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SOCIOECONOMIC ALLIANCES AND ANTICOLONIAL NARRATIVES IN CAETANO'S *BOLIVIA*

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Abstract: New Argentine Cinema represented the increasing crisis in Argentina from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, and has been defined as an attempt to chart the production of new cartographies of Argentinean socioeconomic citizenship. Adrián Caetano's *Bolivia* (2001), as it explored the disruption of trajectories of labor and consumption in the suburbs of the Argentinean capital of Buenos Aires, emerged as one of the most successful films of this new wave. More importantly, its introduction of an immigrant protagonist made it the first film of this cinematic trend to reflect on the translocal nature of the crisis. This essay argues that *Bolivia* engages in what Mignolo would call epistemic disobedience—a shift in the geography of reasoning, in this case from Argentina to Bolivia—in its interpretation of the crisis. In doing so, the film requires that Bolivia's peripheral position in and rejection of the neocoloniality of the capitalist world-system be considered when interpreting the Argentinean economic crisis. Through this epistemic disobedience, not only does the film attempt to de-nationalize experiences of labor and consumption during the neoliberal crisis; it also points to the regional reconfigurations of capitalism that developed in South America from the mid-1990s onwards.

New Argentine Cinema was born out of a moment of increasing economic tension and social crisis in Argentina,¹ and has been defined by critics such as Joanna Page as an attempt to chart and record the new socioeconomic realities of this country from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s (2009: 732). If films “literally map out a territory, and the ways in which it is subject to historical

¹ President Carlos Menem's government, following recommendations made by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, implemented neoliberal policies that resulted in the privatization of economic sectors, the weakening of state and other institutions (such as trade unions), and increasing poverty and unemployment. The unstable 1990s led to increasing withdrawals from banks by local and foreign clients, culminating in the December 2001 Crisis, during which the government introduced restrictions of the population's cash withdrawals.

change,” as Dudley Andrew suggests (qtd. in Jens Andermann 2012: xviii), then the filmic representations associated with New Argentine Cinema not only locate the crisis of the Argentinean economy in Buenos Aires, but chart and record the production of a new cartography of the capital, where urban trajectories of labor and consumption have been disrupted, and where growing poverty has displaced, and in many cases completely dissolved, social and spatial boundaries between classes and neighborhoods by the time of the Crisis at the end of 2001.² Indeed, films such as *Pizza, birra, faso* (Caetano and Stagnaro 1998),³ *Bolivia* (Caetano 2001),⁴ *Mundo grúa* (Trapero 1999),⁵ *Rapado* (Retjman 1992),⁶ and *Silvia Prieto* (Rejtman 1999),⁷ reflect this new cartography as they explore the impact of the neoliberal politics of the 1990s on Argentinean society and, as Cacilda M. Rêgo and Carolina Rocha argue, the relations between inhabitants of Buenos Aires who face unemployment, increasing poverty, and inequality (2011: 9). Reflecting on a citizenry that had become largely associated with consumption under Carlos Menem’s neoliberal government, these films also emphasize the fact that the adverse socioeconomic conditions marginalized large portions of the Argentinean population from the nation’s economic activity, robbing them of their identity as middle-class citizen-consumers.

Many critics maintain that because the films of New Argentine Cinema were engaged in recording the dissolution of Argentina’s local identities during the failing neoliberal project, they avoided Fredric Jameson’s premise that all third-world texts are necessarily national allegories, and distanced themselves from previous Argentinean cinema, particularly Third Cinema’s production of moral and propagandistic mechanisms and messages.⁸ The aforementioned films may have shared Third Cinema’s insistence on observing the effects of governmental policies

² As Guano explains, the late 1990s was “a time when the social and spatial boundaries between the local middle class and the urban poor were increasingly thinning” (2004: 70). The poor occupied middle class neighborhoods by squatting in unoccupied buildings, and the middle class population, increasingly affected by unemployment, lost its purchasing power, inching its way closer to the situation of the urban poor.

³ *Pizza, birra, faso* (*Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes*) explores Argentinean society of the 1990s by following a group of unemployed youths in the capital Buenos Aires.

⁴ *Bolivia* observes the challenges Argentines and immigrants face in a Buenos Aires increasingly affected by the economic crisis of the 1990s.

⁵ Trapero’s film *Mundo grúa* (*Crane World*) follows the life of Rulo, a day laborer who travels from his home in Buenos Aires to Patagonia and back in order to find work and maintain his dignity in this difficult economic climate.

⁶ In *Rapado* (*Cropped Head*), Rejtman links the identity crisis of youths to consumerism as the protagonist Lucio goes through the streets of Buenos Aires in search of a motorcycle to replace the one stolen from him.

⁷ *Silvia Prieto* explores its characters’ participation in the service industry, and the transitory nature of employment in Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata in the 1990s.

⁸ Third World Cinema, according to Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, was revolutionary in that it insisted upon the denunciation of the effects of neocolonial policies, the examination of what caused these results, and the investigation of ways of provoking change (1970-71: 7).

and societal behaviors, but in general they refrained from constructing new alternatives of Argentinean identity by avoiding the representation of possible socioeconomic solutions to the crisis. Page argues that New Argentine Cinema attempted to represent a crisis in social knowledge (2009: 732), pointing to the fact that former discourses, theories, identities and boundaries had been delegitimized by the economic crisis (1033). Indeed, the directors of New Argentine Cinema may have consciously decided to avoid reconstructing a new social and cultural imaginary, partially because theories of the nation and neoliberal national development had become inadequate, and new theories of collective socioeconomic identities had not yet emerged.

Since previous knowledge of nationhood was now seen as ineffective, and the potential of new collective national identities had not yet been articulated, then this reconstruction would have to emerge from what Page calls “a position of no-knowledge” (1055), to the limits of epistemology. In this conception, the role of New Argentine Cinema was to take on somewhat of an ethnographic role, cataloguing and recording the marginalized identities of the 1990s and early 2000s as if they were completely new to Argentina—which in a sense they were and therefore could not be judged according to previous knowledge—, but also preserving them as if they were under threat of extinction (1062).⁹ While the films of New Argentine Cinema may not have conceived new local and national imaginaries, I believe that their attempts at mapping new cartographies of capital, labor and consumption in Buenos Aires, and other Argentinean provinces, point to a desire to reconstruct the country’s identities from the knowledge that was already present but had previously not be considered or acknowledged. Although I agree with Page that these new identities would be articulated from the limits of the hegemonic narrative, these films also demonstrate a desire to tell stories not only from the inside of Argentinean epistemology but also from beyond its borders.

Bolivia (2001), Adrián Caetano’s second feature-length film, which through its black-and-white images produced a documentary-style observation of the Argentinean economic crisis as lived by the employees and clients of a Buenos Aires suburban café-bar, emerged as one of

⁹ Indeed, because the New Argentine Cinema directors catalogue new social marginalities “as if recording the biochemical makeup and behavior of a new species” (Page 2009: 1055), Page associates the position of these directors to the position of “no-knowledge” from which ethnographers write.

the most successful films of this new wave.¹⁰ By following two days in the life of Freddy (Freddy Waldo Flores), a Bolivian immigrant recently arrived in Buenos Aires who struggles to establish himself in the capital, and the racially and economically-charged conversations shared by the Argentinean clients of the café-bar, *Bolivia* reflects on the impacts the crisis has on individuals, family, and community. As Freddy goes through his workdays, he is confronted with, and ultimately succumbs to, the negative, racist attitude of the Argentinean characters, an attitude based on the geographical imaginary of the nation's middle class that clearly defines boundaries between the Argentinean identity and that of immigrants. This representation sustains the discourse of Argentinean exceptionalism which, as Natalia Jackovkis explains, has separated the nation “from the rest of the Latin American countries and posited it as a ‘European’ nation only geographically located in Latin America” (2010: 169). But it also echoes the ideas sustained by politicians from the late 19th century to Menem's presidency that had situated Argentina close to — if not alongside — nation-states at the core of the world-economy, and therefore to modernity.

By representing the economic crisis as lived by both Argentinean and immigrant characters, *Bolivia* also reflects Emanuela Guano's claim that by the end of the 20th century, most of Argentina's population was confronting “a foreseeable future of poverty in a third world country where everyday life experience not only contradicted the neoliberal narrative of progress towards first world status, but blatantly turned it upside down” (2004: 72), pushing the country towards a more peripheral status in the global economic structure. Rising socioeconomic inequality due to falling wages, loss of employment, and rising costs of living led to the collapse of the middle class. As a result, Argentineans began to live what neighboring countries such as Bolivia had already begun to undergo in the 1980s.¹¹ Therefore, as *Bolivia* represents the delegitimized neoliberal narrative of progress, it also delegitimizes the identity of Argentineans as constructed on principles of economic success and Europeaness. In doing so, it not only pushes identity formation to the limits of Argentinean modernity-related epistemology, but also beyond it to the colonial epistemologies of neighboring countries such as Bolivia.

