

Where Blackness Resides: Afro-Bolivians and the Spatializing and Racializing of the African Diaspora

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We came from Africa. The Spanish brought us; but who knows in what year—not even our grandparents could know that. . . .

—Afro-Bolivian female Yungas resident, age eighty-two, 2001

We're from Africa. It's said that we're from the African, from Africa. The race, every black, is from Africa, all the blacks, no? My parents used to say that, that's how I know; I've written all those things down in my head.

—Afro-Bolivian male Yungas resident, age eighty-two, 2001

With the increasing use of the term *diaspora* across academic disciplines in recent years and the growing popularity of African diaspora studies, scholars have offered varying definitions of just what the concept diaspora encompasses. There is little argument, however, that at its most basic level it describes a dispersal. In the case of the African diaspora, this is of course a spatial dispersal of peoples of African descent outside of the African continent. Consequently, diaspora identities are fundamentally about space and the negotiation of identity in relation to space and place. While the African diaspora is, in fact, global, all too often a select few geographic places monopolize conversations about and understandings of the African diaspora. Despite a global dispersal and presence dating back centuries, people of African

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descent continue to be perceived as “out of place” (physically, as well as culturally, socially, and historically) in certain circumstances outside the African continent.

Those identified as black in Bolivia are estimated to constitute less than 2 percent of the overwhelmingly Indian and mestizo national population.¹ Despite a continuous presence in Bolivia dating back to the 1500s, when Spaniards brought Africans into the region to work as slaves in the silver mines of Potosí, black Bolivians have been largely ignored by their government, their fellow citizens, and scholars.² From the 1851 abolition of slavery to the present, claims about the existence of a distinct Afro-Bolivian ethnic or racial identity have been contested or, more often, overshadowed by a dominant Indian-/mestizo-centric vision of Bolivian history, society, culture, and national identity.³ What acknowledgment Afro-Bolivians have received has tended to be dismissive, highlighting only their small numbers, their geographic concentration, and a sociocultural identity and historical trajectory that are supposedly indistinguishable from those of the country’s majority indigenous population.⁴

Considering the extent to which Afro-Bolivians have been overlooked in their own country, it should come as no surprise that they have suffered the same fate in the larger African diaspora. While the justifications for this exclusion are multiple, this essay, speaking to the aforementioned centrality of space in conceptualizing the African diaspora, examines the geography of this exclusion or, more precisely, the perceptions of geography and how they produce the racialization of place and the spatialization of blackness.

During two years (2000–2002) of anthropological research on contemporary Afro-Bolivian identity and culture and the broader meanings and experiences associated with blackness and race in Bolivia, the significance of space and place to notions of Afro-Bolivianness became increasingly evident to me. This significance emerged in opposition to the prevailing view that there was nothing to Afro-Bolivianness save superficial skin color, a view enabled by the fact that in Bolivia the organization of diversity and the popular, scholarly, and official discourses on difference emphasize socioeconomic class and degrees and kinds of Indianness to the exclusion of other kinds of difference.⁵ I spent a large portion of two years living and conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Tocaña, a small Afro-Bolivian village in the Nor Yungas province several hours outside the national capital, La Paz.

Travel to the site proved a challenge due to the poor condition of the roads and the absence of direct, public transportation in and out of Tocaña.⁶ However, it is not the challenge of entering the Yungas or the seeming remoteness of the community that compelled reflections on the role of geography in creating and sustaining notions of blackness, for there are far more remote and inaccessible locales to be found in Bolivia. Instead, it was the realization that despite the movement of significant numbers of Afro-Bolivians in and out of the Yungas region over the past twenty years for the purposes of completing their education, finding work, or engag-

