

# Visualizing Disability: Wheelchair Caravan Across Bolivia

## PEDAGOGICAL GUIDE

This educational resource, also available in Spanish, enables students in undergraduate and graduate cultural anthropology courses to analyze the “Wheelchair Caravan of Integration,” a mass mobilization by Bolivians with disabilities that took place across Bolivia in 2011. As they progress through this activity, students will also learn how to think holistically and critically about a wide-range of topics like disability, medicine, the body, the senses, citizenship, and Latin America utilizing primary sources. First students read the original narrative, “Wheelchair Caravan in Bolivia,” in which Carlos Mariaca Alvarez, a Bolivian activist with disability who led the march, details the profound role collective support played as the activists strove to perform the complementary, non-hierarchical duties that made their arduous journey across Bolivia possible. Next, students watch two-minute videos produced by the Bolivian media that show an important moment in the caravan journey when activists, frustrated that their mobilization was not receiving necessary public attention, got out of their wheelchairs at a public plaza in Santa Cruz and utilized their bodies to gain visibility for the sacrifices they made in their struggle for equal rights and to demand a financial benefit from the national government. The first media video, “Caravan Interview Activist,” created by ATB Digital, provides commentary by a journalist and an interview with an activist. In the second video by Viva, “Caravan Interview Public,” footage and interviews show the public’s reactions. Finally, students can write or actively discuss their responses to the questions offered in this resource. In sum, this multi-modal activity offers students a unique opportunity to critically analyze primary sources as they comparatively explore how the Bolivian activists, media, and public differentially interpret the Wheelchair Caravan of Integration’s significance.

## **WHEELCHAIR CARAVAN IN BOLIVIA BY CARLOS MARICA ÁLVAREZ**

In 100 days, from November 15, 2011 to February 26, 2012, people with disabilities (PWD) in Bolivia achieved a historic mobilization in wheelchairs, traveling 1520 kilometers from Trinidad, Bení through five Departments of Bolivia to La Paz, the seat of government. "The Wheelchair Caravan of Integration," led by the leaders of the Bolivian Confederation of Persons with Disabilities (COBOPDI), together with the leaders of the Departmental Federations (FEDEPDIS), had the objective of claiming rights for PWD by proposing a new law, "Preferential Treatment for PWD," to improve the quality of life for this social sector and grant an annual benefit of 3600 Bolivianos or 521 U.S. dollars. They also demanded the creation of community shelters for people who do not have families and must wander as orphans through life in extreme poverty.

The Wheelchair Caravan of Integration was on the road, exposing itself to the climatic conditions and the dangers of vehicular traffic, counting only on the support of Bolivian citizens. They were accompanied by some of their relatives and other Trinitarians who, together with their children, joined the demonstration in solidarity, to push wheelchairs, prepare food, wash clothes and help them with personal hygiene tasks. In mutual agreement with the caravan's leadership, it was their responsibility to ensure they did not miss breakfast, lunch, and dinner and provide for all of their needs, whether it was repairing and replacing shoes that fell apart on the road or distributing clothes that were received as donations. Two cars transported the portable kitchen, food, rations, sleeping bags, and old mattresses. The food that supporters prepared was for everyone. The children who accompanied them were supplied with milk and diapers that were either purchased or donated from different parts of the country.

The caravan, which had received very little coverage in the media and was ignored by government authorities, became known as "The Invisible March." A block before entering the main square, people with disabilities decided to change this situation so they took off their clothes, got out of their wheelchairs, and onto the ground. They entered the 24 de Septiembre Plaza, crawling on the ground in a shocking and moving effort to make their struggle visible. Those who could not mobilize were dragged by volunteers or supporters, even a journalist from Santa Cruz helped. This impressive action was made in homage to the brothers and sisters with disabilities who do not have adequate conditions, must crawl in their homes, in the streets or where they live, to leave their corners, look for food or perform their basic biological needs.

It was important to make this reality visible to the public so they see them as they are and witness the conditions in which they have to face life and hear their demand for equal rights in their country. Not only was this mobilization a sacrifice, it was very emotional because they exposed the painful and difficult lives of those with disabilities, who live in total defenselessness to indifference of the State and the current Bolivian government. The public as well as the media were moved, openly weeping at the sight of this outward display of true suffering. They understood the message, the activists needed them to achieve their goals. The activists exposed their message to the media, so people could learn to see that people with disabilities in Bolivia are just like everyone else. They laugh, cry, love, sing, dance, and get angry like any person who does not have a disability. They are not saints, or angels, or demons; they are human beings with one or multiple disabilities and that their struggle is for love, love for life, love for their family, love to live even in spite of adversity and love so as not to renounce the possibility of a better and dignified life in Bolivia.

