

- Oral History Interview Transcription with Isabel Scarborough, University of Illinois Doctoral Candidate
- Interviewer: a student in 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 23rd, 2010

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B = Interviewer Brianne

I = Interviewee Isabel

(p) = short pause (1 second)

(P) = longer pause (over 2 seconds)

italicized= louder pitch or more animated voice tone

underlined= stronger emphasis placed on word/phrase

...= took out unnecessary mumbling

Transcription 1: Economy and Government [21: 12 – 28:08]

B: Do you remember any issues with the government or the economy affecting your life as you grew up in Bolivia, and if so can you explain what you remember or what you understood then?

I: (Oh gosh) Not that many, I mean it's, it's funny the things that sort of come to mind, right, that you remember, um (p) well you can look at a history book and you can see all the changes that the country went through, right, well while I was growing up especially in the mid 70s, and I was a little girl then, but there were a number of military dictatorships, far right military dictatorships and this was a pattern throughout Latin America, there were some in Chile, some in Argentina, right? So Bolivia went through that period too, and I guess I don't remember much because I was a young girl but I do remember things like I remember one New Year's Eve...being in my room reading or something and then suddenly realizing, '*Oh my goodness it's like 10 at night!*' And rushing downstairs and telling my mom, 'why are all of my aunts and uncles and grandparents *still here?* Are they gonna all *sleep here?* We don't have that big a house' because there was a curfew. Everybody had to go home, had to be at home at 8 o'clock. And now I know it was very strict,... especially in the capital city there were tanks patrolling the street, this kind of thing, you had like, patrols like going *through* and you had people *literally* thrown into jail and it was very, it was a very scary *time*, but I remember my parents just sitting around and saying '*oh no, you know* since it's New Year's Eve, the military government lifted the curfew for this one night (p) so people can like roam the streets until whatever time, just for *tonight*' so that kind of thing, remembering this when I think I was like 7, 8, (p) this kind of *story* I guess, and you know it was something that you don't think about when you live it, you think it's normal, it's something interesting that you get to tell people about later on.

Um (p) so I remember that, and then in 82 the country held elections, you can read all about that in history books I guess again, but um this was when the first democratic elections were held after a *long* time, like ...they finally managed to convince (p) that military dictator who was then in power to *call* for national elections. And they did and um it worked out. He actually did there was a peaceful transition and this democratic government started. We were just *talking about* this with a visiting professor who was here from the University of Copenhagen the other day, and he had been in Bolivia also in the early 80s, and uh we were talking about our experiences then and what happened then is that this first government lasted only three years, (p) the presidential term is usually for four but after three years they ousted them and they held elections again and had somebody else come in because um they didn't do a very good, umm I'm not an economist, I have no idea what happened before or after but the end *result* of course I was an 11 year old child then you know, you don't really think about these things, but the result was that there was this huge *inflation*, and you know *1000s of percent inflation*, and it got to the point where it was ridiculous, you would have to like literally take a shopping bag full of money to the grocery store to buy a bag of bread, this kind of thing, because what the government was doing is that it just kept printing paper money. More and more and more, to sort of keep up with the inflation, instead of taking other measures, so it got to this ridiculous point where people were walking around with bags of worthless money (P) like literally, everybody was a millionaire. Everybody had like 10s, 100s of thousands of, you know, of these pesos that they were like caring around with them to buy like very small things. And my brother was born in 82, my youngest brother, and I remember like standing in line at the grocery store to go buy powdered milk, standing next to, ya, like it was like a bale full of, you know, it was like a bag about this tall and this wide..