ing in periodic commercial activities, the region and even the specific community of Tocaña with its mere 130 residents served, without comment or qualification, as representative of Afro-Bolivianness in general. What is represented as “authentic” Afro-Bolivian identity, culture, and experience—as “quintessential” blackness—in newspaper articles, on postcards, in travel guides, and in conversation, is, in fact, more accurately Afro-*Yungueño* identity, culture, and experience. This means that not only are black-skinned bodies to be found in the Yungas but also that they are to be found in poor rural communities where they engage in the cultivation of the coca and fruit that dominate the Yungas economy and live daily, seasonally, and annually according to that economy, landscape, and rural isolation. Bolivians appear to take for granted the idea that the Yungas is a natural locus for people of African descent. In light of the fact that the history of Afro-Bolivians seemingly ends with abolition (there being virtually no historiographic accounts of the population after 1851 to cite), it is the Yungas that connects the past to the present. Markers of how Bolivians think about blackness are found in the ways in which this connection is written and spoken about.

Locating Blackness in Space, Putting Blackness in (Its) Place

Since no modern census data has been collected (much less circulated) *confirming* the regional presence of Afro-Bolivians in the Yungas, and since the details of Afro-Bolivian history are not widely known by Bolivians in general, “locating blackness” refers to the geographic space blacks inhabit in popular knowledge and in the imagination (of Afro-Bolivians and non-Afro-Bolivians alike) as much as in fact. What imaginary racialized geographies manifest themselves in the limited discourse touching on Bolivia’s blacks?⁷ Where are Afro-Bolivians in the cultural geography or moral topography of Bolivia?⁸ What geographies of identity—understood as the “senses of belonging and subjectivities which are constituted in (and which in turn act to constitute) different spaces and social sites”—operate in the Bolivian context that impact the spatialization of blacks and blackness in such a way that they are peripheralized in the realms of social, cultural, political, scholarly, and activist discourses and participation?⁹

Geographical regions in a nation are but one space vested with senses of belonging and subjectivities; in this instance, it is the regionalizing of race and the racializing of regions that is central for locating this marginalized—even invisible—group. There are several familiar, if general, examples of indigenous groups in Bolivia who are associated with particular places in the nation; the Tupi-Guarani are, for instance, associated with the Amazon region, the Aymara with the highlands, and the Quechua with the valleys. An even more general association that operates throughout the Andes is that of Indians with rural spaces and of mestizos and whites with urban spaces.¹⁰ The major regionalism of Bolivia that pits *colla* (highland dweller) against *camba* (lowland dweller) also involves the association of

groups or types with particular geographic spaces; the *colla* is perceived as racially and culturally Indian and the *camba* as mestizo and culturally more European, with both groups subject to unflattering stereotypes by the other.¹¹ Afro-Bolivians are left out of or are ambiguously positioned in both the association of *campesino*/rural space with Indians and the racialized *colla* versus *camba* regionalism.

Despite the migration of many blacks out of the Yungas over the past twenty years and their increasing presence and visibility in urban areas such as La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz, the association of blacks with the Yungas persists in a way that is both naturalized and taken for granted. A deliberate examination of the interplay between geography and identity with respect to Afro-Bolivians reveals specific ways in which the Yungas as a region is implicated in the content of social constructions of blackness and, additionally, in the scarcity of those constructions.

The Yungas, which is divided into the Nor (North) Yungas Province and the Sud (South) Yungas Province, stretch northeast and south from La Paz along the eastern side of the Cordillera Real and the Cordillera Quimsa Cruz in an area of about 9,600 square miles. This semitropical region (*yunkas* means “warm valleys” in Aymara) is characterized by year-round warm temperatures, generous seasonal rainfall, and fertile soil and lush green vegetation covering uneven mountain and valley terrain. This makes for a stark contrast with the neighboring altiplano region that sits at eleven thousand feet to thirteen thousand feet above sea level on the other side of the cordillera; the landscape there includes flat grassland and snow-capped mountain peaks, while the air is thin, cold, and dry. The Yungas is an intermediate zone between this and the more humid and rain-forested Amazon lowlands of Alto Beni, which neighbor the Yungas to the east.