¹⁰ *Bolivia* was awarded prizes at the Cannes, San Sebastian, London and Rotterdam film festivals before it premiered in Holland in 2002, for both its neorealist cinematographic style and its interpretation of the Argentinean crisis.

¹¹ As Guano explains, the late 1990s was “a time when the social and spatial boundaries between the local middle class and the urban poor were increasingly thinning” (2004: 70). The poor occupied middle class neighborhoods by squatting in unoccupied buildings, and the middle class population, increasingly affected by unemployment, lost its purchasing power, inching its way closer to the situation of the urban poor.

Most critics of the film have focused on the ways in which *Bolivia* registers and reproduces the crisis of these Argentinean discourses that have spatially, economically and culturally separated this nation from other Latin American countries. For instance, Gonzalo Aguilar comments that the film “confronts one of the most central stereotypes” of Argentinean culture, that of Bolivians, or “as they are derogatorily referred to, *bolitas*” (2008: 147). He adds that the stereotype of the Bolivian immigrant is widespread and plays “an active role in the imaginary, linguistic, and perceptive configuration of the average Argentinean,” because it expels the Other behind a boundary not only traced by a national border but also by prejudice,¹² therefore preserving the integrity of the group to which Argentineans believe they belong (147). It is undeniable that *Bolivia* visually and linguistically displays this prejudice through its observation of the Argentinean characters that work in or frequent the café-bar — racist speech is constantly uttered, and verbal attacks towards immigrant employees are regular, until they culminate in the film’s violent ending — and it therefore refers to the strength of national discourses of exceptionalism even as they are delegitimized by the crisis.

This interpretation of the film, however, considers neither the importance of the Bolivian character and markers present in the film, nor the Bolivian Indigenous discourse of *hermandad*, or alliances, that is also alluded to throughout, all of which engage in the reconstruction of a novel Argentinean socioeconomic imaginary that articulates knowledge originating from beyond its borders. By situating a Bolivian immigrant as the protagonist of the narrative, the film attempts to explore identitarian alternatives from what Jens Andermann calls “a displaced vantage point” (2012: 52), and allows Argentinean audiences in particular to witness “an (auto)-ethnographic view of themselves as seen from elsewhere” (52). Indeed, by evoking this displaced vantage point, *Bolivia* allows the viewer to engage in what Walter Mignolo calls epistemic disobedience, which implies that the viewer “will shift his or her geography of reasoning” (2014: 163) – in this case from Argentina to Bolivia –, therefore producing a different locus of enunciation for the representation of the Argentinean economic crisis, and consequently offering an alternative understanding of it. It is through the incorporation of Bolivian markers such as an Indigenous immigrant character from La Paz, the film’s title, and the music of Los

¹² This prejudice was further nourished by speeches and interviews given by government officials during the 1990s, who blamed the Argentinean socioeconomic crisis on the criminality and illegality of working immigrants.

Kjarkas, a famous Bolivian Andean popular music group,¹³ in the representation of the Argentinean economic crisis, that Caetano's second feature film shifts the cultural and perceptual framework from which to interpret the crisis, from an Argentinean to a Bolivian point of enunciation.¹⁴

Although the film's documentary approach does hint at its ethnographic style, this article will argue that *Bolivia* goes beyond simply registering the marginalized identities negotiated in the café-bar because it hints at the articulation of Argentinean identities based on this Bolivian point of enunciation. In doing so, I contend that *Bolivia* makes an attempt at considering 1) the Bolivian Andean *hermandad*, or brotherhood through alliances, which is based on Andean Indigenous collectivity and community, especially as elaborated in the 1990s between various Bolivian Indigenous groups as well as rural and urban working-class organizations in order to protest against neoliberal policies and their impacts in Bolivia, and 2) the alliances established and developed between Bolivian and other South American governments in their fight against the neocoloniality of the global economic structure. By rethinking local Argentinean identities during the crisis in terms of their connections to the aforementioned development of Bolivian Andean identities through its various alliances, *Bolivia* contemplates the importance of Bolivian Andean perspective as it intersects with Argentinean knowledge in the microcosm of the café-bar. As a result, the film aims to modernize Rodolfo Kusch's theory of the 1970s, which Mignolo defines as the necessity of reinscribing "Andean thought in the present as a cultural and political intervention and contribution to Argentina's social transformation" (*Local Histories/Global Designs* 2000: 3974).¹⁵

One of the most important Bolivian markers of the film that allows the viewers to engage in this perceptual shift and to inscribe a Bolivian Andean vantage point in the analysis of the

¹³ Los Kjarkas, a Bolivian Andean group that was created following the governmental reforms of the 1950s in Bolivia, was and still is one of the most important music groups of the country, particularly in the folklore music genre. Their music celebrates Indigenous cultures, particularly those of the Andes, but also represents the call for the increasing integration of Indigenous peoples and their cultures in the country.

¹⁴ This shift in perspective would be explored further a few years later in Burman's *El abrazo partido* (2004) (*Lost Embrace*), Burak's *Bar 'El Chino'*, (2003) and Poncet, Burd, and Gachasset's documentary film *Habitación disponible* (2005) (*Room Available*).

¹⁵ Kusch was a polemical Argentinean philosopher who, according to Mignolo, contributed "toward a new epistemological landscape" in Argentina (*Local Histories/Global Designs* 2000: 3243). Kusch argued that the Andean people and cultures he tried to understand may have been "foreign to his Argentinean urban, middle-class background, yet 'they' were also 'we': (Latin) Americans" (2000: 3756). The new epistemology he proposed was therefore one that articulated both Argentinean and Andean knowledges.

Argentinean crisis are the Los Kjarkas songs used in the trailer to promote the film,¹⁶ and also incorporated during key moments of the film itself. The mix of Andean string and wind instruments inscribe the music, and the film's locus of interpretation, within the Andean *altiplano*, or high plains.¹⁷ Indeed, the Bolivian Andean discourse sustained in the lyrics of the songs invites the viewers to interpret *Bolivia's* rendering of the Argentinean socioeconomic crisis from a message of *hermandad*, or brotherhood, rather than from the racist and nationalist Argentinean discourse also registered in the film. This perceptual shift towards *hermandad* rather than opposition allows us to acknowledge Caetano's claim that the film reflects the confrontation of people belonging to the same social class, all workers on the verge of being socioeconomically displaced (Stantic 2002). This comment is reinforced by Ignacio López-Vicuña's argument that the film focuses on the similarities between characters in the film rather than on their differences (2010: 157). As *Bolivia* records Freddy's everyday practices, as well as those of his Argentinean clients, it engages with Katherine Bricknell and Ayona Datta's notion of translocality as *habitus*, that is, as material, spatial, and embodied power struggles and exchange of various capitals valued across different scales (qtd. in Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013: 375). The first objective of this article will therefore be to examine how everyday practices blur territorialized and racialized boundaries in the microcosm of the café-bar, and establish denationalized socioeconomic similarities between Freddy and the Argentineans he works with and serves during the short time he lives in Buenos Aires until his violent death. In doing so, the film visualizes and imagines connections between seemingly opposed national identities, and points to potential post-national class allegiances.

The idea of brotherhood based on socioeconomic similarities is not the only Bolivian discourse to be found in the film however: the Los Kjarkas lyrics also allude to the idea of Bolivian liberation, particularly that of its Indigenous peoples. During the 1980s, the Bolivian government asked for support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, both deeply influenced by U.S. power and policy, in order to address its growing economic crisis. The advice and monetary aid received as a result of negotiations between these organizations and the Bolivian government led to the implementation of the liberalization of

¹⁶ It is the music of Los Kjarkas that accompanies the conceptual and geographical mapping of the narrative as presented in the trailer.

¹⁷ The song "Condor Mallku" (1980) is used at the very beginning of the film, the song "Ukhamampi Munataxa" (1994) accompanies a sequence that focuses on the labor of the employees of the café-bar, and the film closes on what is considered Los Kjarkas' most famous song, "Bolivia" (1976).

trade, privatization of industries, and tax reforms, but also to increasing unemployment levels, and social instability. Although Evo Morales had not yet been elected to the Bolivian presidency, the late 1990s and early 2000s in Bolivia were characterized by alliances established to protest against these neocolonial policies and conditions under which Indigenous peoples were still living, as well as the growing influence of the economic imperialism of the Global North, specifically the United States.

