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Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 14(1)

ISSN

2154-1353

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Publication Date

2026-07-14

DOI

10.5070/T4.47028

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Infrastructures of Modernity in Bolivia: Railroads and Infrastructural Reading in José Aguirre Achá's *Platonia*

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Abstract

Constrained by Bolivia's marginal position in the global economy and the systemic exclusion of indigenous populations, early twentieth-century Criollo elites were unable to establish a modernity grounded in stable material and political structures. Instead, they projected their ambitions onto infrastructure projects and the expansion of consumer practices, with the desire to align themselves with the industrial centers of the West. Drawing upon the concept of infrastructure as material interventions in space that facilitate mobility and shape collective imaginaries, this article analyzes Bolivian José Aguirre Achá's 1923 novel *Platonia*. The analysis shows how the novel, by narratively engaging with infrastructure projects like the railroad, participates in articulating aesthetics of mobility and cosmopolitanism. In doing so, it reflects and contributes to reinforcing *Criollo* elites' political and cultural dominance while discursively marginalizing subaltern groups from the envisioned modernity.

Keywords: modernity, railroad, infrastructure, world-system, cosmopolitanism, infrastructural reading.

Infrastructure and Modernity: A *Criollo* Project

In his 1919 account of traveling through Bolivia, Uruguayan writer and diplomat Vicente M. Carrió described La Paz as a city shaped by three distinct historical periods. The first two corresponded to the colonial past and the republic's formation, while the third, the era of modernity, began "cuando el ferrocarril unió a La Paz con el resto del mundo" (Baptista 109).

According to Carrió, it was at this point that the transport of large quantities of iron and heavy loads, beyond what llamas and indigenous servants could carry, became possible, "y la ciudad apareció como palacio de cemento armado, con chalets llamativos rodeados de 'parterres', con jarrones y estatuas de barro vidriado y escalera de mármol blanco" (109).

The transformation of urban space through infrastructure projects marked the beginning of modernization, fueling collective cultural fantasies of La Paz's proximity to major world capitals and industrial cities. New constructions, the expanded use of cement and industrial steel, and advancements in transportation technology became key symbols of modernity. These elements

provided a crucial reference point, enabling the *Criollo*[1] elite to envision themselves as active participants in a modernizing dynamic that linked them to centers of civilization and progress.

However, this aspiration faced significant challenges in a postcolonial society like Bolivia, where deeply entrenched ethnic, cultural, and historical divisions constrained the *Criollo* vision of a Western-style modernity. The exclusion of the vast indigenous majority from full citizenship rights and protections resulted in an incomplete political modernity. Likewise, Bolivia's peripheral position in relation to global centers of capital accumulation relegated it to the margins of economies dependent on raw material exports and technology imports, exposing a society that experienced "fantasmagóricamente los siempre convocados índices de modernización" (Souza 102).

Consequently, the elusive nature of material and political modernity led to the pursuit of progress and civilization through the developmentalist vision embodied by infrastructure: a society envisioned through railways, advanced communication technologies, commercial enterprises, innovative architectural designs, and modern vehicles. *Infrastructures* are not merely physical structures that facilitate the movement of goods and people; they also shape subjectivities, rational processes, and collective imaginaries. They "encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real". (Larkin 333). Thus, early 20th-century criollo modernity was conceptualized through urbanizing infrastructures, which, imbued with symbolic capital, functioned as local equivalents to the economic center in Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system analysis**.**

The early 20th-century urban development also played an infrastructural role in shaping a literary sensibility that locally replicated the center-periphery dynamics of capitalist modernity through a globalist and cosmopolitan literary language. As evidenced by José Aguirre Achá's lesser-known 1923 novel *Platonia*, which portrays a *Criollo* protagonist's struggle against a corrupt mestizo environment to implement a railway-driven colonization project, literature functioned as a tool for symbolically shaping a social space integrated into the global circuit of circulation of cultural fantasies. This was seen as a literary solution to internal social conflicts, while imaginatively marginalizing the indigenous and mestizo populations, effectively erasing their historical presence from the circuits of modernity.

This article's purpose is twofold: first, to examine how these infrastructural projects facilitated the *Criollo* cosmopolitan and universalist dream of a nation integrated into the global network through technology, mobility, and consumption; and second, to analyze the intersection between urban development and literature to propose an alternative approach to the archive of Bolivian modernity. It highlights urban space as a site of political and cultural significance, examining both how spatial

politics shape literary discourse and how, in turn, literary discourse reflects and participates in shaping spatial imaginaries and politics.

To achieve these aims, the article first establishes the historical and cultural contexts in which these infrastructural projects emerged, focusing on early twentieth-century La Paz and the *Criollo* elite's aspirations within the global system. Subsequently, it turns to a detailed analysis José Aguirre Achá's novel *Platonia*, employing an infrastructural reading to explore the interplay between the language, spatial politics, and the construction of modernity.

The "World-System" and the Transnational Circulation of Cultural Fantasies

La guía internacional del viajero, written by Walter Carvajal and Julio Gutiérrez in 1918, uniquely blends local informational content with a diverse and extensive array of commercial advertisements, resulting in a hybrid text that merges reference and advertising. Alongside descriptions of Bolivia's main cities and details on national and international rail travel schedules and costs, readers could find information on importers of glassware, liquors, and fine preserves, the latest models in imported jewelry and pearls via Chile, and hotels with cuisine and family apartments "situados en el punto más pintoresco de Antofagasta sobre el mar" (Carvajal and Gutiérrez 219), where "los principales idiomas europeos" were spoken (Carvajal and Gutiérrez 217). *La guía* features advertisements for printing houses and bookstores with the latest scientific and literary novelties, agents for office equipment and supplies, such as the "Underwood," "la mejor máquina de escribir del mundo" (Carvajal and Gutiérrez 211), imported from its headquarters in New York; information on customs agents, car importers, construction materials, banks, and fashion houses that guaranteed unique seasonal pieces through exclusive trips by the owner to Paris.

