

***DECOLONISING INTERSECTIONS: THE  
LIVES OF TRANS PEOPLE IN BOLIVIA.***

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## **CONTENTS**

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Preamble: Linguistic considerations and acronyms</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
Summarised introduction and rationale to the thesis	<b>8</b>
Research question and aims	<b>13</b>
<b>2. Literature review</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.1. Part I: Theoretical framework</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1.1 Theorising Trans and gender variance	<b>14</b>
2.1.2 Links between postcolonial and decolonial theory	<b>22</b>
<b>2.2 Part II: Trans lives in context</b>	<b>32</b>
2.2.1 Trans lives in the Latin American & Caribbean context	<b>32</b>
Different levels of violence	<b>33</b>
Education and employment	<b>34</b>
Public visibility and recognition	<b>35</b>
Access to public services	<b>36</b>
2.2.2 Trans lives in Bolivia	<b>36</b>
Brief socio-historical account	<b>37</b>
Current legal framework related to gender identity	<b>41</b>
Issues faced by Trans people	<b>43</b>
Dissident discourses, criticisms and theoretical tensions	<b>47</b>
<b>2.3 Part III: Historical background to research</b>	<b>51</b>
Introduction	<b>51</b>
Pre-colonial and colonial times	<b>52</b>
The 1952 revolution and the indigenous advent	<b>54</b>
Contended racial identities	<b>57</b>
<b>3. Methodology and Methods</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>3.1. Epistemological and Ontological Perspective</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>3.2. Methods</b>	<b>63</b>
Data collection	<b>63</b>
Recruitment	<b>65</b>
Research aims	<b>69</b>
<b>3.3. Analyses</b>	<b>70</b>
Interview data	<b>72</b>
Photographic data	<b>72</b>
Reflective journal	<b>72</b>
Contextual research	<b>74</b>
<b>3.4. Ethical considerations</b>	<b>75</b>

<b>4. Analytic findings I: ‘Becoming’ Trans (Issues intrinsic to Trans experiences and identity development)</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>4.1. (Trans)gender epiphany during childhood</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>4.2. The role of institutions</b>	<b>87</b>
4.2.1. The family	87
4.2.2. The church	93
4.2.3. Medicine, Education and the State	96
<b>4.3. Framing and becoming trans</b>	<b>99</b>
4.3.1. Coming out	100
4.3.2. Visibility	101
4.3.3. Perceived privilege	106
4.3.4. Perpetuating binaries	112
<b>4.4. Precarious lives</b>	<b>118</b>
4.4.1. Violence self-inflicted and otherwise	118
4.4.2. Trans rebirth and the prodigal children	125
<b>5. Analytic findings II: (Im)possibilities for decolonising Trans experience</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>5.1. Global Trans terminology versus autochthonous knowledges</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>5.2. Influence and role of international and local NGOs</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>5.3. The influence of the MAS project of political decolonisation</b>	<b>140</b>
Clashes between identity-based aspects	141
Government’s contradictions	146
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>157</b>
Reflexivity	157
Discussion	158
<b>7. References</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>8. Appendices</b>	<b>190</b>
Explanation of research phases	190
Interview questions	192
Information sheet	193
Consent form	195

### **Abstract - *Decolonising intersections: the lives of Trans people in Bolivia***

Within the current context of socio-political decolonisation in Bolivia and the reforming agenda of the last decade, the landscape for its LGBTB population has transformed. Legal and political recognition have come about as a result of a long struggle that echoes other LGBTB emancipatory movements worldwide. Historic racialized and gendered oppression have also affected the struggle, triggering tensions to define the LGB and Trans movement: seeking inspiration in Western contexts, or looking inwards and attempting a true decolonial quest.

This research draws on data collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews across Bolivia's rural and urban hubs, from conversations and dialogical exchanges with Trans people who also identified as lesbian, middle class, indigenous, sex workers and a plethora of other intersecting identity traits. These intersections emerge as key in terms of authenticity, and also determine how Trans individuals access and navigate their immediate public and private realms. The project was conducted looking at quotidian experience, escaping pathologizing and exoticizing individuals because of their gendered, sexualized and racialized identities, but not omitting and ignoring their stories of struggle and hardship, since this would inevitably revictimize them further. The results of the research open the debate of how Trans experience may rupture the post-colonial context and find a sense of rooting and belonging in certain (indigenous) areas. Drawing on a critical realist thematic analysis underpinned by phenomenological aspects, the research engaged with theories within trans/queer studies scholarship as well as postcolonial/decolonial debates to provide a framework of intelligibility to better understand the multiplicity, heterogeneity and potential contradictory experiences lived by the participants. This thesis highlights the implications of the decolonial agenda among gender and sexual diversities in Bolivia and the wider Andean region (from Peru down to Argentina) echoing some of the de-medicalisation movements in the West. The findings show how through globalisation the interlocking of race-gender can open up possibilities to establish conversations and reflections about the possibility of creating other hegemonic discourses, both in postcolonial contexts as well as in the West (the non-Occidentalist), whilst keeping a critical approach to epistemological populisms that essentialise individuals based on apparent identity traits.

Based on the above, it is therefore possible to conclude that Trans identity in itself is far from a monolithic construct, and in the Bolivian context, due to the complexity of the decolonial colonial history and decolonial present there are several parallel currents of thought, and sources of experience (a mirror in which Trans individuals look at for a reference point, validation and reaffirmation) in social, historic and cultural terms.

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## PREAMBLE

### LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Linguistic considerations are key across this thesis, not only because of the implications of the data having been collected in Spanish and then translated into English, with all the limitations and impossibility of capturing and conveying culturally and socially specific ideas, constructs as well as the power (Mack, 2006) of the words spoken. From a social constructionist discursive standpoint, words not only do but make things and subjects, and this extends to translation and the use of acronyms for the sake of linguistic economy. In regards to translation, it is not a harmless apolitical action but an endeavour that has its own life and contributes to meaning construction (Spivak, 1993) and also its limitation and reduction. For a specific reflection on issues around translating and writing in English see the ethics section within the methodology chapter. As a result of some of these reflections, this short section aims introducing the definition of acronyms (in order of relevance) and some key concepts (namely 'Trans'), some of which remain untranslated throughout the thesis as this may help the reader navigate the different sections.

- Trans: Despite not being an acronym in itself, it is used as umbrella term to refer to the participants gender identity, often used by themselves notwithstanding the globalised nature of the concept and the risk of losing local specificity in terms of beliefs systems, practices and identities (Valentine, 2007). In this sense it includes transgender, transexual, travesti, crossdresser and genderqueer, as well as other indigenous denominations.
- TLGB: *Trans, lesbiana, gay, bisexual*. Used in this order to highlight the importance of Trans people and to bring them to the forefront for the sake of greater visibility.
- LGB: *Lesbiana, gay, bisexual*. Only refers to sexual diversities leaving Trans people outside, therefore not considering issues around gender identity and/or variance.
- LGBT: *Lesbiana, gay transgénero, bisexual* (Lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual). Used in the similar sense that would be used in English speaking contexts, often in an academic, development or activist sense. This is used interchangeably with the concept "sexual and gender diversities" as this is often used in Bolivia.
- GLTB: *Gay, lesbiana, transexual, bisexual*. Often used in Bolivia in activist spaces and by individuals involved in NGOs and other development organisations.
- NGO: Non-governmental organisation. Often refers to local organisations funded nationally which may have originally been grassroots groups.
- INGO: International non-governmental organisations. Referring to organisations funded by international bodies and foreign governments which would set specific agendas and fulfil particular development programmes.
- MAS: Movimiento al Socialismo. Evo Morales' party.
- MDG: Millenium development goals.
- SDG: Sustainable development goals.
- Comité DSG Cochabamba: Comité Diversidades Sexuales y Genéricas de Cochabamba. Organisation that works around sexual and gender diversities in Cochabamba.
- MSM: Men who have sex with men. Used within NGOs doing HIV prevention and epidemiological work without conveying a label for sexual orientation.
- ATTA: Asociación de Travestis y Transexuales de Argentina.
- Redlactrans: Red Latinoamericana de personas trans.

- Redtralsex: Red de trabajadoras sexuales.
- EPU: *Examen periódico universal*. The Periodic Universal Review commissioned by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

In short, the act of translating and constructing meaning makes the endeavour susceptible to the personal, political and moral values and choices of the translator. With the exception of some excerpts in Quechua, not only was the participants' data produced using Spanish (a colonial legacy and imposition in itself), but this was then translated into the academic lingua franca per antonomasia (English), which is the one that validates and legitimises knowledge production. This transfer (translation) of words, symbols and ideas is rarely innocuous, namely in the different instances where original words have been left in the original Spanish, to create the discomfort and dissonance that Anzaldúa (1987) used in her own writing to shift the inadequacy and uneasiness bestowed on her body by racism and lesbophobia, onto the reader.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### SUMMARISED INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE TO THE THESIS

Bolivia came to the international spotlight in 2005 when Evo Morales was elected president of the country. The expectation raised was not due to his proposed leftist policies, which some claim have fallen into neoliberal and imperialist decisions blended with indigenist populism (Quispe Huanca, 2018; Mamani Ramírez, 2016; Quispe Quispe, 2011; Infobae, 2017) but to the prospect of his very race and ethnic background. He was equally vilified and glorified nationally and internationally by opposing media outlets as the first indigenous president in Latin America (Albó, 2008). He became the visible face of a long-standing struggle of invisible skins, lives and stories that had long been erased, whitened and pushed into the margins. His election announced another turning point in Latin American politics, which had been preceded by decades of far-right US-sponsored dictatorships resisted by leftist populist movements across the continent (Panizza, 2009). The advent of the indigenous revolution came with the promise of a new horizon for racial relationships in Bolivia, plagued with uncertainty and violence, with hopes for reparation shadowed by fears of retribution. In short, the indigenous conquest of power bore the possibility of justice for the long-forgotten majority. The arrival of Morales and the consequent approval of the 2009 constitution also opened historic debates about marginalised groups (including LGTB people), land-owning rights and the nature of Bolivia's cultural, social and historic identity. The increased presence of indigenous people in spheres of power has received attention in academic and political circles internationally (Artaraz, 2012; Panizza, 2009; McNeish, 2006), but the focus has remained absent from other pressing issues unravelling within the decolonising context; namely the rights of sexual and gender diverse people.

Although LGTB research is not new in the Latin American context, most published work has been produced in more developed countries, namely Brazil (Parker, 1999 & 2009), perhaps due to its influential power in the region, its fast development and modernisation, and the increasing presence in global trade and markets (Panizza, 2009). There have been valuable contributions to LGTB research in other Latin American countries, but these refer mainly to Argentina, Chile and Mexico and specifically focus on male homosexuality (Girman, 2013; Gutman, 2003; Parker, 1999).

From my previous development experience of working in La Paz (Bolivia), I became friends with LGTB colleagues who introduced me to groups and organisations operating in the main cities, some of which are actively advocating for legal protection from violence and abuse, and towards equality and visibility. After reviewing the legal framework around the rights of LGTB communities in Bolivia, it is clear that there is some degree of official protection in theory (Ministerio de Justicia, 2008) but this may not translate to the daily lives of LGTB (Vidaurre, 2014). The Bolivian Constitution provides basic protection for LGTB people as stipulated by the Plan Nacional de Acción de Derechos Humanos 2009-2013 (National Action Plan for Human Rights) approved by Supreme Court Decree in December 2008. This plan establishes a set of political, social and legal tools with a holistic approach to Human Rights, with a focus on challenging and fighting discrimination and exclusion. Chapter 5 of this Plan is exclusively dedicated to LGTB, defining them as a vulnerable group that have historically been discriminated across Latin America suffering homophobia channelled through physical and psychological violence (Vidaurre, 2014). The year 2016 saw the approval of Law 807 (Gender Identity Law), granting full recognition of civil, political and economic rights to Trans individuals, through the



possibility of changing their name and sex on all public documents. This law was inspired by the Argentinian legislation and provides a non-pathologizing understanding of Trans identity.

In spite of the existing legal frameworks that aim to protect the rights of LGBT in Bolivia, the opinion of some local community groups and individuals differs from the official story. Some people think that the law only satisfies the international community and other lobbying groups, but in practice there is no real implementation or budgetary allocation that materializes the anti-discrimination framework. This extends to other vulnerable groups protected by specific laws such as the disabled, women and old people (Vidaurre, 2014).

On the regional level recent estimates on the wellbeing and livelihoods of Trans people in Latin America and the Caribbean revealed that 80% of Trans women died before the age of 35 due to systematic societal and state-sponsored violence (Hernando, 2015). The issues faced by Trans people remain a taboo in the Andean region, namely Bolivia, since the constant turmoil that the country is submerged in leaves the majority of the citizens in a vulnerable and unequal position either because of their ethnicity, social class, disability, gender or race. Hence, making it very difficult for the state and the wider society to bring to the spotlight the demands of Trans people. In the Bolivian context, one of the major issues faced by Trans people is the discrimination they experience when accessing public care and health services. Whilst the legislation recognises the rights of all citizens, the constant changes in the legal protection (see next paragraph) of Trans Bolivians hinder access and public health providers and other public officials further contribute to ostracising and marginalising an already vulnerable group. At the institutional level, the Bolivian ministers hit the headlines due to unfortunate statements that reinforce sexist and homophobic attitudes and perpetuate inequalities at the highest levels. Some of these blunders included the destitution of the health minister Juan Carlos Calvimontes for revealing the HIV status of a dissident judge and dropping allegations of sexual *deviation* as a justification for his health problems (EFE, 2014). Another example includes the public battering of the newly appointed minister Adriana Campero by president Morales and vice-president Linera who *accused* her of being a lesbian and recommended her to marry in order to be taken seriously (Página Siete, 2015), all of which were clearly at odds with statutory rights to protection.

### Further developments

During the first week of November 2017, the Constitutional Tribunal of Bolivia declared part of the Gender Identity Law 807 anti-constitutional and illegal (Loza, 2017). The specific text that was declared illegal is paragraph II, article 11 which recognizes the right of Trans Bolivians undergoing legal modification of their sex and name in all documents, to exercise all basic political, labour, civil, economic and social rights (La Prensa Digital, 2017). In practical terms this means people who changed their legal name and gender on all documents can no longer vote (with their current name), stand for office, apply for work with their name, produce official invoices or tax documents, adopt children or get married. The issue of gay marriage seems to be the underlying reason behind this decision, with the most conservative sectors considering Trans marriage on equal terms as gay marriage (Los Tiempos, 2017b). It is unclear what will happen to the dozen Trans individuals who have been married in the last year since the approval of Law 807.

The consequences of this decision have yet to be discussed in legal terms between the different judiciary and governmental authorities. However, its impact has been incorporated into the current research context and discussion, since some of the accounts provided by participants

are in direct relation with the newly acquired rights that Law 807 provided them with. This timely set of events reinforces the need for the current project to be produced. Since the news of the legal decision broke, many participants interviewed contacted me to share their concerns and fears within the current conjuncture.

Finally, the aim of this brief opening chapter is to introduce the indexed structure and contents of each of the subsequent chapters conforming the present doctoral research thesis, providing the scope and the research questions at the end of the section. Therefore, the thesis is organised under the following chapters:

### 1. Introduction

The present chapter's aim being to introduce the thesis contents explaining the structure of each section and chapter.

### 2. Literature review section

This section is divided in three sub-chapters which will be explained in further detail: 2.1 Part I (theoretical framework), 2.2 Part II (Trans lives in context) and 2.3 Part III (historical background to research).

#### 2.1. Part I: Theoretical framework

This subchapter includes the theoretical framework underpinning this research and locating it in terms of disciplines. In this case, the literature interrogated and analysed pertains to postcolonial studies (focusing on Latin America) and Trans studies (departing from a quick introduction to gender studies). The chapter is divided in two sections:

The first section covering Trans theories within gender and queer studies introduces an overview of concepts related to transgenderism, transsexuality and gender variance in a wider sense; how they emerged, transformed and what they mean to different authors in varying contexts as these provide the backbone to some of the discussion affecting issues around Trans identification and systems of reference. It will set the foundations to analyse how these mostly Eurocentric notions relate or compare to Trans people's experiences in Bolivia, intersected by their sexualized, racialized bodies in a decolonial setting. By the end of the chapter, a proposal of how this research will contribute to current debates on Trans studies will also be presented.

The second section of the chapter looks at links between postcolonial and decolonial scholarship as it relates to RQ, Q1, Q2 and Q3. The colonial legacy contributes and affects the ways in which Trans Bolivians understand themselves and the context they inhabit in physical, sociocultural and symbolic terms. Hence the section aims at situating decolonisation within relevant disciplines (i.e. decolonial and postcolonial studies), providing the most relevant definitions in relation to the research topic in terms of geopolitical specificity, providing an understanding of what is it on an academic/philosophical level, and how it is actually used in the context of the research and in the everyday conversations (data) by Trans participants (and also the average lay person). This section introduces some theoretical underpinnings to understand how racial relationships and categories have been defined in decolonial/postcolonial settings, and how (Trans)gender identity has been theorized and constructed, and to suggest ways in which both come together and become embodied in the gendered racialized Trans individual in Bolivia. This

subchapter also provides some explanations on the terminological choices and how concepts are mobilised and used in the current thesis.

### 2.2. Part II: Trans lives in context

This subchapter contextualises the socio-historic developments that have taken place in Bolivia and the neighbouring region, exploring how these have influenced the course of cultural and societal life, and by extension the lives of Trans people as citizens of this specific context and conjuncture. The chapter reviews regional Latin-American grey literature to provide a snapshot that will help the reader to understand the context navigated by the Trans people who partook in this research including a critique and reflections by the researcher. It also contains some contextual research (mostly of grey literature) closely linked to developments on non-normative gender/sexuality to understand the issues faced by Trans people in Bolivia and the wider region as it is relevant to the accounts contained herein. In short, there are a series of structural issues that affect Trans individuals across the region including Bolivia (physical and societal violence, lack of access to services and recognition, limited work and employment, police harassment, etc). The chapter concludes with a context laid out in a way whereby the research question and aims gain relevance and clarity.

### 2.3. Part III: Historical background to research

This subchapter briefly introduces specific historic racial tensions in the form of contextual research to help the reader understand why it is appropriate to carry out a multi-layered analysis of Trans experience in Bolivia where historic events and discourses are reviewed and considered as key influences. This historical analysis covers benchmark historic events relevant in terms of non-normative gender and sexuality constantly intersected by issues around race/ethnicity in the unfolding decolonial/postcolonial context. This chapter sets the socio-political context navigated by Trans Bolivians in the research up until nowadays, and includes the legal frameworks in place, some of the specificities of the decolonial/postcolonial Bolivian space as well as some of the issues faced by Trans people in the context. This chapter provides the backbone to understand how the concept of decolonisation is used among participants, drawing on some Latin American theorists found in the theoretical framework chapter (2.1), with analytic chapter 5 linking and drawing heavily on its contents.

## 3. Methodology and methods

Chapter 3 introduces how the research question and aims are approached in terms of method, epistemological and ontological underpinnings, namely the initial phenomenological stance which eventually developed into a critical realist stance. The chapter also links the epistemological and methodological approaches to the analytic process and theoretic framework used to make sense of the research questions. Whilst the chapter also includes a description of the data gathering process, recruitment, ethics and researcher positionality, this section has changed extensively over the course of the research and has incorporated elements of the researcher's journal and observations as part of the data to be included for phenomenological and anthropological lenses and elements influencing the analysis. The chapter also includes a reflection where the ambivalent position of the researcher is assessed in relation to the participants, the topic and the Bolivian context.

#### 4. Analytic findings I ('becoming' trans)

In the style of the Latin American testimonial tradition (Grillo, 2014; Ruiz Silva, 2004; Beverly, 1993) and its long history and primary importance in Bolivia (see Peredo, 1996; Huanca, 1991; Viezzer, 2005; Taller de Historia Oral Andina, 1994) the analytic findings will be divided in two extensive chapters (4 and 5) in order to avoid rupturing the internal consistency and flow of the data.

The present analysis chapter is the first of two discussing the main overarching ideas developed from the data transcripts in relation to the research aims (Q1 and Q2) and literature, in this case better summed up with the heading 'becoming trans'. This chapter focuses on exploring a snapshot of the issues intrinsic to Trans experiences and identity development as reported by Trans individuals in Bolivia that may be frequently experienced by Trans people elsewhere. The main themes identified are the following:

- (4.1) (Trans)gender epiphany during childhood*
- (4.2) The role of institutions*
- (4.3) Framing and becoming trans*
- (4.4) Precarious lives*

#### 5. Analytic findings II: (Im)possibilities for decolonising Trans experience

Chapter 5 introduces the second part of the data analysis whereby the specific discourses on decoloniality used by participants are analysed in relation to their specific Trans experiences in Bolivia. This is so due to the impossibility of disentangling the experience of coloniality with that of gender variance in this context, and to that extent, in any context with a colonial past. The following subsections structure this chapter:

- (5.1) Global Trans terminology versus autochthonous knowledges*
- (5.2) Influence and role of International and local NGOs*
- (5.3) The influence of the MAS project of political decolonisation*

These subsections include the specific issues that are particular to the Bolivian conjuncture and stem from the racialised and ethnically divided society, the links of which can be traced back to colonial times, the hegemonies established after the independence of Bolivia, and the influence of international development programmes and funding that were brought into the country during the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all of which have had an impact and influence in how Trans people experience their transness in terms of alliances, discourses, self-image, cultural associations and roots, and their understanding of gender. The background to these subsections is rooted and explained in chapter 2.3.

#### 6. Conclusion

Chapter 6 is the final chapter that wraps up the analysis into a deeper discussion of the findings in relation to the research aims and overarching research question.

The aim of the thesis was to look into the lives of Trans Bolivians under the current decolonising conjuncture, both at the social and political level, as well as the individual through the lived experiences of Trans people as shared with the researcher.

Some salient aspects are highlighted: which mirrors of identity Trans people are using, whether mirrors looking inwards towards historic and precolonial understandings of gender or mirrors facing outwards by incorporating the discourses by NGOs, academic and the global LGBTB movement. Further closing comments and conclusions are provided in this section as well as more reflexivity notes on the role of researcher subjectivity during the course of the research.

#### **RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIMS**

The present project's main research question is [Q] *How do gender variance and race shape Trans people's lives in Bolivia?* with the following research aims:

Q1 *'To explore the experiences of hardship of Trans Bolivians and get a better understanding of their life conditions within the realm of the public and the private'*

Q2 *'To understand how race and/or ethnicity may influence the daily lives of Trans Bolivians'*

Q3 *'To understand the relationship between non-normative gender and race in the context of decolonisation'*

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### PART I: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 2.1.1 Theorising Trans and gender variance

This first theoretical section includes the framework underpinning this research and locating it in terms of disciplines. In this case, the literature interrogated and analysed pertains to Trans studies (departing from a quick introduction to gender and queer studies) and will help understand how transness and gender variance have been theorised. This subchapter sets the ground for the empirical research to follow, more clearly outlined with the RQs above.

Furthermore, this section will introduce an overview of concepts related to transgenderism, transsexuality and gender variance in a wider sense; how they emerged, transformed and what they mean to different authors in varying contexts. It will set the foundations to analyse how these mostly Eurocentric notions relate or compare to Trans people's experiences in Bolivia, intersected by their sexualized, racialized bodies in a decolonial setting. By the end of the chapter, a proposal of how this research will contribute to current debates on Trans studies will also be presented.