Following in the footsteps of its neighbor, Argentina began negotiations with the IMF in the early 1990s, which led to the implementation of neoliberal policies that impacted its population in the same negative ways that had impacted its neighbor a few years before.¹⁸ If shifting the vantage point to subaltern epistemologies, as Arturo Escobar claims, is “useful for thinking about alternative local and regional worlds” (2004: 210), then shifting the film’s cultural and perceptual framework from an Argentinean to a Bolivian locus of enunciation will therefore also allow the viewers to consider Argentina’s crisis in terms of neocoloniality and to conceive of Argentina’s place in the global geo-economic organization as the root of its economic crisis. In doing so, the film points to Argentina as both a local and regional site of negotiation for dynamics that attempt to challenge the current global cartography of capitalism, which encourages trade between the Global North and the Global South rather than alliances between nations of the Global South. The second objective of this article is therefore to demonstrate how a specifically Bolivian discourse of liberation from the economic imperialism of foreign powers is explored through a representation of the attitudes of the Argentinean clients of the café-bar, particularly with regards to their dependency to external support, and the narrative of victimization.

Potentials of Brotherhood Articulated through Everyday Labor and Consumer Practices

Bolivia opens on footage of a soccer game between the Argentinean and Bolivian national teams, immediately introducing the exploration of the national hierarchies that the film configures and reconfigures between the Argentinean characters — Oso, Marcelo, don Enrique, Mercado and Héctor — and the foreign employees Freddy and Rosa. In the fragments of the game that are presented on screen, the Argentinean team beats its Bolivian adversary without

¹⁸ It is now accepted knowledge that, beyond initial and temporary positive impacts on inflation and deficits, the IMF involvement in Bolivia and Argentina failed. The IMF itself has questioned whether neoliberalism had been oversold, including by its own organization.

facing much resistance. The low-angle shots of the Argentines, compared to the high-angle shots of the Bolivian players, also reproduce the hierarchy according to which the Argentines are superior to the Bolivians. This superiority is further emphasized by the triumphant reaction of the Argentinean public and the negative comments made by sportscaster Fernando Niembro regarding the Bolivian team's performance. As Aguilar claims, initially, the game seems to be one more televised image in the film that converts unequal relations of power into spectacle (2008: 151).

Despite the force of this oppositional stance, which is sustained throughout the film by Argentines, and most specifically Oso, the film constantly questions and challenges the position of inferiority to which Bolivia has been relegated in this opening scene. Although the soccer game is a cinematographic quote that visually sustains this discriminatory hierarchy, the audio-visual language challenges the positions of superiority and inferiority that it outlines. First, the order in which the credits appear at the beginning of the film is significant: Freddy and Rosa's names, and the names of the actors who play them – all of which represent the outsiders – , are the first to be listed, and overlap the image of the screen in such a way as to fragment the visualization of the game. The fact that the Bolivian players march onto the field first, followed by the Argentinean players, further reflects this order. Although the Argentines dominate the game itself, and, one could say, dominate the microcosm of don Enrique's café-bar, these initial takes point to the importance of the Bolivian presence in much of the film's narrative. This not only begins to destabilize the oppositional hierarchy the game establishes; it also points to the displacement of epistemology from an Argentinean to a Bolivian perspective.

Second, the music that accompanies this archival material also allows for an exaltation of Bolivia: while fragments of the game that incite Argentinean nationalism are shown in succession, the extradiegetic song "Condor Mallku" by Los Kjarkas drowns out the Argentinean sportscaster's voice, and attributes more importance to the Bolivian voice and perspective. The first two stanzas are significant, because they introduce the concept of potential brotherhood that is hinted at throughout the film:

As a bird that emerges from dreams

Beyond all reality

Rising up as you cross the Andes

Carrying a message of brotherhood. (*Condor Mallku* 1980, translation mine)¹⁹

Freddy, as an immigrant that brings with him a reality beyond that known by Argentineans, has indeed crossed the Andes from La Paz to reach Buenos Aires, and can therefore be associated with the “condor mallku” — which signifies condor and leader in Aymara — that is the symbolic figure central to the song. As such, he can be considered as the one to bear a message of brotherhood in *Bolivia*.

Furthermore, the message conveyed in the lyrics introduces the shift in cultural and perceptual perspective that displaces the locus of enunciation to Bolivia throughout the film. The Bolivian music, and the lyrics that both discard the notion of hierarchies and replace it with one of *hermandad*, offer a counter-narrative that reveals non-oppositional, fraternal forms of identity that go beyond geographical, cultural and national boundaries. If the spectacle “is a social relation between people that is mediated by images,” as Guy Debord claims (2009: 427), then the visual message conveyed by the soccer game is that the social relation between Argentineans and Bolivians is unequal, and is based on race and nationality. However, the song “Condor Mallku,” expressing a desire to emerge from dreams, beyond all reality, in order to bring a message of brotherhood and seeking to encounter its freedom, evokes the hope of transcending racial oppression, as it accompanies the racially charged images of the football game. In doing so, it points to the potential articulation of new relations between Bolivians and Argentineans that will not be based on divisions, but on similarities founded on brotherhood, and therefore equality.

Bolivia accomplishes this by presenting labor and consumer practices as the foundations of identity construction during the crisis in Argentina. Page argues that despite the value that work acquires in a context of scarcity, it “nevertheless becomes increasingly less central to constructions of identity” (2009: 1131). Rather than basing class identity on activities connected to everyday work, Argentinean middle class identity, she suggests, is increasingly articulated around the country’s repeated economic crises, and shaped by what Alejandro Grimson calls the shared experiences of disintegration that these crises provoke (2005: 1132). While *Bolivia* refers to the precarious nature of work as it becomes the motivating factor that spurs its characters to action or inaction, it questions Page’s interpretation as it suggests that labor is the starting point for identity construction during the crisis. Following Enzo Faletto and Fernando Henrique

¹⁹ The original lyrics are the following: “Cual ave que brota de los sueños / Más allá de toda realidad / Remontando cruzas por los Andes / Llevando un mensaje de hermandad” (*Condor Mallku* 1980).

Cardoso's observation that "capital itself is the economic expression of a social relation," that "it requires the existence of a set of persons working by wage—selling its labor force—and another group" (2008: 221), it is possible to see that the film elaborates on the positioning of characters in Argentinean society in terms of the success or failure of this selling of labor force — which results in the acquisition or loss of consumer power — and that the racial tone that regulates most relations are also developed according to this characteristic in *Bolivia*.

First, the film underlines the importance of simply being able to sell labor force. Indeed, the words "chef/grill cook needed" — "*se necesita cocinero/parrillero*" — on the sign that don Enrique (Enrique Liporace) posts on the door of the café-bar, seems to suggest that the film will focus on the importance of obtaining employment, rather than the type of labor that will be conducted. The sign divides the two occupations of the future employee by a line traced between *cocinero* (cook) and *parrillero* (grill cook), but when don Enrique posts the sign once again at the end of the film, the order of the words has been inverted. In reality, this line is not divisive: it converts into a fluid threshold that can be crossed, and points to the duplicity of the nature of the work to be achieved rather than to the hierarchy of one job over the other. The fact that Freddy conducts both of these activities in the same space behind the counter, while also interacting with clients over the counter, suggests that other responsibilities are expected of him, further emphasizing the fluidity of the job across space and thresholds in the café-bar. The interchangeable nature of the words on the sign, as well as the multifaceted nature of the job, both underline the importance of having employment, rather than the specific responsibilities that define it. What matters is not the difference of each labor activity, but rather the economic capital that obtaining employment entails. The importance of this accomplishment leads Freddy to ask don Enrique for an advance on his salary, just so that he can call his wife to give her the good news. When Freddy speaks with her, he focuses on the fact that he has found work rather than on the nature of the work. Furthermore, there is so much pride in this accomplishment that he not only tells his wife: he wants everyone in his town to know.