Under the subtitle "Información útil para el viajero," *La guía* provides details on navigation ports, customs procedures, and import-export tariffs, while also examining the condition of Bolivia's manufacturing sector, which:

> Está todavía en estado de iniciación, siendo muy pocas las que han alcanzado algún adelanto o perfección...Las condiciones actuales de Bolivia son muy favorables para la implementación de cualquier industria o manufactura, pues necesitando como necesita su población de proveerse de todo cuanto ha menester un pueblo civilizado, lo pide todo de Europa y América, pagando en dinero elevados precios, al capricho muchas veces de fabricantes y comerciantes. (Carvajal and Gutiérrez 197)

Bolivia's heavy reliance on imports, driven by its abundant raw materials, underdeveloped local industry, and growing consumer demand for international goods, underscores its peripheral position within the global capitalist system. This dynamic aligns with Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, which interprets industrial-capitalist modernity through unequal relationships within a global economic framework. Wallerstein defines a "world-system" as "a spatial/temporal zone which cuts across many political and cultural units, one that represents an integrated zone of activity and institutions which obey certain systemic rules" (Wallerstein 17). Fundamentally, the modern world-system operates as a capitalist world-economy characterized by a global division of labor and a hierarchical structure of core, semi-periphery, and periphery regions interconnected through unequal and dependent exchanges.

This relationship, structurally unequal and organized by a territorial division of labor, connects regions that import consumer goods and provide raw materials and labor with those that focus on capital accumulation. This connection creates a hierarchical structure integral to the global capitalist industrial system, as the system's existence is contingent upon such subordination. The core-periphery relationship produces cultural and historical disparities, compelling less developed societies to emulate so-called "civilized" models and thereby illustrating the spatial configuration of power. However, as Dominic Davies (2017) argues, the world-system extends beyond nation-state interactions, operating through local commercial networks where core-periphery relations "are constituted not only between homogenous nation-states, but along and between infrastructural routes such as railway, shipping and telegraph lines, etc." (Davies 2). This means that infrastructure establishes spatio-temporal zones that transcend political and cultural borders, where technology integrates peripheral populations into exploitative relations and provides symbolic markers of "civilization" and "modernity" for colonial and neocolonial actors.

Daniel Nemser (2016) conceptualizes infrastructure as any physical modification of space, such as streets, automobiles, electrical wiring, bridges, or computational systems, etc., that facilitates the circulation of goods, people, and knowledge, thus actively shaping social relations. In the same vein, Brian Larkin argues that infrastructures "are matter that enable the movement of other matter" (329), emphasizing that their daily use reveals embedded political rationales and showing how infrastructures embody collective desires and fantasies beyond their technical functions.[2]

Thus, the aspiration for a connected society centered on consumption and technological imports, evident in the 1919 *Guía internacional del viajero*, emerged directly from infrastructural developments in transportation, urban transformation, and technologically enhanced public spaces.

These systems facilitated an unprecedented flow of goods and capital, simultaneously cultivating the criollo elites' aspirations to identify with a distinct reality, one linking them to the "civilized" world through novel commodities and new trade routes.

The ambitious infrastructure projects envisioned by Bolivia's liberal governments in the early 1900s required La Paz to attract external capital and technical expertise.[3] Railway construction exemplifies this trend. Bolivia's railway expansion began gradually in the late nineteenth century, prompted by the social and political consequences of the War of the Pacific,[4] which highlighted the nation's fragmented territorial integration. Starting in 1880, civil authorities recognized the urgent need to better connect national resources with global markets to address historical deficiencies revealed by the conflict. By the early twentieth century, La Paz had established rail connections to the Pacific: Mollendo, Peru, in 1905; Arica, via Viacha in 1909; and Antofagasta through Oruro shortly thereafter. As a result, "La Paz adquiere un progreso apreciable, colocándose entre las capitales progresistas de América" (Sanjinés 33).

While the railway improved passenger transit, La Paz's economic transformation was its primary impact. Lower transport costs spurred mineral trade and shifted traditional, predominantly artisanal, production through the influx of foreign goods and technologies (Ferrufino 278). This import-driven dynamic facilitated the introduction of new technologies, from construction materials like steel to luxury goods for the elites, profoundly shaping urban development and social life. The transport infrastructure embodied the nation's deep-seated desire for international connection, particularly poignant after losing its seaports as a result of the war. A prime example of this technical influence on the urban imagination was the Guaqui railway terminal, financed by the Bolivian Railway Company and designed by Gustave Eiffel's firm (Bedregal 46). Constructed between 1913 and 1917 with steel from Pittsburgh, the terminal's open, fluid design reflected contemporary commercial ideologies and the modernist architectural spirit, echoing the urban constructions of Western capitals. Rail technology reshaped social consciousness, turning the station into a symbolic link to global centers. Criollo elites imagined ties to Paris, New York, and Panama, icons of Eiffel's engineering. This cosmopolitan vision crystallized in 1925, when the terminal hosted the centennial Feria Internacional, confirming the city's internationalist ambitions.

Similarly, the public tram service, the "ferrocarril urbano," was initially entrusted to a foreign company, the Bolivia Rubber and General Enterprise Limited, which operated with French capital (Lázaro 120). The inauguration of the urban tram was well-received and celebrated by the local press. Notably, one of the first publications detailing its implementation, design, and operation appeared in

Brill Magazine, a journal published by the J.G. Brill Company, founded in 1868 and based in Philadelphia, which at the time was the largest producer of train cars, trams, and intercity buses in the United States. The Bolivian Rubber commissioned the Brill company to manufacture the cars for the tram's inauguration in July 1909 (Morrison 2005).