These characteristics of the Yungas region provide the foundation on which geography is implicated in the construction of blackness. There is a notion that the Yungas is somehow environmentally the “closest thing to Africa” in Bolivia and so a “natural place” for black slaves to have ended up and a “natural place” for their descendants to have stayed. With this, an Africa otherwise distant in time, space, and memory makes a rare if abbreviated appearance, its invocation tying Bolivia’s blacks to the larger diaspora by virtue of their shared dispersal from the African continent. If any part of Afro-Bolivian history is familiar to both blacks and non-blacks, it is the oft-repeated but brief account that blacks were brought to Bolivia to work the silver mines of Potosí, did not fare well there due to the altitude and cold, and so came to live in the Yungas, where their descendants can still be found, “because those tropical climates are the ones they best tolerate.”¹² This account easily ties into the “natural place” myth that surfaces repeatedly in casual conversation, as well as in research and newspaper articles, evident in remarks such as, “The black community or ethnicity in Bolivia . . . has in the Yungas an ideal habitat if it is a question of a warm geographic area and conditions similar to those of the ‘mother country.’”¹³ Another states, “Whoever visits . . . Chicaloma or Ocabaya [Sud Yungas

towns], in the midst of the leafy vegetation, will think they are magically being transplanted to black Africa.”¹⁴ The Bolivian cardiologist and university professor Hernán Criales Alcázar has dedicated an entire book, *La raza negra y la altura* (*The Black Race and Altitude*), to arguing for the biological incompatibility of blacks with high altitude such as that found in Potosí (thirteen thousand feet above sea level) and La Paz (twelve thousand feet above sea level). He explains the absence of blacks in these and other locations in Bolivia in biological rather than historical or socioeconomic terms.¹⁵

Coexisting with the idea that the Yungas offer a more hospitable environment for blacks is the image (more prevalent in past centuries than in the present) of the Yungas as an inhospitable environment in general. One Yungas overseer, Francisco Xavier de Bergara, described the region in the following manner in 1805: “This is a land of the unhealthiest sort known. It has the perverse quality of debilitating the most robust constitution. . . . [The Yungas] are extremely humid and hot. The rains are very continuous. Tertian fever is abundant. . . . Humanity lives exceedingly uncomfortable and annoyed by the multitude of insects that pursue it.”¹⁶ Blacks, then, were brought to this region “to attend the diverse plantations that needed rough work and a special resistance for the hot and unhealthy climate.”¹⁷ More recently, the British anthropologist Allison Spedding notes that Indian Yungas residents are known to be pallid and yellow compared to people of the high plains in part because of the unhealthy climate and the frequency of parasites in the region. She points out that in pre-Colombian times the Inca state used Yungas coca plantations as penal colonies because of the hard work, the difficulty in accessing the region, and the unhealthy conditions.¹⁸ Bergara and others acknowledge that black slaves and laborers were challenged by the environment of the Yungas, but it was still considered a more suitable and natural place for them, reflecting perceptions of Africa’s environment as inhospitable and attitudes that blacks were at once more physically rugged and less human than others. As a result, they were “brought . . . for the agricultural work of the hot regions, where individuals of other races could not endure.”¹⁹

A popular saying heard in Bolivia and possibly dating back centuries, sums up much of the naturalized connection between blacks and the Yungas—“Gallinazo no canta en puna” (The vulture/turkey buzzard doesn’t sing in the highlands). *Gal-linazo* refers to a large black bird that seldom flies high or far, and while it can be seen in the Yungas it is rarely found in the high plains. This saying, as it is currently uttered by blacks or in reference to blacks, reflects the notion that they, like the *gal-linazo*, are to be found in the Yungas and would be out of place in the highlands, where they would likely fall victim to altitude sickness. Sometimes the saying is changed to explicitly state, “*Negro no canta en puna.*”²⁰ All of these suggestions that blacks are physically suited for the Yungas, dating from the colonial period to the present, contribute to the biologizing and thus racializing of blackness, some-

thing subsumed in the prevailing scholarly and popular discourse that emphasizes Bolivia's ethnic fluidity and social mobility as independent of characteristics thought of as "racial."