#### ***Ethical critiques and issues of representation***

Echoing the research question and aims of this research, [Q] *How do gender variance and race shape Trans people's lives in Bolivia?* one of the key concepts explored is gender, and within it, the gender variant experience. The importance of outlining this comes from a position of *decolonizing* to the greatest extent possible the way that 'othering' keeps on being reproduced in research on the non-normative: whether the focus is transgender experience, disability, race or ethnicity, sexualities, etc. The elitist Westernised academic glance (Vidarte, 2005) runs the risk falling into these *othering* traps without reflecting on the privilege of who speaks, what is spoken about, and what the implications to the norm are (Romero Bachiller, 2005). While it may be an obvious reflection to make, all societies have a set of categories and labels that serve the purpose of organising in hierarchies our personal relations and exchanges (Quijano, 2000; Lugones, 2014); and while this depends on relations of power, they often exist through the eyes of the normative hegemony.

Using simplistic examples, gender relations could instantly trigger a reflection on how women differ from men economically or socially (Cornwall et al., 2008), or in current times, how transgender people navigate their identities in relation to a cisgendered world (Browne and Bakshi, 2011). Sexuality initially addressed ways of disciplining the female body (for reproductive purposes) and then became a matter of how homosexual desires were pathologized against the heterosexual norm. Race and ethnicity were approached through a white ethnocentric gaze that scrutinized the racialized other. Class is mostly analysed through despoiling the poor and vulnerable of their knowledge (Kirkwood, 2012) to build theories that serve the interests of academic elites and corporations (Goodin, 1986; MacKenzie et al., 2007 & 2014), and so on.

Decolonising and queering research practices demands for a critical reflection on these power imbalances (Smith, 2012; Dadusc, 2017). Gender rules all of our social exchanges and influences everyone, whether cisgender or trans. Race and ethnicity pervade our cultural practices and relations, whether people are white, black, mixed raced, Roma, Māori, etc. Sexuality is an element that concerns all bodies equally, whether desire or affect are heterosexual, asexual, homosexual, or fluid in any way. Finally, class is a matter that should be explored with equal respect across the social spectrum – not only invading and dissecting the poor but being able to

access and scrutinize the powerful and their private spaces too. In short, one of the contributions of this research will be to make a claim to the quotidian experience, an experience shared equally by Trans people as much as anyone else, recognizing the specificities of this experience, but locating it in a wider context of human complexities, affects and desires, rather than in a peripheral, subaltern or exoticized position. This will be explored in chapter 3, within the ethics part reflecting on researcher positionality.

### ***Terminological considerations***

As stated at the beginning, the umbrella term Trans will be used throughout the research to refer to the experiences of self-identified transgender, transsexual, travesti, transformist, non-binary or gender-fluid individuals. This choice has been made for the sake of clarity, linguistic economy and ease of understanding. Drawing on Stryker (2006 & 1994), using a single term to name such rich phenomena does not constitute a simple descriptive task, it carries political and disruptive connotations that position those involved in the research (from the participants to the reader and the researcher) in a cultural, political and socially defiant space. However, the researcher is aware of the risk of erasing the specificities of each experience, and also of the colonizing nature of the term Trans and its Eurocentric ramifications may have in post-colonial Bolivia, where other ways of understanding gender variance may co-exist with Western notions. The aim then to refer to gender variance through the term Trans is to find an overarching term that refers to gender experiences outside the cisgendered binary norm based on genital assumptions at birth. This terminological consideration is made recognizing how some Trans individuals' identity expression supports and perpetuates the gender binary and normative ways of doing gender, but acknowledging how an element of 'transness' (Serano, 2013) remains intrinsic<sup>1</sup> to these identities and those who pass as cisgendered males or females.

### ***Gender variance: understanding modern Trans identities***

In the West, Trans people have often been described in basic terms as individuals whose gender identity is not dictated by their birth assigned sex or genital morphology (Whittle, 2006). Historically, a number of assumptions have been made about Trans experience, including associations with psychopathology, self-mutilation and gender stereotyping (Stryker, 2006). Most definitions happened in the realm of medicine (Hirschfeld, 1925; Benjamin, 1999; Money and his heavily unethical research), including the different ways in which Trans experience is defined depending on the permanence of physical transformation (from garments to surgery and social representation) (Stryker, 1994; Hill, 2005). These would lead to labels framing individuals as transvestite, transsexual or transgender.

Hegemonic medical discourses around Trans experience have been a concern due to the obscure motivations of medical institutions and their relation to Trans individuals' agency (Roen, 2006). These critiques are founded reflecting on the perniciousness of psychological, medical and psychiatric approaches to homosexuality and *abnormal* sexuality historically<sup>2</sup>, which justifies suspicion on the Trans realm. Foucault (Foucault & Chomsky, 1971) critiqued medicine's apparent benignity in improving humankind, upholding a mask of neutrality void of political or power interests. The presumed moral neutrality and authority of medical institutions and their role in perpetuating systems of power and discipline (Foucault, 1999) has been responsible for

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<sup>1</sup> The researcher is aware of the risk of essentializing non-normative gender and sexual identities, as pointed out by Namaste (1996) and Anzaldúa (2009).

<sup>2</sup> This affects how travestism and transgenderism were also dealt with, as the confusion between sexuality and gender identity often problematized both under the same umbrella of diagnosis and treatment.

the stigmatization (Walker et. al, 2012), disciplining and demise of the very patients it aimed to help (Duckett, 2012). Some academics are not completely against medicine playing a role in the lives of Trans people (Ross-Quiroga, 2013) but to do so in a way that accompanies individuals through their processes of identity formation, rather than disciplining bodies and validating identities that do not conform. The latter is the approach defended by many Trans activists in Bolivia and Argentina.

Notwithstanding Sedgwick's (1990<sup>3</sup>) foundational work on queer identities and Butler's contribution to the theorizing of performed gender (1990) which supported different ways of thinking about gender identity and framing Trans identities, new political and radical meanings of Trans experience came about through the work and activism of Trans people themselves, notably Feinberg (1992) and Stone (2014) in the US. Feinberg (2006) contributed not only to a different way of understanding oppression due to non-conforming gender and embodiment, but also engaged in producing an extensive historiography of Trans narratives across space, time and culture. Their revisiting of historical figures through a lens of transness is not without problems but was the precursor of a current wave of queering history (Hubbard, 2017; McCollum, 2017) and rethinking sexuality and gender identity in the best Foucauldian fashion. In the context of this research, these discussions underpin the analysis of how Trans individuals in Bolivia make sense of their gender identity in ways that go beyond the binary, medicalised and Westernised views of gender variance, drawing on their personal experience and specific sociocultural concepts and ideas [Q1, Q3].

In contrast, within the UK context, activist movements such as Press for Change invested efforts in anti-sexism, anti-racism and in support of the right of Trans people to receive medical treatment when/if required (Stryker, 2006). Their work played a determinant role in the passing of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, which heavily relies on medical discourses around gender dysphoria (APA, 2013) to categorise and *validate* Trans experience, guaranteeing legal recognition (UK Parliament, 2004). A series of recent publications and activist work have challenged this approach, proposing a psychosocial frame (Johnson, 2015) to drive the discussion away from policy-oriented medicalized discourse into queer and feminist politics and their relation with space (Browne, 2006). Within this current, Roen (2006) has also critiqued the medicalization of Trans lives and highlighted cultural identity rather than gender identity, challenging the supposed inclusivity of trans/queer concepts and their all-size-fits-all cross-cultural validity.

Closer to the Bolivian context, the Ibero-American debate on gender variance and Trans lives has been stirred by contributions from Trans scholars including Platero (2012) and Missé (2013), and other queer theorists (Soley-Bertrán & Coll-Planas, 2011; Solá and Urko, 2013) working across the LAC region (Falconi Trávez et al., 2016; Serena, 2014). The growing trend in radical feminist activism has also produced some notable collaborations between Bolivian activists and Western theorists (Galindo & Preciado, 2017). Galindo is well known for her controversial work and activism within the Mujeres Creando movement, contending with her actions normative and technocratic approaches to sexuality and female autonomy (Galindo, 2006, 2013 & 2017b; Mujeres Creando, 2005 & 2010; Monasterios, 2006).

In disciplinary terms, medicine and psychiatry aside (WHO, 2016; APA, 2013), Trans studies sit at the intersection between feminist and queer studies (Stryker, 2006), but both have somehow failed to accept Trans anti-heteronormative power, due to the lack of coherence between sex

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<sup>3</sup> Epistemology of the closet



and gender in the crossings of sexuality. Other academics have also been critical of the ethnocentric approaches adopted by queer and feminist studies and their tendency to globalize Trans discourses without regard for cultural specificities (Roen, 2006; Besnier, 1994; Towle and Morgan, 2006). This chapter aims at exploring concepts that will resound in a post-colonial Bolivian context, where different discourses may collide and help understand Trans identities in their quotidian lives.

### ***Theoretical positions***

Outside the medical profession, Trans lives have historically been explored by sociologists and anthropologists (Namaste, 1996) and in recent decades through the development of Queer studies. Since the inception of queer studies as a discipline, queer theorists have been accused of perpetuating ethnocentric discourses that ignored the experiences of people outside the white spectrum (Goldman, 1996; Anzaldúa, 1987) and erased Trans identity (Namaste, 1996 and 2006). These positions in reference to Trans people have been critiqued widely for a lack of understanding (Johnson, 2015) of issues around gender and the pathologizing of non-normative identities. Namaste (1996) frames the issue of erasure as a matter of methodological incompetence, where academics fail to reflect on their position and address their role in perpetuating certain discourses and representations of social actors. In turn, this lack of critical reflection and positionality becomes an issue of also an issue of epistemology and validity (Boyd and Roque Ramirez, 2012). Adopting a queer position towards any single research topic should incorporate an analysis of all forms of identity that fall out of the normative (Anzaldúa, 2009; Dadusc, 2017), despite the tensions and contradictions, queer research should go beyond sexuality to include, gender, race, class, ability, etc (Goldman, 1996; Namaste, 1996).

Roen (2006) is critical of queer theory's ethnocentrism and lack of focus on the lived experience of Trans people, and how this has led to a wave of Trans theorists trying to rework these shortcomings in gender theory; but ethnocentric approaches remain a problem with the omission of racial 'minorities' being left out. Intersectionality emerges as a relevant concept to analyse the omissions and complex matrix of privileges embodied by the Trans subject. When intersectionality was initially coined by Crenshaw (1989), a similar theoretical reshaping was taking place, since feminist politics were being framed in a (white) hierarchical hegemonic way that ignored subjects whose race, class and other identity-based and social traits rendered them invisible for the mainstream liberal feminist discourses (Platero, 2012). A similar rethinking is proposed by Roen and her scepticism of how mainstream Trans and queer claims to inclusivity ignore or are unaware of the perpetuation of white trans/queer perspectives (Roen, 2006) on those living beyond Eurocentric or Western boundaries.

### ***Conceptual framework***

The following concepts have been identified within the Trans studies literature as key to understanding the narratives comprised within the current research. Roen's writings (2006) on Trans embodiment in post-colonial settings, Besnier (1994) anthropological work on gender liminality<sup>4</sup>, Cromwell's research (1999, 2006) around space and embodiment will set the foundations to understanding the post-colonial space occupied by Trans Bolivians. A space that bears the potential for making sense of Trans existence through a prism of discourses and knowledges, some native, some Western, others collating different understandings and influences, essentially creating what Rivera Cusicanqui described as *ch'ixi* zones (Rivera

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<sup>4</sup> Besnier rejects the decontextualization and whitewashing implied by the use of labels including transvestite, transsexual, etc; proposing instead a term that captures "attributes of intermediate-gender status" in the Polynesian context (Besnier, 1994).

Cusicanqui, 2015). Ch'ixi zones denote the grey spaces where disputed powers and identities are concomitant and co-exist but also clash, juxtapose and disrupt one's own identity, in terms of race, sexuality, gender, class, and essentially belonging to any and all potentially opposing mental and social spaces. Within the Andean region, some indigenous pre-Hispanic knowledge regarding gender variance survived the damning legacy of the colony and has made it to current times in narrative (Suárez Saavedra, 2017) and artistic forms (see Moche culture's ceramic legacy depicting hermaphrodite figures).

### ***Gender variance in non-Western contexts***

The research approach to gender variance will be informed by Besnier's work, which favours an analysis of Trans experience focused on cultural rather than gender understandings (Besnier, 1994).

Despite Feinberg's historiographic investment (1992) and extensive reinterpretation of key historic characters as transgender individuals, some scholars remain sceptic and critical of not only revisiting people's identities in retrospect, but also imposing a Western lens and label on their realities. Towle and Morgan (2006) are critical of applying the Trans label to nonnormative practices outside Western and Eurocentric contexts, warning that such interpretations are complicit in perpetuating categories and ways of thinking that (Valentine, 2007) upkeep the very oppressive systems that ought to be deconstructed.

This appropriation of non-Western nonnormative gender concepts by anthropologists and activists perpetuate the use of transgender as an essentialist and universalist label of gender difference. Besnier (1994) had already pointed out that part of the obsession with third gender stems not necessarily from the interest in those other knowledges, but rather to disparage Western gender binaries, since Western post-industrial societies are regarded as less tolerant and more inhibited than their counterparts in less developed contexts. This concept allows for reflection and analysis of contradictory impulses and tensions. They fairly point out the risks of infantilizing through myths "the danger of portraying the transgender native in this way is that it can perpetuate stereotypes about non-Western societies, with their "shamanic rituals" and panoply of gods." (Towle and Morgan, 2006, p. 672). Besnier (1994) is critical of using categories that make sweeping generalisations, claiming people have the same common struggles and removing the specificities of each context, which is why the umbrella used in his work is 'gender liminal'. Besnier's view contends views upheld by activists like Feinberg, who imply in their historiographic accounts that Trans people across the globe and other *gender liminal* individuals are essentially the same in shamanic and mystical terms (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2013). This discussion leads to the issue of representation, misrepresentation, lack of representation or complete distortion of Trans experience, which makes people feel other categories are interchangeable and have experienced different (and more desirable) levels of sociocultural evolution.

### ***Colonised bodies, colonized knowledges: the paradox of decolonizing (as recolonizing efforts)***

Towle and Morgan (2006) are equally critical of other appropriation of identities such as hijras, criticizing some people who have framed them as healers, or used them for these purposes (travelling to their communities to find meaning – or the meaning denied to them by the transphobic Western society), with the underlying assumption that identities are and will stay stable when transferred from one cultural context to another. This is something usually Feinberg is accused of doing in some of their work, presenting personal accounts of history that is somehow romanticized and reads as transgender practices which probably were not (issues of

queering history, whose lens and hegemonic views are we imposing, and do we have the moral standing to do this). Despite this criticism, Feinberg did reflect and was weary about imposing their white privilege and views on other oppressed people's cultures, to appropriate them in a way that benefited them personally. But nevertheless, they rereads other cultures and historic times to support their claim that transphobia is not part of human nature. Furthermore, their ambivalent claims show the tension between not imposing categories whilst looking for some missing essence of understanding and respect for their identity (which is found elsewhere outside contemporary Western culture). Decolonising gendered bodies has also become the focus of power analysis within Bolivia (García-Pacheco and Lazarte, 2012)

On the other side, in Bolivia some people have embraced and reinterpreted pre-Hispanic knowledge about gender and sexuality, including polyvalent terms that refer to homosexual desire in equal terms to transvestism (Navia Canaza, 2013). Navia Canaza (2013), Álvarez Mollinedo (2013), and Rivera Cusicanqui (2013) blame Judeo-Christian evangelization for the imposition of gender binaries that repressed all other ways of living during Incan rule during the Tawantisuyo (Suárez Saavedra, 2017). These accounts contend Towle and Morgan's (2006) nearly romanticized view, since they recover indigenous knowledge of sanctity and nearly-ritual gender variance and homosexuality, but blended with current understandings of rejected binaries and colonizing ways of thinking. Anzaldúa pointed this out in her writings, feeling the lacerating tension between seeking one own's identity and accepting the coloniser's world and how this creates a romanticized version of reality, whereby native pre-colonised societies were all accepting, all respecting and solidarity reigned, and all evil was introduced through the colony (Anzaldúa, 1987). Navia Canaza blames Spanish colonisers for creating an image of Trans and gay people that depicts them as "demon-like immoral sinners, undeserving human respect or rights" (p. 16). At the same time, a contradiction takes places within this decolonizing thought, as Navia Canaza admits when describing gender and sexuality in the Mochica (known as the homosexual culture, predecessors to the Incas), that despite having respected openly Trans women like herself "there was no technology that allowed these women to modify their anatomy" [p. 15], implying that her own understanding of Trans embodiment requires an alteration that goes beyond the social, ritualist, behavioural etc, resorting to surgical interventions to adapt their physique.

### ***Other considerations***

In order to understand current Trans experience and lives in Bolivia does not only beckon for an analysis of Transgender scholarship, but also a questioning of gender itself and how the current understandings of gender in Bolivia are influenced and shaped by the colonial legacy, a legacy which is currently being challenged and rejected on many fronts through a political agenda of decolonisation with discourses that have permeated the everyday life of Bolivians, including Trans individuals.

On the topic of colonised knowledges and the ethnocentrism of binary heterosexual divisions and interpretations, the work of other scholars who have written extensively (Lugones, 2014; Oyewùmi, 1997; Horswell, 2003; Segato, 2014) will be explored in the following theory section, where Trans experience meets the decolonial socio-political context and thought.

Before exploring decolonial thought and drawing differences and definitions with postcolonial scholarship, it is relevant to draw on some queer studies work as bridge between this current subsection and the next, notwithstanding the risks of epistemological blindness and ethnocentrism. One good anecdotal example of the latter is the part journalistic part

anthropological work by Marc Serena (*¡Esto no es Africano! [This is not African!]*, 2014) who collected stories of gender and sexually diverse people in several African nations. In his book Serena probes a Trans Zambian who responds saying that being Trans is not an illness, but can easily become a psychological problem because of the environment and the lack of references in his native country. While similar accounts in the book echo and parallel issues faced by other Trans and LGB people elsewhere, the interpretations made by Serena and his constant comparisons and parallelisms to other contexts (outside Africa) may rightly hint at an obvious interference between local epistemologies (rejecting Trans people, possibly a colonial legacy) and the co-opting by Northern discourses around gender variance, but also show Serena's lack of knowledge about other gender variant expressions in Zambia and also his ignorance of the existence of Trans work and collectives in the countries he explores, problematically perpetuating the sense of otherness and lack of belonging of Trans people in developing and postcolonial countries.

Contrary to the work of Serena, there are other more critical works in the realm of Spanish queer scholarship (which has also influenced sexual and gender diverse groups and individuals, including some Trans people in Bolivia, namely the work of Preciado – see CMM or Esperanza Gracia among other participants in this research) which have reflected on the issues and risks of doing ethnocentric queer scholarship disregarding the local knowledges and sociohistorical tensions in different contexts and questioning the conformation of sexually and gender diverse identities. The very existence of a Trans identity depends on paying particular attention on one specific element in an individual's life (in this case their 'cross-gendering practises') and creating a whole new identity based on this aspect (Fuss, 1989), a resonance of Foucault's work on the birth of the homosexual (1984). Sáez (2005) reflected on the creation of gender/sexual identities and the pharisaism of Western nations using an apparent current respect and tolerance towards sexual and gender 'minorities' that are not equally upheld by poorer or developing countries. Suggesting a postcolonial reflection around intersex people, Sáez reflects on the moral superiority of some Western countries that dare criticise the barbaric and backward practises of FGM (female genital mutilation) and other bodily mutilations in some 'third-world' countries, while conveniently omitting the forced surgical procedures forced upon intersex individuals (Chase, 2006) disguised under legitimate medical practises of 'sex reassignment', which abides by a binary understanding of gender understood only under two possibilities: man or woman. Therefore, this hegemonic mutilation is valid and accepted, as it is sanctioned by one of the bulwarks of Western modernity, the medical profession, which becomes the institution in charge of reaffirming the binarism of gender identities, invisibilising the intersex experience (Preciado, 2002) through a "hidden mechanism of imposition of normality upon unbowed flesh" (Sáez, 2005, p. 71). In regards to this thesis, this discussion relates to Q3 and how some of these impositions further deepen the issues affecting the lives of Trans individuals (Q1). On the issue of perceived progressive and tolerant attitudes toward gender and sexual minorities in postcolonial contexts (mostly developing nations) compared to the West, Lee (2020, 2021) highlighted how the framework for measuring acceptance and advances of gender and sexual minorities mostly focused on LGB legislation, leaving Trans and gender variant people outside the equation; and how these advances were often met with mistrust and an opposition to LGTB cultural imperialism perceived to erase local tradition (Lee & Carretero-Resino, 2021). This perceived postcolonial state-sponsored phobia and Western ethnocentric complacency (such as the example of the mutilation of intersex individuals) often omits the very role of Western actors in propagating stigmatising and LGTB phobic ideas (Lee, 2020) in previous legislation and colonial rule.

Drawing parallelisms between LGBT movements in Anglocentric contexts and other places, Sáez reflects upon the crisis of the gay movement in the West, that saw Stonewall as a benchmark (starred by Trans women of colour) that went beyond a timid request of respect towards difference, which after decades became absorbed by capitalism as it saw the value of a market niche lost with gay populations (mostly white gay men) who gradually were granted 'survival quotas based on state funding' which strategically shaped and adapted the discourse of LGBT collectives (led by gay men) inside a strategy of 'integration into normality which included the access to heterocentric and capitalist privileges' (Sáez, 2005, p. 72), which at the same time contributed to the formation of the 'gay identity' (understood as the white, middle-class, homosexual) exported to other contexts. In contexts such as the Bolivian, this conflation of gender and sexual diversity under the leadership of gay men triggered the same schism seen in the west (Aruquipa, 2012), with the added funding of international development agencies that promoted specific hegemonic discourses and practises, rightly defined by Monasterios (2007) as gender technocracy and gender technocrats in Bolivia. These discourses produced the emergence of conservative discourses of 'good gays' that adhere to the patriarchal binary and images of masculinity (which sanction marginal practices such as cross-dressing, public sex, or campness) leaving the most marginal individuals aside. The main aspiration of this group was reduced to a monolithic identity of white, wealthy gayness that only seeks entry to the institutionalised heterosexual paradise of marriage. At the same time, this hegemonic and reductive view of LGBT collectives led to the demonisation and ostracism of minority subcultures (the minority within the minority that Anzaldúa spoke about in 1987), that propagated a cultural imperialism that excluded the 'bad homosexual' which eventually sacrificed the sense of difference in favour of the homogenisation of the dominant gay culture. This not only led to the schism of lesbian and Trans individuals but also saw the emergence of queer people who chose a different self-identification to mark the difference and distance with the normalised and normative gay. Butler (1990, 2004) and Sedgwick (1990) were among some of the scholars who also questioned the identity politics of 'women' and 'gays'.