The *Brill Magazine* was a monthly publication that started in 1907, primarily featuring information on intra-urban transportation in the United States and Europe. Its purpose was to promote the latest technological advancements, applications, and designs of cars produced by the J.G. Brill Company and other companies in the field. The news about the cars built for Bolivia appeared in the May 15, 1909, edition, which featured an image of Baltimore and Calvert Street in Baltimore on its cover (Image 1). It included notes on new trains produced for operation in Chicago and the novelty of "convertible Pay-As-You-Enter" cars for New York City, "the most interesting types of cars for city service which has ever been built" ("Brill cars for the capital of Bolivia" 104). When describing La Paz, the magazine provides geographic details about the city, noting the elevation of its streets and identifying its primary urban routes. Regarding the city's population, the magazine stated: "The population of La Paz is 60,000, of which 14,000 are white persons and the balance Indians and mixtures" ("Brill cars for the capital of Bolivia" 113). The publication privileges a "white" urban public and relegates the indigenous and mestizo majority, revealing the social group imagined as the beneficiary of the new transport technology. Its descriptive and visual rhetoric foregrounds the city's racialized composition, while amplifying the value attached to the tramcars bound for Bolivia. Image 2 shows San Francisco Square, near the church of the same name, outside the colonial city walls in the "Parroquias de Indios." Rather than the modern center, it depicts a space with strong indigenous and mestizo presence, echoing nineteenth and early twentieth-century travel postcards that exoticized Bolivia for Western audiences.

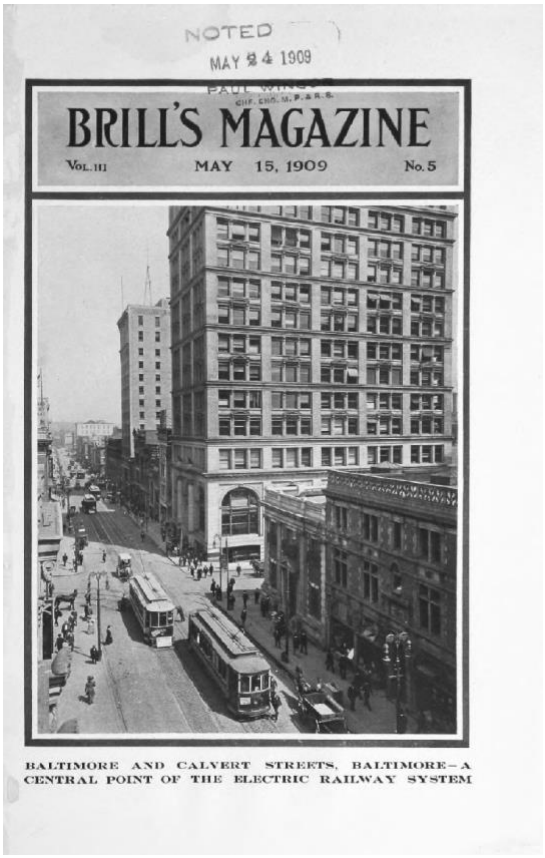


Figure 1. Cover of Brill's Magazine. Brill's, May 1909. Hathi Trust Digital Library



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CARS FOR THE CAPITAL OF BOLIVIA — Scene in the Calle De Lacarnaca La Paz — Native Shops on the Right

Figure 2. Image of San Francisco Square. Brill's, May 1909. Hathi Trust Digital Library

Brill Magazine likely provides the only public and detailed account of the tramcars Brill built for Bolivia with W. R. Grace & Co. (New York). It traces their journey from the U.S. East Coast through Mollendo, Peru, to La Paz. By juxtaposing an "exotic" urban backdrop with this transnational route, the magazine casts the tramcars as a "civilizing" technology, emblems of progress reinforcing elite aspirations to affiliation with the world's metropoles. The *Criollo* elites further solidified their local dominance, with the tram symbolizing their aspiration for cultural superiority and their effort to rationalize social space as a means of social distinction.[5]

Modern transport, coupled with a reasserted *Criollo* identity, reproduced global core–periphery disparities locally, mapping them onto divisions between white and non-white populations. The adoption of a universalist, cosmopolitan, and commercial discourse in the city served to solidify these asymmetrical, neocolonial power dynamics within the society. For instance, the 1925 celebration of the Republic's hundredth anniversary featured a government-commissioned publication that praised the city's urban modernity, marking the nation's celebration of independence:

> Se pueden apreciar de cerca algunos de los edificios vistos desde arriba y sentir el ruido urbano. Fábricas, tranvías, camiones, un riachuelo pedregoso, lavanderas que apenas

> levantan la cabeza cuando pasa el tren. Luego la estación Central, amplia y elegante, considerada como una de las mejores de su clase. Bajo sus marquesinas, acosado por vendedores de diarios y revistas, conductores de maletas y agentes de hoteles, desciende el pasajero, a quien esperan a las puertas de la estación tranvías y centenares de automóviles, dispuestos a conducirlo a su alojamiento. Tiene a su disposición hoteles que, si en general no tienen la suntuosidad de los de otras grandes capitales, poseen lo indispensable para vivir con decoro, comodidad e higiene: ascensores, calefacción, ventiladores y, de más está decirlo, los servicios higiénicos más modernos y completos (*Bolivia en el primer centenario de su independencia* 13).

