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Gillian Greenberg

Washington University in St. Louis

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Recommended Citation

Greenberg, Gillian, "Treasures in the Salt Flats: Bolivian Perspectives on Lithium Extraction" (2017). *Spring 2017*. 47.

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TREASURES IN THE SALT FLATS:
BOLIVIAN PERSPECTIVES ON
LITHIUM EXTRACTION

Gillian Greenberg

Mentor: Bret Gustafson

Bolivia's lithium reserve, the world's largest, has brought the country into the spotlight as demand for lithium-ion batteries grows. A state-run project to extract lithium and produce batteries broke ground in 2008 and continues to work towards industrial scale production. This research, based on two months of fieldwork, explores the local and national perceptions of the project. The study finds that Bolivians frame lithium within their country's history of natural resource extraction as a way to conceptualize why this project—government-run with an emphasis on creating lithium-ion batteries within Bolivia—is different than past extractive industries. It also explores how the Bolivians evaluate the project based on its ability to generate economic development both at regional and national scales. Finally, it examines how lithium provides a mechanism through which regional civic organizations negotiate their relationship with the state by using the lithium project as a way to gauge the government's dedication to regional economic development. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how local support for lithium extraction has been conceptualized through its capacity to change Bolivia's history with extractivist industries and produce economic development.