Queer theorists attention goes back to Foucault's influence through his work on power as a matrix of relationships where sex is the by-product of complex technologies and knowledges that can be extracted/obtained through triggering discourses (medicine, psychoanalysis, confession), instead of a repressed reality, which is why Foucault himself was against the perceived essentialism of the gay liberation movement. So the 'productive process implies the consolidation of specific subjects' (faggots, hysterics, etc) (Sáez, 2005). Here we have a turn between practice and identity, up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century sodomy referred to forbidden acts, and the offender was merely a 'judicial subject', but after this turn he became a homosexual, 'pervasive in the full extent of the individuals life constituting its insidious principle and forever active' "nothing that the individual is escapes his sexuality" (Sáez, 2005, p. 74). The homosexual identity appears because the sodomy practices are transformed into an 'interior androgyny, a sort of hermaphroditism of the soul.' Foucault was critical of how unintentionally gay liberation movements have embraced the sexuality device, as they wanted to answer the 'requirement of generating truth about their bodies and practices.' That is why in queer theory it is important not to question the individual and the validity of their accounts looking at whether they are gay/lesbian, because when we fall into ad hominem fallacies we give all the information chewed and produce truths for others to reappropriate discourses/practices. Biopolitics is also of great use for queer stuff because of its 'relation with racism and the exclusion processes' as it transforms the individual into a population (fundamental for biopolitics). Now the quest of power was not anymore to kill or let live, but the contrary, creating demographics, public

hygiene, social security, treating people through ‘a regulation, a scientific control aimed at making people live’ (Sáez, p. 75). An example for this is the disciplining and regulating role of medicine. But Foucault himself was suspicious of identity politics because of their tendency towards ghettoising. “AIDS is one of those phenomena where biopower strategies are deployed with greater visibility” (Sáez p. 75). The positive summary of Foucauldian theory for queer studies is that power can be something more than negative/limiting/erasing as it has the capacity of producing (possibilities of action, choice and resistance, since in the power relation matrix there are always vanishing points and fissures. Therefore there is no outside, that’s why queerness does not adopt liberating discourses, but resisting ones. In the context of this thesis, some of these concepts and critiques allow for a more holistic understanding of the possible contradictions embodied in some participants who embrace medicalised, Western and academicist ideas and terminology (namely the more educated ones, and those in contact with INGOs) around their gender variance, whilst also making claims about decolonising and rejecting global/Western ideas surrounding LGBT identities.

### 2.1.2 Links between postcolonial and decolonial theory

This second theoretical section includes literature from decolonial studies and a brief introduction from postcolonial studies to help explore the current understanding of transness in Bolivia. This analysis will focus on how colonialism has shaped transness and gender variance in Bolivia through an exploration of how racialised and gendered identities emerged and have been understood, situating decolonisation within postcolonial studies.

***“No single group holds a total perspective on domination”***

(Romero Bachiller, 2005, p. 158)

This chapter aims at providing a snapshot of relevant postcolonial and decolonial theoretical work with an aim to provide the reader some terminological currency and will also situate decolonisation in relation to postcolonial scholarship. It is not an exhaustive review but rather one that engages with key ideas as they relate to the gendered and racialised stories of the Trans participants involved in the research. Both postcolonial and decolonising research practices and proposals by indigenous people have challenged the labels cast upon them as powerless individuals sitting at the margins rather than as producers of knowledge (Dadusc, 2017). For the sake of clarity, the researcher acknowledges some rather simplistic divisions in terms of what is meant by postcolonial, decolonial and anticolonial debates and theory: ‘postcolonial’ applies mostly to contexts where both independence, emancipation and a decolonial agenda have been undertaken, and also in Anglocentric academic contexts mostly refers to the former Asian and some African territories and their relation to former imperialist powers (see Spivak, 2010 & 2003; Said, 1979; Bhabha, 1994); ‘decolonial’ studies and thinking can also apply to contexts where independence has been attained but the inherited colonial structures of the state are mostly intact (this is what may be referred to by some scholars below as ‘internal coloniality’ [Reinaga, 1970; González Casanova, 2003; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010b]), it is worth noting that this is the term used as common lingo in academic Latin American circles (Bhambra, 2014), even if the differences between postcolonial and decolonial thought are at times rather blurred and overlap; finally ‘anticolonial’ possibly underpins both postcolonial and decolonial studies, but in practical terms is applied in contexts where there is still a struggle for independence and emancipation from a former/current empire or colonial centre (see some African and Caribbean nations, not exclusively), where this is a complex and possibly never

ending process (Morana, 2008; Mariátegui, 1924). Another view on decolonisation as praxis is that it goes beyond a fight against global capitalism, where the visible axis of “world/system capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial” relations is the nemesis being challenged (Andrade and Grosfoguel, 2013). This definition highlights and renders visible the different logics of domination that underscore colonialism and colonality and that the decolonising endeavour attempts to fight. For the sake of linguistic clarity the researcher will be talking about decolonial thought to refer to some of the Latin American discussions in this section, even if in Western academic circles they may be considered as postcolonial concepts (see Quijano or Mignolo). Most of these concepts are mostly referred to from a theoretical point of view, while they also have a rather practical side that lives through social movements and tensions, namely the decolonising currents in many Latin American countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, etc.)

This theoretical analysis is by no means an attempt to dissect the (Trans)gendered racialized body or question its validity or existence, but rather a departure point to understand how academicist and development approaches have depicted and framed Trans people; creating the platform to read through local and individual knowledges as they are explored through the data collected.

### ***Racial issues in the colonial context***

Fanon’s seminal work (1986) will be used as departure point to reflect on the issue of race in colonial settings, drawing on different perspectives and approaches (Bhabha, 2000; Rustin, 2000; Serena, 2014) and making them explicitly relevant to the Bolivian context (Stephenson, 1999; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). This departure point positions the (Trans) racialised individual at the centre in order to explore some of the racial/ethnic issues present in their stories, and how these have been framed and may be of use when making links to intersectional scholars (Mohanty, 1984; 2008).

In the epilogue to *Black Skins, White Masks*, Bhabha (1986) claimed that the state of emergency in which people live in the colonial context is not the exception but the rule. This was in relation to the colonial neurosis that informed the everyday life of racial tensions between and within both dominant and dominated people, representing culturally and psychically the non-white colonized as dehumanized and dislocated repository of desires, myths and flaws, making it virtually impossible to locate them (since they seem to occupy two places at once – what they are, and what they are not). This space of dislocation is also inhabited by Trans people and those straddling across the margins of already oppressed groups (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Talking about racial tensions beckons for a definition of this contested term which some argue is little more than an empty and arbitrary category (Rustin, 2000) or fiction based on biological terms (Lugones, 2007; Quijano, 2000). Rustin goes on to claim that racial differences depend mostly on the negative definition given to them. These rarely highlight significant human capacities (beyond pigmentation), so they are explained through myths. Fanon (2000) argued that racist meanings are ingrained in individuals’ psyche to know how to ‘read’ others, but these meanings and significations are not genetically inherited, as this would imply essentialising racism. Nevertheless, racial labels are filled with symbolic and social power (see the taxation system of indigenous peoples in previous chapters) that facilitate control, division and subjugation of individual bodies.

Despite’s Fanon psychoanalytic approach to understanding this, he valuably framed how the issue of splitting and rejecting indigeneity (or negritude) in the colonial context is one of

alienation. He claimed that the mechanisms of whitewashing convey a deep phobia crystallized through fear and revulsion of the racialized Other (Fanon, 2000) who is also endowed with projections of the negative, repressed or inaccessible aspects of the individual (Rustin, 2000) who is a racist or has incorporated the system of 'internal colonialism' (or 'internal coloniality' as coined by Quijano). These belief systems become part of the collective unconscious of the colonial site, since this is cultural it means it is acquired, and the result of non-reflected impositions of culture (Fanon, 1986) which facilitate the absorption of European archetypes. The latter echoes the concept of aesthetic coloniality in the work of Valencia (2014) which will be explained in the next section on the decolonial turn.

Although both Fanon and Rustin reject the idea that racism is merely an ideological device or system of lies, some of its more evident propagandistic tools require some attention for their impact on the collective unconscious and individual psyche. In the Bolivian context, most of the obsession with indigeneity has been framed in terms of hygiene and the erasure of indigenous *blemish* physically, psychologically (including the organization of the family home, the village, the female body and social hierarchies) (Stephenson, 1999) and collectively through the dispersion of Ayllu's and expropriation of communally owned lands. This erasure and vilification of anything indigenous and non-white is reproduced equally by those inhabiting the colonial site and leads to what Fanon described as crystallization of a way of thinking and behaving that was essentially white (1986). Nevertheless, the notion of being 'essentially white' is problematic since it implies that there is an essence of indigeneity, blackness, sexuality, transness and so on.

Fanon's description of the Antillean negro conducting himself intellectually as a white person due to the lack of black voices (Fanon, 2000) or lack of references (Serena, 2014) is framed in psychoanalytic terms as something that happens unconsciously. In the present thesis, this reverberates with the idea of systems of references positioned outside (Western influences on LGBT lives) and within (the active seeking of pre-Hispanic and decolonising gender variant references), as well as with the concept of internal colonialism (Reinaga, 1970; González Casanova, 2003; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010b]), this being relevant as well to Q3<sup>5</sup>. The way this sort of performance of whiteness is framed leaves very little space for individual agency and experience of navigating the (oppressive and complex) matrix of the everyday. It could be argued that in cases where hegemonic cultures and identities are incorporated, individuals who become consciously aware of specific violences or rejections, conform to such dominant behaviours as a way of 'passing'. Albó (2008) concluded that in the Bolivian context it is perfectly possible to identify both as mestizo and indigenous, depending on the socio-cultural context one is navigating. Whilst it may be easier for indigenous people to *pass*, the issue of lack of representation and references is similar for both black and indigenous populations, so the worldview incorporated tends to be white<sup>6</sup>. Passing therefore, is salient not only in the context of Trans individuals navigating and observing gender cues, but also applies in any other context where acceptance (or safety) of an individual is based on or depends on the extent to which they can immerse themselves in specific groups (and this may depend on accent, sartorial choices, common lingo, repetition of rituals or behaviours, an apparent shared understanding or experience, etc.). Passing thus implies conforming to the dominant or hegemonic identities<sup>7</sup> and

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<sup>5</sup> 'To understand the relationship between non-normative gender and race in the context of decolonisation'

<sup>6</sup> In previous chapters, it has been explored how the advent of the indigenous movement in Bolivia have changed the socio-political landscape by adopting a cosmivision informed by indigenous history and culture.

<sup>7</sup> As Rustin (2000) points out, it would be simplistic to ignore the interaction of different oppressions or fail to acknowledge the profits of imperialist domination for those who sit at the pinnacle of its privilege. Excluding the



results in a split between identity and space, and the desire to reinterpret the relation one has with their inner and outer world, *negotiating* how the personal and the social are navigated in different temporalities and situations. To an extent, we all pass at one time or another, but this issue of passing does not render everyone on the same level of risk or insecurity based on our identity-based ascriptions and physical presentation, as more often than not passing will grant individuals the privilege and safety of accessing some contexts and spaces, while not being able to pass may have serious consequences.

Negotiating a racialized Trans identity within a colonial space where Western culture and ideology is all-pervasive will obviously create the splitting ruptures mentioned by Rustin but also recognized by academics like Anzaldúa (2009), Mohanty (1984) or Rivera Cusicanqui, (2010). The latter acknowledges the interstices running through her body in terms of gender, indigeneity, class and Western education, but instead of offering a naïve solution of harmonious *mestizaje* and identity-based coexistence, she reclaims the constant tension between clashing identities and beckons for a reflection in indigenous terms (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010), in line with other decolonial feminists explored under the decolonial turn.

### ***Gendered bodies as sites of cisheteronormative coloniality***

The splitting of the colonial individual is described through being positioned in the space between a range of contradictory places that coexist, where the individual's identity (as the Other) finds itself at the point where stereotypes are simultaneously evoked and erased (Bhabha, 1986). Previously, it was argued that the Bolivian Trans individual had mostly been approached in medical and epidemiological terms, through international development research agendas which reiterate the Trans body as the (ill or criminal) site to be controlled, policed or empowered for the sake of the common good.

The issue of INGOs and their influence in Bolivia leads to the question of empowerment and being empowered. What this means in practice requires some reflection as it has nearly become a buzzword used indiscriminately beyond the development jargon. Hennink et al. (2012) explore definitions of empowerment within international development and what it entails, as this fits in a more relevant manner to the research context. Empowerment programmes can lead to anything from poverty reduction to improved health outcomes generally building on individual and community resources, capabilities and opportunities (Hennink et al., 2012), and this is often the approach supported by global bodies such as the WHO or the World Bank. To be empowered means one was disempowered in an unfair and/or unequal power relation with oppressive socio-political power structures (where an identity-based aspect is related to this inequality), and the aspect of agency is salient in this context as a way to challenge and shift the situation (Sen, 1999). How the collectives and NGOs internationally funded align these perceived inequalities through local organisation structures and values to beckon individuals and vest them with an agency to rise and become empowered is key. The relationship appears unidirectional (NGOs co-opting individuals and their quest for equality, be it indigenous rights, gender/sexual diversity issues, women's inclusion, etc), but the very agency of individuals to join these collectives is usually described in paternalistic and unempowering ways that portray them as recipients of more sophisticated and technocratic charity. This influence is the result of the Western focus on educating the *undeveloped*, which in turn becomes a source of profit (Valencia, 2014).

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Other based on their race, gender, etc. brings among other things the benefit of restricting competition, reinforcing the idea of supremacy

If Bhabha (1986) claimed the non-white colonial individual to be an 'incalculable object' due to its dislocated nature of inhabiting two places at once, and because colonial desire is always articulated in relation to the place of the Other, a similar logic can be applied to Trans identity and its place in the heteronormative society. Parallel to Fanon's analysis on the fallibility of dominant identities in the (indigenous) colonial individual, Butler (2004) talks about the inapproximability of the gender ideals produced by heterosexual and cisgender norms. These norms operate through producing and policing hyperbolic ideals of masculinity and femininity embodied by the binary 'man/woman' which cannot be chosen but rather have to be negotiated. As with definitions of racial differences, finding a definition for gender will produce contested views that serve no great purpose, but which nevertheless point in a certain direction. The way of experiencing masculinity and femininity are culturally and context dependent (Haraway, 1991), but in most cases they are more easily grasped through their absent traits than their visible factors: defining what they are *not*, rather than what they are. Butler (2004) concedes that there is not a single femininity with which to identify, suggesting the concept itself offers a plethora of identificatory sites, the same would apply with masculinity. In Bolivia, these gender ideals have been influenced by the Spanish conquest and Western ideas, incorporating a gendered racialized image of the white heterosexual woman as mother of the modern nation (Stephenson, 1999) and the white heterosexual educated man as model of masculinity. In this regard, as Toranzo (2008) pointed out, there are no monolithic or fixed identities, but the unattainable racial and gender model to follow is shared collectively. Bringing issues of racial difference and hegemonies into the discussion is relevant due to the power that both categories have in controlling, policing and subjugating bodies based on some physical or biological traits. Butler (2004) rejected essentialist definitions of sexual desire as dictated by the position occupied in sex, and beckoned for a wider analysis of power relations that interrogated how gender and (homo)sexuality are produced racially and geopolitically in specific regimes and spaces. Such an analysis is key to understand how the Trans body is read and framed within Bolivia, not solely in gender but racial terms.

In line with Fanon's description of the phobia that pervades the colonized and white minds against the racialized Other, a similar terror/desire can be interpreted in terms of gender, namely in the abhorrence of the non-normative gender or Trans bodies. Butler argues that the obsession with re-signifying (and rejecting) meaning comes from a terror of losing one's *proper* gender (2004), which leads to a complex cisheterosexist apparatus to regulate and shame *abnormal* gender. In the same way that Fanon (1986) spoke about the impossibility of attaining the ideal of white totality (the dominant identity model), Butler sustains that one can never fully inhabit the ideal gender "s/he is compelled to approximate" (2004). The space for Trans people then becomes dislocated as well, between the tensions to follow gender binary ideals that are unattainable, or to omit them and embrace a self-assertive identification that might equally be alienating. Fanon spoke of a similar issue faced by black and indigenous peoples, whereby they are forced to constantly combat their own image and becoming alienated from their own body, by adopting a forced identity (from the dominant group) or by having to adopt a self-assertive behaviour (instilled by condescending liberalism) (Fanon, 2000). There is a similar quandary faced by Trans Bolivians who may too be identifying under indigenous/mestizo categories: the issue of authenticity vs. inauthenticity. Possibly a way of overcoming or thinking about this would be to reject Manichean and binary terms. Nevertheless, the subversion and dislocation of gender norms supposedly embodied by Trans identities seems to be a greater concern for radical feminists than Trans people themselves. Whether Trans bodies in Bolivia become

colonized by cisheterosexual ideals or behaviours is the result of a complex matrix of lived experiences, learned and internalized patterns of dominant and normative behaviour, and the result of interrelating to one's surroundings in physical and psychic terms. This complex matrix is better understood with the contributions by decolonial proponents in the following section.

### ***The decolonial turn in Latin America***

Oftentimes when introducing the basic tenets and concepts of decolonial thought in the Latin American context both Aníbal Quijano and subsequently Walter D. Mignolo are credited with being central figures of this critical current and decolonial turn, both of whom focused on analysing Western modernity as the product of the conquest and colonisation process of America and the socio-political aftermath faced by its people (their emancipatory struggles) across the subcontinent (Quijano, 2000 & 2007; Mignolo, 2005 & 2007). Despite their apparent contributions, Quijano has been accused of producing a body of work that omitted (ignored) feminist analysis at best and perpetuated patriarchal framings at worst (Lugones, 2008). Other decolonial proponents such as Rivera Cusicanqui have also criticised Quijano and Mignolo for appropriating some of her work and ideas from the Taller de Historia Oral Andina (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010) and for perpetuating epistemological hegemonies (Andrade and Grosfoguel, 2013) rather than being 'epistemically disobedient' as purported<sup>8</sup> (Mignolo, 2011). Furthermore, as Méndez & Figueroa point out, '*there is a politics to who one cites*' (2019, p. 13) and for the sake of [practical and ethical] coherence it seems relevant to quote and circulate the knowledge of individuals genuinely committed to decolonial praxis (Méndez & Figueroa, 2019) regardless of their writings. Romero Bachiller (2005) also insists on acknowledging the sources of thought currents and theories as it serves to restore the historic imbalances and extractivism committed in academic circles that tend to omit or co-opt discourses from marginal and oppressed contexts<sup>9</sup> without due recognition. Far from being the ultimate deconstructed and coherent position, decolonial thought and praxis does not come without complexities and contradictions, some stemming from the actions of some proponents and others from the nature of the difficult discussions themselves.

Drawing on Bhabha's analysis on the different trajectories of postcolonial and decolonial thought (2014), the latter emerged from looking at how the *coloniality of power*, which was expressed through economic and political spheres was closely linked to the idea of *coloniality of knowledge* (as coined by Quijano) which introduced the concept of modernity/rationality (Lander, 1993) and also the *coloniality of being* (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Maldonado-Torres reflects about how scientific racism and (racist) discourses around Eurocentric modernity and universalism would not have been possible without the coloniality of knowledge giving supremacy to white/lighter-skin individuals' knowledge and social practices (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and the coloniality of being negating the very existence of the *other* (Martínez-Mejía, 2021). The issue of epistemology and erased knowledges (or *epistemicide* as De Sousa Santos pointed out, 2017) is therefore raised, being relevant to how the participants of the research know themselves and understand their identities within a matrix of gendered and racialised knowledges, experiences and violences. Valencia (2014) provided another valuable contribution that sits somewhere between the coloniality of being and the coloniality of knowledge, i.e.. *aesthetic coloniality*, which in simple terms upholds the idea that all canons of beauty<sup>10</sup> are filtered through Eurocentric, white patriarchal standards that people aspire to, and nations and communities are assessed against. This may be also happening to some LGB and Trans people

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<sup>8</sup> Mignolo was publicly accused by a doctoral student of sexual harassment (Lemus, 2018), and this public complaint ended up embroiling Rivera Cusicanqui for disclosing without permission some of the details of the sexual harassment in her quest to challenge and critique Mignolo (Martínez, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Sexual and gender minorities in the case of Romero Bachiller's research.

<sup>10</sup> Valencia's specific reference is to music.

in Bolivia, namely those who are better off and hold certain aspirations aligned with European whiteness (where passing may be the vehicle to facilitate and perpetuate aesthetic coloniality). Valencia describes coloniality through a matrix of power consisting of the axis of European/capitalist/military/Christian/patriarchal/white/heterosexual ideals – and how specific sociocultural institutions (i.e.. the media) reinforce these through their practices (Valencia, 2014), something that echoes the activities of some INGOs and community groups.

Another layer of analysis emerges with decolonial feminists critiquing Western feminism for its universalist focus on white women's issues on the one hand (Espinosa Miñoso, 2009; Curiel, 2007), and their inclusion of the gendered nature of colonialism in decolonial thought on the other. A notable contribution within decolonial feminism includes Lugones' (2008) concept of *coloniality of gender* which argued that the Iberian conquest and evangelisation of the Americas did not only introduce a racialised hierarchy of oppression and social organisation but this was also gendered, introducing a model of stratified gender binarism that turned females into subjugated women (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Méndez & Figueroa (2019) acknowledge the value of the coloniality of gender but warn against the potentially naïve idea that other non-colonial or precolonial societies may have been lacking patriarchal modes of organising (and oppressing), so although a specific frame of patriarchal binarism may have been exported and universalised through European colonisation, this does not erase the fact that other patriarchal or male-dominated arrangements may have been in place elsewhere (Anzaldúa, 1987; Paredes, 2008), while also other more egalitarian modes of social structuring/interrelatedness were possible (see Marcos, 2006; Méndez, 2003). Stoler (1989) also considered how despite their apparent racial privilege above colonised people in the dominated territories, European women in these territories held an ambiguous position that often implied more rigid and limited lives than their metropolitan counterparts. The complexity of framing gender within the academic locus (be it through the Trans and queer scholarship or the decolonial work explored herein) relevant to this study, echoes the similar complexity expressed by the participants in the testimonials that make up the data chapters of this thesis.

Nevertheless, the value of analysing these matrixes of violence and oppression provides a multilevel framework to explore the experiences of hardship endured by Trans people, and the ways that different discourses, tensions and exclusions frame their lives. As already mentioned, this is useful to better understand how issues of gender and race intersect in the bodies of Trans Bolivians. As Motta (2011) defended, queer and Trans lives are often constituted by a specific type of systemic violence, which is why experimenting with different methodologies or epistemological approaches may serve the purpose of decentralising dominant narratives (Motta, 2011b; Dadusc, 2017).

Following on this debate about complimenting different knowledges to shed light on the different aspects salient in Trans Bolivians lives brings Rustin's work (2000) reviving the debate about knowledge defined as a systematic and formal body of ideas and suggesting the development of approaches that also include and pay attention to everyday and popular beliefs, echoing the demands of queer and decolonial scholars for a change of epistemology and a shift to the centres of knowledge (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; De Sousa Santos, 2017; Martínez-Mejía, 2021). Rustin proposed that the best way to analyse cultures is to collate and include popular held beliefs of specific groups, which in a way has informed the qualitative methodology herein (Rustin, 2000). Such beliefs include religious practices, which in the context of this research emerge as the particular syncretism of Catholic, Evangelic and Indigenous imagery, practices and

rituals embraced by some of the participants and that is prevalent and obvious in most cultural and social practices in everyday life in Bolivia (Gisbert, 1994 & 1999; Rivera Cusicanqui, 1993).