B: like 2, 3 feet tall

I: yaa, you know, just, it had like... this stack of bills, of money, right and we were going to buy several you know cans of powdered milk, and you had to do it on the day because tomorrow the price, you know, would go up by so many thousands of pesos again so you had to do it again, and I remember like guarding the bag of money while my mom, like, left me there and would come back and that kind of thing. And a lot of people remember this, it's not, it's a well-known thing, so that was kind of interesting growing up, see but all of these things, which I guess are like these little highlights, these flashes, but in the whole a very, (p) I don't know I guess it's what people go through (P) and people didn't think about it like '*ooh look at me I'm living through a time in which I'm like*' you know, the situation stabilized, obviously they got rid of that *currency*, and made a *new* currency called the boliviano instead of the peso and that's a currency that is still being used today. And I think that's interesting actually what the current president is *doing* is he is um, to strengthen the boliviano, he has been like, because (p) you'll hear this from other people who live in Latin America, the Latin American currencies are very dependent on the U.S. *dollar*. (P) Anywhere in Latin America if you travel you can take dollars with you and people will take your dollars actually, you don't necessarily have to convert them many times, you know Ecuador has a completely dollarized economy, they use dollars there, umm, so it's just interesting that um what the current president is doing is to strengthen the boliviano, he's sort of like kept, because what happens is that, you know, people keep,

that's how you see whether the currency is strong or not, everyday in the newspaper they have the current *exchange rate*, with the dollar, I think it's like 6 bolivianos for every dollar now, but while I was in *fieldwork* in 2008 and 2009 actually the president was doing this thing where he was artificially like sort of trying to close the gap, so when I got there my dollar would buy me 7 bolivianos. When I left it would buy me something like, I don't know, 6 bolivianos and 10 cents or something. It sounds silly but it made a difference in my purchasing power, the year and a half I was there, it was because I got paid in dollars with my fellowship, so so it's kind of interesting to see how these things kind of affect how people live day by day.

Transcription 2: Back and Forth Theme [28:24 – 36:10]

B: Did you have any connections to the United States before you moved here permanently, or before you came to college here?

I: Umm ya, we were atypical, in the sense that we are not the typical migrant family because of my dad. Maybe I should backtrack a little bit. My grandfather, my dad's *father*, was a mining engineer, and in the 1940s – this was when there was a big mining boom throughout Latin America and Bolivia became, some families or some people I should say a small sector of the Bolivian population became very very wealthy in the 30s and 40s because of, they owned tin mines, and umm my grandfather ...was from Texas, umm was a mining engineer and he umm (p) ended up working in the Bolivian mines to what was, like the largest corporation, the Patino mines, they were called and this guy *Simon Patino*, you can look it up in the history books too, he was called the *Tin Baron* and he was like one of the world's first big, well he was one of the world's, you know the *Forbe's 100* or whatever he was very very rich and I think his descendents to this day like you know are jetsetters and live in Switzerland and this kind of thing right? But this was, this was a humble rags to riches story, guy, Bolivian, who made his fortune off the tin mines and my grandfather worked for him and that's where the Bolivian connection comes in I guess. And he worked there for a number of years, (p) *nine* years almost, and when *my father* was born, my father was born in, oh in a mine actually, in Potosio(?) it was called the mine of Catavi(?) ya and I think it was like ridiculous something like you know 4000 you know, I don't know 20000 feet above sea level, you know like very harsh conditions and stuff, so when my dad was born my grandparents decided to return to the states because ya it was fine to be all adventuresome and you know..

B: and now you have a child

I: ...traveling South America but then they had a baby so then they just came back. So my dad was born in Bolivia, but that was it and then years *later* when the Vietnam war broke out, my dad umm had an uncle who was in the recruiting office or whatever and they told him, well this is the way my dad tells it right, they told him that his turn was coming up – his name was going to come up to be drafted, so instead of traveling to *Canada*, like some of his friends did right, like Bill Clinton did to sort of avoid the draft, my grandmother, my grandfather had died by then – he died in a car accident, umm my grandmother said 'well

why don't we go back to Bolivia and visit where you the know the place where you were *born*'. So they *went back to Bolivia*, and she hooked up with like you know friends and people she had met way back when, this is like 20 years later, and umm my dad began attending the local law school there because he had been in college here and had been getting a degree in Political Science I think or something and the war was suppose to only last a few *months* but then he got bored of you know not doing anything so he decided to enter the local law school, and that's where he met my mom. See, and the rest is kind of *history*. They kind of met there and they got married and then umm my dad got a job in Bolivia. There was talk of maybe coming back to the *States* but they he just sort of made a life for himself there, so, ya, that's why we were born there. We're all born as U.S. citizens born abroad, but what we did do is that we came every two years, definitely and sometimes almost every year we traveled here to the States to visit my grandmother

B: In what area?