Yet other reminders of the black connection to the Yungas can be heard in popular song lyrics. For instance, Los Kjarkas sing of a "negro ardiente" (passionate black) and his *saya* (a uniquely Afro-Bolivian song and dance expression) "nacida en tierra caliente de los Yungas de La Paz" (born in the hot land of the Yungas of La Paz) in a song frequently heard on radio and television. The lyrics of Afro-Bolivian *saya* music also make reference to the Yungas, as one song announces to the audience, "Somos yungueños, señores presentes" (We are people of the Yungas, all of you people present). Among blacks, the Yungas region is consistently invoked in narratives of identity and origins, as in "we, as a people, are from the Yungas," or as the lyrics proclaim, "somos Yungueños." The Yungas prove central in establishing (even if unconsciously) a direct link to generations of ancestors and to a shared and particular historical past.

Many Afro-Bolivian migrants to La Paz and elsewhere still have family in the Yungas but have established themselves as full-time city dwellers for many years and may also have children who have never lived in the Yungas. Regardless, the region is still often referred to as if it was every individual's home or place of origin. Family visits maintain ties with the region, and migrant organizations sustain and promote that regional identity. For instance, Afro-Bolivians in Santa Cruz formed the Centro de Residentes Yungueños de Santa Cruz (Center for Yungas Residents of Santa Cruz) in the 1990s. In La Paz, the original members of the first Afro-Bolivian identity organization, Movimiento Cultural Saya Afro-Boliviano (Afro-Bolivian Saya Cultural Movement), formed in 1988, were all migrants from the Nor Yungas region. The practice of asserting a Yungueño identity may take on special significance for blacks as a means of *spatially* establishing their existence and their Bolivianness in the face of not only their small numbers and the national neglect of the salience of blackness but also in the face of the common but mistaken assumption—evidenced in personal anecdotes recounted by many blacks—that blacks seen in La Paz or elsewhere outside the Yungas are probably Brazilian, Peruvian, or from somewhere other than Bolivia. Place is, of course, an important component of many group identities or "imagined communities," whether in a group's own sense of origins or home or in its portrayal as a localized culture or ethnicity. For Bolivian blacks, emphasizing the space and place that is the Yungas is certainly a means of delineating themselves as a united and spatially defined group—a "legitimate" ethnic group by traditional definitions—and literally mapping blackness onto the Bolivian nation.²¹

In the 1990s, a group of urban blacks submitted a petition to reword the national constitution to include mention of their rights as *afrodescendientes* (Afro-descendants) over their "ancestral land." While the Yungas were not explicitly named,

they are the only lands in Bolivia that blacks have an “ancestral” connection to, as evidenced in this discussion. The petition came in response to the recent inclusion of the rights of indigenous populations over their *tierras comunitarias de origen* (communal lands of origin). The mobilization around land issues of indigenous populations throughout the Americas has, among other things, secured political visibility and a political identity for Indians. The relationship between blacks and land is less clear, but here is a case in which engaging in a rhetoric of ancestral lands could be interpreted as a strategy for gaining a political identity for blacks. The strategy does not, however, seem to have succeeded for Afro-Bolivians; the evidence gathered by the author during fieldwork in Bolivia strongly points to cultural performance as Afro-Bolivians’ foothold for a largely apolitical form of national recognition dating from the 1990s. The strategy is, nevertheless, a reminder that there is more at stake in establishing group identity than identity for its own sake. At stake are issues of rights—to property, to livelihood, to political representation, to access to development funds, and so on. Notably, *afrodescendientes* were not explicitly named in the national constitution until December 2007, when it was amended under the administration of Evo Morales (Bolivia’s first Indian president).

