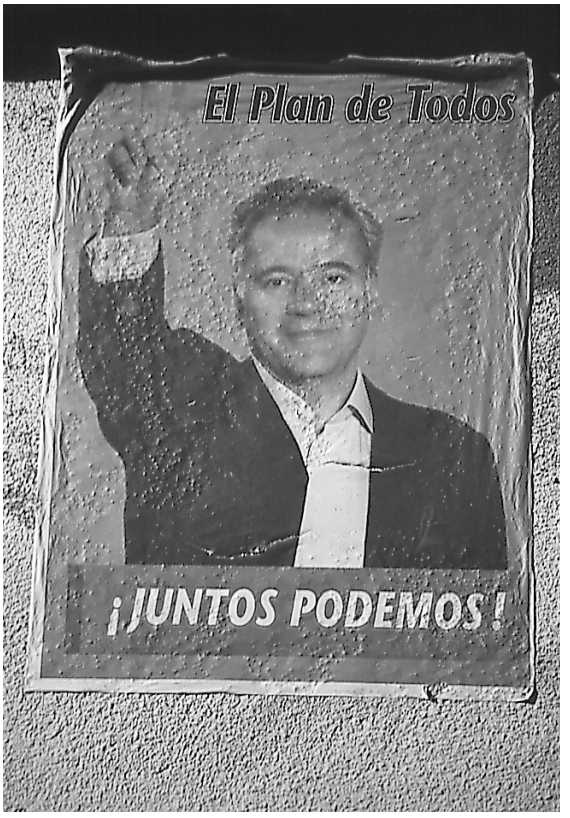
3 • Adjusting Poverty

After the Bolivian government's initial embrace of neoliberalism in 1985, subsequent administrations broadened and deepened the process set in motion by Víctor Paz Estenssoro. Some of the most important and far-reaching reforms followed the 1993 election of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada to the presidency. Sánchez de Lozada, who designed Bolivia's original neoliberal agenda when he was minister of planning, ran on a platform that emphasized his past success at bringing inflation under control and stabilizing the economy. As president, he headed a coalition of parties that, once in power, passed a series of legal reforms that had two broad objectives: the further reconfiguration of the state apparatus and the continuing transformation of the relationship between the state and Bolivian citizens. Three reform laws were particularly important for El Alto: the Ley de Capitalización (Capitalization Law), the Ley de Participación Popular (Popular Participation Law) and the Ley de Reforma Educativa (Educational Reform Law).

Despite its clever name, the Capitalization Law lays the legal framework for the privatization of state enterprises and the *decapitalization* of the state. It permits the sale of 50 percent of the stock in public entities to private investors, who frequently acquire them at artificially low prices. The government then transfers the remaining stocks to a revamped social security system, which is charged with administering the stocks and distributing an annual pension—the BONOSOL—to individuals aged sixty-five and older. The BONOSOL will supposedly provide elderly Bolivians with a modest income of approximately $250 a year.



Campaign poster of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, 1993

Despite these modest benefits, the law decapitalizes the state in ways that are particularly significant for El Alto. As one local leader notes, the value of Bolivia's oil, natural gas, and mineral reserves and the future income from their sale do not figure into the law. Profits from these resources now flow into the coffers of private corporations, not those of the Bolivian state. The result, he maintains, is that "the state's revenues will be greatly reduced and consist of little more than a nominal tax that the corporations will pay. It is going to be impossible for the state to maintain the salaries of public school teachers and health care workers in the city."

Indeed, the Popular Participation Law and the Educational Reform Law must be understood within this context. The Popular Participation Law aims to decentralize government and to entrust local organizations

with greater decision-making power. It proposes to redistribute 20 percent of the state's revenues to municipalities in proportion to their populations. Each municipality in turn is reorganized into Organizaciones Territoriales de Base (OTBs), which in El Alto constitute the neighborhood committees. The OTBs, or juntas de vecinos, are then supposed to use the money for purposes determined by the groups and to elect officials to a Vigilance Committee to oversee expenditures.

This model of local government encounters a number of problems. As state enterprises are privatized and the state itself becomes increasingly decapitalized, it is not at all clear that 20 percent of state revenues will actually mean an improvement for local residents in El Alto. Some people argue that the Popular Participation Law favors El Alto, because the city's dense population will merit a larger share of federal funds than the amount received by smaller cities. Others are much less sanguine. They interpret the new law less as a democratic blueprint for popular political participation than as a new form of domination.