On the issue of Catholicism in Latin America, Napolitano has written extensively about the role that Catholicism and evangelization have had in the identity formation and the everyday relationships of people in several Latin American territories where the majority had indigenous ascent (Napolitano, 1998, 2017). On the lines of this work, Mayblin pointed out how despite Catholic dogma portraying women as God-like in rather paternalistic and infantilizing terms, Catholic symbolism introduced specific notions of sin and moral deprivation that were mostly attributed to women and the feminine by extension (Mayblin, 2017), helping to support the idea that the politics of domination within the colonial endeavour were also gendered. In a way, the fact that some of the Trans women in this research speak of feeling heathen or corrupt may not only stem from transness itself being regarded as a sin but also from the fact that their female identity/womanhood embodies the symbolic sinner *per antonomasia*. In the case of the Trans men, this may mean embracing an archetype of masculinity that is mostly divided between the good Samaritan (kind, devoted, a fisher of men) and the disciplined, self-abandoned worker able to accomplish brutal labour in a display of heroic masculinity (Napolitano, 2017) both of which perpetuate and display specific sexist behaviours. The relationship between these Catholic archetypes is bound to labour and virtue, but as Brandes (2017) and Christian (2017) point out, these dynamics also depend on other aspects such as gender, ethnicity, cultural background, class, education and urban/rural living. Such is the case of the complex reality expressed by some of the participants in the research, notwithstanding the religious syncretism present in Bolivia.

Some of the positions within Bolivian proponents of decolonial praxis from indigenous and lesbian backgrounds (Paredes<sup>11</sup>, Galindo, Rivera Cusicanqui, Mujeres Creando, Guzmán Arroyo, etc.) have become embroiled in ruptures and discourses around their loyalty towards the MAS linked to a sense of purity in their ideas and philosophy, where those critical of the MAS have become tarnished with the label of liberal feminists (Guzmán Arroyo, 2019). These diverse and confronting positions once again disrupt the notion that individuals can be critical of local/autochthonous movements (i.e.. the MAS) without being proponents of the Eurocentric views as they somehow are accused of having internalised colonial views. This issue echoes the concept of epistemic populism framed by Grosfoguel (2008; Grosfoguel and Andrade, 2013) in this critique of Mignolo's simplification and reduction of academic endeavour (where Mignolo would claim anything coming from Europe is imperialist or colonizing, and anything coming from a person in the global south or a postcolonial context would automatically be considered as decolonial) (Mignolo, 2005), therefore committing an ad hominem assessment of the value of contents based on who speaks. On this issue of purity and freedom to dissent, Anzaldúa (1987) agreed that it is normal to become exalted when reclaiming one's (racialised) identity, especially when it is being lost in whiteness, as a way of compensating for the racist revaluation, but one cannot willingly ignore the damaging aspects within specific movements (or cultures). In this case, the critical voices with the MAS government and/or figures (be it due to some of the sexist views of some of its figures, or due to other ideological differences) or supporters such as Paredes (due to the perpetuation of intimate violence within her relationships despite advocating for antipatriarchal and antimachismo violence) are valid within their right and tarnishing them as Eurocentric or colonial simplifies the conversation and reflections. Being

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<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding Julieta Paredes' role in cofounding the Mujeres Creando collective, as well as some of her valuable contributions from her lesbian Aymaran identity towards community feminism, Paredes became embroiled in a spat with her former partner María Galindo after their separation (Argüello Pazmiño, 2012). Eventually an accusation of domestic violence against Paredes emerged from Galindo and another partner of Paredes accused her of attempted femicide (López, 2020; ANF, 2017).

indigenous, Trans, or belonging to any oppressed group may imply specific lived knowledges and experiences, but not necessarily vest individuals with unique and superior morals as this would too risk falling into epistemic populism (nobody is exempt from falling into microaggressions and discriminatory behaviours). Hence, bodies are not containers of social realities, rather through space and time, they constitute the relations of power at stake (Dadusc, 2017).

Complexity is salient throughout the thesis, be it due to the interlinked theoretical positions, the rich accounts of the participants or the personal journey of the researcher in her reflective practice. Ontologically, this complexity hints at the need to escape the purity of stable and safe identity-based positions that are marked by multiple differences (Romero Bachiller, 2005). Along these lines, a useful prism to understand this complexity is found in Rivera Cusicanqui's *ch'ixi* concept (2018).

*"[...] ch'ixi holds diverse connotations; it is a colour that results from juxtaposing (through small dots or splotches) two opposing or contrasting colours: white and black, red and green, etc. That mottled<sup>12</sup> which results from the imperceptible mix of white and black, which misleads perception without ever fully mixing. Ch'ixi [...] belongs to the Aymara idea of something that is and isn't simultaneously, which raises the logic of the third included. A ch'ixi grey is white and is not white simultaneously, it is white and also black, its opposite. The ch'ixi stone thus hides within mythical animals such as the serpent, the lizard, the spiders or the toad, ch'ixi animals that belong to ancient times [...]. Times of undifferentiation, when animals spoke to humans. The power of the undifferentiation is that it conjugates the opposites. Just as the allqamar<sup>13</sup> conjugates the white and the black in symmetric perfection, the ch'ixi conjugates the Indian world with its opposite, without ever blending. [...] The notion of 'hybridity' [...] is a genetic metaphor which implies sterility. [...] The notion of ch'ixi on the contrary [...] raises the parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences that don't fuse but are antagonistic or complementary. Each reproduces itself from the depth of the past and relates with the others in a contentious way." Rivera Cusicanqui, (2010, p. 69-70, my translation and omissions)*

This framing of a *ch'ixi* identity as the motley mix embodied by mestizos (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010) rejects notions of hybridity (García Canclini, 1997) and echoes the work of Romero Bachiller (2005) who similarly spoke about the instability and conflict of our identities, in her case making links to other non-white feminists and their intersectional contributions (Lorde, 2001; Anzaldúa, 1987; Mohanty, 1984; etc.) and bringing up the specific issue of transness. There are some obvious links between the intersectional work proposed by such scholars and the *ch'ixi* concept developed by Rivera Cusicanqui and other decolonial activists in Bolivia (see Paredes, 2008; Galindo 2006 & 2013; Guzmán, 2019; Mujeres Creando, 2010) namely since both advocate for the prevalence of partiality and multiplicity over universalism and unity (Romero Bachiller, 2005) and towards a community feminist approach against different colonial and patriarchal violences and oppressions (Paredes, 2008). This concept can also serve as a frame to understand the specific tensions and coexisting identity-based traits embodied in the Trans participants from this research. It parallels queer and intersectional understandings although there are no implied *crossed* identities and there is not always a hierarchy of privilege (or lack thereof) as a result. Also the specific nature of the *ch'ixi* concept linked to the Andean cosmovision vests the concept with cultural and social relevance.

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<sup>12</sup> The original Spanish uses the adjective '*jaspeado*' stemming from Jasper, which provides a stronger image of the metaphor which is lost in translation.

<sup>13</sup> The mountain caracara, an Andean bird found in the high plateau region of La Puna among others.

Queering and decolonising epistemologies represent a way that shifts the traditional perspectives that objectify or aim to empower (in condescending imperialist ways) the oppressed and marginalized (including Trans people) challenging certain worldviews and calling for a recognition of indigenous experience and conditions and problematising the relations of power traversing these conditions. Embodied experiences help to understand better cultural dynamics (Pink, 2009), which is why social relations need to be understood through an interaction with other people and an environment. These interactions create experiences that are lived and internalised through the body and consciousness (Ahmed, 2006b). These very interactions form the basis of the testimonials and located conversations that underpin the data of this research. The relevance of the discussions by the decolonial feminists lies in their understanding of the body as a historical political territory and not simply as a biological one (Espinosa Miñoso, 2009; Gómez Grijalva, 2014). This is not an attempt at homogenising thoughts and approaches around transness in Bolivia, but rather an exercise of situating geopolitically and historically the development/emergence of decolonial ideas around gender/race and how they have been paramount in challenging how specific 'subject positions' have been framed (Espinosa Miñoso, 2014). However, due attention must be paid, since even when the political Trans subject is being dismantled and decentred this is still done in reference to a Eurocentric north that remains reinstated and perpetuated (Curiel, 2009).

This section concludes bringing back the analysis by decolonial, indigenous and racialised feminists. Lorde (2001) highlighted the need to defining oneself avoiding narrow and limiting descriptions and inhabiting one's differences (not just a singular one), which resonates with the accounts of many participants herein. These critical analysis of differences and excluding identities (Anzaldúa, 1987 & 2009; Rivera Cusicanqui, 1993 & 2010b) help to highlight how Trans people may be constantly situated and envisaged as eternal intruders (Romero Bachiller, 2005) both in theory and praxis. The different views analysed here aimed not only at considering specific individual identity-based perspectives (Trans, indigenous, mestizo, white, Christian, masista, middle class, etc) in order to provide a story of the homogenised monolithic Trans person in Bolivia, but rather to capture the multiple differences constituting the individual and adopting as Romero Bachiller (2005) put it, the collective perspective of analysing the simultaneous oppressions and challenges without erasing specificity or the situation of the Trans participants.

## PART II: TRANS LIVES IN CONTEXT

Since the Cuban Revolution in the late 1950s there has been a *Panamericanist* (Marxist) movement advocating for the union of the Latin American nations through shared struggles, cultures and liberation processes. This idea has materialised in the last decade through the emergence of decolonising Bolivarian agendas in several countries (namely Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador). Therefore, it becomes relevant to see how Trans narratives have been echoed in the wider regional context, analysing any potential similarities to the situation faced by Trans Bolivians and also, to see how the previous theoretical chapter unfolds in this specific social, historical and political context.

This subchapter will introduce a review of existing literature on Trans lives across the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region in order to show the influences and parallelisms between the issues faced by Trans Bolivians and those in their neighbouring countries (many participants in this research travelled to Argentina to get treatment and others had experience of working with organisations across the region through their involvement with INGOs). It is divided in two main parts: the first will explore thematically the factors affecting Trans lives in the LAC region (2.2.1), analysing the specificities or commonalities across different countries in regards to the issues faced by Trans populations. The second part will focus on the situation of Trans people in Bolivia alone (2.2.2), drawing mostly on the scarce grey literature available.

Overall, the subchapter provides a snapshot of Trans issues faced in Bolivia and the neighbouring region, as well as a historic account of how the lives of Trans Bolivians have evolved in the last decades (including a brief analysis of the current legal framework). This provides the reader with an intelligible scenario that draws parallels to the historic genealogy provided in the following subchapter, which will help understand the diverse nature of political movements and their parallel development. In short, whilst ethnic tensions brewed in the Bolivian context, so did issues of gender variance and sexuality.

### 2.2.1 Trans lives in Latin America and the Caribbean

Most of the literature relevant to Trans people in LAC (namely Central America) has been produced by national organizations funded by international development agencies in the context of HIV/AIDS programmes with a focus on sex work and Trans women. In recent years, there has been an increasing academic production on the issues faced by Trans people in Mexico (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015), Argentina (Godoy, 2015) or Brazil (Camillo et al., 2015; Holanda Costa et al., 2015; Sodr  de Souza, 2017), which are also the countries that present the highest prevalence of murders<sup>14</sup> of Trans people in the region (TvT, 2016). The international development human-rights agenda has highlighted violence and exposure to HIV as the main issues affecting the population, perpetuating a pathologizing perspective on Trans lives (Godoy, 2015). Amidst a context of widespread violence against women (Redlactrans, 2012), the narrative on Trans lives has adopted a synecdoche whereby Trans women's issues have become representative of all Trans lives, rendering Trans men invisible (Aruquipa et al. 2012; Redlactrans, 2012).

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<sup>14</sup> In 2016, the highest figures of Trans murders in the world emerged from the LAC region: Brazil (123), M xico (52), Colombia (14) and Venezuela (14) (TvT, 2016).



Whilst the issue of violence will be exposed across the region, other aspects have been explored to understand how Trans people in LAC (and Bolivia, specifically) negotiate their identity through everyday spaces and the quotidian. A mixed review of academic and grey literature has been carried out in an attempt to provide a wider perspective on Trans lives in the region that goes beyond epidemiological issues. Looking at different sociocultural contexts is essential as these establish the patterns used by individuals to make themselves intelligible by society (Godoy, 2015), which is of paramount importance in the construction of identity for Trans people.

The data interpretations have been organized under the following headings: Different levels of violence, Education and employment, Public visibility and recognition, and Access to public services. It must be noted that these aspects are interrelated and often overlap, since the running thread of Trans visibility and negotiation of identity through occupying different spaces triggers different responses from the agencies and actors Trans people come across.

### ***Different levels of violence (structural and societal)***

Violence against Trans people, and particularly Trans women is perceived to be the result of several factors including social exclusion and stigma, family rejection, work and education discrimination; lack of recognition of gender identity; exposure to violence through work, and criminalization based on stereotypes and prejudices (CIDH, 2014). There are also different levels in which violence against Trans people persists in the Latin-American context: at the intimate level (violence experienced within close relationships with relatives, friends or partners), at the social level (violence experienced in the everyday relationships with members of the public in quotidian situations) and the institutional level (institutionalized violence perpetuated by public or official agencies or apparatuses of the state). These often overlap and can be perpetuated by the same agents in different contexts and situations (i.e. a policeman who arbitrarily arrests a Trans person, can also engage in other forms of physical or psychological violence outside official duties). Martínez-Guzmán (2015) defines transphobic practices as a power and domination mechanism widely recurrent in the quotidian.

In regional terms, UNAIDS statistics (2012) highlight Honduras and Guatemala as the countries in Central America with the highest death toll of Trans people. In the case of Honduras, the index of reported Trans murders was 10.77 per million compared to 4.49 in Brazil or 2.21 in Mexico (TvT, 2016)<sup>15</sup>. Whilst some of the countries in the region present the highest statistics of violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Venezuela) (RedlacTrans et al., 2012), linking the prevalence of Trans murders to widespread systemic violence would oversimplify the issue.

Law enforcement officers have been identified as chronic perpetrators of violence and human rights violations against Trans people across the region (RedlacTrans, 2014). RedlacTrans reports that police violence usually emerges in the context of sex work<sup>16</sup> or perceived illegal activity, and the abuses range from arbitrary detention, torture, extortion, sexual assault or murder.

In Panamá, police have reportedly forced themselves on transgender women as their pimps: the police who arrest them do not take them to the competent authorities but take their money in exchange for letting them go. When Trans sex workers resist this extortion, they become subject

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<sup>15</sup> Activists' organisations across the region consider the figures on Trans murders an underestimate due to the common misconceptions about Trans identities and the fact that transphobic murders are reported as 'common crimes' (RedlacTrans et al., 2012)

<sup>16</sup> It is estimated that 90% of Trans women in LAC are sex workers (RedlacTrans, 2014)

to abuse and degrading treatment (Redlactrans, 2014). Something similar happens in Curitiba, (Brazil) or places like Guatemala, where the clients of Trans women doing sex work are extorted and humiliated by police for having sex 'with other men' (RedlacTrans et al., 2012).

Medical services represent the other main state institution subjecting Trans people to violence and discrimination. They are responsible for the pathologizing and criminalization of Trans identities (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015), that emerges from the links between non-normative identities and illegal activities which are deemed immoral or socially reprobable (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015; Aruquipa et al., 2012). This pathologizing endeavour became aggravated with the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the influx of international aid funding and HIV/AIDS programmes, which highlighted Trans people as 'risk population' stigmatizing Trans women under the label MSM (Redlactrans, 2014; Aruquipa et al., 2012).

### ***Education and employment***

Across the region, access to education and employment remains one of the main hurdles determining Trans people fall into precarious and marginal lives. In Bolivia 70% of Trans people have not completed their education (Redlactrans, 2014; Ross Quiroga, 2013b). In places where a gender identity law is in place, some Trans people have returned to education, but this does not always mean Trans people will be exempt from discrimination among peers and other staff (Godoy, 2015).

Uruguay and Argentina both have promoted programmes to improve the employment prospects of Trans people, coincidentally both countries count with a gender identity law and more progressive legislations for gender and sexually diverse populations (Redlactrans, 2014). In Mexico, some employers may allow Trans people to carry on in their positions whilst they transition as long as they hide "external" sign of their sexual or gender identity out of respect (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015). When sex work is the only option, Trans people fall into the trap of criminalization and harassment by police and clients. the only country where self-employed sex work is legal is Uruguay, where sex workers can register to get social security (Redlactrans, 2014).

In Bolivia and Mexico educational spaces become privileged social stages (Aruquipa et al. 2012) where the process of adoption and affirmation of identity unfolds, and a disjunctive emerges: embracing Trans identity or the abandonment of studies (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015; Ross Quiroga, 2013b). The educational context subtly segregates through different discriminatory mechanisms making it virtually impossible to be a student and identify as Trans. The segregation between dominant gender expressions and non-conforming ones turn education into an excluding space. The Argentinian context has produced the only exception of a trans-inclusive educational centre<sup>17</sup>, Mocha Celis where they specifically support the educational needs of LGTB people and have high numbers of Trans students enrolled (Redlactrans, 2014).

Gender variance is punished formally or informally, which may explain why most Trans in LAC reach only secondary or preparatory (RedlacTrans et al.; 2012; Ross Quiroga, 2013b; Barros Torres et al., 2015). Exclusion from educational spaces early in life leads to Trans in Mexico to a difficult access to work and participation in public life (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015). This leads to double discrimination, due to lack of qualifications or formal education and because of their gender identity or expression. The issue of dropping out of education is prevalent among Trans Bolivians, Argentinians and Brazilians, whose restricted access to education and formal

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<sup>17</sup> Escuela Mocha Celis, Buenos Aires. See <https://www.facebook.com/mochacelis/>

employment leaves sex work as the only possibility (Aruquipa et al., 2012; RedlacTrans et al., 2012) to avoid poverty (Godoy, 2015). The same is reported by Trans activists in Honduras protest that if they had access to an education and formal work they would not have to be sex workers and be exposed to the violence and risks of the streets (RedlacTrans et al., 2012). The issue of double discrimination in the access to employment is prevalent across the region.

### ***Public visibility and recognition***

Continuing with the idea of structural violence, public visibility and recognition have become a problem across the region, since the only specific social programs that target the transgender population are in the field of health, specifically through national programs against HIV and STIs related to sex work (RedlacTrans, 2014). Public space and 'quotidian' social life are hostile, since they are made up of diverse factors that reproduce and perpetuate heteronormative values that regulate access and integration of Trans people (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015). The association of Trans bodies to criminal activities (sex work) implies a constant interrogation of Trans people as suspects of punishable behaviours, which in places like Mexico can also include an association with drug dealing (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015). In Mexico, Brazil or Bolivia, the conservative social sectors widely reject Trans people but tolerate their public presence working as stylists or entertainers (in nightclubs or other festive contexts) in denying them access to other formal employment (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015; Aruquipa et al., 2012; Camillo Bonassi et al., 2015). In most cases, Trans people's only choice of employment is limited to sex work (Ross Quiroga, 2013b; RedlacTrans et al., 2012).

Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay and Mexico DF<sup>18</sup> are the only countries that have legislation recognizing the gender identity of Trans. Ecuador partially recognizes it, whilst it keeps the biological sex registered in official documents (Flick, 2016), and some departments in Brazil also allow similar recognition (RedlacTrans, 2014). The lack of legal recognition of Trans identities often leads to arbitrary detention due to the lack of agreement between Trans peoples' appearance and their official ID documents, such is the case in Chile or Guatemala (RedlacTrans et al., 2012). RedlacTrans (2012, 2014) also denounced that the lack of gender recognition in Guatemala meant Trans women are incarcerated among male inmates, suffering daily rapes and beatings whilst in police custody (RedlacTrans et al., 2012).

In the Mexican context, Martínez-Guzmán argues that Trans people have traditionally being marginalised socially and made invisible due to their non-adherence to normative identities (2015). As a consequence, Trans people face serious consequences for navigating between genders and sexes and stepping out of sociocultural binary boundaries (Godoy, 2015; Holanda Costa et al., 2015). In Brazil, prejudice and stigma condemn condition Trans people to precarious life conditions, including family rejection (leading to homelessness), unemployment (forcing sex work) and a consequent high exposure to physical violence and HIV transmission (Camillo Bonassi et al., 2015).

Visibility within the family has been identified as problematic in Bolivia (Ross Quiroga, 2013b) Guatemala (RedlacTrans et al., 2012) and Mexico (González-Martínez, 2015), where family space is identified as arena of constant tension for non-normative identities, where relatives often reject or punish Trans identities. This fear of rejection leads most Trans to hiding their identity and lead a double life depending on the different social spaces (Aruquipa et al., 2012; Martínez-Guzmán, 2015).

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<sup>18</sup> This applies only to the Mexico DF district, not extensive to the whole country

LGTB spaces have been identified as spaces that perpetuate the invisibility of Trans people since many LGTB also follow the cultural prejudices of normative identities (Galindo, 2006 & 2017b; Monasterios, 2006; Redlactrans, 2014). In Mexico, Trans identities are perceived as detrimental for gay/lesbian issues and objectives leading to their exclusion (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015). The issue of invisibility of Trans people among LGTB collective has two different ramifications: Trans men invisibility is perpetuated by the view that Trans women in LAC are highly vulnerable (Redlactrans, 2014; Aruquipa et al, 2012) making their issues representative<sup>19</sup> of all Trans people (Godoy, 2015); on the other hand, Trans women visibility and recognition among wider women's rights agendas has been questioned in countries like Guatemala and Honduras (RedlacTrans et al., 2012). The latter is far from being an issue endemic to the LAC region since the issue of Trans women being excluded from women's rights issues and feminist agendas is prevalent among prominent academics and feminists<sup>20</sup> including Germain Greer (Wahlquist, 2016) or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Telesur, 2017).

### ***Access to public services***

There are other levels of structural and societal violence, for instance criminalisation of Trans identity is one of the greatest obstacles Trans people face in accessing medical services, exerting their political rights or enjoying cultural and educational programmes. Honduras, Ecuador and Chile have specific laws that punish crimes against morality and decorum in vague terms, which allow for the open interpretation used to punish Trans people (Redlactrans, 2012).

The access to legal and judicial services varies across the LAC region. The existence of sodomy laws in the majority of Caribbean states alongside the punishment of sex work in many Central American countries creates a highly unfavourable and hostile situation for Trans people (namely women) who become the target of police abuse and exploitation with full impunity (International HIV/AIDS Alliance, 2009).

Access to justice and police protection remains one of the key obstacles and risks for Trans people, since the hate crimes committed against the population go unpunished due to the inaction of authorities. This is particularly the case in Honduras and Guatemala, although it is seen equally across the region. In Mexico, for instance, the murders of young Trans women are usually not investigated by police as it is assumed they are 'crimes of passion'; in Uruguay or Argentina, police officers usually assume the murders are related to 'settling scores' or drugs. Across the region, in the case of Trans women, violence within intimate relationships are regarded "as a dispute between two men, a street brawl, and fail to deal with such cases appropriately as incidents of violence against women", this specially the case of Guatemala, since Trans people don't have their legal name recognised by official documents, any crimes that would otherwise fall within the "femicide law" are excluded from legal protection (RedlacTrans et al., 2012).