While the simple fact of obtaining work is celebrated in *Bolivia*, the film also explores the meaning that emerges in a person's life when engaging in the work itself. Page explains that as the camera scans the different corners of don Enrique's café-bar, and lingers repeatedly on the cooking utensils that the employees will use once the working day has begun, it introduces the film's "meditation on, and homage to, labor, its tools, its practices," and revalorizes "labor in the

context of severe and increasing unemployment” of Buenos Aires towards the end of the 1990s (2009: 1171). Page describes the poetic grandeur of the materiality and embodiment of labor, and claims that the film’s most powerful homage occurs when in the most stylized sequence of the film the slow-takes of the camera register don Enrique, (the owner of the café-bar), and Freddy and Rosa (his two immigrant employees), all hard at work during one of the busy moments of the day (1151). At the end of this sequence, the look of satisfaction on Freddy’s face after he finishes drinking a glass of water hint at a the sense of achievement gained when engaged in work-related activities.

In the Argentinean context of the crisis, during which the government had disarticulated Argentina’s long tradition of working-class rights,²⁰ and delegitimized the country’s populist identity construction, these sequences re-establish the dignity inherent in labor. If dignity, as Marina Sitrin explains, “is about creating your own relationship to work and to your community” (qtd. in Lucy Taylor 2013: 608), then this sequence reveals how don Enrique, Freddy and Rosa create this relation to work and the community they serve through iterated and purposeful movements. By approaching labor’s “practices step by step (still by still) with a sense of rediscovered awe,” as Page suggests (2009: 1166), and by showing the ways in which these practices structure the day of the workers through repeated stills of the clock, the film indeed accords dignity to work-related activities. Page notes that this series of shots — the contemplation of the tools of the café-bar during this initial sequence of the film and the observation of don Enrique’s, Freddy’s, and Rosa’s work at the height of the work day — set Freddy’s illegal status aside to give priority to representing labor, of any kind, and accomplished by anyone (2009: 1172). This sequence therefore not only reassigns dignity to work; it also aims to de-racialize the body by placing emphasis on its movements as it engages in everyday labor. Although David Harvey claims that such homogenization of the “working man” and of “labor powers” (2000: 38) fails to take into account the variegated geographical terrain of capitalism, the homogenization of everyday labor practices in this sequence actually serves to demonstrate Marx’s claim that “working men have no country” (39), therefore not only attempting to de-racialize but also de-nationalize the microcosm of the café-bar.

²⁰ Pía Riggiozzi explains that, “the labor reforms proposed by Menem aimed to undermine the power of unions, on the understanding that this was an essential step in order to move promptly in other areas of economic reform. By 1996, Menem had successfully introduced a number of laws and executive decrees that radically changed social and labor rights in the country. The changes altered not only the context within which the unions operated but, more dramatically, their capacity to defend their membership” (2009: 97).

During the sequence mentioned above, the slow-motion, and the close-ups and extreme close-ups of the workers and their hands as they undertake the various activities behind the bar set aside the labor hierarchy between employer and employee, and for a brief moment Freddy and Rosa become don Enrique's equals, in the sense that they share in the same productivity and dignity of work. In this case, the film suggests that work allows Argentineans and an immigrant to establish relationships based on similarities rather than the racial hierarchy that usually dominates the café-bar. However, this type of identity is problematic because it is "based on a vision of sameness and the manufacture of a monocultural, monoepistemological state" (2013: 600), as Lucy Taylor argues, claiming a universality that "involves asserting that at some level all humans are the same, but what that sameness *is* is uttered from the Occidental locus of enunciation" (599). In the case of the film, this concept of identity emptied of any intersectionality with race and ethnicity is partially evocative of the national-popular narrative of Peronism, which placed so much importance on the participation of the proletariat in the rearticulation of the nation and its identity. The potential *populismo* evoked in the film may rearticulate identities around class-based solidarity, and therefore be inclusive of all people, no matter what their nationality. Still, its avoidance of race and ethnicity suggests that Argentinean citizenship and indigeneity remain incompatible identities. This form of limited inclusion is evocative of Peronist reforms under Perón, which Taylor describes as requiring Indigenous assimilation based on their class position (2013: 602). The fact that the postcard of Eva Perón on Rosa's bed is the only reference to the world of governmental politics in *Bolivia* seems to further hint at this potential class-based identity that would once again be exclusive of ethnicity and race. The film therefore seems to reflect Taylor's argument that "this working-class politics and the possibilities for citizenship that it proffered, then, was a tool of coloniality" (602), reinforced through Western political subjectivities. As a result of this racial and ethnic erasure, the identities constructed around labor in the film are negotiated from an Argentinean epistemology, rather than from the Bolivian concept of *hermandad* that was articulated in terms of ethnic politics and organization in the 1990s and early 2000s in Bolivia. The film may therefore attempt to evoke a Bolivian epistemology through the music of Los Kjarkas and its Andean protagonist, but its erasure of race and ethnicity in reality empties *hermandad* of its original meanings.

This is not the only way that *Bolivia* articulates identities around working-class commonalities that discard race and ethnicity. Obtaining employment and completing its

prescribed activities are but two of the three positive aspects of labor that the film explores as a way to establish similarities between Freddy and the Argentinean characters. If selling labor force is at the origin of all social relations, gaining access to the power of purchase that results from receiving a salary is also necessary to be considered a full citizen under neoliberal policies. *Bolivia* explores the power of purchase gained through labor by visually emphasizing economic transactions that occur in the café-bar. Aguilar comments on the film's use of high-angle shots that last longer in these moments, "highlighting the importance of economic transactions in the narration's development" (2008: 151). The camera also repeatedly lingers on these moments of economic transactions when characters exchange money for services rendered or for commodities like food and drinks in order to observe how they organize social and spatial relations in the café-bar and instigate the interactions between the characters that either work there or frequent it.

The central figure around which these relations are organized in the café-bar is don Enrique. As owner of the bar, he not only distributes the money to his employees, he also oversees all transactions that occur in his establishment. In the café-bar, labor is insufficient; it is the power of purchase gained through it that provides both employees and patrons with certain privileges. For example, although he reacts in a slightly dissatisfied way when Freddy asks him for an advance on his salary in order to call home, don Enrique eventually agrees, as Freddy has already earned some of the money after working for part of the day. A few moments before, a similar situation arises with Oso (Oscar Berteá), one of the patrons of the establishment, and don Enrique does not react in such an understanding manner. Oso has accrued a significant debt in the café-bar, and although he continues to consume food and drinks there, he shows no sign of being able to repay the owner the money owed. Don Enrique may understand for a while — Oso claims to have helped him in the past so don Enrique owes him this favor —but the owner's patience has its limits, and he eventually communicates this clearly to Oso.

The film hints at this hierarchy in social relations through the distinct ways the camera frames the characters that approach the counter that separates employees from clients, and discerns, through its different angles, between those who have power of purchase and those who do not. For example, while at various moments of the film eye-level medium close-ups are used to establish the equality between don Enrique and Freddy as they work together and fulfill their work activities around the counter and kitchen, high-angle shots, even if only slightly

pronounced, are used to convey Oso's inferiority to don Enrique because he does not have the power to purchase commodities in the café-bar.²¹ Additionally, during many of the economic transactions, those that have power of purchase — which don Enrique and Héctor (Héctor Anglada), one of the café-bar's patrons, gain by selling commodities, and Freddy by selling his labor force — are usually framed by low-angle shots, conveying their superiority in the economic relations established during these moments. Once again, although this time through power of purchase, there is an attempt at de-racialization of the microcosm of the café-bar, where identities are rearticulated not along racial and national terms, but following the neoliberal paradigm, according to which “a person's worth is measured by his or her ability to consume,” as Jackovkis explains (2010: 169). In doing so, the film seems to support a sort of neoliberal multiculturalism, which proposed the coexistence of diverse cultures and the democratization of access to socioeconomic development, without necessarily addressing structural and institutional inequalities.

Both identities and relationships are articulated around consumerism in *Bolivia*. The café-bar is “the place where the patrons go to look for old forms of community bonds,” as Jackovkis suggests (171), and where the “patrons try to rebel against the rhetoric of neoliberalism that affirms the hegemony of the marketplace and the primacy of consumption” (168). Only male clients are seen to enter the café, where they sit for hours facing the one television screen, watching the displays of masculinity it presents as it broadcasts boxing matches, pornographic films, and soccer games, while they blame their socioeconomic difficulties on globalization. However, most relations are developed around economic transactions defined by consumption. On the one hand, although Oso and Marcelo (Marcelo Videla) are friends, their alliance in the film is based on the exchange of money, food, drinks, and drugs. On the other hand, Freddy and Rosa establish a partnership in which they share tips, and even their salaries when they go out to dance at a *bailanta* after work.²² In registering these relationships' articulation around the power

²¹ Don Enrique does temporarily offer Oso a line of credit. But he also offers Freddy an advance on his salary before he has completed his first day. Although this may partially be seen as don Enrique's desire to help, it also points to his desire to control the people that work and frequent the café-bar. As he is owed money or work, it becomes easier for him to impose his expectations regarding behavior, whether as a client or employee, and therefore to maintain the socioeconomic hierarchy he has established in his café-bar between him as owner/employer, and others. In this sense, Freddy and Oso are placed in a similar subordinate position.