These critics are disturbed by the way that the Popular Participation Law attempts to restructure the very nature of political participation by legitimating and encouraging new forms of political expression while ignoring or marginalizing preexisting ones. In particular, the law emphasizes municipal organizations but ignores the existence and the forms of struggle associated with national and regional entities. Oscar Michel, the president of FEJUVE in El Alto, explains:

> [The Popular Participation Law] goes against the interests of the popular classes. Why? Because we have confederations at the national level. We have federations that are departmental or regional in the case of El Alto. And we have the Central Obrera Boliviana. And the unions and the juntas de vecinos group themselves around these national or departmental institutions. When there is a conflict, it is these national and departmental entities that make pronouncements and organize pressure tactics.
>
> But what happens with the Popular Participation Law? Each neighborhood committee is empowered to make its own arrangements with the state without consulting any overarching organization. The intentions of the government are divide and rule. It intends to debilitate the main organizations by putting local leaders in charge of small areas and [tying them directly to the state]. This guarantees that there are no solid institutions that question the government. It reduces the power of the popular movement.

My conversation with Michel took place in late 1994, a few months after the passage of the Popular Participation Law, amid heated debate and intense political maneuvering generated by the law. CONDEPA, the party that controlled local government, adamantly opposed the new law, and many details about its implementation at the local level remained unclear. Amid the uncertainty that prevailed, political parties jockeyed for position and control over the emergent political structure. Michel, a CONDEPA member, told me that "every party is involved in this [maneuvering] in accord with their interests, projections, and so forth. They are trying to use the law for their own ends. An enormous fight is taking place that lessens the value of civic work."

In light of the political reforms laid out by the Popular Participation Law, the agenda for public education, set forth in the Educational Reform Law, becomes intelligible. The Educational Reform Law transfers much of the responsibility for public education to local municipalities, including the hiring, firing, and supervision of teachers and the upkeep of schools. It abolishes the Education Ministry and no longer guarantees the graduates of teacher-training institutes positions in the public school system. Teachers must approach newly empowered local officials for jobs, but critics say these officials will not receive the money they need to pay teachers' salaries or maintain buildings and classrooms. Most classrooms are barren settings that frequently do not even have enough seats for all the students. Peeling walls, serious overcrowding, and a dearth of materials make learning extremely difficult. Critics claim that the law furthers the de facto privatization of the public school system, forcing teachers to turn to private institutions for employment and obliging those parents who can afford the expense to place their children in private schools (see chapter 5).

A number of fly-by-night private schools have sprouted up to take advantage of the public schools' difficulties. The new religious congregations that now proliferate in the city support some of these private schools. But private schools are not an option that most parents can reasonably consider, and the vast majority of students remain stuck in the deteriorating public system. In addition, although figures for El Alto are not available, the percentage of children in La Paz department aged six to thirteen who do not attend school jumped from 10 percent in 1988 to 17 percent in 1990 (CEDLA/ILDIS 1994). This is because deepening poverty forces children to leave school and find work to help support their families.

As the people of El Alto debated the latest round of neoliberal legislation in the mid-1990s, longtime residents and new immigrants continued to be victims of a process that Lúcio Kowarick terms "urban spoliation"

(1994:32); this form of exploitation arises from the state's unwillingness to provide adequate housing, employment, health care, education, and basic sanitation to residents of peripheral urban neighborhoods. Neoliberalism has not created this situation, as state spending on social services has always been inadequate, but the new neoliberal reforms are likely to aggravate an already acute crisis. Nationwide expenditures on health, housing, educational, and sanitary services fell from 19 percent of the 1987 state budget to 15 percent in 1992 (CEDLA/ILDIS 1994). To make matters worse, the municipal government of La Paz deprives El Alto of important revenues. Airport taxes paid by departing travelers and tolls from the various highways that lead to and from the city never enter local coffers. Similarly, El Alto receives no tax revenues from many local businesses, because the firms either avoid paying taxes altogether, or they pay them in La Paz, where most have their administrative headquarters.

State-sponsored health care is in desperate straits, as symbolized by the 1991 reappearance of cholera—a nineteenth-century scourge that was once thought to have been eliminated. Although the cholera epidemic shocked the sensibilities of congressional representatives, who declared a citywide emergency in El Alto out of fear that the epidemic would spread to La Paz, the resurgence of this dreaded disease should not have surprised anyone. El Alto has two doctors for every thousand residents, and one hospital and twenty-four undersupplied health clinics are the only public facilities available to a half-million people. In contrast, La Paz, which has approximately the same number of residents, has fourteen hospitals, 115 health clinics, and 180 smaller health posts (CEDLA/ILDIS 1994). Public sanitation and deepening unemployment are also worse in El Alto and place people at greater risk of illness.

Those who can afford the expense, or who are driven by sheer desperation, turn to a limited number of private clinics for health care. International development organizations, which have stepped in to ameliorate the worst symptoms of the neoliberal crisis, support some of these clinics. PROSALUD, for example, is an NGO financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) that operates six clinics specializing in child and maternal health care. Five are concentrated in one area of the city, where the de facto privatization of the health care system began in the early 1990s. Consultation fees charged by PROSALUD are only nominally higher than those at the public health clinics, and the doctors and nurses receive the same pay as state employees, but PROSALUD requires them to work longer hours, and they enjoy none of the benefits of the state system.