The Yungas at the Periphery of *lo Andino* and the Diaspora

While claiming a geographic space may help solidify the imaginings of blacks as an ethnic group, that that space is the Yungas may actually explain in part the relative invisibility and neglect of the Afro-Bolivian population. Here, one must consider the implications of the emphasis on *lo andino* for this particular region and its inhabitants. *Lo andino* refers to “that which is Andean,” which in scholarship and popular discourse has long been interchangeable with “that which is Indian.” In other words, even while there is the general association of Indians with rural areas and of mestizos and whites with urban areas, the Andean region as a whole is associated with Indians and Indianness, in particular with the highland Indian, and the typical/stereotypical highland region most often associated with the Andes mountain range. The image attached to “Andean,” both geographically and culturally, actually excludes much of Bolivia’s terrain and population, including the Yungas.

That the majority of inhabitants in the region are either Aymara migrants or the not-so-distant descendants of Aymara migrants from the altiplano is a contributing factor in the “nontraditional” image associated with Yungas inhabitants insofar as these Indians are separated from their places of origin and the families, communities, and physical and historical spaces that might solidify their “traditional” ethnic identity. Inhabitants have also long been a part of a market economy. Xavier Albó was compelled to refer to the Aymara of the Yungas as “the ‘other’ Aymaras” in a 1976 examination of the Sud Yungas region, *Yungas: Los “otros” aymaras*.²² He wrote that the Yungas resident had less of a sense of Aymara ethnic/cultural identity, less of a connection with an Aymara past and more interest in the present and

future, and that issues of “the *indio*,” whether positive or negative, were not found in the region as they are in parts of the altiplano or in La Paz. He further attributed group conflicts to economics and class divisions rather than ethnic divisions.

More than twenty years after that assessment, Albó continues to present Yungas inhabitants as nontraditional based on their links to a market economy and their “lesser cultural and linguistic loyalty.”²³ Bolivia’s blacks are thought to have assimilated into these nontraditional Aymara, and it is frequently stated that Afro-Bolivians have no unique cultural identity of their own but rather that they share the cultural expressions, social and economic realities, and historical experiences of their rural Aymara neighbors. Here again, their location in space—this time in proximity to a majority Aymara population in the Yungas—has impacted understandings of Bolivian blackness. While association with the Yungas biologizes and thus racializes blacks, it simultaneously denies them an ethnicity of their own, the suggestion being that any unique sociocultural identity they might have had was lost once they left Africa. Due to this primary association, blackness is consequently reduced to the mainly somatic and, correspondingly, race is constructed as physically and biologically real.

The discursive marginality of the Yungas in the shadow of *lo andino* explains, then, some of the discursive marginality of blacks in Bolivian identity discourse and beyond Bolivia. Blacks are not only left out of the national discourse of Bolivianness, dependent on Andeanness and Indianness, and focused on the highlands rather than the Yungas, but they are also left out of the international discourse on the African diaspora. Indeed, talk of the African diaspora tends to remain silent on Andean blacks, but in particular on those from present-day Bolivia. Throughout the Americas, people identified as black are often associated with coasts, and they are typically understood as the descendants of slaves working a primarily Atlantic coastal plantation system and over time confronting increasingly mixed (mulatto/mestizo) societies or, in the case of the United States, a largely white immigrant population. By contrast, Bolivia has no coasts. Bolivia’s first blacks arrived not to work plantations but to work in mining, and they faced and continue to face a majority indigenous population. So it would appear that Bolivia’s blacks are not “traditional” African diaspora types existing in a “typical” diasporan space, just as Aymara Yungueños are not traditional Andean Indians existing in a typical highland space. The Yungas region lies at the margins of *lo andino*, and Bolivia lies at the margins of the African diaspora.

Conclusion

Both the analytical concept of the African diaspora and the lived experiences of African diaspora populations have space and place at their very center. However, it is not merely about spatial *facts*—that is, the points to which African descent populations were dispersed and the locations outside of Africa where they can cur-

rently be physically found—but rather, as suggested in this essay, about how those facts are perceived and how those perceptions in turn impact the social construction of blackness in a given historical and sociocultural context. There are clearly assumptions and expectations about when and where people of African descent are to be found outside Africa; blacks and blackness (whether somatic, cultural, political, etc.) can, in other words, be “out of place.” This demonstrates that the African diaspora is imagined as a biologized and thus racialized category. What is at stake in recognizing such assumptions and expectations may very well be the undoing of core and peripheral spaces and populations in the African diaspora world, which has undoubtedly led to an incomplete and even skewed (toward the center) understanding of the diaspora and to a peripheralization of populations, experiences, and identities that do not fit or are invisible historically, as in the case of Bolivia’s black population.