²² *Bailantas* are dance clubs where immigrants gather in Buenos Aires. It is interesting to mention, given the similarities the film establishes between the Argentinean and immigrant characters, that immigrants who gather in these clubs listen to *cumbia villera*—the intradiegetic music playing at the *bailanta* Rosa takes Freddy to—, which is

of purchase, the film reflects on the Argentinean reality of the end of the 1990s, during which the suburbs of Buenos Aires had been converted into what Beatriz Urraca describes as “expandable locations of the global consumerist marketplace, where socio-economic considerations and transactional relationships often take precedence over more traditional forms of social interaction” (2011: 52). It also demonstrates that immigrants are just as caught up in these transactional relationships as Argentineans are, but that they do not share the same space outside of business hours and have different spending practices.

Many of the conversations between the patrons, who attempt to forge new alliances to take advantage of the others’ financial contacts or possibilities, often seem suspicious, and rarely result in positive outcomes. At one point, Oso corners Mercado (Alberto Mercado), yet another patron of the café-bar, in the restroom, and starts a conversation with him about his contacts at a car dealership:

Oso: Will you accompany me one of these days, and see what we can do?

Mercado: Come, and we’ll talk. (Caetano 00:27:16)²³

Although Mercado agrees to initiate the dialogue between Oso and his contact, he never returns to the café-bar after that, pointing to the instability of promises of mutual support between Argentineans. But even Freddy and Rosa’s relationship may not be as stable as it initially appears. Although they seem to establish a fair alliance when Rosa offers Freddy to share tips halfway, don Enrique at one point warns the young Bolivian that he proceed carefully with her because she is deceitful,²⁴ introducing doubt into this relationship as well. Rosa may be using their shared identity as outsiders to establish an initial bond with Freddy, allowing her to take advantage of the salary gained after one of their working days when they go dancing and drinking together, however small the amount may be. *Bolivia* consistently insinuates the

the same type of music associated with lower-class *porteños*, or inhabitants of Buenos Aires (López-Vicuña 2010: 159).

²³ The original dialogue is:

-Oso: ¿Tú me acompañas un día, a ver qué podemos hacer?

-Mercado: Vení, y vamos a hablar.

What this conversation implies is that having Mercado present at the dealership when Oso meets his contact may help Oso get a better deal on the rental or lease of a car compared to the one he has now.

²⁴ This may be an attempt on don Enrique’s part to come between Freddy and Rosa’s nascent relationship. However, due to the fluidity of relationships in the film, and particularly the film’s insinuation that Rosa only interacts with men with power of purchase, it is difficult to say whether his comment is manipulative, simply warning Freddy of what he considers to be a fact, or both.

precariousness of relations based on the power of purchase, and suggests that all social and cultural ties are short-lived and eventually collapse.

While Freddy's relationship with Rosa may be unstable, and points to the breakdown of his own marriage, it also provides him with the possibility of ending the nomadic state that led him from Bolivia to Argentina. Freddy is not a nomad in the complete sense of the word because he can always return to his home in Bolivia. But he represents this figure as he wanders through the streets of Buenos Aires, as he has no place of lodging to return to at the end of his working day. The camera rarely leaves the café-bar, and when it does, it focuses on Freddy's wandering movement through the city in a sequence of static shots, emphasizing his solitary and itinerant state. After being arrested by the police one night,²⁵ he decides to enter a café, a safe though uncomfortable and temporary shelter where he will spend the night in exchange for purchasing a cup of coffee. But on account of the relationship he establishes with Rosa, he finally finds lodging in an apartment building that rents rooms, as well as the sense of having a home to return to after work as he can now return to this room with Rosa. After just over one week in Buenos Aires, Freddy has reached a situation resembling a domestic life, even if at the expense of the one he left in Bolivia.

While Freddy leaves his home in Bolivia in exchange for labor and power of purchase in Argentina, many Argentineans in the film are living the same process and headed towards the same outcome. The disintegration of Argentinean identity can be observed through the Argentinean characters' shift from a sedentary life, defined by the inaction of characters like Oso, and the breakdown of homes and families — such as Mercado's failing marriage — towards what Aguilar describes as “the absence of home, the lack of powerful (restrictive and normative) ties of belonging, and a permanent and unpredictable mobility” (2008: 34). While the film never shows any of the Argentinean's homes, hinting at the absence Aguilar evokes, mobility is only attributed to Freddy. Yet, many narrative and visual elements and conversations throughout the film are suggestive of the disintegration of the Argentinean family and identity, and the unpredictable mobility that unstable socioeconomic circumstances may provoke.

²⁵ It is possible to see this scene as a reference to the 1990s national discourse that associated increased levels of criminality in Buenos Aires with the increased immigrant presence in the city. Grimson and Kessler comment that many immigrants were detained during the 1990s simply for looking foreign (2005: 1682-1688).

Oso is the one that most exemplifies this disintegration of personal and economic stability. Close to the end of the film, Marcelo reveals to don Enrique that Oso has so much debt and so little money that he cannot pay for either his car — which, as a taxi driver, is his only source of income — or his home, and that soon, he will probably lose both. Having seen scenes in don Enrique's café-bar during which men are asleep at different tables, and having seen Freddy himself spend the night in a café for lack of money to rent a room where he can sleep, the viewers know what type of homeless existence Oso is heading towards: a small economic transaction, such as the purchase of a cup of coffee, will allow him to sleep at a table, and not in the street. There is no direct verbal mention of his family, but a take in the final sequence focuses on Oso's keychain, with the picture of a young girl on it, suggesting that he at least has a daughter. The economic crisis he is facing will therefore not only affect him but also his family, reflecting the situation that led Freddy to leave Bolivia.

Although neither Oso nor any of the other Argentinean characters leave Buenos Aires during the film, Héctor does mention, in a conversation shared over the counter with don Enrique, the possibility of leaving for Córdoba, pointing to another stage in the displaced experience of Argentines during the economic crisis. From being a country that was “an attractive destination for foreigners,” as the Menem government announced in the 1990s (López-Vicuña 2010: 155), Argentines began leaving Buenos Aires, and Argentina became a country that even Argentines fled during the crisis.²⁶ Given the racist and nationalist discourse sustained by Oso throughout the film, it is difficult to believe that he would undertake such a life change. However, the precariousness of his situation echoes that of thousands of other Argentines, and other Latin Americans such as Freddy.

One of *Bolivia's* most important arguments is that of precarity: the failing neoliberal system, the impossibility of finding employment, and the consequent loss of power of purchase can convert anyone from the middle class into solitary and marginalized migrants. When characters become nomads, the sense of not belonging also changes the cartography of the city. Spaces like cafés that are occupied by these marginalized figures as replacement for lodging become what Marc Augé calls non-places, which are spaces to be passed through rather than

²⁶ Although this wave of emigration began in the 1990s, there were six times more Argentines that left Argentina from 2001 to 2003 (Jachimowicz).

inhabited, and where all share anonymous yet similar identities (2008: 81).²⁷ Because they have nowhere else to go, the Argentinean characters who sleep at a table overnight convert the microcosm of don Enrique's café-bar into an in-between space where they do not stop being Argentineans, but in which they also become very similar to recently arrived immigrants such as Freddy.

By comparing these sequences that convert the cafés into non-spaces, and presenting both local and foreign characters as homeless and potential migrants, following what Aguilar calls "erratic itineraries and movements toward the world of waste [...] (all that capitalism attempts to locate, illusorily, in the margins)" (2008: 34), *Bolivia* temporarily minimizes the racial distinctions so strongly felt at other moments of the film and establishes similarities based on class. *Bolivia* may observe the marginalized, those that Page describes as "living in the interstices of the city who are rarely accorded any presence on the big screen," but their lives do not remain unexplained, or 'other' as Page claims (2009: 849-854). Rather, the film's exploration of the successful and failed attempts at selling one's labor force depicts the likeness between Freddy, the employed immigrant, and the employed Argentineans, but also between Freddy, the outsider and victim of economic displacement, and those Argentineans who have also been or are in the process of being displaced by economic hardship.