Although the privatization of health care via NGOs has taken place in

some neighborhoods abandoned by the state, many parts of the city have neither state- nor NGO-sponsored health care centers to tend to the needs of local people. When a medical crisis strikes residents in these areas, they must rely on their social networks for assistance and activate any ties they may have to influential people. Such was the case in early 1995, when Veronica Mamani, a ten-year-old girl, fell deathly ill with a parasitic infection.

Veronica lived for seven years with her aunt in the Yungas, a series of subtropical mountain valleys on the eastern flank of the Andes. Veronica's mother, Juliana, had sent her daughter there after she remarried and her new husband—Veronica's stepfather—expressed little enthusiasm for the child of his wife's previous relationship. Veronica did not thrive in the Yungas, and when she became extremely weak and sickly, the aunt returned her to Juliana, who lived in El Alto. Juliana, her husband, and their two young children occupied a rented dwelling in a peripheral part of the city. Juliana made a meager income from weaving shawls, and her husband pursued odd jobs around El Alto and La Paz. Health care facilities were completely absent in this part of town, but Juliana participated in a literacy program sponsored by an NGO and turned to the NGO director for assistance with her daughter.

Juliana and a couple of NGO representatives took the child to El Alto's only public hospital at the opposite end of the city. The physician who examined the girl stated that Veronica was severely malnourished and suffered from an acute parasitic infection; indeed, the infestation was so bad that a large lump protruded from her abdomen. After berating Juliana for allowing her daughter to become so sick, he told the group that Veronica had to be hospitalized immediately or she would die. The NGO director then managed to get an ambulance to take the sick child to La Paz, where she was admitted to the Children's Hospital in Miraflores. Shortly thereafter, Veronica underwent surgery to remove the parasitic lump, which was too large and life threatening to be treated with drugs, and for the next two days she seemed on the road to recovery. Then, in the middle of the night she suffered a heart attack and died.

For the next several days the NGO director and Juliana made arrangements for the child's burial. With NGO funds the director purchased a coffin, a plot in the local cemetery, and arranged for a death certificate, even though the child lacked formal identification documents. The director explained that even though these activities and the entire matter of health care lay completely outside the NGO's mandate and realm of expertise, simple compassion required that the organization address the periodic

crises that its impoverished constituents faced. Indeed, the entire experience illustrates how the retrenchment of public health care is increasingly forcing residents to turn to NGOs for their basic needs. It also demonstrates how the intensity of El Alto's poverty overwhelms the limited capacity of NGOs while pushing them to take on tasks that have nothing to do with their formal agendas.

The depth of the health care crisis, however, goes far beyond the issue of NGOs, or the relative strengths and weaknesses of public versus private health care, because many alteños harbor deep suspicions about Western medical practitioners. They value the seemingly magical cures that these people can provide with pills and injections, but the race and class prejudices of many health care providers make some alteños—especially recent Aymara immigrants—very uneasy about interacting with them. Florencia Huanca is a sixty-two-year-old Aymara woman who is mortally afraid of hospitals, which she believes are places where people go to die and where their bodies are abused.[1]

When a benign lump developed on her wrist, Huanca's relatives urged her to enter a hospital to have it removed. She described to me her discomfort when hospital personnel made her disrobe and asked her to remove a ring before the operation. She did not understand why she was being asked to remove her clothing and her ring and insisted that she was "not a sick person," but those attending her paid no attention. After the surgery she recalled falling asleep and awakening in an unfamiliar part of the hospital. She did not remember how she got there, but just as she was awakening, someone—a doctor, she thinks—pulled a needle out of her arm. Huanca called out to the person and demanded to know what was happening. The man ignored her and hastily left the room.

Huanca maintained that this individual was really a *kharisiri*, or predatory ghoul, who stole her blood and probably intended to sell it to foreigners for a profit. As proof of this likelihood, she cited the following evidence: although she had quickly bounced back from an earlier, and more serious, gall bladder operation, she was weak and unsteady for several months after the wrist surgery. She added that at the time of the operation, many people in La Paz and El Alto were trafficking in human blood, and because her blood type was rare, she believed she was a logical target for a kharisiri attack.

The murderous activities of marauding ghouls—known variously as kharisiri, *lik'ichiri, pishtaco,* and *ñakaq*—have a long history in the Andes that dates to the sixteenth century. They vividly express the race and class exploitation experienced by indigenous peoples, who, because of persistent

unemployment and malnutrition, are intensely insecure about their bodily integrity.[2] The contemporary creatures appear to their prey as cholo intermediaries, doctors, engineers, and "gringo" development workers; in the past, they were more likely to be priests. Traditionally, kharisiris steal their victims' fat, which they then use for a variety of nefarious purposes, such as manufacturing medicines and creams, paying the foreign debt, or lubricating airplanes, but contemporary marauders in poor urban neighborhoods are more likely to covet blood or body parts. In almost every case, however, an outsider or a powerful individual from a superior race, class, or nationality profits from the primitive accumulation of oppressed peoples' vital bodily substances.