In a historical and scholarly moment when much is made of global movements, the permeability of borders, and the defiance of space (through the seemingly unprecedented physical and virtual ease with which bodies, goods, services, and ideas travel), the spatialization of identities and experiences that continues to occur *within* the African diaspora (which according to many definitions is no less than the prototypical example of globality and of spatial defiance) is all the more conspicuous. Even as Bolivia’s blacks move in and out of the Yungas and increasingly take up residence outside the region, the national imagination continues to locate them there. After more than five hundred years, the descendants of African slaves continue to be identified not simply through somatic characteristics but by associating these characteristics with a particular geographic space; this demonstrates that racialized geographies of imagination and geographies of identity are operating on them, on the historical and sociocultural landscape of Bolivia, and on the African diaspora more broadly.

An incident involving Bolivia’s current president encapsulates the (out of) place(ness) of blacks and blackness in Bolivia. During an unsuccessful run for the presidency in 2002, Morales came to the Nor Yungas provincial capital, Coroico, to give a speech at a campaign rally. On that occasion, residents from the nearby Afro-Bolivian community of Tocaña were invited to perform Afro-Bolivian *saya* dance and music. About twenty residents danced, sang, and drummed *saya* around Coroico’s central plaza to open the rally and draw together a crowd; then they gathered, front and center, to listen to Morales speak. Nothing in Morales’s speech specifically referenced or acknowledged the Afro-Bolivians who had been invited to perform and who stood before him. The only time he acknowledged them was when, after concluding his speech, he danced *saya* around Coroico’s central plaza with a young Afro-Bolivian woman on each arm, at which point he commented, “I feel like I’m in Africa.” With these words, uttered after a speech silent on Afro-Bolivians (as both Bolivian political and public discourse generally are), Morales expressed

something about the place of blackness in Bolivia—that is, *no place*. Morales, like so many Bolivians, had few reference points for the African-descended in Bolivia. So rarely do nonblack Bolivians find themselves surrounded by blacks that distant Africa was invoked to make sense of such a circumstance. Thus Morales’s “I feel like I’m in Africa” suggested that Africa’s legacy was incompatible with the very Indian or Indian/mestizo Andean nation of Bolivia. Even in the Yungas, then, blacks were “out of place,” a people or “race,” out of its natural space—which would seem to be, judging by the words of Morales, distant (in space and time) Africa.

