time I have shared with them. Today, I bring to them my experience and understanding, a historical context that increases the relevance of old images I had previously discarded as uninteresting or insignificant, but now recognize as keys to discussions I never had previously. Originally, Luis and Basilia were peripheral to my endeavor because I did not realize the significance of their roles, and therefore left them alone. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight and 15 years’ distance, they represent the quintessential migrant experience as much as those with whom I live in La Paz (then and now). In light of that, creating this photo essay about Luis directly reflects my ability to distinguish the threads, knots, warps, and wefts that make up the family fabric and their migration experience. Without further inquiry and reflection, the meaning of these images would remain the same—descriptors of urban Aymara life—but instead they reflect a collaboration, which has had a lasting impact on all of us.

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Notes

1 El Alto is a bedroom city resting above La Paz, sprawling out across the Altiplano. At the time this research first began, El Alto had about 500,000 residents. Today, it boasts nearly one million.

2 One of the brothers, Alvaro, has been my principal contact in the city, and his family has been my primary focus for how Andean migrants constantly redefine “community” during the processes of urbanization and migration (Crowder 2003, 2007; Wayland and Crowder 2002).

3 The scanning/digitizing process offers several opportunities to the researcher in that (1) it is a form of data analysis, a chance to review and reconsider the images and what they meant when originally made; and (2) it is a subjective moment for adjusting the image (cropped, balanced, etc.), requiring skill rather than automated, mechanical operation.

4 For more on selection and organization of images, see chapter 10 in Marion and Crowder (2013).

5 For more on affect, see chapter 1 in Marion and Crowder (2013).

6 After the Catholic rite is completed, sometimes a r’utuch’a, or first haircut, takes place. It is during that ritual when guests trim the infant’s locks and make cash gifts for the child’s well-being, and usually evolves into a party. It is for this reason few people turned out at the church and only went to the reception.

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