The tales graphically depict the feelings of vulnerability among those who are losing control of their lives as well as their bodies. They express the seeming irrationality of poverty and the terror that race and class oppression can assume. Because of these fears, as well as a more general desire to avoid the condescension and racism of Western health care practitioners and the availability of an indigenous non-Western medical tradition, many people turn to a variety of local folk healers for treatment. Others leave health problems untreated or medicate themselves with a variety of drugs from local pharmacies. Most people experiment with a variety of potential solutions until they find relief. Marcelo Mamani, for example, suffered from chronic back pain after being hit by a speeding taxi. When treatment at a local health clinic failed to alleviate his symptoms, Mamani went to a folk healer, who instructed him to purchase several small lizards in the local marketplace, gut them, and apply the still-squirming carcasses to his back under a tight bandage. After two treatments Mamani's back pain disappeared, and he declared that he would never enter a clinic again.

As alteños grapple with a serious health crisis and a crumbling public education system, the lack of state investment in social services devalues the economic worth of the city's growing reserve army of unemployed. This forces people to put in long hours of work to secure at least some of the basic necessities. They travel to work on the minibuses that troll the streets and avenues of the city, and for the thousands of people who work in La Paz, this means sitting in mind-numbing traffic jams that lengthen their workdays and waste their time.

Before the government deregulated urban transportation in the early 1990s, alteños had access to large state-subsidized buses for the daily commute to La Paz, as well as a system of *collectivos* (buses) whose fares were regulated by the state. Although the buses were frequently overcrowded and spewed thick, noxious black smoke into the city's rarified air, they pro-

vided relatively cheap transportation for those who had to commute to La Paz every day. After deregulation the government sold its buses, and the large collectivos disappeared from the streets. They were replaced by a plethora of minivans that accommodate a maximum of fifteen passengers. Because of the sheer number of minivans in central La Paz, in the mid-1990s one could literally step outside a building and expect to get a seat immediately, even during rush hour. But it was not so easy for many residents of El Alto. Drivers frequently overcharged on unprofitable routes to distant residential neighborhoods, or they refused to service these areas. Even along El Alto's major thoroughfares, the minibuses traveling down to La Paz filled up quickly during peak times, and this obliged passengers to travel to La Ceja, switch to another minivan, and pay twice, because no system of bus transfers exists. People were also subjected to quixotic fare fluctuations in La Ceja, where the state does not control the fierce competition between drivers.

When alteños are not contending with the transportation debacle and have a moment to relax—usually on a weekend afternoon—they have few public parks and recreational facilities in which to enjoy themselves. To make matters worse, the streets and vacant lots of El Alto function as open sewers, because only a third of the residents have access to some kind of waste disposal system. Even fortunate residents, who live in older neighborhoods endowed with sewer lines, endure the stench produced by ruptured pipes that were never meant to handle the volume of waste flowing through them.

Perhaps more than any other aspect of life in El Alto, housing exemplifies how hard people must work to meet their basic subsistence needs and how state indifference exposes them to hardships. The formal market for land, credit, and housing excludes poor rural immigrants, and although the state once subsidized a limited amount of housing for some public sector employees (e.g., police officers, miners, teachers, and railway workers), the vast majority of rural immigrants has always had to fend for themselves. Nowadays government housing policy, to the extent that one exists at all, turns on the basic principle that the right to a house depends upon individual effort and self-sacrifice. The state tolerates unregulated owner-constructed housing as the political price for accommodating thousands of new immigrants at the lowest cost possible.

Home ownership and the possession of land, even if only a tiny urban lot, appeals to immigrants' seldom-met aspirations for autonomy. A house and the lot on which it stands can be passed on to children, a legacy that provides a material link between the past and the present. Ownership has

the potential to liberate immigrants from the demands and exactions of landlords, who are often other immigrants only marginally better off, and it frees them—albeit often momentarily—from the conflicts and pent-up frustrations generated by forced sharing with relatives, other families, and individuals. A home also provides a refuge from the strains of the outside world and a space within which people can exercise greater control over their lives and social relationships.

Irma Escóbar's experiences as a renter and her views on home ownership typify those of thousands of other city residents. Escóbar and her family came to El Alto in the mid-1980s after her husband lost his job as a miner. Although they had purchased a lot through a housing cooperative that was active in the mining community, financial insecurity and unemployment prevented the Escóbar family from building its house. The family rented living quarters for years but in 1994 finally received assistance from an NGO and was able to begin construction. I met Irma Escóbar just two weeks after the family moved into the new domicile, and she summarized what renting had entailed for the family: "Being a renter is very difficult [*una vida sarificada*]. The landlords are always watching you. They want to know if you go out a lot, if you use a lot of water, if you are wearing out the doors, and if you have the lights turned on until late at night. They even complain about the children and the noise that they make. But now in our little house, we can do whatever we feel like doing."