Notes

1. Blacks have not been counted as a separate category on the national census since 1900. Published estimates of the population over the past twenty years have ranged anywhere from 2,000 to 250,000.
2. A 1964 article by the German historian Inge Wolff is recognized as the first piece of methodologically and theoretically rigorous scholarly work on slavery in Bolivia. The first full-length works dedicated to the history of Bolivian slavery were published in the 1970s—Alberto Crespo’s *Esclavos negros en Bolivia (Black Slaves in Bolivia)* (La Paz: Academia Nacional de Ciencias de Bolivia, 1977) and Max Portugal Ortiz’s *La esclavitud negra en las épocas colonial y nacional de Bolivia (Black Slavery in the Colonial and National Eras of Bolivia)* (La Paz: Instituto Boliviano de Cultura, 1977). In the years since, two more books dedicated to Bolivian slavery have been published—*La mujer negra en Bolivia (The Black Woman in Bolivia)* (La Paz: Ministerio de Desarrollo Humano, Secretaría Nacional de Asuntos Etnicos, de Género y Generacionales, Subsecretaría de Asuntos de Género, 1995) by Eugenia Bridikhina, and *María Sisa y María Sosa: La vida de dos empleadas domésticas en la ciudad de La Paz (siglo XVII) (María Sisa and María Sosa: The Lives of Two Domestic Servants in the City of La Paz [Seventeenth Century])* (La Paz: Ministerio de Desarrollo Humano, Secretaría Nacional de Asuntos Etnicos, de Género y Generacionales, Subsecretaría de Asuntos de Género, 1997) by Pilar Mendieta and Eugenia Bridikhina. These books and the few articles that came out in recent years all consider slavery in the colonial period, with little mention of slavery during the republican period beginning in 1825. The history of African-descended Bolivians after their 1851 emancipation remains largely unwritten. This, in turn, gives the impression that they ceased to be distinguished as social actors once they were free or, alternatively, that they ceased to exist all together once slavery was abolished and they were, in theory, able to integrate into the general population.
3. Throughout this essay, the terms *black* and *Afro-Bolivian* are used interchangeably to refer to all Bolivians of African descent. The term *afroboliviano* (Afro-Bolivian) has gained popularity since the early 1990s, largely due to the formation of a black consciousness movement among urban black migrants. These migrants were instrumental in promoting this term to replace *negro* (black) or the more commonly used *negrito* (little black or cute/dear black) and *moreno* (brown-skinned person or person of dark coloring). *Afroboliviano* is considered more respectful and a means of asserting blackness as a legitimate and distinct ethnic identity, as opposed to the merely phenotypic identity implied by the terms used before the introduction of *afroboliviano*. *Negrito* and *moreno* are still used, particularly among older generations who associate the term *afroboliviano* with those active in the urban black consciousness movement and in the public performance of *saya*, the uniquely

Afro-Bolivian song and dance tradition. While the author addresses in other writings the ways in which this element of expressive culture has come to be viewed as “the last” or “only” evidence of Afro-Bolivian cultural retention, and thus emblematic of the Afro-Bolivian population, for the purposes of this essay *saya* should be understood as a cultural tradition and expression born and nurtured in the rural isolation of the regional space/place here discussed. See Sara Busdiecker, “We Are Bolivians Too: The Experience and Meaning of Blackness in Bolivia” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2006).

4. This indigenous majority includes more than thirty recognized Indian ethnic groups, with the largest being Aymara and Quechua. Afro-Bolivians are most often associated with the Aymara population.
5. If the role of place in ethnic fluidity is acknowledged, it becomes apparent that blacks are not the only ones being racialized in Bolivia. An individual referred to as *indio*, or to be more polite, *indígena* or *campesino*, would likely be a rural dweller who labored in agriculture, spoke Aymara or Quechua and spoke Spanish with the accent of an Aymara or Quechua speaker (if able to speak Spanish at all), had limited education, and wore some form of dress that revealed his or her rural and regional origins. If this individual was female and was to leave her rural community to work as a street vendor in a city such as La Paz, she would need to speak Spanish while working but would likely wear a *pollera* skirt and its associated dress items (e.g., bowler hat, shawl, *aguayo* for carrying bundles, etc.). That individual would likely be referred to as *cholita*, a label (*cholo/chola*) applied to an intermediary position between Indian and mestizo. While not always consistently defined and applied, the *cholita* is generally thought to be “in process” or “on the rise.” Should this individual have daughters, they could potentially come to be labeled mestizas by speaking Spanish exclusively and well, attaining more education, changing a clearly indigenous surname like Quispe to Gishert, and abandoning *cholita* dress and braids for contemporary skirts, pants, and hairstyles. Notably, individuals labeled Indian, *cholita*, or mestiza may all have the same “racial” ancestry and the same physical traits; phenotype is not the most important factor—and often not a factor at all—in the application of ethnic labels. All of this offers only a simplified description of what is a common scenario in the context of Bolivia. Cases like this are what lead to the contention that race and racism are of no importance in Bolivia. Ethnicity is fluid; any individual has (supposedly) unrestricted social mobility. Of course, this is provided that the individual sheds less desirable or less valued ethnic traits, which, invariably, are those associated with Indians, and aspires toward traits associated with mestizos and whites—no one tries to take advantage of ethnic fluidity by moving from white to Indian.
6. In 1995, the Inter-American Development Bank designated the road from La Paz into the Yungas “the world’s most dangerous road” (*Baltimore Sun*, April 5, 2000). Locally, it is known as “the road of death” due to the numerous accidents that occur along the narrow dirt road that twists and turns as it descends 11,800 feet from La Paz into the heart of the Yungas with thousand-foot precipices on one side and rock overhangs on the other.
7. Jacqueline Nassy Brown, “Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13 (1998): 291–325.
8. Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 51.
9. Sarah Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood, *Remaking the Nation: Place, Identity, and Politics in Latin America* (London: Routledge, 1996), 27.
10. That the word *campesino* (technically referring to rural peasants, from the root *campo*, meaning “countryside” or “field”) is used in place of or interchangeably with *indio* or

