

**Migratory Identity: A Bolivian’s Connection to the University of Illinois**

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- Oral History Interview with Isabel Scarborough, University of Illinois Doctoral Candidate
- Interviewer: Brianne Bokish, Latin American and Caribbean Studies 395 and in conjunction with the Ethnography of the University Initiative, University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana
- Oral history project on Latin American immigrant stories and their connections to the University of Illinois

Date of Interview: April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010

Date of Notes: May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010

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An oral history is the recording, preservation, and interpretation of a person's story and how it ties in with history. For my oral history I interviewed an individual about her personal experiences growing up in Bolivia and how she ended up at the University of Illinois today. This was done through a recorded interview and the following is my interpretation of her story.

To me, oral histories are what personalize history. They connect real life experiences to historical facts, and make history more tangible through emotions and different perspectives. I was able to research Bolivia prior to my interview with Isabel, but it wasn't until after I talked with her that I formed a good mental image of Bolivia and could picture its history through her stories. For me it is hard to make history come alive without personal tales and descriptions, and what I do remember from history classes are the personal experiences shared about that place and time in history.

This oral history is valuable because every person has a story and something can be learned from each and every one of us. Isabel's story can teach us about Latin America and migration to the United States in particular. Her story may be different from many other Bolivians, but she still represents the country and culture, and still had to face challenges while migrating to the United States. We can learn about ourselves through her experience of not understanding her own identity and how she has been able to relate to numerous types of people because of her peculiar upbringing. Most importantly this oral history can clear up confusions about Bolivia. A quick Google search on Bolivia will supply you with ample material on what is going wrong in the country. The bad is always what seems to be the most highlighted in every society, especially in current news. Bolivia has faced horrible hardships and their economy isn't the best in Latin America, but it's still important to learn of what potential they have and to see the good the country has to offer, even if it's not what the majority of the country is seeing. There's a good and a bad side to every story, culture, and country, and Isabel seemed to bring out the best. She spoke very fondly of her country and talked mainly of the good experiences in her life, giving me an entirely new perspective on the country and its potential.

I think that this oral history could be used in classrooms from kindergarten to high school. Isabel

shared many personal stories about life growing up in a military dictatorship and living through hyperinflation, that really help one to understand that different atmosphere. Her vivid stories conveyed these terrible events in history through the eyes of a child, and how different that can be from an adult's perspective. Her stories, because they were created when she was a child, would be great geared toward children learning Latin American history.

### **Interviewee Biography**

Isabel Scarborough is a U.S. citizen born abroad in Cochabamba, Bolivia. She was born in 1970 to a middle-class family and has three siblings. Her family history plays a significant role in explaining her life and travels between the U.S. and Bolivia, which ultimately influenced who she is today and what she identifies as. Her grandfather, born in Texas, moved to Bolivia in the 1940s as a mining engineer. Her father was born in the mines of Bolivia and the small family then decided to leave the adventurous life behind to move back to the United States for a more secure upbringing for him. When the Vietnam War broke out years later, her father and grandmother traveled back to Bolivia to avoid the draft, expecting only to spend a short time there, but her father soon enrolled in the local law school to pass the time and met and married a Bolivian native. Isabel was born to an atypical Bolivian family in the sense that her father was American and her mother Bolivian, and therefore they were raised in a bicultural atmosphere. She spoke Spanish to her mother and English to her father and it was stressed by her father to speak both languages properly and to never use 'Spanglish'. She grew up attending public and Catholic grade school, as Bolivia's official religion is Catholic. Her father encouraged her and her siblings to attend the international high school to give them better opportunities for education and employment in the future.

Living in Bolivia through the 1970s and 80s, Isabel experienced great government and economic change. She lived during numerous military dictatorships, the first election of a democratic government,

and one of the highest inflations the world has ever seen. With the poor economy of Bolivia, her father knew that the best jobs and opportunities lay elsewhere and they needed to prepare for better options. She spent her entire life up until college living in Bolivia, but visited the United States frequently to see her father's family, so wasn't completely turned away from the idea of attending school in the United States. With opposition from her mother and mother's side, she left Bolivia for Bryn Mawr College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for her undergraduate degree. She wasn't too shocked by the changes as she had visited the U.S. many times before, but she was still faced with many cultural differences not growing up with the same experiences as her peers. She met her former husband, a Bolivian-American, in college. They married and moved back to Bolivia for five years where she had a son and then moved back in with her parents. Even though she was teaching at a university there she was unable to afford the best life possible for her son, so she later moved to the United States when he was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, to attend graduate school at the University of Illinois.