Yet unemployment, poor health, indebtedness, and a wide range of other factors that make daily life in El Alto so precarious constantly threaten the home as refuge and the relative autonomy that it symbolizes. Also imperiling home owners are state policies that establish the parameters within which contending groups—land speculators, recent immigrants, nouveau-riche resident landlords, and tenants—engage each other in the struggle for access and control over property. These struggles turn on the politics of land development.

Immigrants who wish to own their own home must deal with the increasing commodification of urban real estate. High prices for urban lots in central El Alto—a rural area until the mid-1980s—keep many people out of the housing market, and the situation in more peripheral zones with lower land prices is little better. In addition, considerable uncertainty exists about what administrative body is responsible for issuing land titles and legitimizing claims, because continuous urbanization has generated so much administrative chaos that the boundaries between El Alto and the neighboring municipality are not clearly defined. Consequently, who owns what is often unclear, and private real estate developers easily victimize im-

migrants. These developers, who are often little more than speculators, frequently operate outside the bounds of legality with the complicity of state officials, or they may simply take advantage of the legal confusion to advance their own interests. They are often tied to broader real estate financial networks and work through a variety of local intermediaries.

El Alto has various kinds of speculators, or *loteadores*. One group operates with the appearance of legality. These individuals, organized in small businesses, purchase contiguous land holdings from peasants on the urban periphery, then sell the property to immigrants at inflated prices. Others acquire land through a variety of fraudulent practices, such as falsifying titles to occupied but untitled areas. The loteadores promise immigrant buyers a range of social services, but buyers frequently discover that services are slow to arrive, and the developers, who hold the property titles, start to demand payments far in excess of what the immigrants expected to pay. Desperate to acquire legal title to avoid losing their entire investment, residents try to make the excessive installment payments but become mired in debt. Or they may be forced to leave. In either case, the loteadores continue to profit from appreciating property values.

Still other loteadores promote land invasions by desperate immigrants. These invasions occur on public lands, such as areas that have been set aside for public parks or "green areas," and public authorities with ties to the developers may facilitate the invasions. Squatters can remain on the land as long as they first recognize the loteadores' right to the property by signing a document that grants power of attorney to them. This document then enables the speculators to begin the judicial process of legalizing their theft of public property. Eventually, the loteadores expel the original squatters, subdivide the property, and sell it at a considerable profit. This kind of theft and speculation are not only a way to profit from the desperate housing needs of immigrants but also are means to privatize public lands that they could not otherwise develop.

The Villa Pedro Domingo Murillo in central El Alto emerged from a long and contentious battle between residents and a notorious real estate speculator. Crammed between the airport and the noxious ditch that contains the Río Seco, the villa developed in the early 1980s, when peasants from the northern altiplano, railway workers, and a few ex-miners began to purchase lots from a loteador. Most buyers did not build homes immediately, because they had not consolidated their social and economic ties in the city. Consequently, the lots remained vacant for months and even years in some cases. When settlers did begin to filter into the area, they found that the speculator had sold their plots to multiple owners, and they be-

came mired in disputes with him and the other claimants. To make matters worse, those who had managed to build houses and establish themselves in the villa found that the loteador constantly raised the fees for services, even though they never had received electricity, water, and sewerage. Residents, however, were forced to pay, because the developer constantly found reasons to withhold titles to their properties, even after they had paid for them. Elvira Canasas, a longtime resident, explained:

> We didn't begin to build our house until approximately four years after we got the lot. But after paying for the land, [the developer] did not want to give us the document that showed that we had completed all the payments. He said that we owed more money, because the land was sold very cheaply. But the area was still pure pampa. There were no services. How could he charge us more if there was no water, electricity, or sewer lines?

Represented by local neighborhood committees, residents began to protest the abuses. Some leaders belonged to the political party CONDEPA, and this facilitated their dealings with many local officials. They also benefited from the support of a local church-operated radio station, whose progressive director aired the residents' views. In addition, activist nuns and later a Spanish priest who lived in the villa, intervened with local authorities on behalf of the residents. The priest helped to finance costly legal proceedings and, according to one local leader, "was like an adviser. We [the residents] didn't speak Spanish well enough to deal with the authorities. The authorities didn't understand sufficiently what we tried to express. But Lucho [the priest] walked into their offices and had more influence."

From the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s residents waged court battles, lobbied local politicians, and mounted protest marches through the city. The developer's henchmen threatened the residents' leaders and silenced some residents with bribes. Others participated in the exploitation of fellow residents by actively allying themselves with the developer. Moreover, multiple conflicting land claims pitted residents against each other. Thus the battle with the developer not only created divisions among residents but to a certain extent also defined divisions between emerging sectors of the villa. Andrés Castro, who in 1994 was head of the junta de vecinos in Sector 3, described how alliances had shifted over the years:

> We used to be all part of one sector, but because of the fight [with the developer], we've split into four divisions. Sectors 2 and 3 have always been united and struggling to get the land titles properly reg-

> istered, but Sector 4 allied itself with the loteador. Only recently have some of the residents decided to be on our side, but the leaders still refuse to support us because they are controlled by the loteador. Sector 1 is also with us now, even though for awhile it was allied with the loteador.