## **TRANSCRIPTS**

### **CARAVAN INTERVIEW ACTIVIST**

**Song playing in the background:** Guardián de mi corazón by Annette Moreno.

**Journalist:** This is how people with different disabilities are making their way into the main square and the images that we are observing are quite painful. These people left from Trinidad, Beni. Fifteen people started this so-called caravan of integrity. At this moment, there are ninety-five people who are entering to protest and demand a financial benefit from the national government.

**Activist:** It is quite painful but we do what we are doing for those children who cannot be mobilized, for those children who do not have a voice to be able to shout what is needed, those children who do not have a crutch, a wheelchair that they need. On our journey, we have seen quite a few abandoned people with disabilities. They also discriminate against us like that. What we ask from them is to put their hands to their chest and that they propose this law once and for all, that is what we ask for. Only that they put their hands to their chest, that they will not have an accident and become disabled. It is a big impotence that is discriminating against us.

### **CARAVAN INTERVIEW PUBLIC**

**Journalist (0:00):** This truly is the mobilization of protest and the request of the disabled who left in a dignified march on November 15th and today came to the main square. They left their wheelchairs and crawled through the streets to the plaza.

**News Ticker (0:05):** DISABLED PERSONS DRAGGED TO THE PLAZA

**News Ticker (0:17):** THEY DROPPED AND SHOWED THEIR LIMITATIONS

**Journalist (0:28)** In this way they seek civility from the government and ask them to pay a benefit to give dignity to the special abilities with which they must to live.

**News Ticker (0:40):** THEIR BODIES BEGAN TO BLEED

**Journalist (0:43)** Some were injured, they took off their shirts, they crawled. And people circulating around the square stopped to see the protest of the disabled.

**News Ticker (1:00):** CRIED TO SEE THE DISABLED

**Journalist (1:00):** Many shed tears of pain and impotence to see the reality of these people.

**News Ticker (1:15):** ASK GOVERNMENT TO LISTEN TO THEIR DEMANDS

**First woman interviewed (1:17)** It makes me sad. I feel very sorry, it hurts, I feel sorry.

**Second woman interviewed (1:30):** It is a shame to see these people in this state, walking, really slithering like a snake about this life. It is a pity.

**Journalist (1:41):** The disabled are asking for a payment and have been requesting the benefit for five years...

### QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

- How did the activists explain the meaning of this mobilization? Why does Mariaca say that it was important for the activists to achieve visibility?
- How did the activists use their bodies to achieve visibility? Why do you think using their bodies in this way worked?
- How did the caravan activists mobilize collective action in both their journey and at the plaza in Santa Cruz? Why do you think they wanted to make their collective action visible?
- Compare how the activists, media, and public interpreted the mobilization in Santa Cruz. Explain what differences stand out to you.
- In Bolivia, people with disabilities use person-first terminology to confront the dehumanization they experience in their everyday social relationships. How do we understand the impact of this group's experience with dehumanization in Mariaca's narrative and the videos? Why is it important for many people with disabilities to challenge dehumanization?
- How do members of the caravan highlight the limitations of defining disability simply as a medical problem that requires treatment? What other social and cultural considerations should we make?

## **TRANSLATION NOTES**

When analyzing these resources with students, it is important to note that while “disabled person” is often the preferred terminology in Western countries like the United States, Bolivians with disabilities prefer the term “person with disability.” They assert that the person-first expression enables them to better challenge the dehumanization they routinely experience. Additionally, in Mariaca’s narrative we see him use the term, *la movilización*, which can be roughly translated into “demonstration” in English. However, we decided to use the direct translation, “mobilization,” as it underlines the claims to social, political, and spatial mobility activists in the caravan have been making. These nuanced differences highlight the importance of being culturally sensitive to how different meanings of disability are produced through the distinct sociopolitical relationships people living in local environments have with history, culture, and global disability models.

## **AUTHORSHIP**

Carlos Mariaca Alvarez, who helped lead the Caravan protest, curated the videos and authored the narrative, “Wheelchair Caravan in Bolivia.” Mariaca Alvarez, who has physical disability (Triplegia, 75%), served as the National Historic Leader of the Bolivian Confederation of People with Disabilities (COBOPDI) from 2002 to 2012, and founded the Inclusive Social Movement (MSI) and Emerging Society Bolivia (SEMBOL). Marica is also a self-taught lecturer and writer of Oriental Philosophy and Esoteric Psychology.

Megan Neal wrote the pedagogical guide, student questions, video transcripts, and translations. Neal is currently a PhD candidate at the University of California, Irvine. Her research examines how citizens with disabilities in La Paz, Bolivia challenge normative understandings of development, the senses, and political participation. She also serves as the Web Content Producer for the Teaching and Learning Anthropology Journal’s Website.