The publication brings to light the existence of groups who were deemed unable to grasp the unfolding civilizing project, thus positioning them outside the process of urban modernization:

> Lo que llama más la atención del viajero y, si es inteligente, le sugiere meditaciones interesantes, es el contemplar cómo los indígenas de los alrededores de la ciudad, y de la ciudad misma, siguen haciendo su vida rudimentaria, conservando su vestido primitivo y su lengua autóctona… No es raro que en los paseos públicos invadidos por la gente elegante que sale de los clubs, de los teatros, de las confiterías y otros sitios de recreo, exhibiendo las creaciones de la última moda de Londres o París, se vean grupos compactos de indios de cara huraña y vestidos con sus trajes especiales, paseando lentamente o agolpándose con infantil curiosidad delante de los escaparates resplandecientes de los grandes bazares, o subiendo a los tranvías en unión de sus compañeras trajeadas igualmente conforme su propia usanza (*Bolivia en el primer centenario de su independencia* 13).

The document explicitly portrays the idealized vision of the country held by the dominant *Criollo* consciousness, where the city is depicted as a material space divided between an "elegante" society and those composed of individuals in "trajes especiales"; between subjects aligned with the universality of fashion and "indios" with "huraño" faces; and, ultimately, between a modern and a non-modern population. The former group is associated with cosmopolitan centers like London or Paris, while the latter is relegated to a childlike position, evidenced by their perceived inability to comprehend the terms of an urban modernity that, while admired, remains largely misunderstood. Thus, in a country where the indigenous and mestizo population was dominant, the quotation clarifies that the core-periphery relationship of the modern world-system is inscribed not only across national borders but

also locally, through infrastructural circuits of spatial urbanization, which the city celebrates on its national anniversary.

Technological advancements, expanding commerce, and infrastructure projects transformed the urban landscape, fostering an aura of modernity that reinforced *Criollo* dominance within the periphery of the global capitalist system. By imagining an alignment with metropolitan centers of capitalism, the city materialized its peripheral marginality, aspiring to mirror global hubs, while simultaneously reinforcing local hierarchies that marginalized the subaltern population, effectively excluding them from modernity.

Amid emerging urban communication infrastructures, the rhetoric of technical modernity reshaped *Criollo* self-representation, privileging metaphors of connectivity and mobility that organized the lettered criollo group's bodily imagery. In his 1921 volume *Cabezas: siluetas de políticos, literatos, diplomáticos y otras liendres de la fauna pintoresca*, Gustavo Adolfo Otero uses humor to profile leading figures, among them former president Ismael Montes, a key exponent of *Criollo* liberalism, dwelling on their physical traits:

> Una frente bastante amplia con los músculos laxos y hormigueantes por una multitud de canales, los cuales van a refluir a las cejas. Las cejas de este caballero son elásticas, ondulantes y mecánicas…Sus bigotes, unos bigotes agresivos, rabiosos, que arrojan vibraciones eléctricas en torno de su cara … El dedo índice de Montes es largo como una antena, eréctil y vibrátil. Es el órgano externo de su voluntad… Tal vez sin ese dedo Montes no habría sido nunca presidente de Bolivia. (11)

Otero's ironically charged descriptions reveal how, within a modernity shaped by technological advancements, the *Criollo* body was performatively constructed as an instrument of connectivity and valued for its capacity to "mover una época," echoing the tram and railway's modernizing impulse. His humorous use of technological metaphors (eyebrows as channels, mustaches radiating electricity, a finger like an antenna) highlights the *Criollo* elite's aspiration to embody modernity, portraying this connection less as a stable reality and more as a self-conscious posture.

Similarly, Miguel Vicente Ballivián, a *Criollo* from an old aristocratic family, founder of the Geographical Society of La Paz, and one of the most prolific explorers and writers of his time, is described as the nexus between local reality and the world of new advancements and social ideas. The German explorer and archaeologist Arturo Posnansky refers to Ballivián's "modesta oficina de estudio" as the place "donde salían los hilos que comunicaban a Bolivia, país entonces ignorado y envuelto en un manto de egoísmo, con el mundo civilizado" (Albarracín 86).

Rather than the *Mestizo* or indigenous body, the elite *Criollo* body is fashioned through such language into an imagined connection to progress. This metaphorical construction attempts to reinforce a central role in the nation's modernization project, even as the irony underscores, as in Otero's text, the often-superficial or aspirational nature of that very modernity for the elites themselves.

Platonia. Literary Infrastructures of Modernity

This focus on infrastructure's productive power resonates strongly with analyses of the Latin American context. Daniel Nemser (2016), for instance, demonstrates how "congregative" constructions, such as planned colonial towns and educational institutions, functioned as "infrastructures of race". They were not just built upon pre-existing racial divisions, but were "systems of relations" that actively produced and entrenched the hierarchical racial categories, "indio," "blanco," and "mestizo", that structured colonial society. In this account, infrastructures produce social relations by spatially reconfiguring subjects and interactions (Nemser 17).

Literature functions as a cultural expression of this material process. Much like the physical infrastructures Nemser describes, many texts from the period under study organize social space and meaning, often reproducing the hierarchies embedded in the material city.Dominic Davies (2017) examines the connection between infrastructural development and British imperial domination, introducing the idea of "infrastructural reading" as a critical methodology to uncover the interaction between material structures and the literary production of the empire. Davies argues that infrastructures like roads and railways are not merely backgrounds for colonial narratives but often symbolize the ideological and material forces sustaining imperial power.

Davies's "infrastructural reading" reveals the dynamics of correspondences between writing and the construction of social space: "As a spatial sense-making technology itself, colonial literature draws on infrastructures to give shape to its own representations, and in turn (re)produces a colonial landscape shaped by imperial ideologies and their subsequent socialities (racial and class hierarchies, for example)" (21). In this view, literature employs spatial infrastructures to organize narrative settings, making the colonial world comprehensible from an imperial standpoint and embedding racial and class hierarchies as normalized elements.