Although the residents of Villa Pedro Domingo Murillo seemed to be on the verge of victory in 1995, the problems and issues are familiar to many other new El Alto neighborhoods, most of which are not so fortunate.[3] The state's refusal to attend to the critical housing needs of immigrants exposes them to the rapacious activities of real estate speculators and complicit local authorities. In the turmoil that arises from this situation, immigrants must contend not only with the illegal and manipulative practices of land speculators but also with the tensions that conflicting land claims create in the neighborhood.

Building a House, Owning a Home

Immigrants' difficulties do not end after they have successfully established their land claims. They must then make numerous sacrifices to build a house, which is usually a process of several years' duration and turns on the availability of family resources. It requires people with few assets to extend their working days to include holidays and weekends, because they cannot afford to hire wage laborers on a regular basis. Those in the development industry frequently refer to this practice as "self-help," but it is really a form of unpaid overtime, one that weighs increasingly heavily on alteños—especially women—who must use more and more of their "free time" to produce the means of subsistence.

When peasant immigrants begin to build, they usually start with one or two adobe rooms. They may not even occupy the rooms on a regular basis but use them to accommodate visitors from back home on their periodic trips to the city. Once people establish permanent residency and as resources permit, they add additional quarters to accommodate the needs of growing families. They may eventually raze their adobe dwellings and replace them with more durable structures of kiln-fired bricks, but families with fewer resources may simply construct brick facades to partially replace the less fashionable adobe. Building a brick house is expensive, and it invariably obliges families to go into debt, cut expenses, and find additional ways to earn cash. It is possible only when family members are willing and

able to collaborate, and in practice this means mobilizing the labor power of women and children.

The experiences of the Choque family are instructive. Pablo Choque and his wife, Felicidad, were born in the 1930s in a rural community on the shores of Lake Titicaca, and they acquired a lot in the Villa 16 de Julio in 1963, when the region was still a windswept pampa. Because Pablo Choque's job as a Baptist preacher kept the family in the neighboring town of Viacha, a caretaker, who was a relative, lived in a small hut on the lot to maintain the Choques' claim. The Choques did not construct an adobe home until the early 1970s, and in the mid-1990s, after living on and off in the city for more than thirty years, they began to construct the house of their dreams.

At this time the Choques did not represent the most impoverished sector of El Alto's Aymara immigrants. Pablo Choque considered himself the epitome of success, and the family had enjoyed considerable upward mobility. It owned two secondhand minibuses; Felicidad Choque managed the buses, which the family operated as urban transport vehicles. Their son, Mario, and daughter, Juana, were high school graduates, and Pablo Choque, who had abandoned his career as a preacher and ascended through the ranks of the public teaching profession, was the director of a local school. Thus the Choques' experience with housing is not typical, but it does illustrate some of the strategies that aspiring home owners adopt in the absence of state and private sector support.

I met Don Pablo, as he likes to be called, in 1994, when he was planning to demolish the adobe house that had been home to his family for several years. In its place he wanted to build two multistory brick houses for an extended family that had grown to include in-laws, four grandsons, and a great-granddaughter. The homes would supply better quarters for the rapidly growing family and provide an inheritance for Mario and Juana; Pablo hoped his children and their families would remain together in the compound. Pablo Choque also wanted the dwellings to serve as an imposing legacy of his hard work and dedication to family. So, at the age of sixty-two, he slowly and sporadically initiated the construction projects, fretting all the while that he would die before they were completed.

Although the Choques were successful and prosperous by local standards, they still did much of the work themselves, including all the interior work (*obra fina*); for example, they brought grasses from the countryside to insulate the roofs, cut down a tree in Pablo Choque's natal community for the floor boards, painted the walls, wired the house, and installed the electrical fixtures. To raise money for construction materials and to pay labor-

ers for specialized tasks, Juana Choque delayed her university education and contributed all her savings from her work as a hairstylist. Felicidad Choque contributed as much as possible from the minibus earnings that Pablo, Mario, and Mario's son Orlando brought into the household.

Yet a constant shortage of cash frequently obliged the Choques to suspend work on the houses for weeks or even months at a time. And occasional emergencies, such as the breakdown of a minibus or a medical problem, diverted funds to other ends. Like similar efforts taking place around the city, the unfinished dwellings often stood with metal support rods protruding from the roofs until the money materialized to add another story, purchase windows, install door frames, and so forth. To raise money Pablo Choque borrowed extensively from an extended network of relatives, friends, political associates, fellow immigrants from his natal community, and fictive kin. But these measures were still not enough.