In terms of access to health, most Trans people will only attend medical centres when their conditions are urgent or critical (Ross Quiroga, 2013b). In most cases, Trans people in the region will access medical care when the health risk outweighs the cost of being discriminated (Redlactrans, 2014). Public health institutions contribute through their medical branches to the

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<sup>19</sup> Godoy (2015) highlights that whenever Trans issues are presented in the Argentinian or LAC context, there is a constant discourse around the life expectancy of Trans people being under 35, whilst this is true of Trans women there is not enough data to extend this assumption to Trans men.

<sup>20</sup> It is quite possible that since discourses around transgenderism developed in the West and were adopted by local organisations (either to capture international aid funding or follow on the steps of LGBT movements) the same prejudices have been reproduced

pathologizing of Trans identities by surveilling, regulating and treating non-conforming gender identities and labelling them through mental health categories (Martínez Guzmán, 2015) and with an epidemiological approach (Aruquipa et al., 2012) that assumes criminal or marginal activity from Trans patients (Ross Quiroga, 2013b).

Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Mexico City Mexico have specific public policies targeting the needs of the transgender population (Redlactrans, 2014). In some departments of Brazil, public health services carry out free gender reassignment surgery (after a psychological assessment), allowing Trans people to change legal gender assignment in the birth certificates, although social movements keep demanding a gender identity law that provides free health support and treatment for Trans people (Oliveira, 2016).

In Venezuela, it is estimated that 9 out of 10 Trans people do not seek health care from official medical institutions due to stigma and abuse from staff (RedlacTrans et al., 2012). Within the Mexican medical context, three stigmas intersect Trans people's access to health: stigma against non-hegemonic identities, stigma against sex work and HIV/AIDS related stigma (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015). This translates in the wider LAC region by placing Trans people at higher risk of contracting HIV and dying of AIDS related conditions.

### 2.2.2 Trans lives in Bolivia

This second section will be organised in different subsections that will start with an overall introduction into the socio-historic background of Trans people in Bolivia, followed by a brief analysis of the current legal framework relevant to Trans individuals, continued by a summary of the issues faced by Trans Bolivians, finishing with a review of current discourses and critiques around gender identity and Trans identities in the Bolivian context.

#### ***Brief socio-historical account***

This section will draw on socio-political developments in Bolivia from the 1952 revolution to explore the emergence of Trans narratives parallel to critical events taking place in the country. This section will start with the 1950s misconceptions around homosexuals and transformists, through to the emergence of visible travesti individuals in festive contexts in the 1960s and 1970s ending with the formal organisation and conceptualisation of Trans identities marked by the advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis since the mid-1980s.

#### *The 1950s revolution and subsequent dictatorships*

The 1952 revolution transformed the Bolivian politically, economically and socially, through the agrarian reform, the introduction of universal voting rights, the nationalisation of mines and the focus on basic education. This period saw the homogenisation of Bolivian identities into the adoption of mestizo ideals, which materialised through the disruption of indigenous identity by transforming it into (unionised) peasants.

The new regime's obsession with creating a nationalist feeling promoted the visibility and celebration of popular culture, which essentially mixed Western notions of national integration by looking at indigenous culture through a 'folkloric' othering lens (Aruquipa, 2012). In this context, Andean cultural heritage prevailed over Amazonian and tropical expressions. The ongoing migration fluxes triggered by the revolutionary reforms saw an increased presence of indigeneity in urban centres and peripheries (namely La Paz, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz),

which apart from providing indigenous labour also saw the irruption of indigenous festivities and cultural expressions. The subsequent dictatorships that seized power after the revolution dismantled the national unions and kept a capitalist and colonial order underpinned by traditional norms supported by the catholic church. This order disciplined bodies by framing them into binary, heterosexual and machista norms that fit with moral religious beliefs of 'good citizen' (Aruquipa, 2012). The disciplining of bodies was exerted by the different apparatuses of the State, including the judicial system and the security forces, who reinforced social norms and order by repressing individuals who were perceived as deviant.

During the 1950s *chicherías* acquired significance as spaces where popular culture manifested in its everyday quotidian form. Chicherías were modest drinking places that served the traditional chicha, had originated in indigenous rural areas and started surfacing in the periphery of cities like Cochabamba and Sucre (chicha is an alcoholic drink extracted from the fermentation of corn which used to be consumed by indigenous people in pre-columbine times).

In the years after the revolution chicherías became spaces where different groups would socialise at the margins of a racist and classist society. This is how people who would never meet socially outside the chichería, became part of an unlikely encounter by sharing the same space. This meeting point of different identities included the presence of hacendados, traders, cholas, musicians, labourers, politicians, students, travestis, artists, homosexuals and anyone who wanted to celebrate, drown their sorrows or pass the time in the company of alcohol and traditional music. Aruquipa (2012) highlights how these places saw initially the emergence of male homosexuals and travestis like the singer Gerardo Rosas, which at the time was embraced in the chicherías because of his talent, with his sexuality accepted by patrons and clients equally, including the times when he dressed as a woman<sup>21</sup>. This perceived gender transgression extended to festive times, namely carnivals and fiestas patronales (popular festivities in honour of the local patron saint). In the period between the 1950s until the mid-1970s Carnival became the main space where non-normative identities became accepted and visible. As Figari (2009, cited in Aruquipa, 2012) claims, carnival and other festive events represent in their own right spaces that transgress the normal state of affairs for everyone, hence providing the freedom to represent a world order that is turned 'upside down', allowing a sort of ceremonial gender crossing (Bornstein, 1994). Carnivals provided a space for aesthetic experimentation, androgynous performances and non-binary identities that repel the grotesque masculine figures (Figari, 2009). Paradoxically, in the case of female travestis parading in carnivals, their appearance confirmed the dominance of the masculine body, until 1974 women were not allowed to parade during the main carnival events as they had to 'preserve their morals and good manners', remaining safe from openly sexualised dances.

Some well-known examples of popular festivities becoming a platform that subverted the established (binary) order appear in Oruro's Carnival<sup>22</sup> and el Gran Poder<sup>23</sup> in La Paz during the 1960s and early 1970s. Both events included men who played the roles of traditional female

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<sup>21</sup> Aruquipa, Estenssoro and Vargas (2012) reflect about how in the decades before the influence of the Stonewall riots, there was a wide misconception in Bolivia around sexual orientation and gender identity, specifically in the *distinction* between male homosexuals and travesti identities, this happened among and outside the spaces and close communities where travestis lived and socialized. As the three authors mention, this did not consider the narratives of male travestis who remained invisible as was the case in other countries.

<sup>22</sup> Oruro's Carnival is one of the most important and recognised popular events in Bolivia.

<sup>23</sup> El Gran Poder is considered a celebration with contested origins due to its mix of Andean folklore, Christian beliefs, and pagan elements.

characters including Awilas, La China Supay and La China Morena. As Aruquipa highlights (2012), most times these roles were played by male homosexuals with many identifying as transformists at the time, some of whom after the decades fully identified as travesti or Trans women. These three characters represent different traditional aspects mixed with mestizo-urban elements, all of which exposed hypersexualised and seductive behaviours of demon-like women that despite the connotations of gender transgression, inevitably perpetuated the patriarchal and binary order. These transgressions were also regulated by the social parameters which accepted them only in the context of carnival and with pre-established meanings: those of sexually perverse women who did not repress their instincts. Nevertheless, these appearances in popular traditional festivities facilitated the appropriation of certain public spaces which were otherwise hostile to travestis.

By the mid-1970s, the carnival parades that included travesti characters became so popular in peripheric and marginal neighbourhoods that they attracted the attention of local authorities which aimed at the institutionalisation (control) of these events. This was the case of La Paz and the festivity of El Gran Poder, which had initiated in the marginal neighbourhood of Chijini and in 1974 was invited to parade across the city centre. One of the main travesti characters of that parade (Barbarella) approached the then Dictator Bánzer and kissed him whilst dancing (Aruquipa, 2012). This event was blamed as causing the subsequent restriction of travestis and transformists in the carnival parades of the main cities (namely La Paz and Oruro), which paradoxically opened the participation of (cisgender) women to the festive events. Also, bringing the parade to the urban centres where power institutions reside meant the marginal popular festivities became closer to power structures. Once the right of those in the margins to enjoy central space was conquered, travestis were pushed back into the margins, since they carried on participating in smaller town parades. El Gran Poder had become the embodied performance of what *chicherías* had previously represented: a space where people from different backgrounds, classes and identities merged in the margins of society.

However, as Estenssoro (2012) and Aruquipa (2012) point out, the presence and visibility of certain travestis (namely Barbarella) was made possible due to their social status, family name and wealth (and possibly their ethnicity), which positioned them as privileged above the other travestis with more humble background. In the case of Barbarella, she had previously lived in Brazil and had enough money to travel to other countries getting to know the international travesti and transformist scene, incorporating elements to her appearance and making it possible for her to access both popular spaces and realms where the powerful socialised.

Before the HIV/AIDS epidemic emerged as the main issue faced by travestis and Trans in the 1980s, some of the issues faced since the 1950s by those identifying as travesti included the rejection of their families, harassment by society, police repression<sup>24</sup> and the abuse of alcohol as a channel for pain (Aruquipa, 2012). For some, their humble background also meant they could not access certain privileged spaces reserved for travestis who could afford to dress and look (pass) in a way that would be socially accepted. This became aggravated in the 1980s and 1990s with the increasing prevalence of travesti and Trans beauty contests, where specific feminine expressions were favoured (Estenssoro, 2012), receiving criticism by emerging feminist groups such as *Mujeres Creando* (2005 & 2010; *Monasterios*, 2006). Most travestis were condemned to underground scenes in order to be able to fully express their identities in

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<sup>24</sup> During the dictatorial period, police and security forces practiced “*fondeamiento*” with travesties, male homosexuals, and political dissidents. This consisted in tying a heavy weight to a person’s body and pushing them into Lake Titikaka for them to drown quickly.

nightclubs or through street sex work (i.e. in central areas of La Paz). The media perpetuated a stigmatised view on their identities<sup>25</sup> as criminal and scandalous, and most police raids before the arrival of democracy in the 1980s included reporters who would 'out' travestis by showing their pictures with sensationalist accounts of arrests and moral judgements. The process of identity creation and expression would be more complicated and even dangerous for travestis belonging to marginal or less privileged statuses. Estenssoro (2012) recalls the case of Mika, one of the first Trans women to be visible in Bolivia, who started self-administering industrial silicone in her hips and breasts and eventually died as a result of heart failure related to poisoning induced by the substance.

### 1980s: the advent of the neoliberal state and the HIV/AIDS crisis

The series of dictatorships that had ruled Bolivia since the 1950s came to an end in 1982 with the introduction of democracy and the adoption of a neoliberal model of the state that once again saw the transformation of the social, economic and cultural fabrics. The mass privatisation of state-owned companies, alongside the 'relocalisation' (redundancy) of mining workers sank the country into a deep economic crisis. This context facilitated the embracing of neoliberal policies imposed to Bolivia by the World Bank and the IMF.

Following news of the Stonewall riots in 1969, many Latin American Countries followed by Bolivia would be influenced by the concepts, movement and ideas that stemmed from New York's events (Vargas, 2012). In this early 1980s context, the visibility of travestis and trans<sup>26</sup> increased in cities like La Paz, Yacuiba, Cobija or Santa Cruz. However, their increased visibility still framed them in the margins, as alcoholics, traditional healers<sup>27</sup>, or entertainers in nightclubs and private parties. This perceived marginality would be further deepened with the appearance of the first cases of HIV/AIDS among the travesti and gay scenes. Within a globalising context, the structural changes imposed externally alongside the irruption of international development agendas and funding created a new language of prevention targeting 'high risk' populations (gay men, Trans and travesties, many of whom are also sex workers) and an equality agenda focused on women's rights (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006; Monasterios, 2007 & 2007b; Galindo & Sánchez, 2007). In the early 1990s, the influence of USAID AIDS programme was paramount for the groups of friends who identified as travesti, gay or Trans, promoting an institutionalisation of informal groups around the theme of STI prevention (Estenssoro, 2012). The AIDS programme initially acknowledged and made visible the existence of Trans, travestis and gay men in order to challenge HIV related stigma and help diminish the patriarchal, religious and cultural oppression experienced by the 'key populations'. Within these epidemiological and medical approaches the first organisations were created by gay men including Trans and travestis. This 'gaycentrism' was the result of the HIV agenda and would pervade the organisations and movements until the dawn of the millennium, when Trans Bolivians found their independent voices and formed their own groups in order to represent their interests (Vargas, 2012). These organisations were organised differently across the central axis of the country (La Paz–Cochabamba–Santa Cruz) and were influenced by the different ethnic compositions, migration fluxes, historic colonial

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<sup>25</sup> Sensationalist tabloids would often portray scandals around travesti, Trans and homosexual men often confusing gender and sexuality.

<sup>26</sup> Some travestis incorporated new concepts from the international gay rights movement. This also included a shift in other terminology, including the preferred use of 'gay' instead of 'homosexual'.

<sup>27</sup> Rebeca la curandera from Yacuiba, her recognition as travesti came hand in hand with a perceived sense of 'the paranormal'.



structures and hierarchies of financial and political power. The different backgrounds would result in divisions and fragmentation of the movement throughout the decade (Estenssoro, 2012; Vargas, 2012).

During the mid-1990s dissenting voices started rejecting the institutionalisation of the gender and sexual diversities<sup>28</sup>, and refused to be framed under an epidemiological approach that ignored their civil rights and wider political agenda. Up until this point, most of the support provided to Trans and travestis was framed under the umbrella of HIV education, empowerment, prevention and outreach to 'condomise' and control bodies perceived to be dangerous or ill, and the view that 'risk groups' citizenship rights are only linked to HIV (Estenssoro, 2012). The problems faced by the population remained to a greater degree the same as in previous decades, with the added stigma that the HIV/AIDS programmes and their focus on prevention through visibility had cast upon Trans and travestis (as marginal, morally reprehensible, criminal or ill). These historical discourses are relevant as they have been captured by grey literature (grassroots oral history magazines, notebooks, NGO reports) that both captured the issues of Trans people as well as served to inform the younger generations providing them with a framework of words, identities and references.

Paradoxically, despite the internal divisions across geographic regions and among individuals in TLGB groups and organisations, many Trans people acknowledge the emergence of USAID and the World Bank HIV funding as providing the platform for specific collectives to come together and organise (Vargas, 2012). As in neighbouring countries, the emancipation of Trans and travestis from 'gaycentric' organisations dependent on international funding also highlights a different synecdoche, one in which Trans women and their issues become representative of the whole Trans movement (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015; Godoy, 2015) perpetuating the invisibility of Trans men.

### *The new millennium and the advent of ethnic politics*

The new millennium saw the deterioration and collapse of the neoliberal system accelerated by the water war in Cochabamba, the war on coca in Chaparé, and finally the complete blockade of La Paz through the gas war in 2003 brought the country to a halt. The failure of the neoliberal system had widened the gap between a political and economic elite and the indigenous and popular classes, who had been requesting since the early 1990s a land reform to be protected from transnational interests and corporations (Albó, 2002). Geographically too, the country was more polarised than ever between the Andean West (La Paz) and the whiter and mestizo landowners and powers of the East and the 'half-moon'<sup>29</sup>. The rupture of the political arena by new indigenous actors and movements further divided the country and challenged the colonialist, racist and patriarchal roots that had been maintained throughout the colony, republican and revolutionary times (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1993 & 2006; Stefanoni, 2007). These tensions eventually turned into violent protests and clashes causing several deaths by the repression of police and armed forces, pushing the president to resign and flee the country. This conjuncture made it possible for the first indigenous president to be elected and highlighted the need to refound the nation with the participation of historically ignored and discriminated actors

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<sup>28</sup> At different points during the 1990s there were debates among different gay, Trans and feminist groups regarding the label to self-identify the movement or collective. Individual voices were tired of the synecdoche of labelling everyone as 'gay' and ignoring their lesbian, bisexual, travesti, transgender or transexual identities. The LGBT, GLBT and TLGB labels were considered, and nowadays the preferred denomination is TLGB or 'gender and sexual diversity'.

<sup>29</sup> La media luna or half-moon includes the area of Santa Cruz, Pando, Tarija and in recent times, Sucre.

(indigenous people, women, disabled groups, gender and sexual diversities). Refounding the nation focused on the development of a new constitution for the state that would guarantee the rights of an invisible majority, the return of natural resources and the territory and the creation a new decentralised State (Artaraz, 2012).

This context of rupture with the neoliberal order which had prevailed for 20 years and had initially facilitated the articulation and organisation of TLGB groups became another polarising point among Trans, gay and feminist groups (Vargas, 2012). The introduction of neoliberal policies and agendas at the behest of the IMF, the World Bank and international development had supported and funded TLGB people in the context of HIV/AIDS prevention, but these discourses and the institutionalisation of TLGB groups had worn many people out of the movement due to suspicion and power dynamics (Aruquipa, 2012). The influence of feminists' critics made it evident how there were some obvious tensions between the decolonising work by social movements to challenge structural patriarchy, racism and classism but this was never part of the internationally funded processes of NGOs and grassroots organisations working with gender and sexual diversities (Galindo, 2013 & 2017b; Monasterios, 2007b; Mujeres Creando, 2010).

Publicly, Trans people carried on being visible in the same spaces (namely beauty contests), although they had started organising according to their own interests and differentiated needs. They also started participating in the first TLGB marches taking place since the early 2000s in Santa Cruz and La Paz, which were initially received with violence and aggression by the police and religious groups (Vargas, 2012). During the constitutional assembly period, many individuals and organisations from gender and sexual diversities took part in the negotiations and talks to highlight their demands from the new constitution. After years of division, failed alliances with other social movements (Afro Bolivians, the disabled, old people) and ongoing coercion and intimidation of assembly members supporting the rights of TLGB by religious fundamentalists, a final draft of the constitution was produced in Oruro in 2007. This document included articles that made it specifically illegal to discriminate people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, which was perceived by fundamentalist groups and churches as an attack on their freedom of speech (Vargas, 2012). The climate of division in the country was such, that even within allied groups classist and racists motives further fragmented the constitutional process and the demand for recognition of TLGB rights. This was the case of TLGB organisations in Santa Cruz, who initially refused the validity of the constitutional process altogether since it had emerged from an indigenous, leftist president (Vargas, 2012). Many of the members of TLGB groups and institutions in Santa Cruz were closer to the economic powers and elites that would be most disadvantaged by land reforms and by the new management of natural resources, which is why they initially asked gender and sexually diverse people to vote against the referendum, despite benefitting them personally by acknowledging their civil rights. The new constitution was finally approved and despite having some key articles<sup>30</sup> modified by the pressure and intromission of the catholic hierarchy, it recognised for the first time the rights and existence of gender and sexual diversities.

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<sup>30</sup> The wording of Article 63 defined marriage in a way that could include same-sex couples. This was modified during the proofreading and style checking process.

### *Current legal framework related to gender identity*

There are several legal instruments that specifically cover the rights of Trans people and those whose gender identity does not conform to the norm. Whilst there are many municipal orders and departmental plans, the following documents are highlighted as benchmark for further anti-discrimination laws that have developed throughout the years. These include Article 14 of the Political State Constitution, where the State clearly prohibits any form of discrimination based on among other things gender identity; and Article 58, where children are granted the right of protection to their gender identity within their development process (Asamblea Constituyente de Bolivia, 2009).

One of the key legal documents that provided a framework to pass new anti-discrimination laws was introduced, the 'Human Rights National Action Plan to Live Well 2009-2013'. Article 5 of this plan specifically focused on the rights of people with "diverse gender identity" (Ministerio de Justicia, 2010). Drawing on this national plan the Supreme Decree N. 0189 was introduced in 2009 to declare the 28<sup>th</sup> of June as the "Day of the rights of People with Sexually Diverse Orientation in Bolivia" (Gaceta Oficial, 2014). The contents of this decree did not make any specific mentions to people whose gender identity was non-normative, and specifically left out any mentions to Trans individuals. This omission highlights a prevalent misconception between concepts of gender identity and sexual orientation (Vargas, 2012).

In October 2010, 'Law 045 Against Racism and All Forms of Discrimination' was approved by the Legislative Assembly, establishing prison sentences for individuals who discriminate other based on their gender identity, among others. This law includes for the first time a definition of transphobia as "the discrimination against transsexuality a transexual or transgender individuals, based on their gender identity" (Asamblea Legislativa Plurinacional, 2010: Art. 5).

Finally, Law 807 of Gender Identity was passed in May 2016 which legalised and established the procedure to allow transexual and transgender people to change the name, sex and picture of official documents issued by the State and other private institutions, allowing the full exercise of their gender identity (Gaceta Oficial, 2016). During the first week of November 2017, the Constitutional Tribunal of Bolivia declared part of Law 807 illegal, contravening the basic principles of the Constitution of the State and depriving Trans people from basic civil, economic and labour rights.

### *Issues faced by Trans people*

Despite the passing of legislation protecting the rights of Trans people to safety, citizenship, and access to public services, there is a gap in the implementation of specific programmes that materialise the law into an improvement of Trans lives (ACNUDH, 2014). The gap between the legal protection and the everyday reality of many Trans people is visible through Ombudsman office (Eju!, 2016) and the reports by Trans organisations and TLGB collectives. For instance, Comunidad Diversidad reported that in the period 2007-2017 at least 65 Trans people have been murdered in Bolivia (Comunidad Diversidad, 2017).

Most of the statistics about transphobic hate crime and the issues faced by Trans Bolivians are developed within the context of internationally funded organisations (Ross Quiroga, 2013; Jaime, 2013; AC, 2014; Arteaga, 2014; Hurtado, 2014; Aruquipa, 2013); or the realm of HIV prevention programmes (Ross Quiroga, 2013b). Notwithstanding the value of these resources, their focus and contextualisation has been problematised by different voices within the current Bolivian context (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2013; Monasterios, 2007; Familia Galán; Mujeres Creando

2005, 2010) due to their particular framing of Trans narratives and lives. The prevalence of grey literature (and historic discourses resulting from it) stemming from the development agencies and their local partners, as well as the absence of academic publications specifically focused on Trans people<sup>31</sup> (where they are not grouped together within GLBT), makes it necessary to explore the voices and problems raised in these documents, having reflected about the context of their emergence and production.

### Violence at different levels

One of the prevalent ideas emerging from the different reports on Trans people in Bolivia show a reality of structural, social and personal violence (Ross Quiroga, 2013b; Estenssoro, 2012; Arteaga, 2014). The EPU report (ACNUDH, 2014) revealed that 49% of the Trans people surveyed had experienced violence, and this being more prevalent in the central axis cities (La Paz, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz). This report goes on to show that Trans people feel most vulnerable to police violence (with 71.4% of respondents reporting some form of violence from the police force). Parallel to the region, police and armed forces have historically been identified as one of the main structural actors exerting violence against Trans people. This violence included: murder (by *fondeamiento* during the 1950s dictatorships), harassment of Trans people who do sex work (Ross Quiroga, 2013b; Estenssoro, 2012), extortion to keep Trans identities 'hidden' (Estenssoro, 2012) especially those arrested during the private events and parties in the 1970s and 1980s, arbitrary arrest based on moral prejudice and stereotypes linking Trans people to criminal or clandestine lifestyles (Vargas, 2012; Ross Quiroga, 2013b; Arteaga, 2014). The police have also been identified as using psychological violence against Trans people in police custody, including exposing their naked bodies, removing clothing, make-up or cutting hair and forcing detainees to look at their reflection in the mirror, or forcing them into cells with detainees of their assigned birth sex (Arteaga, 2014).