In early-twentieth-century Bolivia, an independent republic still peripherally inserted in hegemonic networks, the rail and tram circuits that promise mobility for *Criollo* elites also naturalize

internal colonial separations, rendering indigenous and mestizo populations peripheral to the mapped routes of progress.

The idea that progress is only possible through the diffusion of industrial products destined for the lagging areas of the pre-modern world stands as a symptom of cultural and economic neocolonialism, and reflects the dependence of Bolivia and its elites on international capital. As Rodolfo Stavenhagen points out in his 1965 text "Siete tesis sobre Latinoamérica," the notion that Latin American modernity would be achieved solely through the expansion of modernist attributes (technology, know-how, and capital) from developed countries to the peripheries constituted a neocolonial version of history. This perspective, as Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui argues, often masks processes of "recolonization" (53), whereby modernizing impulses actually reinforce colonial structures of domination and exclusion rather than dismantling them. It exemplifies the persistence not merely of a colonial subjectivity, but of what Rivera terms "internal colonialism": "the reproduction of hierarchical colonial relations within the supposedly independent nation-state" (56).

For early 20th-century *Criollo* politicians and intellectuals in Bolivia**,** the central aspiration was a vision of civilization and progress predicated on the influx of new technologies, the technological enhancement of production, industrial development, and the infusion of foreign capital. This represented a specific, elite-driven project of modernity, distinct from potential indigenous modernities rooted in different historical trajectories. Furthermore, Rivera highlights the distance between modernizing discourse and actual practice in such contexts; elites might adopt the rhetoric of progress while perpetuating archaic, exclusionary social and economic relations inherited from the colonial past: "Es pues la práctica de las abigarradas colectividades productivas lo que define su condición moderna, en tanto que el discurso modernizante de las elites tan sólo encubre procesos de arcaización y conservadurismo económico, cultural y político (62).This drive for modernization manifested in an experimental literary language, where the incorporation of *modern* elements introduced novel themes and literary forms, reflecting the authors' ambition to engage with the global exchange of aesthetic sensibilities, even as the underlying modernization project reproduced the logic of internal colonialism.[6]

Albarracín Millán (1976) demonstrates how this progressive and industrial aspiration, which developed from the mid-19th century in the works of authors such as J.A. Aramayo, Pedro Kramer, Mariano Baptista, and José Manuel Pando, served not only to establish the republic's progress but also to achieve social order previously disrupted by political coups, lack of national integration, stagnation,

and backwardness in agricultural and mining production. This urgency is reflected in various literary productions of the early 20th century. The necessity for a morally sound social environment to accompany the technical development of cities, symbolized by the arrival of the train or tram, is a recurring theme in José Eduardo Guerra's *El alto de las ánimas* (1919) and Alcides Arguedas's *Vida criolla* (1911). The protagonist of Walter Carvajal's *Renovarse o morir* (1919) admires the city's progress as a "lienzo distante y fantástico" (1) upon seeing the new developed urban space from a tram, a symbol of modernity's impulse. One of the political promises of political candidate Rojas in Chirveches's novel *La candidatura de Rojas* (1909) is the construction of a railway connecting a rural town to the city of La Paz.

Across Latin America, through the first half of the twentieth century, literature also turned infrastructure into social concern. From Argentine Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's *Cabeza de Goliat* (1940), a dissection of Buenos Aires as a centralized apparatus, to Mexican Agustín Yáñez's *Ojerosa y pintada* (1960), where electric signage, tram circuits, and paved avenues choreograph subjectivity and class, writers made rails, roads, lighting, and communications central to narrative form and social critique. Comparable threads run through Argentine Roberto Arlt's urban novels (factories, clandestine technical networks in his novels from 1926 to 1931), Chilean Baldomero Lillo's mining tales (1904), Brazilian João do Rio's street chronicles (trolley lines, illumination, policing from 1908 to 1911), and Colombian José Eustasio Rivera's *La vorágine* (1924). A prominent theme in this literature is the infrastructural development of space, encompassing colonization and modernization projects tailored to the national landscape and critical of local political practices. In the Andes, adapting industrial machinery to the Andean environment required substantial investments from private companies and the expertise of foreign specialists who arrived to implement new projects and instruct local urban workforces. Foreign capital brought technical expertise and waves of specialists, reshaping the local skill hierarchy. The engineer, now a prestigious figure in a society long oriented toward law, the clergy, and the military, became a prominent presence. Newspapers record how foreign technicians permeated urban life, arriving for industrial and construction works and circulating through private homes and salons, where meeting them became social protocol. This shift also shaped literary sensibility, elevating the engineer to a protagonist of industrial modernity: they were seen as enterprising and cosmopolitan, building roads and opening trade routes.

This is a literary period in which Bolivian authors began to grapple with the promises and contradictions of national progress, giving rise to a new protagonist: the hero as an agent of modernization. In novels from this time, such as Armando Chirveches's *A la vera del mar* (1926) or

Diomedes de Pereyra's *El Valle del Sol* (1928), cosmopolitan engineers often struggle against a corrupt social environment, proposing infrastructural solutions like railways and colonization routes as the path to civilization. This literary movement was part of a broader shift that influential critic Augusto Guzmán classified as the Realist period (1905-1932), defined by the "novela costumbrista, social y pintoresca" (55) that directly addressed national realities.