To make more money the Choques also became landlords. They rented out a series of rudimentary rooms that they had previously constructed around a central courtyard, and from time to time they reorganized their own living arrangements to temporarily accommodate a tenant. Amid the crisis of housing and the lack of viable employment opportunities in the city, mass landlordism represented one way that people could earn a living by taking advantage of the needs of other immigrants. When conducted by arriviste immigrants like the Choques, landlordism exaggerated the fragmentation of El Alto's poor into privileged and oppressed strata. This tendency was particularly pronounced in the Villa 16 de Julio, where, at the time of the 1990 census, renters occupied 87 percent of the dwellings. The many merchants who rented space for their businesses accounted for some of the renters in this villa, but other, less commercially dynamic neighborhoods housed a disproportionate number of people who did not own their dwellings. For example, renters in Villa Pedro Domingo Murillo, who are mainly former peasants, and in Villa Santiago II, who are primarily former miners, represented 68 percent and 80 percent of the residents, respectively (INE 1992).

The Choques had a variety of different arrangements with their tenants, who came from various walks of life. Mateo Mamani, his wife, Miriam, and their two small children occupied three rooms at the back of the lot. Mateo, a welder, used one room for work, and the family lived in the others. Miriam, a washerwoman, laundered clothes in the courtyard. The Mamanis had negotiated a rental agreement with the Choques known as *anticrético,* paying a lump sum of money equal to a year's rent. The Choques, however, were obliged to return the full amount at the end of the

stipulated period, when the Mamanis had to either depart or negotiate another payment.

An anticrético arrangement is attractive to tenants because it allows them to live virtually rent free for a period of time, and it appeals to landlords like the Choques who have no access to housing loans from commercial banks. But the arrangement also has drawbacks. Many renters are simply too poor to be able to arrange an anticrético, and the instability of economic conditions in El Alto means they always face the possibility that landlords will not return the money. Indeed, in 1995 both the Choques and the Mamanis worried about the expiration of their anticrético agreement, because it was not clear that the indebted Choques would be able to repay the money.

The Choques also had monthly rental agreements with other tenants. An itinerant merchant rented a single room for his occasional overnight stays in the city. This man lived in the mountain valleys of the Yungas but came periodically to the biweekly market in the villa to buy and sell. Pablo Choque's nephew from the countryside paid a nominal fee for another room, and Doña Casimira, or *la hermana* (the sister), as she was commonly known, occupied yet another. Casimira was an elderly Aymara woman who had been abandoned by her husband and whose only son was an unemployed mine worker. Felicidad Choque had befriended her at a Baptist church meeting. Although Casimira paid little if any rent and did not contribute significantly to the Choques' housing plans, she helped Felicidad and Juana Choque with the domestic tasks, and Felicidad Choque seemed to enjoy her friendship and company.

Perhaps the biggest boon for the Choques came in 1991, when a prominent NGO relocated its headquarters across the street from their home, and a stream of foreigners—including students, an anthropologist, a journalist, and a photographer—began to seek out the NGO for contacts, information, and temporary housing in the villa. The organization arrived in the villa as internationally financed NGOs were proliferating across El Alto, opening a series of new opportunities for local people (see chapters 7 and 8). The Choques, for example, quickly became acquainted with NGO staff members, who purchased cigarettes from the small store that Felicidad Choque operated in front of the house, and these individuals readily referred visiting foreigners to her.

This was how I got to know the Choques. I had been searching for a place to live in El Alto, and because I was interested in the activities of NGOs, living across the street from one seemed like a good idea. The Choques were also particularly interested in renting to me, a gringa, be-

cause, as Pablo Choque eventually confided, "We knew that you could pay and that you would eventually leave." Indeed, the ability to pay and the willingness to leave were highly valued qualities that he had not always found in local renters, who were always short of cash and vulnerable to unemployment and illness. In addition, his prior experience with North Americans and Europeans convinced him that they were decent people who made reliable tenants.

He first encountered North Americans in the 1930s, when Baptist missionaries established a school in his natal community and taught him and other children to read and write. The education made both Choques, and especially Felicidad, somewhat unusual among the peasants of their generation; indeed, rural people did not attend school in large numbers until after the 1952 national revolution. Consequently, they both felt a debt of gratitude to the missionaries. Pablo Choque also traveled with the Baptists to the southern United States for a brief visit during the 1960s and was impressed by what he considered to be the superior "progress" of Texas in relation to his own country. He felt that North Americans "know how to do things" and that they could be useful.

He viewed Europeans much the same way; before my arrival two Dutch women and a Belgian photographer referred by the NGO had resided with the family for varying lengths of time. Pablo Choque charged all of us more than the Bolivian tenants, and we paid our rents with coveted inflation-proof U.S. dollars. To a certain extent, we were important status symbols, and our habits, beliefs, and stories made us strangely fascinating and exotic for the family, whose members loved to rank and compare us. A Dutch woman, for example, was the most *alegre* (lively) but gradually fell out of favor after she left, because she stopped writing; the photographer, who stayed only briefly, was notable for his height and his convoluted Spanish, which the grandchildren liked to imitate; I was encouraged to equal, or to outdo, the Thanksgiving meal once prepared by the U.S. missionaries who preceded me. The benefits, the prestige—and the entertainment value—of having foreign tenants came with a price, however: Pablo Choque worried that jealous neighbors would spread rumors that he harbored CIA agents in his home, but these fears did not deter him from asking me to send the family more of my *paisanos* (countrymen).