Other official bodies including medical institutions have collaborated with police forces under the pretext of health control and instigated violence against Trans people. This became visible in the peak of the HIV epidemic, when medical institutions would instruct the police to identify Trans sex workers and arrest them so they could be provided with a *matrícula*<sup>32</sup> (Estenssoro, 2012). The State was able to control Trans bodies considered as infectious and dangerous through the effective use of medical institutions (Vargas, 2012).

In terms of social violence, this includes everyday verbal and physical abuse experienced by Trans people, especially when they are perceived to transgress or cross the boundaries of their allocated social (marginal) spaces (Aruquipa, 2012). As previously mentioned, the most severe cases of physical violence lead to the murder of Trans people (Comunidad Diversidad, 2017). Social violence would also come in the form of moral surveillance<sup>33</sup>, with neighbours or onlookers reporting perceived illegal activities by Trans people (namely sex work) to the police,

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<sup>31</sup> The collective memories developed by Aruquipa, Estenssoro and Vargas (2012) have provided a primary resource to explore oral histories and memories into different activists and public figures in the history of TLGB in Bolivia. Although their work does not fit with academic publications, it has proven a key resource to be included.

<sup>32</sup> Matrícula means 'number plate', these were issued specifically for Trans women doing sex work with the pretext of controlling their health and HIV status

<sup>33</sup> Aruquipa (2012) claims that during the 1960s and 1970s, neighbours of Trans and male homosexuals would usually call the police to report social activities perceived to be immoral and against social norms

often triggering the detention of other Trans people who were not involved in illicit or illegal activities (Arteaga, 2014; Ross, Quiroga, 2013b).

Vargas (2012) and Ross Quiroga (2013b) talk about 'internal violence' to describe the physical aggressions and violence exerted by other Trans people. This emerges in the context of street sex work, where those Trans women perceived to be better looking, younger or more successful with clients are physically attacked. Both authors speak of the many cases where Trans women doing sex work in the streets would be cut in the face or the breasts by other rival Trans sex workers in order to leave them 'marked'.

Violence in the family is another factor that plays a key role in the development of Trans peoples identities. Family rejection and violence are prevalent among Trans Bolivians (Aruquipa et al., 2012) with some family members exercising sexual and physical aggression to correct or punish the identity expression of Trans people (Ross Quiroga, 2013b; Estenssoro, 2012). This early rejection influences the educational development of young Trans people, and also affects adult Trans people who are economically dependent on their families and fear *coming out*. Some families economically exploit Trans people (including forcing them into sex work) with the promise of acceptance or tolerance, whilst others *allow* Trans people to embody their gender identity outside the home, out of respect to the family (Ross Quiroga, 2013).

#### Access to work and education

Trans people are more likely to drop out of primary and secondary education than their cisgender or LGB peers (Aruquipa et al., 2012) due to the stigma, lack of recognition and peer pressure exerted by classmates and the lack of support of many families, forcing them to leave the family home (Conexión Fondo Emancipación, 2010). Ross Quiroga (2013b) reports that only 11% of the Trans women surveyed had finished secondary education, with 2% attending some sort of university education. Some of the discrimination experienced within educational settings leads young Trans to commit suicide (Aruquipa et al., 2012).

The lack of formal education, alongside prejudice against Trans identities results in double discrimination when accessing the labour market. On one hand, many Trans people lack the skills and training to be *employable* whilst on top of that, many employers are reluctant to hire Trans people based on their gender identity (Ross Quiroga, 2013b; Estenssoro, 2012; Martínez-Guzmán, 2015). This leads to the adoption of sex work as the only option to support themselves financially. Trans individuals from wealthier and privileged backgrounds (i.e. Barbarella, Roberta Benzi) were able to keep their own businesses (although these were restricted to beauty and hairdressing saloons, tailoring and textile sales, etc.) (Aruquipa et al., 2012).

#### Access to health services

Medical services and public health institutions are one of the main spaces and contexts where Trans people encounter resistance to their identity and experience different forms of discrimination (Conexión Fondo Emancipación, 2010). The historic pathologizing of Trans and non-conforming gender identities by psychiatric disciplines, and the epidemiological focus during the HIV/AIDS crisis made the Trans body subject to State control and interrogation (Aruquipa et al., 2012; Jaime, 2013) facilitated by the police.

Before the recent introduction of the Law of Gender Identity, the lack of official recognition of recognition of Trans identities raised many issues in medical settings, where staff would lack specific knowledge on gender identity and exercise their personal prejudice (Conexión Fondo

Emancipación, 2011). In many cases the perceived lack of physical correspondence between physical appearance and the official identification documents would prevent Trans people from getting medical support.

In the context of Trans sex workers, the discrimination experienced is double (Ross Quiroga, 2013b), since they are stigmatised by medical professionals who have moral prejudices against sex work and also discriminate because of their gender identity. In some extreme cases, medical staff would exercise violence by omission of duty, refusing or neglecting to give treatment to HIV positive Trans patients. Ross Quiroga specifically speaks about the case of a Trans woman who was left to die in pain after the doctors revealed her HIV positive status, triggering a fear and repugnance among the rest of staff to treat the patient. This abandonment of the medical duties alongside family abandonment (namely Trans sex workers) means that many Trans people would die in medical facilities and nobody would claim the body, with a few cases where other Trans friends and sex workers would collaborate to pay the burial (Estenssoro, 2012; Ross, 2013b).

#### *Issues with limited visibility and overexposure in the specific realms*

There are some tensions in terms of the meaning of visibility of Trans bodies. Whilst many Trans people recognise how social spaces including carnival parades and beauty contests have helped in the process for creating their identity and have allowed an appropriation and transgression of the public space, some just want to be regarded as “normal women” fitting in with the wider society (Vargas, 2012). Feminist voices (Mujeres Creando, 2005, 2010; Galindo, 2006) have spoken against these desires for passing and becoming absorbed by the society that perpetuates discriminatory norm, accusing Trans and other LGB people of victimising and perpetuating patriarchal binary structures. A visible example of this is the figure of Roberta Benzi, coming from a bourgeois background she was one of the first Bolivians to access surgery. When she was invited to participate in the 2005 elections and the Constitutional Assembly process she refused once she found out she was being invited as a ‘visible Trans candidate’ (Estenssoro, 2012). However, she never refused support for other Trans people, even those ‘outside her social circle’ (Gibellino, 2009).

Visibility became a problematic term amidst the HIV epidemic, where many ‘risk populations’ became visible for the first time (namely Trans and gay men), exposing and associating their bodies with epidemiological perspectives (Estenssoro, 2012) perpetuating the pathologized view that feminists had been challenging for decades (Mujeres Creando, 2010), although feminists are also divided in terms of Trans identities and rights (Wahlquist, 2016; Raymond, 1994; Jeffreys, 2014; O’Donnell, 2019; Hines, 2019) as will be explored later. Social visibility exposes Trans bodies in a way that makes them easily the target of intolerant attitudes, rejection and harassment by different social and institutional actors (Vargas, 2012).

Whilst Estenssoro (2012) claims Trans Bolivians received wider acceptance from popular social sectors (rural migrants, indigenous populations living in urban peripheries, cholas, etc.) due to their visibility in popular spaces including chicherías and carnival parades (Aruquipa, 2012) Hurtado’s survey (2014) reports indigenous women can be the most discriminatory against Trans people and gay men. Equally important, the visibility of Trans men remains absent from most surveys, policies and organisational focus (Godoy, 2015). Whilst this may be a result of the perceived higher vulnerability of Trans women, it becomes problematic to assume similar problems are faced by Trans men (Aruquipa et al., 2012).

### *Dissident discourses, criticisms and theoretical tensions*

Some activists and academics have been critical of the influence of international development agencies and foreign aid on the Bolivian social landscape (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006; Monasterios, 2007; Monasterios et al., 2007). This becomes visible in the context of women's rights and the civil rights of gender and sexually diverse people, and the introduction of development agendas (i.e. Millennium Development Goals) and the health prevention set by AIDS programmes funded by USAID and the UN (Aruquipa et al., 2012). In the context of the introduction of women's rights amidst the emergence of the neoliberal state in the 1980s, Rivera Cusicanqui (1993, 2010) argued how the international *experts* imposing Western models of women's rights programmes had started using concepts<sup>34</sup> initially deployed by activists and local academics, to turn them into 'neutral' development tools. Monasterios (2007) builds on this view by referring to the international experts as *gender technocracy*, who appoint local representatives as official empowered speakers<sup>35</sup>. From different perspectives, both Rivera Cusicanqui and Monasterios challenge the lack of questioning of patriarchal, colonising, and racist structures of power, and the dangers of international development discourses co-opting the social movements by imposing their own demands for rights, playing with their influential positions.

A similar thing is critiqued by Galindo (2017b) and Paredes (2008), original founders of *Mujeres Creando*<sup>36</sup>. Both activists denounced how the same international technocratic mechanisms which influenced women's rights agendas were used through the HIV/AIDS programmes promoted by USAID targeting Trans people and gay men and institutionalising their movements, creating a dependence on external funding and a pathologizing jargon around condoms, empowerment and prevention. Galindo was especially vocal about the portrayal of the 'good gay' who became the expert face working within internationally funded organisations to seek 'inclusion' and 'tolerance' from the wider society (Galindo, 2017b; Moraes et al., 2016). *Mujeres Creando* (2005, 2010) challenged other radical feminist views that claim GLTB people existence alone transgress the social system, since most movements didn't question the heterosexual patriarchal system and proposed binary alternatives adopted by many GLBT organisations (Galindo, 2017b; Wiener & Lancharés, 2018).

Amidst the fragmentation and division of TLGB collectives at the end of the millennium, a group of travesti and Trans individuals in La Paz created *La Familia Galán* (the Galán Family), as a way of distancing themselves from the gaycentric institutions and the impositions of HIV programmes. *La Familia Galán* emerged through the exhaustion of its members with the officialist agendas around HIV prevention and the medicalised focus on Trans and LGB lives. They have carried out protests by performing in governmental sites, challenging racist, patriarchal and classist approaches within the sexual and gender diversities. At times, they have collaborated with *Mujeres Creando* and have adopted some of their critiques into their discursive and performative practices.

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<sup>34</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui refers mainly to how through development programmes Western Academia has entered intellectual and social spaces across Bolivia and Latin America, adopting concepts around 'internal colonialism' and has regurgitated them obscuring the political and social power they had, in order to insert them devoid of meaning back to the original contexts.

<sup>35</sup> In the Bolivian case, Monasterios talks about how it is the middle-class whiter mestiza who benefits from this gender technocratic spaces, to lobby the government from a privileged position representative of all Bolivian women.

<sup>36</sup> *Mujeres Creando* was created as an anti-racist, anarchist, lesbian, feminist movement inspired by the anarchist movements of Bolivians in the early 20th century



*Fig. 3 – La Familia Galán in La Paz, 2013 (by Tony Suárez)*

HIV jargon included terms such as MSM (men who have sex with men) as an umbrella term to describe sexual practices, in doing so, they also included Trans women, replicating stigmatising essentialist views (Aruquipa et al., 2012; Ross Quiroga, 2013b). La Familia Galán joined Mujeres Creando into critiquing the emptiness of discourse presented by institutionalised gay organisations, and their claim to represent all gender and sexually diverse identities. Mujeres Creando accused these organisations of carrying out a new colonising endeavour imposed by international agencies, perpetuating sexist and binary norms under the auspices of USAID. They were also critical of the sterile self-esteem workshops, empowerment initiatives and HIV work carried out by institutions like ADESPROC<sup>37</sup>. Finally, they also rejected the constant celebration of Trans beauty contests as cultural manifestations that are little more than a variant of machista culture. This critique of beauty contests has also been picked up by feminists inside and outside the

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<sup>37</sup> This was one of the first collectives for gay and travestis in La Paz, after the years and influenced by international development funding it became the best example of 'institutionalised gaycentric' organization critiqued by the feminists and other dissenting voices.



TLGB movement, denouncing how these events represent continuity and imitation of dominating gender relationships, perpetuating binary norms and objectifying (desirable) female bodies (Aruquipa et al., 2012).

In view of the confrontation and divisions of this period, Rivera Cusicanqui (2010b, 2013) advocated for indigenous people to work alongside other social movements in order to challenge the oppressive state structures. This point was supported by Mujeres Creando (2005; Monasterios, 2006) in the context of the Constitutional Assembly, as they challenged TLGB groups and networks to join other social movements to fight other ways of discrimination, not only homophobia or transphobia. During this period, Galindo and Paredes dismissed any demands related to same-sex marriage. They denounced how it perpetuated the control of interpersonal relationships by the State and refused to be included into an officialist GLTB agenda that sought to be tolerated under a victimisation inscribed into a heterosexual mould (Mujeres Creando, 2005; Monasterios 2006).

Analysing the resistance to external influences imposed by international aid agencies and other Western development organisations by these critics, there seem to be paradoxical outcomes to these tensions. The neoliberal context in which the 1980s and 1990s HIV programmes were introduced is held responsible for the political, social and economic crisis that brought the country to the brink of civil war in the early 2000s. However, despite the rejection of pathologizing approaches to gender and sexually diverse identities (namely Trans and gay men), the irruption of these programmes provided a platform that funded and facilitated the articulation of groups, and this was mostly acknowledged and accepted by Trans collectives (Vargas, 2012). Paradoxically, a similar economic context to that of the 1980s-crisis replicated with the advent of Morales and the different wars on natural resources (water, gas, coca, landowning). This space of widespread polarisation, chaos and social confrontation opened again a space for Trans people to become emancipated from gay organisations, and to become a social movement participating to some extent in the refounding of the nation that came about with the new constitution. It remains difficult to know whether Trans and LGB would have incorporated external discourses and influences if the HIV crisis had not affected the country (Aruquipa et al., 2012). There remain structural differences (class and socioeconomic status) that introduced external influences before the epidemic breakout, for instance with public figures like Barbarella or Roberta Benzi who incorporated Western aesthetics and other cultural referents into their identity expression, impacting other Trans (women) who looked up to them.

Even in the context of ethnic politics with the election of Morales and the decolonising agenda established parallel to the Constitutional Assembly process, the documents and articles drawn on to make demands for the rights and recognition of gender and sexual diversities in Bolivia stemmed from Western agencies of experts: the Yogyakarta Principles (2006) and the Norwegian Statement on sexual orientation and gender identity at the UN (2006). These articles introduced a legal framework for protection and recognition of Trans Bolivians, even with the initial rejection of the Western travesti groups and organisations in Santa Cruz<sup>38</sup> (Vargas, 2012). Also, the influence of other neighbouring countries, namely the visit of Marcela Romero, Trans activist and president of ATTA<sup>39</sup> in 2008, helped with the organisation of the first national congress of Trans women in Santa Cruz in 2009. This visit also facilitated the incorporation of

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<sup>38</sup> As previously explained, the rejection to participate and legitimate the Constitutional Assembly was not related to an agreement with the demand for rights, but in opposition to what Morales represented (an indigenous unionist from the left)

<sup>39</sup> Asociación de Travestis y Transexuales Argentinas (Argentinian association of travestis and transexuales)

TREBOL<sup>40</sup> into REDLACTRANS, the Latin American Network of Trans People, which resulted in increased pressures in the region to recognise Trans rights and to identify the common issues faced in the different countries.

Despite these tensions, or perhaps as a result, there has been a political and social context where Trans identities have been acknowledged and some of their rights and issues have been recognised. Whether these legal advances have had an impact in the everyday life is something that will be explored within the current research, as much as whether the contending discourses are reflected upon Trans people, or these merely emerge in activist, academic and NGO settings.

In all, this thesis will contribute towards the academic research pool by incorporating a mix of sources (considering epistemological issues of whose voices counts, namely in regards to grey literature and the conversational/experiential nature of the data), theories and interpretations which highlight the complexity of gender variance not only in Bolivia but also across the region, whilst opening a space for exchanging and mutually learning from non-hegemonic and non-medicalised discourses around transness which exist in Eurocentric contexts. Also, providing a space to reflect about the issues and risks of epistemic populism in reducing Trans experiences to a mere façade whereby any advances in terms of rights, improvement of life circumstances, etc may easily fall into tokenistic exercises (whether by NGOs, the state, or any political or social movement co-opting Trans individuals).

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<sup>40</sup> The first network of Trans people in Bolivia

### **PART III: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH**

Following the discussion started in the previous subchapters, this section will set the socio-historic context for understanding the current situation in Bolivia, introducing some key events that have shaped the Bolivian cultural and political landscape and transformed the nation and its population. The brief historic account herein takes the form of archival research and aims at providing a snapshot of how questions of race and gender in a decolonising setting permeate the everyday lives of Trans people (and the wider population) influencing their stories and lived experiences.

#### ***Introduction***

Paramount to any research focused on Bolivia is the analysis of race, ethnicity and the convergence between any of their forms and intersections throughout recent history. Reflecting on cliché understandings of race in post-colonial Latin America, where notions of melting-pot cultures and societies have produced categories dependent on hegemonic understandings of power relations, labels such as indigenous, criollo, mestizo, cholo, indio, etc. (see definitions below). have permeated political and academic debates across the continent. Bringing the focus to the mixed Andean-Tropical specificities of Bolivia, an analysis of discourses around mestizaje will facilitate reflection on the role of race and ethnicity (based on the different indigenous ethnicities in Bolivia) linked to gender in the making of current Bolivia as a geographical space where Trans people negotiate their identity by navigating through the intersections between gender and race.

Analysing the experiences that Trans Bolivians have within a post-colonial space beckons for an analysis of gender relationships to explore the roles and expectations attributed by the hegemonic binary man-woman, which some argue is a result of the colonial legacy (García Pacheco and Lazarte, 2012) or the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008). First and foremost, it calls for an analysis on historic racial tensions and ethnic divisions. Talking about the experiences Trans Bolivians have with their surroundings whilst ignoring the rich and problematic history of racial blending, erasure, incorporation and appropriation in Bolivia would equate to building a modern steel skyscraper supported by mud foundations.

#### ***Terminological considerations***

Before delving any deeper into the Bolivian socio-historical context and the overall research, some terminological clarifications need to be made in regards to racial and ethnic classifications. The term *indigenous* refers to native people of Bolivia before the arrival of the Spanish. I will use it as overarching term to include the different coexisting ethnicities (Aymaras, Quechuas, Chiriguanos, Tupiguaraníes, Moxitanos, among others) and to recognize people who self-identify as having a racial/ethnic background located within these identities. The term *indio* refers to the native people Columbus came across, which can be translated as 'Indian'. The confusion rose by Columbus misperception of his arrival in India. Since the time of the colony, the category *indio* has gained pejorative connotations due to its racial and social implications and nowadays still remains a contested notion that has been reclaimed by some social movements. I will avoid the use of this term unless it appears as such in participant's accounts. *Mestizo* originally denoted a biological crossing between Spanish and indigenous blood. It became a fiscal category and eventually the Spanish developed a complex matrix of racial blending organized through a caste system (see Fig. 1 below). *Cholo* designates indigenous people emigrating to urban areas and incorporating aspects of mestizo culture while

maintaining a certain degree of indigenous customs. The label cholo was initially offensive and not used to self-identify, rather it was imposed externally by others. *Criollo* refers to the descendants of the Spanish born in the colonies (with both parents being Spanish) and is nowadays associated with whiteness and certain powerful families in Sucre. The label criollo and mestizo have become associated with oligarchies that rule economic, judicial and legal systems.

It is worth noting that most of these labels are individually assumed or used as self-identification by individuals regardless of their immediate background, customs or skin pigmentation. Within the research I will only refer to them as they appear in relevant literature or as they are assumed or used by participants themselves.



*Fig. 1 - Alberta, friend of the researcher in the courtyard of San Francisco Basilica in La Paz (researcher's picture)<sup>41</sup>*

### ***Pre-colonial and Colonial times***

The origins of what is politically and geographically known as Bolivia can be traced back to the Real Audiencia de Charcas (16<sup>th</sup> century). With the decline and fall of the precolonial Andean empire of Tawantisuyo, the Audiencia de Charcas was established in La Plata (later known as Chuquisaca, and Sucre in the present). Audiencias were the highest political and judicial representation of the Crown of Castile in the newly reclaimed territories, controlling the

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<sup>41</sup> Alberta is a friend of the researcher who helped with accessing areas of La Paz and El Alto, as well as by providing helpful insights and advice into indigenous sartorial traditions, the Quechua language and communities near Potosí. The researcher gauged the potential imbalances in their relationship in terms of ethnicity/race and discussed them with Alberta, both of us connected at a personal level through belonging to a mixed countryside/rural background and sharing interests in folklore, eating and oral histories. The researcher is weary of the ethics of reproducing portraits of racial groups (in line with colonial exercises), this one depicts a cultural visit to the San Francisco Basilica followed by a meal in a local market. Alberta was keen in her picture being taken and used for the researcher's work (with her permission) as she takes great pride in her mantas, sombrero and overall attire.

exploitation of natural resources, supervising trade, administering justice and reporting back to the Court in Europe.

In the early colonial period, there were extensive debates on the human nature of *indios* (Albó, 2008) which were influenced by notable figures like Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas. De las Casas witnessed the atrocities carried out by the Spaniards in the colonised territories and documented them in his infamous *Brevissima Relacion de la Destruccion de las Indias* (de las Casas, 1552). Some of these reports of brutality and enslavement in parallel with the evangelising nature of the Spanish conquest (after a Papal Bull had been granted) possibly influenced Queen Isabel de Castilla<sup>42</sup> to change her testament in her deathbed to incorporate the protection of indigenous peoples in the new territories, effectively granting them the same status (*de jure*) as other subjects<sup>43</sup> of the Crown (de la Torre y del Cerro, 1974). The Audiencias facilitated the introduction of the *mita* system, which was established to force indigenous people to work their lands in exchange of keeping ownership over them. This extortive ethnic-based exploitation also introduced a specific tax regime that was mediated through local *caciques* (indigenous leaders, subjugated to the colonial authority, but serving as link between both). This fiscal regime targeted indigenous populations, who had to pay taxes on top of the work they carried out within the *mita*. The immigration from Castile to the colonies, as well as the introduction of African slaves<sup>44</sup> facilitated interracial blending that led to a complex caste system. Colonial taxation heavily drew on this caste system in order to establish who owed tithes to the Crown, as the vast majority of ethnic identities were homogenised under the fiscal category of *indio* (Harris, 1995), but different statuses were also awarded based on gender. This *ethnification* of financial structures, alongside the labour exploitation regulated by the *mita* explains why some *indios* gave up indigenous sartorial practices and avoided using their language to escape racial taxation (Stephenson, 1999).