She is currently finishing up her doctoral degree in anthropology with a focus in Bolivia.

Through her graduate schooling she has had the opportunity to return to Bolivia for a year and a half to complete fieldwork. With her degree she hopes to become a college professor and have the opportunity to travel to Bolivia frequently for research. Her and her son have decided to make the United States their permanent home. Because of her family's pattern of traveling back and forth between the United States and Bolivia starting with her grandfather in the 1940s, she has picked up the same desire and has made that a pattern in her life as well. Her and her son plan on making the trek back to Bolivia every other year or so as they have found they can't seem to sit still in one place for too long.

## **Bolivia**

Bolivia is a landlocked country in Latin America bordering Brazil, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Paraguay. The capital is La Paz and one of the largest cities is Cochabamba, which is referred to as "the heart of Bolivia". The Andes and Lake Titicaca are located in Bolivia. Bolivia was once part of the

ancient Inca Empire and many South American Indians remain there today as the Andes helped protect them from European diseases. About 2/3 of the population is Indigenous. Bolivia won its independence in 1825. In 1965 a guerrilla movement from Cuba started a revolutionary war (Infoplease). From 1967 to 1982 the country was under military rule and when Hugo Banzer Suarez was elected president in 1971, he replaced civilians with members of the armed forces. The economy grew but human rights were violated. Much violence occurred over the next 25 years as the country went from president to president and the economy quickly failed (U.S. Department of State). It returned to civilian rule in 1982. Bolivia has South America's 2<sup>nd</sup> largest natural gas reserve and has considerable oil, but it remains one of the poorest countries as it has had many work stoppages and coca farming has been wiped out over the course of several presidents. Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, was elected in December of 2005. He nationalized Bolivia's energy industry, formed a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution, and is working to legalize the growing of coca once more. The new constitution Morales presented gives indigenous people more rights. The U.S. has greatly helped in Bolivia's debt relief and is a major partner for their economic development. But because Morales has legalized the growing of coca for illegal cocaine, the U.S. has backed down a bit with helping the country and he has now been referred to as the "United States' biggest nightmare" (Infoplease).

### **The Interview**

I conducted my oral history interview on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010 in Davenport Hall on campus at the University of Illinois. After talking with her once for a pre interview and researching Bolivia on my own for background information, I had planned on focusing the interview on education and the story that brought Isabel to the U of I. In doing background research I found it interesting to find that Bolivia has such a low literacy rate and that many students don't make it through school past the age of 12. I was interested in finding out how my interviewee managed to dodge these problems and have the opportunity

to work towards her doctorate degree. I soon found out that Isabel had a very atypical upbringing compared to most Bolivians and even though the story of her education was interesting, I found other things far more interesting in her interview that I should put more focus on.

As an anthropologist, Isabel seemed very comfortable with the interview and knew exactly what I wanted to hear. She clarified details before I had to ask her and she kept her answers on topic. The over 20 questions I prepared were all answered, but I didn't have to ask half of them to be answered as she ran with the interview and made me feel very confident in its success. As I focused the interview on education through the questions I asked, I realized later, after reviewing the interview several times, that she was focusing her story more on identity and traveling to and fro between Bolivia and the United States. As an atypical immigrant from Bolivia, Isabel has an interesting story to tell. Even though she didn't have to personally face the worst conditions possible growing up in Bolivia, she still witnessed them and still was affected by the government and economy. Because of her dual citizenship she is able to connect Bolivia and the United States, and is much better able to relate to so many different types of people. I feel that her family history and her life up to this point have prepared her to be able to relate to others presently immigrating and to those who are permanent residents of both Bolivia and the United States. Even though she doesn't represent the typical situation people picture in Bolivia, she has much to share and teach the world about her country and its people.