José Aguirre Achá's 1923 novel *Platonia* stands as a remarkable –albeit critically neglected– work of its time. Guzmán identified *Platonia* as a prime example of this trend, praising it as an "auténtica novela política sin parangón en la literatura boliviana" for its ability to characterize realistically "la vida política de cualquiera o de todas las naciones indo-americanas" (97). Understanding the novel's placement within the realist tradition, alongside other works centered on the engineer as a modernizing hero, provides a crucial framework. It casts the narrative as a serious, though fictionalized, diagnosis of the political challenges and criollo aspirations of its time, fully aligned with early twentieth-century Bolivia's dominant literary and social concerns.Set in the fictional South American nation of Platonia,[7] established during the Latin American independence movements, the novel's name alludes to Plato's vision of an ideal civilized society. The narrative centers on Héctor Johnson, a Platonia-born engineer from an English and Spanish family. Héctor embodies the self-styled enlightened, progressive, modern, and morally upright segment of society, a group perceived as threatened by the machinations of petty local *Mestizo* politics. Forced to flee Platonia due to political persecution, Héctor, who studied engineering in Europe, harbors a fervent desire to modernize his homeland through advanced infrastructure projects funded by foreign capital. The novel serves as a persistent advocacy for the introduction of Western-inspired philosophical and technological innovations into Platonia. Héctor envisions railway development, particularly a line connecting the capital to his hometown, as the solution to the nation's moral and economic problems. This project becomes his lifelong ambition, symbolizing the construction of an ideal society through modernization and spatial colonization. *Platonia* extensively chronicles Héctor's travels across Europe, North America, and Latin America, undertaken both in pursuit of his infrastructural vision and as a consequence of Platonia's political and social instability. The story culminates in the realization of Héctor's long-wanted enterprise.

The narrative centers on the protagonist's conflict with the prevailing social environment, which he openly condemns, leading to his persecution and social alienation. His critique of corruption and political opportunism, rooted in a *Criollo* progressive worldview, sets the work's dominant critical tone. This critique highlights the erosion of the foundational ideals of liberty and justice, inherited

from the Enlightenment thinkers who established the republic. Within this context, Platonia emerges as a vision of social utopia attainable solely through the material advancements of progress, specifically through infrastructural development, amidst the nation's political decay and a deteriorating social landscape marked by incessant conflicts among various *Mestizo* factions.

At the structural level, the novel revolves around Héctor's incessant travels, driven by his engagement in local politics and his aspiration to connect his hometown with his family's rural estates via a railway. Each chapter charts Héctor's trajectory: from his childhood to his education in London and Europe, his stay in New York, his return to Platonia and subsequent involvement in the political scene, his forced flight back to New York, and his further travels through Chicago and across Central and South America. Throughout this journey, the narration not only unveils the political and social realities of these external places but also provides an intimate exploration of Platonia itself. Héctor's movements from his hometown to the capital, and from the capital to the provinces, offer a glimpse into both urban and rural settings, collectively painting a comprehensive portrait of the complex social landscape of his time.

The "infrastructural reading," a methodology proposed by Davies for the *colonial literature* archive, relies on a dual reading of the term infrastructure: on the one hand, the author speaks of "infrastructures in the literary text" (Davies 18), which is the appearance of infrastructures on the surface of the narrated story, at a thematic level. The analytical counterpart proposed by the author is "the more complex notion of the infrastructures of the text," which Davies defines as "the historical raw material, be it social, economic or geographic, out of which the literature, as a specific crystallization of cultural patterns and trends, is carved" (Davies 19). The idea is that literature draws from real-world conditions (e.g., societal structures, economic systems, or physical landscapes) and transforms them into narrative strategies that reflect cultural patterns and underlying social dynamics.

In Aguirre's novel, infrastructure is prominently featured through the emphasis on the railway as a vehicle for civilization; however, its narrative deployment is particularly noteworthy, specifically its use as a poetic device to demonstrate how the narrative mirrors this infrastructural logic, underscoring linearity and progress. Like a railway's straight, purposeful trajectory, the protagonist's numerous and continuous journeys resemble a longitudinal path, measurable in axes and direction, and indicative of ordered and sequential movement. This contrasts sharply with the haphazard and chaotic movements of Platonia's *Mestizo* society, characterized by coups, factional infighting, and persistent instability. The protagonist's journeys, both within and beyond Platonia, not only bridge disparate cultural and geographical realms but also culminate in the triumphant realization of his

pursued vision. This outcome diverges significantly from other contemporary literary genres, such as *indigenismo*,[8] where narratives typically conclude with defeat, deferral, or ambiguity regarding the social values being championed in the text. *Platonia* ends with Héctor's return to a finished, functioning project, a celebratory closure. This arc tracks an infrastructural sequence, planning to completion, that endorses a Western, stepwise modernity in which infrastructure delivers improvement and order.

The narrative organization in the novel functions to symbolically inscribe the region within the context of the European capitalist world-system of the early 20th century. The author states in the prologue that the goal is to colonize and populate the territory to achieve peace, in the tradition inaugurated by Sarmiento and Alberdi in Argentina (Aguirre Achá iv). This aspiration to construct a utopian society through colonization requires the transformation of both human nature and the physical landscape, achieved via the civilizing forces of technology, labor, and industry.

Consequently, the novel not only thematizes the aspiration for infrastructure as a core element of its narrative, but, as Moretti, cited by Davies and Boehmer, observes regarding British imperial novels, it also functions "as a sort of literary railway that weaves the network capable of covering country in all its extension" (Davies and Boehmer 23). By denouncing the imaginary republic's political instability, Platonia maps the local landscape, portraying it as vast and conducive to industrial development, and connects it to the principal capital routes of the region. The novel's symbolic mapping of integration routes into the global flow of capital reflects the construction of a "cultural core" linked to a center-periphery production system. This aligns with the idea that core zones are not national blocks, but rather webs, networks or lines, what the social historian of technology and infrastructure Daniel Headrick describes as "tentacles of progress" (Davies 10). Thus, the novel's central argument lies not primarily in its realistic portrayal of the republic's political conflicts but in its proposed infrastructural solution, which symbolically integrates Platonia into global commercial and capital circuits, albeit in a subordinate role.