Parallel to the economic and labour system imposed by the Audiencias, colonial authorities in collusion with religious missions introduced a sense of modernity and development that equated to the erasure of indigenous traits in favour of the *criollo* or *mestizo* customs (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006). This process saw the transformation of indigenous clothing, birth names and the adoption of Spanish as *lingua franca* when outside indigenous communities.

The introduction of racialised hierarchies also had a strong gendered component. Lugones (2008) argues that the colony not only introduced a fragmented system of exploitation that subjugated indigenous peoples, but that this system was also gendered in the same patriarchal and heterosexualised way that pervaded social relations in Europe. In short, this meant that both gender and race informed the status and consideration given to individuals. Lugones denounces how the burden of colonial oppression and subjugation would be twofold for indigenous women and gender variant people, including *sodomites* (Suárez Saavedra, 2017; de las Casas, 1552). At times, indigenous males would facilitate this subjugation themselves (Lugones, 2008). Therefore, gendered and racialised oppression are both considered to be

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<sup>42</sup> The Catholic Queen, of the Trastámara dynasty, who was the ruler (and funder) at the time of the Spanish conquest.

<sup>43</sup> Whilst this possibly didn't mean much since the majority of subjects of the crown lived in poverty, scarcity and survived à la picaresque, this modification went beyond the debates of whether indigenous peoples had a soul and were human.

<sup>44</sup> African slaves were barely introduced in the Andes and surrounding areas that would become Bolivia. Of those who were brought in and survived the exploitation of the mines, most escaped the harsh conditions of the Altiplano and settled in the lower and warmer Yungas valleys (Northeast of La Paz).

colonial artefacts intersecting individuals in different ways (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006; Lugones, 2008; García-Pacheco and Lazarte, 2012).



Fig. 2 - Las Castas, 18th century, Mexico. Museo del Virreinato (Anonymous).

### *The 1952 revolution and the indigenous advent*

The Great Depression triggered by the defeat in the Chaco war (1932-1935) saw the weakening of mining, the control of foreign currency by the State and the burnout of traditional political parties, which led to the emergence of a new party, the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement, hereinafter MNR). In the 1951 election, the MNR obtained a partial victory but did not rise to power due to the interference of a governmental military junta. After street revolts and insurrections in La Paz and Oruro the military was defeated and the MNR finally rose to power on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1952.

The MNR introduced a series of radical reforms which included universal suffrage<sup>45</sup>, access to education, the unionisation of the peasantry and the 1953 land reform (Ticona, 2003). These

<sup>45</sup> Illiterate people did not have the right to vote until then, meaning the majority of the population were excluded, most of which were indigenous.

reforms were part of the overarching “Plan de Gobierno de Revolución Nacional” [Government plan for national revolution] launched to impose a capitalist modernisation of the State (Toranzo, 2008; Ticona, 2003). The new regime created state-owned mining and petrol companies and was politically inspired by Argentinian Peronism and Mexico’s PRI (Albó, 2008). This translated into adopting a political model where the MNR was consolidated as a powerful and all-pervading party supported by the police and popular militias of miners and peasants created by the new government.

In the years after the revolution, the bourgeois and mestizo left undertook a cultural campaign that sought to acculturate indios (Stephenson, 1999), grouping them into unionised campesinos (peasants), transforming their struggle into a class-based one class that avoided any references to indigeneity (Crabtree, 2008; Albó, 2008). This campaign included a literacy programme targeting rural areas which highlighted hygiene and values inspired by Hispanic tradition (Albó 2008 & 1993). Toranzo (2008) and Stephenson (1999) claim that the 1952 Revolution brought about a neoliberal whitewashing reformist project, whilst also opening an economic space that had long excluded those with indigenous background, allowing them the possibility to engage and thrive. With the aim of overcoming the racial tensions of the past and eliminating ethnic conflicts in the new state, the regime promoted an erasure of indigenous knowledge by creating a new social category (Albó, 2008). The term indio was given up in favour of the term campesino (peasant). This process of modernization attempted to create a more unified and homogenous society that ascribed to the mestizo identity, removing any vestiges of indigeneity (Stephenson, 1999; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006).

The agrarian reforms dismantled the hacienda system transforming the landscape into a mishmash of small peasant allotments adjoining large latifundial land owned by agro-industrial oligarchs. This reform saw the emergence of rebel latifundial landowners from the Eastern lowlands (cambas) against landowning peasants from the highlands (collas), as they perceived them as government protégés (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006). The MNR government was overthrown by the military in 1964 but the reformist agenda continued. In an attempt to reach wider population, the new dictatorial government started broadcasting its programs on the radio in Quechua and Aymara using the Catholic Church. Despite the initial goal of spreading propaganda, these broadcasts ignited instead a sense of belonging to indigenous communities among rural inhabitants, increasing awareness of their indigenous cultural identity (Albó, 1993 & 2008).

The opening of economic and urban spaces resulted in migration from rural areas to the cities’ peripheries to provide domestic labour for the wealthier mestizo families (Stephenson, 1999). This migration saw the emergence of the figure of the cholo, indigenous people who migrated to urban areas and embodied a mix between both traditional and metropolitan lifestyles and customs. Younger generations born after 1952 who found themselves living in the cultural borders between the city and the countryside started opening their eyes to the reality of indigenous people being a majority in the country, and used the weapons provided by the acculturation process to articulate their struggle and their identity formation (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006; Albó, 2008).

This incursion of indigeneity into urban space saw the development of Katarismo in the late 1960s and the end of the military-campesino pact. This indigenist revolutionary movement paved the way for the opening of political recognition of the indigenous majority, refusing the campesino label and embracing their lost indigenous heritage, using the very tools provided by the education reforms of 1952 (Albó, 2008). Rivera Cusicanqui defends that Katarismo emerged

as a result of recovering the long memory of indigenous struggle that triggered a 'decolonising way of thinking' (2006). This decolonising thinking included political and violent means to bring down the neo-colonial state (Fanon, 1986; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006). Kataristas had overcome the amnesia of systemic oppression and recovered the long memory in the same ayllus that supported Tupaq Katari in the 1780s, leading to Bolivian independence in 1825. Eventually, Katarismo facilitated the advent of ethnic politics and the arrival of Morales in the new millennium.

The 1952 state collapsed as a result of the instability caused by ongoing military coups, a series of general strikes by mining unions and the hyperinflation that plummeted the country into economic depression (Albó, 2008). This gave way to the MNR embracing neoliberal reforms from 1985 onwards, privatising state-owned companies and promoting the 'relocalisation' of mining workers (Stephenson, 1999), which effectively made thousands of miners redundant. The new neoliberal state acknowledged the importance of ethnic politics, possibly influenced by the events triggered by the fall of the soviet bloc and by the pressure exerted from international bodies including the IMF. Until then, both right and left parties had disdained indigeneity as a primitive trait of peasants, even miners had repudiated Kataristas as they saw them as indios "whose ownership of land rendered them essentially petit bourgeois" (Albó, 2008:24).

The advent of ethnic politics culminated in the 1993 general election. As Stephenson (1999) points out, this plebiscite saw white mestizo Sánchez Lozada seek appeasement and legitimacy among peasants and indigenous populations for his neoliberal reforms by inviting Cárdenas as vice president and right-hand-man (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006). Cárdenas had Aymara roots, had militated with the Kataristas and was a self-proclaimed indigenous rights activist. It was the highest government rank ever occupied by an indigenous person. This union in favour of change correlated modernisation with miscegenation (Stephenson, 1999) representing the male authority in the figure of the white mestizo president (Sánchez Lozada) and the feminine embodied by the indigenous vice president (Cárdenas). A similar discourse of miscegenation, change and modernity was subsequently embraced by the symbolic union between Morales and García Linera in 2003.

The new neoliberal paradigm was ambivalent as it reintroduced new globalizing and neoliberal economic policies, whilst highlighting social and indigenous issues. The relocalisation of miners relegated them from the proletarian Avant-guard that had dominated since 1952 in favour of the indigenous peasants who were not affected by the neoliberal reforms as they were used to informal trade and economic instability (Albó, 2008). The 1994 constitutional reform defined the country as pluricultural and multi-ethnic, introduced an intercultural and bilingual education reform and benefited indigenous communities by recognizing their territories through the introduction of Tierras Comunitarias de Origen (Originary Community Lands). Indigenous presence in local government increased from then onwards. The year 2000 saw new clashes popularly known as 'water wars' due to the privatization of the water and sewage services in Cochabamba. Indigenous chief Quispe blocked access to La Paz and cocalero<sup>46</sup> leader Morales organized revolts in Chapare, eventually forcing the government to impose a state of siege (Albó, 2008). The violent clashes, alongside the increasing indigenous presence in congress and the violent repression led Sánchez Lozada to fleeing the country, triggering the 2005 election that saw the election of Morales as first indigenous president.

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<sup>46</sup> Cocaleros are peasants who cultivate or exploit coca leaf plantations. They have become key influential actors within the current government's economic policies.



The inauguration of Morales as president supported by García Linera as vice president staged the marriage between two opposing forces in Bolivia: the *originary* indigenous and the white mestizo. Morales, a cocalero and Aymara activist, and García Linera, former Katarista guerrillero and self-proclaimed bridge between indigenous people and the middle classes (La Razón, 2005; García Linera, 2008), formed a peace-making duo that promised to appease and stabilise the country and unite its people (Mayorga & Córdova, 2008). This symbolic union between the oppressed and the descendant of the oppressor revived older discourses that had previously been used by capitalist, bourgeois apologists and neoliberal oligarchies in the 1990s (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006; Albó, 2008 & 2002), this time with an alteration in roles.

Despite the political propaganda, these types of unions between the dominant criollo or mestizo and the dominated indigenous do not happen in a historical and social vacuum. The arrival of the indigenous agenda brought about by MAS (Morales' party), sparked tense debates around regional autonomy tainted with racist connotations and resistance in the eastern lowlands inhabited by the wealthier elites and mestizo landowners (Albó, 2008). For the most part these reforms aimed to remove "the vestiges of neo-colonialism" (Crabtree, 2008), diminishing the power of the Catholic Church, promoting bilingual education, establishing landholding rights for ayllus, acknowledging the rights of sexual and gender diversities, and controlling the exploitation of the country's rich natural resources (Mayorga & Córdova, 2008).

If the statistics of the 2001 census showed a high proportion of mestizaje and indigeneity (62%), the advent of the Morales administration only heightened the fears of a new Aymaran hegemony that would ignore the traditions and cultural specificities of other ethnic groups (Toranzo, 2008). Indigenous activists and intellectuals including Quispe Huanca (2018) and Rivera Cusicanqui have advocated for an indigenous hegemony to decolonise Bolivia including all indigenous peoples, not only the Aymaras (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006 & 2015). Paradoxically, the detractors of Morales and the MAS challenged the new government from different and opposing perspectives. The fears by other ethnic groups support the idea that indigeneity in Bolivia is far from being embodied by a monolithic indigenous identity, as there are historic power imbalances between the different ethnic ascriptions. Some defend the idea of Bolivia as a mosaic of rich mestizajes (Toranzo, 2008) where the possibility of embracing multiple (and contradictory) identities conveys their understanding of social groups and their way of experiencing and navigating life.

### *Contended racial identities*

Thinking of indigenous populations as a monolithic, homogenous group is naïve and ignores the racial and ethnic reality of differing Bolivian communities. Despite the hegemonic discourses that present indigenous people as a uniform and well-defined entity (Stephenson, 1999; Toranzo, 2008) this very definition serves the white mestizo and criollo elites in their quest for control and dominance over indigenous communities and their territories (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006). Crabtree (2008) highlights the differing political stances held by indigenous peoples living in the Altiplano (Western Andean highlands) and those scattered in the eastern lowlands, including a long history of suspicion and rivalry between Aymaras and Quechuas and other groups. In certain areas in the Altiplano ethnic consciousness is sublimed with deeply rooted traditions of class politics (Crabtree, 2008) that emerged as a result of the modernising project initiated with the 1952 Revolution.

Enlightened criollos re-defined indigenous people under a patronising light and pushed them to the margins of civilisation, the market economy, cultural and social life, leaving no possibility of

becoming a part of the modern nation (Larson 1995) or the social contract. At the same time, the definition of *criollo* or *mestizo* equated to individuals who could “pass as white” (Stephenson, 1999, Rivera Cusicanqui, 2015). This obsession for distancing themselves from being regarded as indigenous served the purpose of legitimating their dominance. Passing as white was achieved by means already mentioned (sartorial practices, the use of Spanish, imitation of Europeans) as well as rejecting indigenous knowledge and tradition and becoming an “acculturated *mestizo*” (Harris, 1995).

The mere definition of *mestizo* is contested and fluid depending on the setting and the context. When opposed to *criollo* or indigenous it carries economic, spatial, political and racial implications (Stephenson, 2009). Whilst Stephenson talks of *criollos* and *mestizos* as the dominant elite in Bolivia, directly descendent from the Spanish rulers and who sat at the pinnacle of the power pyramid, this same concept is challenged by Rivera Cusicanqui’s (2006, 2013) and Anzaldúa’s (2009 & 1987) writings on *mestizaje* as an identity that is more ambiguous and problematic in terms of power and interrelatedness to both indigenous and Spanish settlers. In Anzaldúa’s case she also considers American settlers as the equivalent of the Spanish rulers in México. Both authors agree on the fact that *mestizaje* takes on board visible indigenous traits and tries to dilute their blemish by assimilating Western models of labour, social hierarchy, family structure, communal relationships, and education, establishing an agreement of who deserves to be included in the social contract. Indigeneity constitutes an original sin that must be purged through changing behaviours and practices (Anzaldúa, 1987), but that fails to achieve its goal since it is in the interests of the white elite to keep the subservient nature of the indigenous visible through their skin (Stephenson, 1999), in an unconscious manner this is symbolic of the fears of the white (Fanon, 1986) and *criollo* elites.

On her part, Rivera Cusicanqui (2015) has proposed the identity-based notion of *ch’ixi*, meaning ‘grey’ to refer to a decolonised *mestizaje* proud of its roots. The *ch’ixi* identity emerges as a result of an awakening to the historic oppression experienced by indigenous populations, who overcome the loss of consciousness imposed by whitewashing reforms and recover the long memory of indigenous struggle (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006 & 2015). *Ch’ixi* identity also acknowledges its European and white heritage, but rather than presenting their coexistence as harmonious and coherent, it appears as a contradictory and contested identity that rejects sterile notions of hybridity, which Rivera Cusicanqui criticises through making an analogy of the mule (a sterile product of mixing two different animals). She goes on to describe *ch’ixi* as representative of the Andean *cosmovision* (worldview), since it is a term that embodies contradictions, tensions, complementarity, ambivalence, dislocation, fluidity and a cyclical history. Her argument is underpinned by a rejection of the Western idea of *mestizo*, which is based on the pacification of contending opposites through incorporation and degradation, creating a symbiotic space inhabited by anxiety (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006). She criticizes the figure of the *official mestizo*, who is a character without a commitment to the past and who becomes a turncoat looking at personal gain from dominant powers of right and left. This official *mestizo* damages Andean movements by promoting a paternalist and victimised view of indigeneity, and subtly rejects the indigenous he appeals to (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2015). The official *mestizo* relies on the father state, which exerts a patriarchal rule to safeguard the personal and collective masculinity of official *mestizos* (Lugones, 2008; García-Pacheco & Lazarte, 2012). It is worth noting that in parallel, Rivera Cusicanqui was equally critical of the official feminist (2006) or ‘gender technocrats’ (Monasterios, 2007; Jiménez-España, 2019) co-opting discourses of sexual and gender liberation through an ethnocentric, NGO-funded discourse and position (see section 2.1.4). Other scholars have been equally critical of the

pervasive presence of NGOs competing in the poorest areas of Bolivia (see Northern Potosí, where some participants came from) where they have also tried to influence and impose specific economic models (Le Gouill, 2015).

Rivera Cusicanqui is very critical of the populist discourses that rather than acknowledging indigenous communities, impose categories that further marginalize them, such as the label 'originario' (*originary*). Originario conveys a link to the roots of the 'original' peoples, keeping them outside modernity by relegating them to an archaic and unmoving identity (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006; 2015) where old colonial divisions are reinforced. Ch'ixi implies working in a space where contradictions prevail, and polarity creates an intermediate contested space where transformations become possible.

In line with Rivera Cusicanqui's contested ch'ixi identity, Albó (2008) analysed census data on ethnicity and self-identification and concluded that it is possible to self-identify both as indigenous and mestizo, depending on the space navigated and the purpose of one's actions within that space. Crabtree (2008) suggests that this identity-based fluidity makes Bolivia a country with a majority of mestizos, rather than indigenous populations, building on the idea that it is possible to self-identify in different ways. The 2001 census revealed an ethnically confused reality where indigeneity and mestizaje were closely intertwined and enmeshed, with an underlying close relationship between ethnicity and social status (Crabtree, 2008). In short, indigenous and mestizo identities often overlap (Toranzo, 2008).

This analysis on the viscosity of racial and ethnic identities lays the foundations to understand other embodied identity aspects that may present in Trans Bolivians lives, and how these, alongside gender variance, influence their everyday experiences and navigation of space. Zavaleta (2008) sums up the discussion on mestizaje in Bolivia by saying that current discourses about indigenous and mestizo demographics only convey the possibility of multiple identities, an undeniable pervasiveness of indigeneity in the Bolivian social fabric, and a primarily indigenous backbone, but say very little about people's attitudes and behaviours. This makes it difficult to make assumptions based on ethnic categories alone, as other factors including class (Albó, 2008) or gender (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006 and 2013) play a great role in determining the ambivalence, contradictions and ambiguities of the different identities potentially embodied by (Trans) Bolivians.

### **3. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

This chapter will introduce how the research question and aims are approached in terms of method, epistemological and ontological underpinnings. The chapter also links the epistemological and methodological approaches to the analytic process and theoretic framework used to make sense of the research questions. Besides including a description of the data gathering process, recruitment and ethics, the chapter also includes some reflections on researcher positionality as this has affected and influenced the overall research process.

#### **3.1 EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Since the key underlying aim of the research is to understand Trans lived experience in Bolivia, and more specifically, the experience of the everyday life intersected by (Trans)gender identity and race (Mora & Lugones, 2014), I have drawn on a flexible application of a critical realist ethnography (Barron, 2013; Porter, 1993) with some phenomenological aspects. The process of developing a suitable methodology and method has been a rather complex one and has experienced several shifts and adaptations, from a purely thematic analysis to an interpretive phenomenological analysis, including creative and visual methods that have evolved and been adapted in parallel to the thesis: almost in instalments and shifting as the researcher delved in reflective practice and evolved both academically and in her relation with the research topic and the participants themselves. Although the particular topic of the research is not particularly new, besides grey literature there was little academic literature in the Bolivian context, and also as previously explored most of the work stemmed from NGO or epidemiological settings. As Ploder and Hamann (2020) point out, when there is no specific guides for a research problem, we must apply the practical skills from our other contexts (professional, academic or everyday) to investigate and produce knowledge. Such has been the case and reason behind finally arriving at an ethnography with phenomenological hints and a critical realist stance since this allows for an interpretation of participants' accounts of their 'actual' life while analysing the underlying explanations of the 'real' world, as this has the potential to "accept the contested nature of reality [while providing] a means of addressing possibilities" (Barron, 2013).

On the one hand, according to Genzuk (2003) ethnographic research allows for the intensive exploration of language and culture of particular fields whilst incorporating a mix of interview, historical (the contextual research section 2.3) and observational methods. Ethnographic interpretations interrelate and intermesh bodies, minds and artifacts implying spatialities and temporalities (Schatzki et al. 2001, cited in Ploder and Hamann, 2020). In this research, the relationship established with participants allowed not only for their interviewing, but also for observations to be made in informal and non-research situations, as well as the collection of pictures and other artifacts (namely food and small gifts<sup>47</sup> given to the researcher as a sign of affection) and for the collection of (grey) literature that helped understand the sociohistorical background of participants. On the other hand, phenomenology is in principle concerned with human experience as it unfolds and is lived (Lavery, 2003). Its aim is therefore to shed light on apparent banal aspects or trivial details of everyday experience that may be overlooked and taken for granted, unearthing their meaning and creating understandings about these context-bound experiences.

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<sup>47</sup> These included *salteñas*, cholita earrings, history books, music, small handmade llama toys, bracelets and general Bolivian food. None of these have been included as artifacts directly analysed in the research due to their intimate and friendly nature, but have possibly and unavoidably influenced my perception of participants and interpretation of their accounts.

Ontologically, a critical realist stance is most suited to the interdisciplinary nature of this research since it can help disentangle the complexities (Danermark, 2002) presented by the research context, the theoretical framework, the diversity of participants and the sometimes-problematic position of the researcher. In lay terms, critical realism distinguishes between the real and the actual or observable world; the first existing independently from human perception and the latter being the result of experiences and perspectives. The interrelation between both means unobservable structures cause observable situations that can be exclusively comprehended when individuals are aware and know the structures leading to these situations (Warwick University, 2020). On a theoretical level, critical realism holds no aspirations towards hegemonic theories that explain social reality and experiences with a single imperialist or reductionist lens (Sayer, 2004).

The phenomenological aspects that are salient apply mostly to the participants accounts of their lives and experiences. On an ontological level, a phenomenologically informed research rejects looking at the world separately from individual experience and the meanings derived from everyday encounters (Lavery, 2003). The premise is that meanings of human experience can be understood as the experience itself occurs. Phenomenology allows inquiry into what specific experiences mean for those who have the experience, considering they are conscious of living the experience and describing it in detail (Moustakas, 1994). This interpretivist framework is laden with conflicting approaches (Smith, 2013), from the more positivist proponents who defend a comprehension of individuals' lived reality through bracketing or reducing one's prior understandings of the reality observed (Husserl, 1962) to those who reject such positivist stances and defend the situated meaning of being in the world (Heidegger, 1996). One of the tenets of phenomenological interpretivism rests on the ontological perspective that there are multiple realities that can be constructed and altered in specific cultural, historic and social contexts (Lavery, 2003). Therefore, in a wider sense, phenomenology is concerned with epistemology more than with strict philosophical stances, as it proposes how knowledge is produced within a value-laden relationship between that which *knows* and that which is *known*.

In recent decades, phenomenology has been implemented as foundational framework for researching Trans experiences (Singh, 2013; Burdge, 2014). Phenomenology has been queered through the practice of academics including Ahmed (2006), Goldberg et al. (2006) or Crowley & Rasmussen (2010) whose take on queer phenomenology has focused on representations of intersectional identities in a post-colonial setting.

Burdge (2014) enlists the following factors influencing queer theorists' rationale to adopt phenomenological frameworks to research Trans experience:

- Phenomenology highlights trans-situated knowledge,
- values Trans agency,
- acknowledges lived experience as a valid source of knowledge,
- prevents researchers to an extent from imposing their agenda,
- and finally provides philosophical underpinnings to comprehend Trans lives as they unfold.

Within this research, I partly drew on Ahmed's key contribution to queer phenomenology (2006) and its focus on the body, namely, what it means for queer bodies to be situated in space and time. Ahmed contends that bodies are malleable and change when navigating the world and encountering other individuals or objects. The recognition in voicing the experiences of Trans people may produce positivist echoes, since Trans people provide accounts of what it means to

be Trans in *the real world*. I reject essentialist descriptions of experience in the Husserlian fashion and rather, I embrace the premise that Trans people are able to provide powerful insights into their own everyday experiences (McKinney, 2005).