Aided, then, by an array of renters, the dedicated work of family members, and a series of loans from a range of different people, construction on the houses advanced; by 1997 portions of the buildings were habitable—though not completely finished—and Pablo Choque and his extended family moved in. Sitting in his new brick home—the tallest on the block—

and looking back on his life, Don Pablo could boast that he had come a long way from his natal community on the shores of Lake Titicaca. There his mother—the only parent that he knew—a younger brother, and Pablo had subsisted by catching and marketing fish and, during the pre-1952 era, working occasionally on neighboring haciendas. As he tells the story, hard work, the grace of God, and an ability to seize random events and turn them into personal opportunities helped him realize his goals over the years. "Hay que hacer cosas, hay que hacer cosas" (You have to do things, you have to do things), he frequently reminded his family and anyone else who would listen.

There is no question that daily life in El Alto—even for an established resident like Pablo Choque—demands that people be inventive, as the discipline imposed by neoliberal capitalism compels them to search for novel solutions to an array of problems. Yet Pablo Choque's journey required much more than God's grace and hard work. It depended upon ties to a wide network of different kinds of people and the ways in which broader forces shaped the relationships that he established with them. For example, his early ties to the Baptist Church not only provided him with an education at a time when few peasants of his generation attended school but also opened avenues of social mobility for him through the ministry and, later, in public education. In addition, the coming of the NGO produced a number of well-heeled foreign tenants who helped finance his housing project. The ethos of individualism and hard work to which Don Pablo subscribed was not enough to displace the importance of these relationships and his family's support. His self-serving account of personal accomplishment and social mobility denied the participation of others—many of whom were more vulnerable than he—and it minimized the struggles that shaped his relation to them. More generally, it effaced the tensions between Pablo Choque's desire to claim and assert an image of unqualified social and economic success, on the one hand, and his dependence on, and occasional exploitation of, other people for this success, on the other.

Felicidad Choque played a central—though not always acknowledged—role in the family's upward mobility. Over the years, she attended to all her husband's domestic needs, raised the couple's children, managed the household, ran a small dry-goods store, and traveled regularly to the countryside, where she farmed a plot of land inherited from her parents. She also managed her husband in ways that she could not explicitly acknowledge or openly discuss, because of the challenges that such assertions would pose to their relationship.

For example, Felicidad Choque frequently engaged in creative accounting practices to deter her husband from squandering hard-earned cash on the consumption of alcohol. One Friday evening before they started building the new homes, she, Juana Choque, and I were sitting in the kitchen of the house that was slated for demolition. The kitchen was a focal point of family social life in the early evening, because the warmth of the stove helped stave off the cold outside. As we chatted and cleaned up the dinner dishes, Pablo Choque tottered into the courtyard absolutely pickled in beer. He had been attending a local meeting of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) and announced his arrival by shouting "Viva Bolivia!" and "Viva el MNR!" He then stumbled into the kitchen, where his grandson proceeded to torment him by replying, "Abajo el MNR, Abajo el MNR" (Down with the MNR, Down with the MNR). Livid, and embarrassed by her husband's behavior, Felicidad shooed Pablo outside, returning with a wad of pesos that she shoved into her daughter's hands, ordering the young woman to go immediately and change the bills into U.S. dollars.

After Juana departed, Felicidad Choque explained that the pesos—worth approximately $14—represented the day's earnings from one of the family's minibuses. If her husband saw the money, he would insist that someone buy beer with it and then convince his son or local acquaintances to drink with him. Felicidad Choque, however, intensely resented her husband's drunkenness and the obnoxious and abusive behavior that it often generated. In moments of disgust she referred to him disparagingly as *el borracho* (the drunk). His heavy drinking was also a major reason for his withdrawal from active participation in the Baptist Church, and this further aggravated his relationship with his wife. Felicidad Choque was a devout Baptist and had many friends from the church, but she was able to participate in church activities only when she could negotiate her absence from the household with her husband. Although she enjoyed occasional success, managing his excessive drinking was another matter. Pablo Choque considered the social consumption of alcohol—even in excessive amounts—his right as a man; moreover, certain festive occasions virtually required that he and other participants imbibe heavily. Confronting him about this matter could lead to violent outbursts. By sending her daughter away with the money, Felicidad Choque avoided a direct confrontation, and after her husband fell asleep and Juana returned with the dollars, Felicidad Choque quietly tucked the money away in a safe place.

Such subterfuges and the silences that they entail highlight the tensions

between what happens to people and their understandings of these experiences, and what they can discuss, negotiate, and reorganize.[4] Experiences and accompanying silences are crucial to understanding processes of differentiation in the household, as well as in the broader society. The next chapter offers a more complete examination of these processes and their consequences for daily life in El Alto.