López-Vicuña argues that the film's exploration of these common identities does not attempt to define the "Other;" that it instead "questions the very limits of the nation" (2010: 152), and stages "the unraveling of the national community in the microcosm of the café-bar" (147). Although he adds that at the *bailanta* "Freddy and Rosa's bonding, surrounded by other immigrants, provides a glimpse of a post-national community, a space that can be considered post-national to the extent that it depends upon displacement" (2010: 159), his argument can be extended to include Argentineans as well. Victims of the neoliberal failure, they too have been displaced to the margins of Argentinean society, and the similarities they share with Freddy articulate a new identity that goes beyond national boundaries.

Despite the problematic articulation of this new identity that focuses on economic and social commonalities and excludes racial and ethnic differences, the similarities established

²⁷ Augé offers supermarkets and airports as examples of non-places, where people pass through temporarily, and where all individualization is blurred because of the shared and generalized identity of 'passenger' or 'consumer.' What matters in these spaces is the temporary release of individual identity. While he claims that the anonymity of these non-places can offer a temporary sense of liberation, *Bolivia* complicates the term. While these non-places certainly save characters from a night on the street, it certainly does not offer any sense of liberation to them.

between the film's Argentinean and immigrant characters is a manifestation of a phenomenon that took place in the early 2000s in Argentina. Indeed, as the country progressed towards the climax of the economic crisis in 2001, citizens belonging to the collapsing middle and lower classes began forging alliances that not only crossed class boundaries — the working and the middle classes joined forces to mobilize for change — but also across nationalities, ethnicities, and races. United by the same cause, many began forming neighborhood associations without distinguishing between nationalities (Alejandro Grimson and Gabriel Kessler 2005: 1799). Bolivian and Paraguayan immigrants joined the *piquetero*, or picketing, movement, which started in the mid-1990s, to protest against injustice and the economic hardship suffered during and after the crisis.²⁸ These immigrants also became key actors in the petitions made for employment programs (Grimson 2005: 29), therefore setting aside, at least temporarily, race, ethnicity and nationality from the Argentinean economic context. While it is clear that the Argentinean characters of *Bolivia* are far from ready to join forces with their foreign counterparts, the film certainly reveals that the commonalities that would unite the inhabitants of Argentina a few years later in their struggle against the government were already present at the end of the 1990s. Rather than a critique of “the de-nationalization in the Southern Cone as a result of neoliberal policies,” as López-Vicuña claims (2010: 147), *Bolivia* establishes the grounds for post-national alliances that would be articulated within Argentina in reaction to the crisis. But at the time the film was released, the potential for the rearticulation of identities around labor and across nationalities had not yet been entirely considered, and it would only take form temporarily, during the worst of the crisis.

Argentinean Neocoloniality and the Need for Economic Liberation

Understanding the potential brotherhood evoked by the socioeconomic commonalities between the Bolivian immigrant figure and the Argentinean patrons of the café-bar in the film also leads to the blurring of regional boundaries — produced, for instance, through the audio-visual language of the soccer game shown at the start of the film — and anticipates future articulations of regional identities that would remain within the capitalist world-system while

²⁸ One of the pressure tactics used by the *piqueteros* was to block streets and highways in order to interrupt traffic and, consequently, commerce. This movement began in the Neuquén province, but soon expanded to the country's cities. It is interesting to point out that the tactics used by the *piqueteros* are evocative of the road and highway blockades used by Andean Bolivians for decades in order to have their demands heard by the Bolivian government, a strategy begun during the Viceroyalty of the Río de Plata with the rebellion led by Tupak Katari in 1780.

simultaneously reconfiguring its structure. Under neoliberalism most of the flow of capital moved from peripheral countries such as Peru and Bolivia to core countries such as the U.S., but South American coalitions from 2000, such as the *Mercado Común del Sur* (MERCOSUR) and the *Comunidad Andina* (CAN) continued forming what Escobar calls “a form of counter-hegemonic globalization” (2004: 223), which would complicate national and regional economies, redirecting the flow of capital between countries on the periphery of the world-economy. As Laura Gómez-Mera explains, regional cooperation and trade liberalization written into these political and economic alliances were a “defensive strategic response by South American countries confronted by the highly asymmetric distribution of power in the international system. A shared sense of external vulnerability among countries in the region has facilitated the converging of their interests in preserving MERCOSUR as a vehicle for increasing leverage in the international system” (2013: 7).²⁹ Therefore, by challenging the imagined ideological and structural boundaries that separated Argentina from other South American countries, and establishing this nation’s commonalities with Bolivia, *Bolivia* articulates a South American discourse of brotherhood similar to that of the song “Condor Mallku” at the start of the film, reimagining Argentina’s position within the capitalist world-economy. The eventual realization of this regional reconfiguration would later lead to the creation of new alliances, and attempts at strengthening existing ones, in the 2000s.

Escobar adds that the alliances between Latin American countries not only attempt to create other narratives within the capitalist world-economy but also aim to fight the excesses of imperial globality (2004: 226). Escobar points to the fact that coloniality did not end with independence in Latin America, “but was rearticulated in terms of the post-World War II imaginary of three worlds” (219). Bolivia has been one of the most significant nations to challenge neoliberalism by attempting to free itself from exploitation by foreign markets, and by negotiating certain South American regional alliances such as CAN.³⁰ In doing so, Bolivia also rejects what Mignolo calls “the colonial wound, the fact that regions and people around the world have been classified as underdeveloped economically” (2009: 161). *Bolivia*, too, collapses national boundaries and identities by situating Argentinean and Bolivian characters in an

²⁹ Although the stability of this cooperation deteriorated during the Argentinean crisis, Gómez-Mera also adds that it improved somewhat after 2003 (2013: 23).

³⁰ In July 2017, Evo Morales declared total independence from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

interconnected regional economic system, therefore suggesting both the coloniality of the world economic structure, and the resulting geographically determined socioeconomic inequalities this structure produces.

The opening song “Condor Mallku” not only alludes to *Bolivia’s* reimagining of Argentinean identities and socioeconomic space in terms of brotherhood at the local level of Buenos Aires and the café-bar; it also points to the film’s reflection on Argentina’s economic spatiality at a regional and even global level:³¹

From the heart of America
Heading towards a beautiful blue sky

The leading condor from Bolivia soars
In search of its freedom (*Condor Mallku* 1980 – translation mine)³²

According to the song, Bolivia is not only the heart of America — clearly a reference to South America here — but the *Andean* heart of the continent, still not free, and flying in search of its liberation. Interpreted within Los Kjarkas’ larger corpus of music, these lyrics are a clear allusion to the internal colonialism lived by many Bolivian Andeans,³³ not only inside Bolivia, but also inside South America, as the film demonstrates through its reproduction of racist language used at Freddy’s expense. Following Javier C. Sanjinés’ argument that Indigenous physical exteriority is the face of coloniality (2004: 9), then Freddy, an Indigenous coca grower from the region of La Paz, not only bears the condor’s message of brotherhood mentioned in the song but his Indigenous features also represent the face of coloniality. Furthermore, if Bolivia is the heart of

³¹ It is interesting to note that Gonzalo Hermosa, one of the members of Los Kjarkas, acknowledges two dimensions to music: one is “a localized, identifiable, and recognizable dimension that can be understood in specific terms at a circumscribed, and local level” and the second is “another more general dimension that transcends the immediate geographic and cultural boundaries” (Gilka Wara Céspedes 1993: 60). These two dimensions at the heart of the music of Los Kjarkas further echo the film’s reflections on Argentina’s spatialities located on a local level of the capitalist system, but that also transcend local boundaries.

³² The original lyrics are the following: “Desde el corazón americano / Rumbo a un hermoso cielo azul /Vuela el condor mallku boliviano / Al encuentro de su libertad” (*Condor Mallku* 1980).

³³ Various Latin American intellectuals, such as the Bolivian Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and the Mexican Pablo González Casanova, have defined internal colonialism as Indigenous people’s internalization of the ideology based on race, ethnicity and culture upon which exploitative systems and their resulting political, cultural and economic inequalities have been developed, implemented and sustained. It also refers to the fact that although colonialism as such ended in the 19th century, colonial systems and beliefs remained after the independence of Latin American countries. Although there have been constitutional, political, cultural and socioeconomic changes since Evo Morales’ first electoral win in 2005 in order to address this, but many issues deriving from it remain unresolved.

South America, the ongoing search for freedom from this aforementioned internal colonialism in the lyrics of “Condor Mallku” is not a search specific only to Bolivia, but is also required in other parts of the continent, including Argentina.