### **Interpretation**

My oral history interview with Isabel Scarborough taught me a lot about Bolivia – more than I know I could find simply reading a textbook. She helped clear up some confusions I had after I researched the country on my own, and she also enlightened me on topics I feel are important for others to learn of. Even though Isabel is only one Bolivian, to me her story represents Bolivia better than any article or book I can read on the country. I feel that it is important to learn the basic information about a country but then more important to reinforce it with personal stories and experiences to better grasp its

history. Personal tales can represent so much more than facts and figures in a textbook and bring to life history through feelings and interactions.

Isabel's interview brought up key themes that I feel are important topics others should learn if studying Bolivia or Latin America. These themes I will address by section and were picked either because they give a different perspective than what most of my background sources depicted, are what seemed to me to be what Isabel really stressed others should take from her story, or because I think it is what really represents Isabel and what she has to offer to others studying Latin America. The themes are: education, a rosy retrospect, an atypical lifestyle, and what I want to focus most attention on: her adaptable identity.

## **Education**

What fascinated me most while researching Bolivia and before interviewing Isabel was Bolivia's education system. An article by Carlos Santander-Maturana states, "The ruling strata of Bolivia have always considered education not as a right but as a tool to marginalize wide sectors of the population. This marginalization has helped them to keep a tight control for most of the life of the republic. As a result, Bolivia enjoys the dubious honor of being the South American country with the worst literacy rate. According to the Bolivian National Statistics Institute, in 2002 absolute literacy runs in the order of 20 percent, functional literacy 35 percent, for a dismaying 55 percent" (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation). It continues later to read, "The confederation is also preoccupied with the large number of children who do not attend school at all. According to data available to us, the absentee rate is high between the ages of six and eight, decreases by the age of nine, but then escalates considerably by the age of 12. The reason given to us is that many children are forced to enter the informal economy often by the time they are 12 years old in order to support or supplement meager family incomes" (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation). With this being the core theme of all the articles I read on education in Bolivia, I was very curious to see how Isabel turned up at the University of Illinois

doing advanced work. Isabel mentioned that she attended Catholic school and then the international high school, and also mentioned how, because Cochabamba is the “heart of Bolivia”, it was building many universities in the area while she was growing up. This took me by surprise because I hadn’t pictured any advanced institutions for education in the country or even good high schools for that matter. She informed me that there are those options and that most students are encouraged to continue their education, especially the males. Of course it is true that many rural Bolivians are poor and dropping out of school to work, but Isabel represents a different part of Bolivia: the urban. In the larger cities like Cochabamba and La Paz, many are continuing on to get advanced educations because these resources are now available to them. Bolivia has close to 20 major universities today. What we learn about the rural population is still true, but is quickly changing. Isabel’s research actually uncovers how many market women are now getting degrees at universities and still continuing to work in the markets, but are giving themselves the options for better lives.

Isabel is at the U of I today because it gave her the right “package” she says. Of the other programs that accepted her, U of I offered the best plan because they gave her a tuition waiver, are very welcoming to international students, are very welcoming to students with children, and the city itself is very accommodating to her and her son. Here she is able to meet other Latin American’s and research in an anthropology program that has done wonderful research in Latin America.

It is important that others understand that Bolivia is growing and changing, and that they do have a good education system, and that many educated Bolivians are moving to the U.S. to do advanced work. It seems as though most websites and resources first focus on what isn’t working and that is what most conclude the entire country is like. Isabel is an example of a successful education story and through her education here, is going back to help Bolivia through her research.

### **A Rosy Retrospect**

Bolivia has lived through centuries of struggles. Even after its independence from Spanish rule in

the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Bolivia has faced horrible pains even just recently with government changes in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Through military dictatorships, social unrest, changes in political powers, and troubling hyperinflation, I assumed growing up in Bolivia would bring up many tales of bad experiences and stressful times. Isabel, a Bolivian growing up through some of Bolivia's hardest times in the 1970s and 80s, surprisingly had mainly good things to say about her childhood. Of course times weren't easy, but it seemed as though she found it more important to avoid talking about the most horrible facts and to explain that it was simply life.

As a child she may not have understood the worst of the situation in Bolivia, but even now it seems to me that she has a mainly rosy retrospect of her childhood during these times. She seemed to only talk fondly of the country she loved and didn't have horrible things to say about anything. I feel that her perspective may not be typical of the majority, but is important to take note of. She still was affected by political and economical changes but brings a bit of a happier tone to the depressing tales read in other sources. She never spoke with a depressing tone or seemed emotional about any of the situations I thought could have brought up terrible stories.