I: Oh in California

B: California

I: Yes, in Pasadena actually, of all places. So we went there and visited my dad's family almost every year or every other year, so and this is you know in the 70s and 80s when, you know, a trip from Bolivia was like you know this big thing-I don't know how my parents did it with four kids you know like, a day and a half worth of travel with all of these suitcases and stuff and it was kind of interesting, so a lot of that, and then umm but that's something that I've continued I guess throughout my life because then I came to college and I was going *back and forth* every year. Then (p) I married a guy who was Bolivian-American, so *we were going back and forth every year again*, and then because of field work I keep going back and forth every year, so I mean I guess in that sense like I said, it's atypical in the sense that I *knew* the culture here, I *knew* I spoke English at home (P) right, which is (laughs) different, a lot of immigrants come here without speaking the language, but on the other hand I think it was also *hard for me* – I remember coming to college here and because I guess my English accent is, ahh, it's gotten better obviously because now I speak more English than Spanish, you can catch my Spanish accent every once and a while I guess, in certain things. Umm when I came here I spoke good English, I spoke proper English, in that sense it's funny, we grew up bilingual, my dad spoke to us in *English* and my mom only spoke to us in *Spanish*, however strange that might sound. Our lunches, ...our dinner table was always interesting because we would be answering in two different languages and my dad was very big on you know, we don't speak Spanglish, you differentiate between the two, you speak proper in *one* or the other.

B: Did he speak Spanish as well?

I: Ya, ya he spoke *very* good Spanish, (laughing) he spoke that with my mom, and my mom understands English but her English isn't that good but she only spoke to us in Spanish – it was this weird situation, but I think they do that kind of thing in Europe all the time, so it wasn't that weird. Umm what was I trying to say? Ya I guess I was trying to talk about,

ya, about language, I did have the language very well when I was in college but I remember talking to my friends, this was when the cultural differences come up, right? They would talk, I took an introduction to Sociology class and they would talk about stuff that they had lived, you know while growing up and the experiences they had while growing up, I don't know, uhh I can't remember, I think somebody mentioned something about Watergate and I had *no clue* what that was because I hadn't *grown up here*. I could tell you all these neat stories about *military dictatorships*, and you know, *inflation*, and walking around with *millions of pesos, with a bag of money*, but I couldn't talk about, I had no idea what Watergate was. I didn't know what Jimmy Carter's policies were, you know I didn't know who his vice president had been, and this kind of thing. So it was, I think, it *wasn't as much a shock for me* but it was always interesting seeing, I would be talking to people, and young people my generation my age exactly, and there were many experiences *they* had gone through growing up here in the States that I had had no part of, but I could speak to other things. So sometimes it was a little confusing, or people would be a little like 'What? What do you mean?' (p) Right? Stuff like that, because you just have very different experiences, so ya I do remember that. That was *not hard*, but it was something that I would sort of have to *gently remind people* that you know, I learned to be very upfront and say 'I wouldn't *know*, I was in South America back then, or could you tell me about this? This sounds really fascinating' or even not even growing up with the same TV *shows* or TV *programs*.