Thinking of the Argentinean crisis in terms of coloniality allows us to reconnect with Argentinean intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s, both in filmmaking and economics, who also delved into Argentina’s colonial status within the international economic order. Solanas and Getino, two of the most important figures of Third Cinema, write that “the culture, including cinema, of a neocolonized country is just the expression of an overall dependence that generates models and values born from the needs of imperialist expansion” (1970-71: 2). But this definition can also be applied to a neocolonized country’s economy as well, suggesting that to liberate a country from its neocolonized state, there is a need to reveal and deconstruct the patterns of dependence that constrain it within the neocolonial system.

Although Argentina’s patterns of dependence within the global world-economy are not central to *Bolivia*, the film does reflect on the country’s dependence on external financial assistance.³⁴ Oso is the character that serves as a reflection of Argentina’s economic situation at the end of the 1990s: he is on the verge of losing it all, yet still relies on external funding to survive. Throughout the film, Oso repeatedly mentions that he is waiting for the final judgment of a trial, which he is certain will favor him and therefore provide him with the financial assistance he desperately needs. In the meantime, he accumulates debt both in don Enrique’s café-bar and at the Uruguayan dealership from which he leases his car. His work as a taxi driver, and consequently his financial survival, become dependent on the financial assistance of a foreign “Other.” Oso’s situation is therefore evocative of Argentina’s increasing dependence on external borrowing under Menem’s government.

It also points to the fact that, as a result of neoliberal policies, and Argentina’s incorporation in the free trade market, many Argentinean industries that were once nationally owned became controlled by foreign organizations, once again placing the country in what Faletto and Cardoso, the authors of the 1979 *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, would describe as a “complementary and subordinated role from the standpoint of the

³⁴ For instance, in the 1990s Argentina depended on assistance from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and foreign direct investment, to fuel its own development.

international capitalist system” (2008: 224).³⁵ From this subordinated role, Argentina sustained the neocolonial relations established by the global economic structure, which as Eduardo Miguez argues involve “an endless transfer of income from peripheral to central countries; thus, the periphery involuntarily contributed to the accumulation of capital in central countries to the detriment to its own country” (2006: 5). By relying on what can be considered foreign financial assistance, Oso’s work also becomes controlled by an external organization. Any money he accumulates is therefore transferred into foreign hands, consequently placing him, just like Argentina, in a subordinate role in the capitalist economy.

Oso’s failure to survive financially also serves as a critique of this economic dependence. As Raúl Prebisch explains, international financial support may be important, “but only as a means of supplementing and stimulating internal action, not as a substitute for it” (2008: 208). Loans, in Oso’s case, do not stimulate him to act to find other work, but rather substitute labor with dependence and inertia. Instead of actively going in search of work, as Freddy, his Bolivian counterpart, does, Oso sits around the café-bar and waits for something to save him. When talking with Héctor, Oso claims that the only solution to his financial problems is divine intervention, as he claims: “only a miracle will save me” (Caetano 00:55:40 – translation mine).³⁶ Although his comment is somewhat sarcastic, it points to his hopelessness at finding a way to survive, and underlines his passivity as he is confronted with the eventual and total loss of economic power. Additionally, other characters in the bar seem to share Oso’s attitude. For example, when discussing Oso’s difficulties, Marcelo eventually tells him: “Don’t complain, things will get better” (Caetano 00:08:45 – translation mine).³⁷ This points to the character’s belief in the temporary nature of the crisis, and the possibility of eventual employment for his friend. Both the belief that financial issues will resolve themselves, and the belief that they never will seem to bring time, at least for characters like Oso, to a standstill. But financial issues never resolve themselves in the film, and the characters, especially Oso, are further displaced towards the margins of Argentina’s economic system due to their static reactions.

Bolivia reproduces the inertia caused by this dependence not only through its narrative, but also through its cinematography. Page argues that the film produces a claustrophobic effect

³⁵ According to Faletto and Cardoso, after the first half of the 20th-century, Argentina had reached a degree of economic maturity. However, despite this achievement, its industrial sector was still controlled from abroad, therefore situating it in a subordinated role in the international capitalist system (2008: 5418-5425).

³⁶ The original speech is: “un milagro me salva. Que me lo traigan los reyes” (Caetano 00:55:40).

³⁷ The original speech is: “No te lamentés, ya va a mejorar” (Caetano 00:08:45).

by constraining most of its takes of Argentinean characters to the café-bar (2009: 2521), and through repeated shots of the clock that stops and that don Enrique constantly has to wind up. Additionally, positive mobility is rarely associated with Argentineans in the film. While the Argentinean characters are mostly seen inside the café-bar, the camera only follows Freddy and Rosa beyond the confines and surroundings of this microcosmic space. Furthermore, while the slow-motion sequence that pays homage to the activities of labor mostly focuses on Freddy's movements, it also observes Oso drinking and smoking, contrasting his inertia as he faces all loss of income with the celebration of Freddy's migration that resulted in labor. This immobility is also present in the other Argentinean characters that repeatedly spend much of their days sitting in the café-bar, smoking, drinking, and watching television.

What the film may suggest in this scene is that even if Oso had wanted to find work in Buenos Aires, he would have failed to do so since the few jobs remaining are being offered to foreigners who, due to their immigrant and even undocumented status, are easier to exploit. Indeed, Héctor mentions to don Enrique that he is leaving for Córdoba because he cannot find work in Buenos Aires. When don Enrique answers that he wishes he had known this, Héctor criticizes him for hiring a foreigner, and suggests that by doing so the owner did not look after his co-nationals. Oso constantly complains about foreigners stealing jobs from Argentineans as well, and criticizes don Enrique for the same reason towards the end of the film. But while Héctor would have considered the *cocinero/parrillero* job that was offered to Freddy, Oso never demonstrates the inclination to even consider taking such a job, convinced, as he is, that he will receive external help, either through loans or by winning the trial.

What his and Héctor's attitudes demonstrate is yet another consequence of economic dependence, as seen in the film and more broadly in Argentinean society in the 1990s: what Jackovkis calls a "narrative of victimization," which sustained that "there is someone who is liable for robbing Argentina's wealth" (170). Indeed, while immigrants were initially blamed for the country's increased poverty levels, they were also accused of stealing jobs from Argentineans. Oso repeatedly comments that foreigners are *hijos de puta* (sons of bitches) who come to Buenos Aires *a sacar el hambre* (to satiate their hunger), and that Argentineans become the victims of these foreigners' success. During one of the conversations he shares with Marcelo, he claims that the Uruguayans at the dealership are ruthless, and that they are capable of anything. In a context of precarity of work, the belief has become "to each his own" at the

expense of Argentines. This narrative of victimization is what ultimately leads Oso to despair, and the reason that Freddy becomes the target of his mounting anger. For Oso, Freddy comes to represent the reason for his own economic failure.

As López-Vicuña argues, “clearly the insecurity felt by those who are being pushed out of their traditional positions clashes with the mobility of those crossing borders of class or nation” (2010: 153). However, *Bolivia* calls for a renewal of Prebisch’s belief that “the time has come to shake off the all too common habit of attributing the inadequacy of Latin America’s rate of development to external factors alone, as though there were no major internal stumbling blocks along the way” (2008: 207). Oso may have been marginalized from Argentinean society because of his dependence on foreign investment, and his ensuing lack of purchasing power, and he may believe that immigrants like Freddy have rendered work even more precarious for Argentines like him. But his inaction is also to blame for his failure to survive. *Bolivia*’s shift in cultural and perceptual framework, which displaces the interpretation of the Argentinean crisis to a Bolivian point of view, calls for viewers to engage in an introspective analysis of the crisis, rather than one that continuously places the blame on external others. Comparing Oso and Freddy from the Bolivian point of view therefore reveals both the external and internal dimensions of Argentina’s economic crisis, and the need to acknowledge both in order to liberate the country from its neocolonial position in the global economy.

Unfortunately, *Bolivia* registers a moment of the crisis during which most people affected had not reached these conclusions. The film was directed, produced and premiered before the 2001 December Crisis, and the social imaginary was therefore still marked by discourses current during the 1990s. What the film registers is the fact that the negative cycle of external dependence had not yet been broken. The film’s narrative circularity, which begins and ends with don Enrique posting a *parrillero/cocinero wanted* sign on the front door of his café-bar, and one of the final comments made by the manager of the building where both Freddy and Rosa stayed regarding the regular disappearance of foreigners, seem to reflect the impossibility of escaping the deepening economic crisis as well as the tensions between Argentines and immigrants at this point in time. Additionally, the film’s dramatic climax, which culminates in Oso assassinating Freddy, suggests that the characters have learned nothing regarding the negative impact that dependence on foreign financial assistance has on their lives, while also pointing to the inevitability of the Argentinean crisis.