Her take on the economic hardships her country faced as she grew up may teach us how differently socio-economic groups face the same hardships. She was privileged to grow up middle class with opportunities for her future, while rural kids were leaving school by age 10 and not making money because of the hyperinflation. Bolivia is unique in that it is a country drastically divided by classes and it's important to understand both sides of the fence to understand the country as a whole, its problems, and its possible solutions.

### **An Atypical Bolivian Lifestyle**

In understanding Isabel's story and applying it to Bolivia or Latin American history, it is crucial to understand that she is an atypical Bolivian. What sets her apart the most is that she had dual citizenship in Bolivia and the United States. Because of this it was easier for her to travel to the States and it was

easier for her to attend school and work. She was atypical in the sense that her father was American and her mother Bolivian. This set her apart because she had a bicultural and bilingual household, unlike all those around her. Her family was middle class and therefore was able to have better opportunities than many other Bolivians. As her father's family was in America, she had many opportunities to visit the States and through that experience was better prepared to leave Bolivia for college.

It is important to understand that parts of Isabel's life were atypical, but I still feel that she represents Bolivia well. Her story and how many times she mentioned how she was atypical made me question what is typical and who defines that. If someone from Bolivia were to interview me about my upbringing in America, would I be typical or atypical? It's impossible for someone to fit every stereotype or condition others apply to what the 'typical' citizen of a country should be, so in a sense we are all atypical. Her 'atypical' story brings a contrast to the information we can read in other sources and just because it isn't the typical tale of an illiterate Indigenous person living in poverty doesn't discredit the importance of the story to Bolivia's history. Her story can actually be used to see the better side of Bolivia and to help others realize its growth and positive changes. Her story can be used to teach others that there really shouldn't be a typical story to tell but that diverse personal histories are important in truly understanding a country and culture, and in my opinion can only fully be understood if we look at all different types of perspectives.

## **Identity**

What I think is most important for others to take from Isabel's interview is the connection she has with others and other parts of the world because of her adaptable identity. Her family has a history of moving back and forth between the United States and Bolivia. It began in 1940 when her grandfather moved to Bolivia for work. Then her father was born and the family moved back to the States. Later her father and grandmother moved back to Bolivia where he made a life for himself and where Isabel comes into the story. Throughout her childhood she was able to travel back and forth to visit family in

America. She also had the opportunity to attend college in America, where she also traveled back and forth every year. After marriage she moved back to Bolivia, and then years later she moved back to the States with her son for graduate school. Through her studies she was able to do research and again be back in Bolivia. This traveling to and fro between the two countries and cultures helped her to understand both very well and to have them affect her identity. Growing up in a bicultural family allowed her to form this bicultural identity as well. The following is a piece from her interview that better explains her ability to connect with others because of her identity, and what she identifies as.

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Transcription from interview with Isabel Scarborough on April 23rd, 2010

[56:44-1:02:58]

Isabel: Gosh what am I doing here? Well I'm what they call a doctoral candidate now, which means that I passed my qualifying examinations, and I did my fieldwork. I'm writing my dissertation basically. I'm ABD, which stands for All But Dissertation. I'm ABD, writing my dissertation and will be in the job market next year. I had a great experience both academically and, you know

Brianne: And that's great that your research is in Bolivia and you are Bolivian

I: Oh yes absolutely. I think I did it that way on purpose because it was sort of a way of being able to, like many people today this wasn't the norm before I guess, but like many people today I'm use to this sort of like back and forth, right? My dad use to make this joke actually when we were growing up that he would introduce us to people as American-Bolivian, because it's true, we always had this American component, right, our dad was American and our last name, Scarborough, oh God forbid the only Scarborough's in the phonebook, and you know, they Spanishized it so we were the Escarborough family...and even so it was just very hard, oh and I went three years of basically hating my last name because it has 11 letters! You know, and filling out forms or trying to talk to Spanish speakers who, in a country that didn't have that many expads, or that many people from abroad actually. So in that kind of a society, we were