Transcription 3: Decision to come to the University of Illinois [43:57 -49:47]

(Talking about working in Bolivia and sending son to school)

I: We moved back in with my *parents*, ...with my very *small* (laughs) salary, as an *adjunct* and the Bolivian university paid for schooling, and this was when I was like, well this is ridiculous, I can't do this for the rest of my life. So that's when I had kept in touch with some people, I guess some of my mentors from *college here* and that's when I started looking into possibilities of coming back to *grad school*, and that's what got me decided to come back to grad school. I actually *waited* until, I sort of *timed* it in such a way that I started my first year of grad school when my son started first grade because as a single parent I wanted to, (p) now I know that there's some kindergartens that are like all day and I could have done it with him a little *younger*, but I guess I had this idea in my head that like *he'll be in school* most of the day, *I'll be in school most of the day* and we'll be able to do it, and it worked out very well. Actually, ...it's just one of these things I chose University of *Illinois*, and you know it has I think it's a lot more welcoming to students with children, whether they're undergraduates or graduate students or whatever than many other universities just because it's not in a *big city*, there's an infrastructure in place, there's such a *huge* population of graduate students, you know, there's Orchard Downs where they have the family graduate housing. There's this whole system in place for people with kids ...so you end up plugging yourself into this network of other people who are all doing the same thing as you are, and you know.

B: Is that the only reason why you came to the University of Illinois or did you have other

I: *Oh no no*, I got accepted into two other grad *schools* but the U of I gave me the best umm

package, basically, like research assistantship without having, with tuition waiver, not having to take out student loans, *I'll go there!* But it also happened to be, I mean, actually, ... I just wanted the place that would be the most advantageous to me, like money wise, and like with a, the University of Illinois actually also has like the Anthropology department here has a reputation for having like, it's very strong in Latin American anthropology- very strong, and it has like famous people have studied here and done great work and that kind of thing, and so that is why I applied here, and now it actually ended up being thank goodness, right, ... I ended up having a good *experience*, but family wise and my son had a great experience here too, but no we chose it because of academics and financial *aid like you would* choose any college or anything like that.

B: And you've been in this area since?

I: We've been in this area, well, seven years already, *well, not the whole seven years* consecutively because we did go for that year and a half so I could do my fieldwork, but we are planning now on staying in the States. And unfortunately, I mean, (p) Bolivia like Latin America is going through a period of transition, of change, the economy is very difficult, there is a huge *brain drain*. I can speak for myself and my three siblings, we all love Bolivia, we all wish we could be there, but you know, for different reasons, mainly economic, we all ended up coming *here*, just migrating and coming here, because you also want to make a living, you want to be able to, something I was not able to do in Bolivia and that I couldn't see myself doing even if I... had done grad school *in Bolivia*, you know what I mean, I explored all my chances. I tried to see that if I do grad school here in Bolivia or if I try to, I don't know, you know even like crazy things, *well not crazy things*, but something totally unrelated to what I do, let's say I get an MBA, would I be able to make a living out of that, right? No, I would still probably be, I'd be better off than with being in anthropology, but I would still have to live with my *parents* or you know *remarry* or you know *something* to be able to make ends meet and save and you know send, and make ends meet in the sense of giving my child a good education and as good as a chance as my parents gave me.

B: So it's a better education here

I: Oh yeah. Oh absolutely. Oh yeah it's a much better education, and you're able to, a young person is able to work hard and make money somehow. Does this make sense? Like I see a lot of my peers in Bolivia, I mean like I said I was lucky because I had the dual citizenship so it was easy for me to come here, that's something that's atypical also a lot of immigrants you will see have a lot of trouble (p) migrating *here* – they either have to do it undocumented or they go through, they basically go through this hellish process that takes forever to get a work permit and all these things, right? Umm but yeah, a lot of my peers have migrated, I have friends, you know, these friends I grew up who are in *Spain*, I have a friend in *Belgium*, I have friends in *Argentina*, I have some friends who are *here*, just they all (p) left and it's really really sad because we all really really love the country, but if you can't make *a living*, right, then, it's just very hard. This is why you decide to, people will tell you, people are always looking for (P) for better opportunities.

Transcription 4 [56:44-1:02:58] (used in interpretation essay)

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, that 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 Scarboroughs 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 expats, 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 roadtrip 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's 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.