By outlining the coordinates of industrial and economic development, the novel inscribes a Western universalist cultural genealogy that defines its ideological project. Upon Héctor's first return to Platonia after studying in London, his father, an educated and well-born English engineer, welcomes him home with a gift:

> Esto es tu escritorio, me dijo mi padre, y señalando sucesivamente los objetos a que se refería agregó con satisfacción manifiesta: este pequeño estante contiene tus libros de colegio que tu madre los ha ordenado cuidadosamente como un recuerdo de la infancia. En este otro encontrarás obras clásicas vertidas al inglés o escritas en ese

> idioma. Aquellos dos más distantes están llenos de libros modernos entre los que hay un diccionario enciclopédico, tratados diversos, obras de consulta que te serán muy útiles en el ramo de ingeniería y otras de diferente índole. Toda esta biblioteca la pedí de Inglaterra y acaba de llegar. Los bustos colocados sobre los estantes representan a Bacon, Stuart Mill, Spencer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Scott, Dickens, Nelson y Wellington. Su recuerdo, aproximándote al país de los hombres prudentes serenos constantes y reflexivos, te alejará siempre de Platonia. (137)

Thus, while the novel examines how liberal reformers imagined the benefits of free trade through spatial colonization, it simultaneously outlines a genealogy of thought rooted in admiration for intellectual models. At the same time, it functions as a showcase of objects, classical books, modern manuals, and busts, presenting Western thought's virtues as an imported good.

In her analysis of the interplay between Latin American literature and the capital export processes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Ericka Beckman identifies a discursive mode she terms the "modernist import catalogue" (43). This mode encapsulates the exclusive consumer fantasies that, within literary modernism, celebrated the market for luxury goods and artworks in the works of authors such as Rubén Darío, José Asunción Silva, and others. For instance, in the Cuban poet Julián del Casal's "Mis amores," the elaborate celebration of bronze, crystal, porcelain, and stained glass, among other items, positions the poet as a "proto-consumer, whose desires are incited and constrained by Cuba's intensified insertion into global circuits of commodity exchange" (Beckman 42). Beckman demonstrates how the *modernistas*' stylized lists and catalogues of imported commodities "helped to forge a language with which to appreciate and 'love' luxurious foreign commodities" (Beckman XXIV). In this sense, literature and capital reveal their intrinsic connection within shared fictional constructs, underscoring the pivotal role of imagination in shaping the economic life of society.

In *Platonia*, a similar phenomenon can be observed. The room Héctor's father prepares for him serves as a curated display of cultural commodities, books, busts, and dictionaries ordered from England, which create a space of security for the protagonist. This imagery allegorically represents access to the intellectual marketplace, akin to the modernist practices examined by Beckman, as a safeguard against internal political threats. Consequently, the novel, much like Carvajal's *Guía internacional*, functions as a discursive spatial sense-making artifact that contributes to the symbolic integration of the local into the global system. It articulates and helps foster a fantasy of universal

citizenship through cultural consumption among the criollos, thereby aligning their imaginary with global centers.

Another critical aspect is how colonial subjects are presented in the novel. They are frequently depicted as passive beneficiaries or obstacles to progress, and their agency erased or minimized. Platonia, a new and nascent nation, existing alongside other newly independent political entities and bearing the scars of political ambition and social instability, possesses a unique distinction. At an early stage in its history, through the decree of a prevailing caudillo:

> se cambiaron los nombres aborígenes o españoles con que eran designadas las poblaciones y provincias del país, con nombres griegos que podían corresponder o no a la distribución de la geografía helénica y a las condiciones peculiares de los lugares, como Olimpia, Tebas, Esparta, Corinto, Platea, Micala, etc.… y de ese mismo tiempo data la costumbre generalizada en toda la República de adoptar los nombres de personas más célebres de Grecia, con solo anteponer a ellos el cristiano que se exigía en la partida bautismal, en esta o parecida forma: Juan Aristófanes, Luis Temístocles, José Arquímides, Pedro Herodoto, Lucas Hipólito, Antonio Zenón, Manuel Ulises, María Filomena, Magdalena Casandra, etc., etc. (39)

From that point on, social relations within the novel are homogenized, at least nominally, through a shift in how people and places are identified and named. People are differentiated based on their economic status, level of education, and political affiliations, yet any trace of indigenous or African heritage is conspicuously absent from the narrative. This omission is particularly striking, given that the author situates the nation within the Andean heartland, allegorically representing Bolivia, a country with a substantial indigenous population since its inception. This strategy, far from being merely satirical, aligns with the novel's realist classification by critics such as Augusto Guzmán and functions as a narrative strategy to diagnose and represent a specific political ideal. In other words, the novel erases the colonial wound by restructuring public space, clearing away the traces of a modernity built upon the remnants of colonial servitude, a reality the text deliberately omits.

The adoption of Greek names for the republic, places, and people thus lays the foundation for importing Western economic and social models, enabling the peaceful integration of modern capital, a vision the novel presents as its literary project. By constructing a homogeneous political body through this strategy, the narrative seamlessly absorbs the indigenous population into the dominant civilizing project, without resistance or conflict, alongside rural areas, which are gradually overtaken by the expansion of the railroad and ongoing colonization efforts. Each of these Greek-derived names,

blended with Spanish elements, serves as an allegory for the type of mestizaje envisioned by Bolivia's ruling elites, one that promotes a homogeneous, post-ethnic civic community. Rooted in rationalist ideals and Western influence, this model ultimately aims to erase indigenous ancestry over time, as it was seen as the primary cause of social decline in the country.