the oddity in that sense. So yeah, very bicultural, like always back and forth, so I guess as being in anthropology it allows me to continue doing that. And it's fun and it really enriches you and gives you different experiences. At least my son is very happy. I remember, when was this, when he was in elementary school here he came one day and he was just appalled, 'I talked to so-and-so in my class today and he's nine years old and can you believe it, he's never been on an airplane in his life!' 'Uh yeah, I can believe it.' You know it's normal and expensive to put a kid on an airplane, believe me. But he had his first airplane trip when he was like, I think, six weeks old, and has been traveling every year since, and I can relate to him. The year when we don't travel feels weird. Now we've been staying here for a year staying put because I'm writing, and we feel weird. You know, like oh this summer we should do a short road trip or something because it's this idea of always being on the move, and going back and forth. It's good. It's different.

B: Um, because you were a U.S. citizen born abroad but you spent your entire growing up in Bolivia, do you call yourself an American, or a Bolivian? Or was there ever a time you did both?

I: It's very hard isn't it? Yeah I went through that in college, and this whole identity crisis thing. Well not identity crisis, but it was difficult. I mean, I can relate a lot to immigrants who come to this country because I've, like I said, I've had this bicultural experience. I can also relate to Latinos. My best friend in college was Latina and I get along very well with Latinos and I can relate to a lot of their experiences because they are second generation many times, especially with people who are second generation whose parents are Mexican or Ecuadorian or Salvadorian, and they've lived in this country and they speak English really well and they've had the American experience but they also have the very strong Latino experience from their parents. I can absolutely relate to them because I had something similar growing up, you know, the other way around. They have their parents speaking Spanish to them at home in an English speaking country. I had my dad speaking to me in English in a Spanish speaking country, so I can relate very well to Latinos. I don't know if I would label myself as such or anything. I know my son is being "labeled" in school as Hispanic or Latino. Also because he carries his dad's last name, which is a Spanish last name...it's just interesting, I don't think I can

B: You can't identify either way?

I: Yeah, I guess

B: American-Bolivian

I: Or Bolivian-American. Yeah I'm Bolivian-American when I'm here, right I guess my Bolivian identity comes out more when I'm here because it's usually, it's the same, and I guess there is, I don't know, when you come to college you probably miss some things about home and identify more with being from, I don't know, whatever state your from, right? From Michigan, or whatever. And when you're in, say Michigan or whatever, then you identify more with being in college with your Illinois friends. Well it's the same thing for me. When I'm here I get identified more with being with my Bolivian identity and I miss parts and things in Bolivia, but when we go down to Bolivia, conversely, it's the same thing. I miss certain things from the States, and I always have my friends, you know, joking and saying, 'Oh my God, you've become such an American, look at you, you can't stand in line at a bank for more than five minutes and you get all impatient, good grief, slow down, it's Latin America, people are late and lines are long, it's a bureaucracy, you have to go with the flow'. There are all of these things, so like I said, I think my circumstances aren't that unique anymore. There's a lot more traveling and interconnectedness and all of these things going on. And you see it a lot more with the younger generation.

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Through her explanation of how her identity changes when she is in another country would be interesting for others to read about. It could open others' eyes to a new perspective, help others realize the changing world we live in today, and also help others find a story they can relate to if they feel they are going through a similar experience. Her story is an example of how we are usually defined by what we're not. When she is in America she is defined by not being like everyone else but more of an outsider and by her differences. I think anyone can relate to this experience as we are placed in new situations and defined by what makes us different or how we don't belong. Like she explained, when we are in a different place we tend to realize how proud we are of the place we came from and identify with that culture or location more.

This story also helps us learn about how culturally connected we are in the world today. Because of immigration and connections via the Internet and other forms of media, we are better able to learn of others and relate culturally. Isabel is unique in that she has formed an identity based on the experiences she had and the experiences in her family history that were affected by migration. She states that she has trouble staying put in one place for too long, and that is interesting to me because it shows how that has influenced her ability to move and learn of other cultures or areas and then be able to relate to people of all different backgrounds. Her story is only one of thousands that depicts this phenomenon that is the interconnectedness of cultures today. Not many years ago so many cultures were separated and people were divided based on their differences, but the world has quickly changed, and it is through people like Isabel who have increased the bonds between countries and cultures. Her story can only prepare us for the way the world is changing for the better, and what we can learn from her story now can only help us to help others in the future.

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