Conclusion

Bolivia is a film about place, and Andermann argues that it uses “spatial enclosure as a way of studying how people are *emplaced*, being cast into social roles and token representations of themselves by the capital relation in which they are all caught up” (2012: 58). *Bolivia* may be one of the most representative films of New Argentine Cinema because of its neorealism, but a reading of this film that engages in a cultural and perceptual shift suggests that in many ways it also departs from the objectives of this wave of films. Although it does not elaborate on them, it does evoke potential alternative identities for Argentina on local, regional, and global levels. The microcosm of the café-bar, where Argentines and immigrants interact, becomes a space where, in Harvey’s terms, “‘otherness,’ alterity, and, hence, alternatives might be explored” and “a critique of existing norms and processes can most effectively be mounted” (2000: 184). In this sense, it is possible to associate Caetano’s film with the revolutionary cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, because like that cinema, *Bolivia* is not a film that fundamentally “illustrates, documents, or passively establishes a situation” but rather “provides discovery through transformation,” to use Solanas and Getino’s words (1970-71: 6).

By establishing commonalities between the Argentinean characters and Freddy, as well as by alluding to structural similarities between their two countries, *Bolivia* reveals patterns of possible labor solidarity that were articulated during the economic crisis of the 1990s and the early 2000s. The construction of identities around labor indirectly refers to the foundations of the *piquetero* movement, for example, which acted according to a logic of equivalence that rearticulated *populismo* (populism) in order to be inclusive of people of all nationalities in Argentina who were suffering the same consequences of neoliberalism’s failures. As María Virginia Quiroga and María Florencia Pagliarone explain, *populismo* in this sense is one mostly defined by negative equivalences defined through an opposition to the institutions that do not satisfy the needs of the lower and middle classes (2014: 196). However, the film’s reproduction of the racist discourse sustained throughout the 1990s also points to the problems of such national-popular rearticulations, because they are provisional, and do not address the roots of institutionalized and structural racism in Argentina. They also point to the fact that, despite aiming to consider the crisis from Bolivian epistemology, *Bolivia* remained trapped within Argentina’s epistemological parameters of nationalism and exceptionalism.

Indeed, this inclusive articulation based on negative commonalities that erased national and ethnic boundaries did not last beyond the Crisis. Ryan Centner explains that “since the 2001-2002 crisis several sites across Buenos Aires that were until recently landmarks of class-based isolation have witnessed historically peculiar and logistically complicated confluences of heterogeneous social groups” (2012: 337), but also that a new figure emerged “at the core of efforts to restore Argentina, draped in the guise of *lo nacional-popular*” (349).³⁸ Because of the re-elaboration of this working-class based national identity, the potential post-national identities to which *Bolivia* alludes never became permanently established. Despite this, the potential regional alliances hinted at in *Bolivia* indeed were being articulated in the 2000s. Alliances between MERCOSUR and CAN are ongoing and developing, and still other alliances have been struck within Western institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) as well. Immanuel Wallerstein explains that while the neoliberal globalizers from the U.S. and the European Union – especially politicians and corporations – still strive “to achieve a one-sided expansion of borders — open in the South, but not really open in the North” (2005: 1276), the “offensive within the WTO was stalled [...] by a coalition of medium powers of the South — Brazil, India, South Africa, etc. — who put forward a simple demand: free trade that works both ways” (1276). These alliances reflect Mignolo’s claim that alliances “are not established by languages or traditions only, but by common goals and interest in the field of forces established and in the coloniality of power” (2000: 3567-3576). By reimagining Argentina’s position within the world-economy, and reflecting on the rearticulation of boundaries at the regional level, *Bolivia* therefore also discerned the nascent foundations for future regional alliances that would attempt to move beyond the colonial structures of global capitalism, preemptively inserting Argentina into the discussions to come.

Wallerstein argues that, “to understand the internal class contradictions and political struggles of a particular state, we must first situate it in the world-economy” (1979: 53). Not only does the film’s association between Argentina and Bolivia allow for an analysis of the Argentinean crisis that takes coloniality into account, but *Bolivia*’s reimagining of Argentina’s position within the world-economy also provides the necessary information to understand its internal causes. The film’s exploration of the themes of economic dependence and the 1990s

³⁸ Centner argues that “in Argentina, this refers to an amorphous nationalism that prizes the humble everyday citizen, with ties to traditions purportedly unfazed by globalization” (2012: 349).

Argentinean narrative of victimization point to the fact that the Argentinean crisis was caused by its excessive integration in the global economy (Escobar 2004: 226), and the consequent structures of dependence that this integration sustained.

Additionally, as Pía Riggiozzi claims, by the end of this period, “it was clear that neoliberalism did not provide the instruments to resolve the problems which had accrued in Argentina” (2009: 98). When *Bolivia* was produced though, other alternatives had yet to be articulated and Argentina seemed trapped within the colonial world economic structure. The film alludes one last time to the coloniality of Argentina’s economic status as it closes with the Los Kjarkas song “Bolivia:”

I want to let out
A scream of liberation

For the century and a half
Of humiliation (*Bolivia* 1976 – translation mine)³⁹

Since dependence was one of the root causes of the crisis, Argentina, just like Bolivia, needs to free itself from the neocolonial capitalist structure. Until the crisis of 2001-2002, Argentina would not consider ways of liberating itself from neocolonial forms of economy, particularly those defined by neoliberalism. However, Wallerstein argues that, “it is only when the existing system is weakened in terms of its own logic that the push from below can possibly be effective” (2005: 1269). Indeed, Riggiozzi explains that once the climax of the crisis had passed, and after Néstor Kirchner took office in 2003, “the climate of mobilization and repoliticization opened up a space for a discussion on the role of the state, the quality of Argentina’s democracy and, even, class compromise, all of which allowed Kirchner to present himself as offering something qualitatively new from the neoliberal era” (2009: 106).⁴⁰ Whether this promise was fulfilled is debatable, but the discourse regarding a rupture from the previous political decade did suppose such transformations in Argentinean governance.

While *Bolivia*’s reproduction of a racist discourse does not suggest the possibility of intraregional dialogues nor the negotiations that would occur on local, regional and global levels

³⁹ The original lyrics are: “Quiero pegar / un grito de liberación / es por el siglo y medio / de humillación” (*Bolivia* 1976).

for Argentina, at least at the time it was released, the film did create a new space from which to think about Argentina's economic crisis that began to challenge Western capitalist epistemology. However, the violence of the film's audio-visual language and narrative resists any conclusive alternatives or resolutions to the crisis, reflecting New Argentine Cinema's rejection of identitarian and political imperatives (Aguilar 2008: 20). By thinking the Argentinean crisis from the Bolivian space though, *Bolivia* re-engages Argentina with the pan-Latin American discourse of brotherhood born at the turn of the 20th-century, the Argentinean populist project, and Argentinean neocolonial economic theories of the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, *Bolivia* points to the fact that Argentina, even at a time of economic crisis, had the necessary epistemological tools to start moving beyond this devastating moment in its history and rebuild itself while challenging the configuration of the cartography of capitalism. By exploring the ways in which migration, as an act of traversing geography but also as a movement of the mind and imagination, as Brickell and Datta define it (2011: 19), impacted the global, regional and local dynamics that contributed to the articulation of new identities during this specific socioeconomic juncture, *Bolivia* therefore challenges Page's claim that New Argentine Cinema observes changing social realities from a space of 'no-knowledge.' It was a matter of engaging with new knowledge and experiences, which the film posits as situated in Bolivia and based on socioeconomic and anticolonial *hermandad* and alliances, in order to imagine new identities in post-crisis Argentina. Unfortunately, the film only engages with a different locus of enunciation in order to return to its own Argentinean epistemological system, and therefore only considers its neocolonial circumstances in the global economic system. Due to this flawed re-imagining, it fails to critically reflect on its own neocolonial attitudes towards other South American countries like Bolivia. As a result, these alliances were only temporary, and seventeen years after the crisis, xenophobic discourse, and the blaming of immigrants from poor neighboring countries such as Bolivia for the nation's ills, have formally been reintroduced under the presidency of Mauricio Macri. It seems that, once again, Bolivian knowledge and experience have been rejected and are being held beyond Argentina's borders, both physical and ideological.

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