In this way, through a deliberate act of historical erasure, the narrative becomes a tool of colonization. It neutralizes the perceived threat of the thousands of indigenous people inhabiting rural areas and the growing presence of *Mestizos* of indigenous descent in urban centers, who are increasingly occupying positions of power. The novel thus constructs an imagined social order, homogeneous, hierarchical, and primed for capitalist development, firmly under the control of the *Criollo* intellectual elites. Ultimately, the novel's strategy of discursive homogenization, erasing race difference through naming and narrative focus, mirrors the protagonist's infrastructural project. The railroad, as the central symbol and tool of modernization, is imagined not just to connect physical space, but to overwrite existing social and cultural landscapes with the idealized, uniform, and Westernized order.

Conclusions: Infrastructure and Writing in *Criollo* Sensibility

In analyzing this relatively unknown novel within the landscape of Bolivian literary tradition, it is particularly interesting to observe how the infrastructural connection between urban space and literature intersect to affirm a *Criollo* space of enunciation. From this position, the lettered *Criollo*, or *letrado,* articulates his own vision of modernity, linking it to the global centers of the world-system while simultaneously reinforcing the colonial past, one that denies otherness as a means of proposing a social solution for early 20th-century Bolivia.This analysis of the intersection between infrastructure and literary writing illuminates how modernity is made comprehensible and imbued with meaning, not merely through technical and economic advancements, but also as cultural narratives participate in creating and perpetuating ways of seeing that validate asymmetrical power structures. Literature serves as a symbolic microcosm where technology, mobility, and commerce are simultaneously engines of progress and instruments of exclusion, replicating the world-system's logic on a local scale. In this regard, *the infrastructural reading* emerges as a crucial instrument for deciphering the interplay between the material and the symbolic. It reveals how the representation of the railway and other infrastructures transcends their utilitarian function, transforming them into metaphors for an ambitious, yet exclusionary, civilizing project.

Furthermore, examining social space through the lens of infrastructure enables a critical reassessment of the modernity paradigm adopted in Bolivia. Applied to the early 20th-century Bolivian

context and Aguirre Achá's *Platonia*, this novel methodological approach highlights space as an active site imbued with political and cultural meanings. It illuminates how the spatial politics under the *Criollo* vision of modernity, integrating the nation into global networks via infrastructure while simultaneously marginalizing internal populations, proved central to the formation and articulation of the literary discourse examined here.

Notes

[1] In the highly stratified society of La Paz at the time, both indigenous people and cholo-mestizos (urban indigenous individuals resulting from rural-to-urban migration) were viewed as subordinate identities. The *Criollo*, who considered himself to possess greater racial purity and to be closer to the European white than to the Andean indigenous population, occupied the highest social level. Bolivian society was structured around three distinct ethnic groups: indigenous people at the lowest level, followed by mestizos, and the criollos at the top.

[2] Antina von Schnitzler, in "Citizenship Prepaid: Water, Calculability, and Techno-Politics in South Africa" (2008), provides a compelling analysis of how, in post-apartheid South Africa during the 1990s, water meters served not only as tools for rationalizing water consumption, but also as a crucial pedagogical technology for cultivating citizens disciplined in consumption and state obedience. This underscores infrastructure's constitutive power, its inherent lack of neutrality, and its embodiment of social fantasies and desires that demand consideration.

[3] The late 19th century in Bolivia was marked by a civil war (1898-1899) between conservative southern elites, primarily landowners in the Sucre region, and liberal northern elites, engaged in mining and coca leaf trade, mainly in La Paz. The northern elites' victory led to the government's relocation to La Paz, inaugurating a new socio-political era defined by economic and political liberalism and the continuation of *Criollo* cultural dominance as key principles for Bolivian nation-building.

[4] The War of the Pacific, fought between Bolivia and Peru against Chile in 1879, resulted in the defeat of the Peruvian-Bolivian alliance, leading to Bolivia's loss of its Pacific coastal territories.

[5] Additional insights into this issue are provided in Velasco, Javier. "Movilidad urbana y geometrías de poder: El tranvía urbano en La Paz a principios del siglo XX." *Bolivian Studies Journal* no. 28, 2022, pp. 135-58.

[6] Rivera Cusicanqui also cautions against reading modernity as a single, linear temporality or collapsing modernization (an economic-political project) into modernismo (an aesthetic program). Her critique of logocentrism and her insistence on visual/social practices disrupt a teleology of "empty, linear time" and invite us to read modernity in Bolivia as contested and multi-voiced rather than a smooth civilizing arc. (Rivera and Aillón, *Antología del pensamiento crítico boliviano contemporáneo*, p. 18.)

[7] Given the location of this fictional nation and the portrayal of its historical, political, and socio-cultural struggles, it is reasonable to conclude that Platonia is an allegorical representation of Bolivia.

[8] As Antonio Cornejo Polar shows, literary *indigenismo* features a process of political organization and indigenous consciousness development, generally culminating in a material defeat reflecting indigenous life's exploitative conditions. This defeat, functioning as a "alegoría premonitoria de la justicia que se avecina" (179), signifies a collective awakening rather than a victory over the nation or transnational power. This is exemplified by the "guerra silenciosa" narrative cycle of Peruvian author Manuel Scorza, or Alcides Arguedas's *Raza de Bronce*, where the indigenous uprising against hacienda violence, despite initial success, ends in a narrative silence that foreshadows the state's violent repression and another historical defeat for the indigenous population.

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