- indígena* is just one manifestation of this association. See Benjamin S. Orlove, "Down to Earth: Race and Substance in the Andes," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 17 (1998): 207–22.
11. Allyn MacLean Stearman, *Camba and Colla: Migration and Development in Santa Cruz Bolivia* (Orlando: University Presses of Florida, 1985).
 12. Felipe Costas Arguedas, "El folklore negro en Bolivia" ("Black Folklore in Bolivia"), *Tradición* 15 (1954): 59.
 13. Mario Montaña Aragón, "La familia negra en Bolivia" ("The Black Family in Bolivia"), in *Guía etnográfica y lingüística de Bolivia (Tribus del altiplano y valle) (Ethnographic and Linguistic Guide to Bolivia [Tribes of the Plateau and Valley])* (La Paz: Don Bosco, 1992). All translations from Spanish to English are the author's.
 14. "Las poblaciones negras de los Yungas" ("The Black Populations of the Yungas"), *Los tiempos*, December 17, 1978.
 15. Hernan Criales Alcázar, *La raza negra y la altura (The Black Race and Altitude)* (La Paz: Facultad de Medicina, Enfermería, Nutrición, y Tecnología Médica, 1992).
 16. Quoted in Crespo, *Esclavos negros en Bolivia*, 2nd ed. (La Paz: Librería Editorial Juventud, 1995), 128.
 17. Raul Meneses, "Provincia Sud Yungas" ("South Yungas Province"), in *La Paz en su IV centenario, 1548–1948: Monográfica 1 (La Paz in Its Fourth Century, 1548–1948: Monograph 1)* (La Paz: Comité Pro IV Centenario de la Fundación de La Paz, 1948), 196.
 18. Allison Spedding, *Wachu Wachu: Cultivo de coca e identidad en los Yunkas de La Paz (Wachu Wachu: The Culture of Coca and Identity in the Yungas of La Paz)* (La Paz: Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado, 1994).
 19. *Censo Nacional 1900 (National Census 1900)* (La Paz: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 1900), 39.
 20. Another reminder of the supposed physical incompatibility of blacks with high altitude comes in the form of a widely performed and recognized folk dance in Bolivia called the *morenada*. It is popularly thought to portray newly arrived black slaves on the march to Potosí. Dancers wear black masks with bulging eyes, flared nostrils, and swollen tongue and lips to represent the physical reactions to the dry and thinning air.
 21. This de-emphasizes, however, the reality of a separate and increasingly important urban black experience. This is in contrast to what is observed in the Aymara population, where much is made, both in popular discourse and in scholarship, of the urban *cholo* identity as separate and distinct from the rural *indio* identity.
 22. Xavier Albó, *Yungas: Los "otros" Aymaras; Diagnóstico económico-socio-cultural de Sud Yungas (Yungas: The "Other" Aymaras; A Economic-Social-Cultural Diagnosis of South Yungas)* (La Paz: Equipo CIPCA, 1976).
 23. Xavier Albó, *Iguales aunque diferentes: Hacia unas políticas interculturales y lingüísticas para Bolivia (Equal though Different: Toward Intercultural and Linguistic Policies for Bolivia)* (La Paz: Ministerio de Educación, UNICEF, CIPCA, 2000).