The data analyses were thus informed by a critical realist stance with some phenomenological aspects. In addition, intersectionality (as framed by decolonial and intersectional feminists) provided some conceptual currency to explore Trans experiences of the everyday, looking at how Trans Bolivians make sense of their lives intersected by gender variance and race within a decolonising space. Such an analytic framework will allow studying how social relations are arranged and how gender variance and non-conforming identities rupture and propose different alliances within these relations, challenging prescriptive norms (Ahmed, 2006).

Theoretically speaking, after careful consideration I decided to also incorporate a decolonising feminist lens, in line with the main discourses being held in Bolivia (Lugones, 2008; Rivera Cusicanqui 2010; Galindo, 2013) and the regional context (Segato, 2014; Mariátegui, 1924b). Drawing on Lugones (2014), decolonial feminism is presented within post-colonial contexts in the global south (namely Latin America) following the work of Crenshaw's intersectionality and the wave of critiques against white-middle class feminism that ostracises the experiences of non-white working-class women. In Lugones' writings, she goes beyond intersectionality advocating for the concept of intermeshed identities, in order to avoid turning the subaltern into monstrosities constituted from divided non-normative parts. While I acknowledge the risks of embracing this theoretical framework due to my problematic background, my theoretical choices are explained further within the reflexivity section. Decolonial feminism is presented in other contexts alongside intersectional feminism (see Andalusian transfeminist movements), claiming a stance to decolonise our own knowledges, practices and norms within apparently hieratic societies. In my own way, I incorporate the decolonial feminist approach, valuing and acknowledging the other non-dominant and repressed knowledges, and looking at ways of decolonising my knowledges, cognitions and beliefs within my own original background, my current research context, and my relationship with the participants in their setting.

In regards to the academic discipline accommodating the current thesis, despite it being produced under the auspices of the School of Applied Social Science at the University of Brighton, and being guided and supported by supervisors within psychology (at the crossroads with community psychology and anthropology) the researcher is not a psychologist and straddles across different interests and disciplines in a sort of picaresque free rider style (drawing on theories, proponents, studies and approaches that best serve the purpose and aims of the thesis and the complexity of the topic). The academic interest in transness has historically been linked to psychology, psychiatry, medicine and so on, and likewise race/ethnicity have gathered the interest of multiple disciplines (from critical race studies to international development and relations, global migration, etc). As a researcher, I feel disjointed (just as this thesis may feel at times like Dr Frankenstein's creature) straddling across disciplines and interests, possibly in line with my initial training as translator ('apprentice of everything, master of nothing') and the disperse nature of my mind. In more practical terms, despite the apparent desirability of interdisciplinary research and approaches, it is hard to fit in both on a personal and academic level in any one single discipline, possibly a reflection (projection perhaps) of other aspects of my life, including my sexuality, background and profession(s) (always having a taste of different contexts and situations for linguistic purposes, but never quite belonging to any once the work is done). Possibly this feeling of alienation is also reproduced and perpetuated by over-specialised and constrained disciplinary boundaries, despite attempts for more holistic

integrative approaches. This feeling is also reproduced within this research in relation to the participants, the context, the topic and the dynamics of each encounter. Either way, despite having the same feeling of banishment that El Cid must have felt, roaming around academic interests and disciplines, possibly the one where this thesis (but not necessarily me as a researcher) possibly sits most comfortably would be somewhere at the intersection between cultural and gender studies.

In conclusion, I adopted a flexible research approach accommodating a decolonial and intersectional theoretical framework, echoing other studies on the Trans experience which have incorporated both (Barron, 2013; Porter, 1993; Singh, 2013; McKinney, 2005; Burdge, 2014).

## **3.2 METHODS**

### ***Data collection***

#### **Participant profile**

The fieldwork period spanned from June until September 2017. During this time, 19 people (n=19) were interviewed across urban conurbations (La Paz, Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, Sucre, El Alto) and rural areas (Llallagua, Oruro, Northern Potosí, Yungas, Lake Titikaka region, Trinidad) of the country (see Fig. 1). The initial research targeted 25 people to be interviewed. However, due to various limitations (heightened risk in some areas i.e. Santa Cruz, El Alto; financial constraints; or the difficulty to reach certain geographic areas due to precarious/dangerous infrastructure i.e. Guanay, El Chaco) this was reduced to only 19.

Of the participants, 8 identified as Trans women, 6 identified as Trans men, 2 as 63travesti63, 1 as transformist and 2 identified as gender fluid (incorporating pre-Hispanic non-binary gender identities). The age of participants ranged from 18 to 57 years old. 3 participants self-identified as being Quechua, 2 as white Criollo, 1 as Guaraní, 1 as Moxitano, 1 as unspecified indigenous ethnicity and the rest self-identified as mestizo.

11 of the interviewees were willing to take pictures and share images of their quotidian lives for the research. Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 2 and a half hours and all participants met face to face with me at least once. 2 interviews were carried out through Skype and 2 pre/post interview meetings were also held on skype due to lack of participant availability or my own unavailability due to travelling in another region.

#### **Consent**

Initial participant consent was due to be written and signed. Participants had to sign two copies of the consent form: one for myself and one to keep themselves. However, after the first interviews, it became apparent that some participants could not read or write, and others were reluctant to sign paperwork with their name attached to trans-related content. An updated ethics application was submitted and approved including the issue of consent.

Thereinafter, I read the information sheet and consent form to those participants who could not read or write. Verbal agreement, recorded through digital tape was sought after handing the information sheets and consent forms to be kept by the participants. This way of agreeing was extended to those who were fearful of attaching their name and/or signature to a form related to Trans content or non-normative gender identity.

This way of getting consent seemed more effective since all participants were agreeing to be recorded (audio), hence granting verbal consent after comprehending the research information seemed a better way of establishing a rapport without disrupting the interview flow.

For the sake of transparency and content reliability, after each interview, I made the interview transcriptions available to participants, so they could add or remove parts that were not accurate. Participants also had the choice of withdrawing from the research after reading the transcript and requesting that their information was not used. Up until present time, no participant has contacted me to request their data be removed from the research. I explained to all participants that post-analysis it would be more difficult to remove their contribution (other than the visual data).

### Interviewing setting

Originally, before the research areas extended across the country, interviews were going to take place in safe community spaces known to me. However, after the modified ethics application was approved, permission was also sought to include other safe spaces notwithstanding participants safety. Hence, safe spaces were changed to adapt to participants' availability and personal safety. In La Paz, this meant using the community space of 'Virgen de los Deseos', a local feminist centre that provides support for women escaping domestic violence, legal information and counselling for young people and women, and includes several social spaces including a café and a library. In other instances, participants requested that interviews take place in familiar places, for instance the Ombudsman office, which is the workplace of two of the interviewees. On several occasions, after having met participants on several occasions, some other participants requested that interviews take place in their home, when relatives or next of kin were in the house but not interrupting the conversations. In these cases, I gauged her personal safety through having established a prior cordial relationship with participant, and/or having been introduced to them by other participants or key actors (activists, public servants, work colleagues, friends and/or relatives). As explained in this chapter, snowballing was the main recruitment method considered, which also granted me the opportunity of having some prior information about participants, allowing a degree of screening and personal safety for both me and each participant.

Changing the safe spaces where interviews take place could raise ethical issues, however, the interviews took place after I met at least once with each participant to talk about the research and explain what was expected. During these meetings, a rapport was established whereby the participants were given the chance to choose the space where they felt safer whilst being interviewed. At the same time, allowing flexibility for interviewing spaces meant that I could have access to other intimate spaces navigated by participants, namely their domestic sphere or workplace and make valuable ethnographic observations of the participants in relation to these spaces. These spaces included local youth and feminist spaces, the Ombudsman office, a public university, participants' homes and workplaces. Before each meeting, I provided two people with anonymised information about the participants scheduled to be interviewed and my whereabouts, and a procedure of how to react in case I didn't make contact within a specific time frame (between 2-3 hours maximum since calling/messaging them letting them know an interview had been started).

### Safety considerations

In addition to informing the two in-country contacts about my whereabouts during home interviews, and in order to comply with CREC safety guidelines, one of my supervisors (Dr



Artaraz) was contacted through WhatsApp, which allowed me to share my specific location and coordinates. Frequent contact with Dr Artaraz happened as a result of his knowledge of the country, the language and ease of contact with my local links. If visual/phone contact had not been made with either the two in-country contacts or Dr Artaraz following the pre-established time frame, all three parties knew to get in touch with other personal contacts to check my whereabouts, in case of still not having any information, local police would have been contacted and a message passed onto the Spanish consulate.

A coded message was also in place with the in-country contacts (asking about 'Chata', a dog). After attending a health and safety whilst doing overseas research workshop organized by the University of Brighton, some strategies were discussed in case of emergency or physical threat. Since I knew the country beforehand, I was aware of specific risks in different regions, and where I was new to an area I would get familiarised beforehand in order to identify where to go for help, food, transport, etc.

### Language

I am a native speaker of Castilian Spanish and am familiar with linguistic localisms, so all the information provided to participants was accessible to them. Both the information sheet and consent form were handed to the participants in Spanish (see Appendix).

On some occasions, the participants' first language was not Spanish and they often swapped onto speaking Quechua or Aymara. During the transcribing of this interviews, I sought the help of two close friends who are native speakers of Quechua and Aymara, who helped transcribe and translate the meaning of these sentences and expressions.

Reflections on how the use of my specific Spanish dialect affected the research and played a role in my interactions with participants in relation to culture, race and class will also be explored in the Insider/outsider section (Ethical considerations).

### Anonymity and confidentiality

A brief oral explanation of the aims of the project, my own background and logistics of the interview (taking pictures, interviewing, the debrief) were given to each participant, stressing issues around anonymity and confidentiality and how these would be kept. Anonymity and confidentiality were granted through the use of pseudonyms in interview transcripts. Some of the participants interviewed are either activists publicly visible or have been known in the public sphere for some other reason, so confidentiality and anonymity were more difficult to keep in these cases. Some of the most publicly outspoken participants demanded their name be shared without changing or choosing alternatives. After careful consideration and negotiation this has been respected, without specific mention to whose name is a pseudonym and whose names are real.

## **Recruitment**

### Recruitment criteria

The participants recruited for the research were people over 18 years of age identifying as Trans. I met with activists from local LGTB organizations<sup>48</sup> in my previous visit to Bolivia in 2015 and decided to use the umbrella *category* Trans acknowledging the fluidity of gender variance, and

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<sup>48</sup> These include *Comité de las Diversidades Sexuales y Genéricas de Cochabamba* (Committee of Gender and Sexual Diversities), *Colectivo TLGB La Paz* (TLGB Collective of La Paz) and *Red Trebol* (Trans network of Bolivia).

for the sake of flexibility to accommodate people who identify as Transsexual, Transgender, *Travesti*, *Transformista*, Drag Queen, or other non-binary gender identity (this was previously covered in the preamble to the thesis). I was interested in exploring all identities, especially those who do not conform to hegemonic *machista* notions of masculinity/femininity embodied in white straight cisgender bodies.

Two participants contacted me when they were under 18 and asked for their accounts to be included into the research once they turned 18.<sup>49</sup> Participants were either Bolivian nationals and/or permanent residents of Bolivia in order for their experiences to be influenced by the Bolivian sociocultural, geographic and political context.

I aimed at recruiting a diverse sample in terms of different social and ethnic backgrounds for the sake of gathering narratives of people with a wider variety of experiences. I was aware of the ethnic specificities of La Paz where a majority of indigenous working-class population contrasts with the wealthier and paler inhabitants of the lowlands of Santa Cruz and the mixed backgrounds of the tropical Cochabamba. Initially, the research was going to take place in the 'central axis' of the country (La Paz-Cochabamba-Santa Cruz de la Sierra), but after the first interviews the fieldwork area was extended to include Trinidad (urban capital of Beni department), Potosí, Llallagua (rural Potosí department), Sucre (urban capital of Chuquisaca department), El Alto (La Paz department) and the Yungas (La Paz-Coroico area). See map below (Fig. 4).

This change was a result of the snowballing recruitment strategy adopted. Post interview, many participants spoke to their friends and acquaintances, some of whom contacted me directly to partake in the project. After careful consideration I felt it was important to echo the voices of other Trans people living in socially and geographically diverse areas of the country to reflect how Trans peoples' lives vary in smaller towns and rural areas, compared to the central urban axis already mentioned. Trinidad, for instance, is a small town in the tropical Amazon area, where there is a big concentration of Moxeño and Tsimané people. Potosí and Llallagua are key mining enclaves, with a majority of Quechua people. Sucre is the constitutional capital, and includes a mix of white mestizos, middle-upper class elites and Guaraní and Chiriguano people. Finally, the Yungas region is found in the lower tropical valley outside La Paz which concentrates the majority of AfroBolivians in the country. Regardless of these specificities, it is worth highlighting that the account of each participant is reflective of their own circumstances, and does not represent or create a universal metanarrative of what it may mean to be Trans and any ethnic/racial identity. I also decided to include these places due to the difficulty of conducting extensive research in Santa Cruz as a result of the increased insecurity and instability in the city at the time of fieldwork<sup>50</sup>.

Inclusion criteria also required participants be willing to have the interviews recorded for the purposes of transcription, analysis and ease to make (ethnographic) observations. I spoke to all participants at least twice within the context of the research: these encounters aimed at explaining the research context, carrying out the interviews, handing pictures and or/forms and talking about the pictures provided and experiences that were salient within those pictures.

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<sup>49</sup> Both underage participants turned 18 during the period spanning June-September 2017.

<sup>50</sup> While the I still visited Santa Cruz, my stay was shortened due to the wave of drug-related crime and killings and the increase in violence and hate crime against Trans people reported in the city, which could have put both myself and participants at risk of aggression.

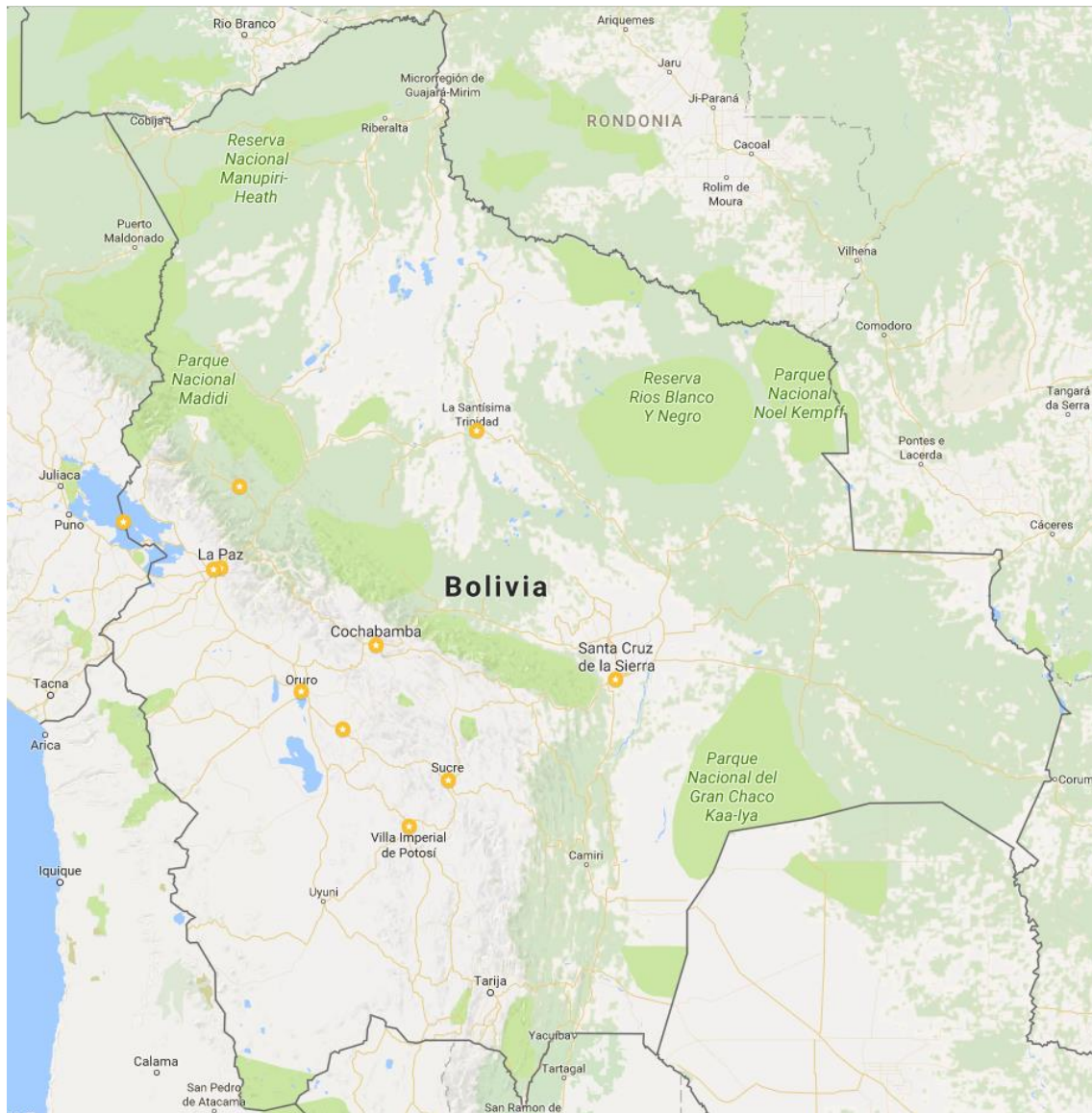


Fig. 4 – Map of Bolivia (scale 1:100km). The yellow dots indicate the locations participants come from.<sup>51</sup>

### Snowballing

In the interest of avoiding sampling bias, I had initially devised a strategy to capture the attention of potential participants by using paper adverts in local venues, educational settings or local community centres which participants within and outside the LGTB sphere are likely to use. However, after talking to people within Trans groups and other friends of mine knowledgeable of the context, this approach was discarded in favour of snowballing. Consequently, snowball sampling was the main recruitment approach adopted. Whilst establishing research logistics in March 2015, I had the chance to access organizations that provided her with contacts of people who may be interested in participating in research or would have further contacts. In parallel, I relied on my Bolivian friends (within and without non-straight and non-cisgender circles) to introduce me to participants interested in sharing their experience.

Snowballing increases bias (Heckathorn, 1997) and raises serious ethical considerations (Boyd and Roque Ramírez, 2012), but allows for easier and safer access to “hidden populations”

<sup>51</sup> Google Maps (2017).

(Browne, 2005) for whom being publicly acknowledged as member may have threatening consequences (Heckathorn, 1997). Snowball sampling as a recruitment strategy allowed me to draw on participants personal networks to gain access to their Trans acquaintances. This approach provided a more reliable and safe exchange for both me and the participant: I had previous information about the potential vulnerabilities or needs of the participant, and participants had some background information about me, my motivations and my relation to the research and the *intermediaries*<sup>52</sup>. This strategy avoided to a certain extent issues of group categorization (Browne, 2005) by beckoning people who may not necessarily socialize or navigate Trans-specific spaces or groups.

### Vulnerability

Within the context of the study, the participants in this research were considered to be vulnerable due to their non-cisgender status and/or non-normative identity and heightened exposure to violence and aggression (as explored in previous chapters). Although I was reluctant to further victimise individuals by casting labels such as '*vulnerable*', the reality of the Bolivian context for many Trans people is one of invisibility, discrimination and hardship (Baldivieso, 2017; Los Tiempos, 2017).

Also, considering the demographics in different parts of Bolivia, it was quite likely that participants of the Andean region (La Paz) would self-identify as belonging to an indigenous background, whilst those of the Llajta (Cochabamba) would be likely to have more mixed or mestizo identity and people from the tropical lowlands in Santa Cruz may have presented with whiter skin, a mixed background or Spanish ascent. While race in itself is not the main focus of this research, its relation to non-normative gender in the decolonial context is key to understanding the Trans lives and their experience. It was also paramount to understand the decolonizing agenda promulgated by the government and other social agents. As explained in the introduction to the research, the contextual history of Bolivia is that of a colonised nation where slavery and ethnic cleansing were practised in the times of Spanish colonial rule, and where certain hegemonic racisms prevail in the collective consciousness and practices of the nation (Erbol, 2008; Servindi, 2008). This could explain why in a country where the majority of people claim an indigenous background, they have remained a silent majority until recently. The relevance of these racial tensions for the research came through the higher *vulnerability* of participants who claimed an indigenous background and who were likely to have experienced further discrimination due to their race.

### The role of technology

This research would have been heavily hindered without the use of technology. From digital voice recorders to, analogic cameras, laptops or mobile phones, each step of the research has been affected or influenced my own and/or the participants use of technology. Without resorting to voice recorders, I would not have been able to focus on non-linguistic aspects of the interviews, limiting ethnographic observations and neglecting the interrelated nature of conversing through qualitative interviewing. The majority of pictures provided by participants through their mobile phones, using WhatsApp to share their photographs with me (with the all the ethical implications of disclosing my personal number to participants). Many of the pictures were also taken using the mobile phones of the participants, and only a few had originally been taken with analogic cameras and then were either scanned or a picture was taken using a mobile

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<sup>52</sup> This is further discussed in the insider/outsider section.

phone.

The original idea for asking participants for pictures of their everyday included providing them with disposable cameras. This imposition triggered ethical considerations that I did not consider initially, namely diminishing the participants' agency and ignoring their own relationship with technology and how they captured their life outside the research demands.

### **Research Aims**

The present project has applied a qualitative approach to answer the main research question [Q] *How do gender variance and race shape Trans people's lives in Bolivia?* and the different research aims which hereinafter will be referred to through the following:

Q1 *'To explore the experiences of hardship of Trans Bolivians and get a better understanding of their life conditions within the realm of the public and the private'*

Q2 *'To understand how race and/or ethnicity may influence the daily lives of Trans Bolivians'*

Q3 *'To understand the relationship between non-normative gender and race in the context of decolonisation'*

Q1 was explored through qualitative interviewing<sup>53</sup>, using open ended questions focused on the development of participants' gender identity throughout the years, probing about negative situations experienced in the everyday in relation to being Trans, finding out whether participants have developed any personal mechanisms to overcome hardship, and how relatives and next of kin have reacted and experienced the participant being Trans. Visual ethnography also supported Q1, through the collection of pictures that were presented by some of the participants<sup>54</sup>. Certain pictures produced by the participants did not depict current times, but instead portrayed intimate settings and/or spoke of personal memories of childhood within a family context, thus supporting further verbal accounts of personal history and identity development.

Q2 was explored through qualitative interviewing, organized under open-ended questions drawing on self-definitions of gender and race, probing about difficult situations as a result of gender and/or race, exploring how race and gender may be related and how this relation is negotiated in the everyday and finally, asking participants what the categories of man and woman mean to them. Participants pictures and ethnographic observations also helped approach Q2, although in most cases these observations were also in relation to my own race and the impact it had when the participant and myself were seen together accessing or leaving a safe space, or meeting informally to hand in forms or pictures. Prior to interviewing participants, I held informal meetings with them to introduce myself, explain the aims of the research and hand in the consent form and information sheet as well as agreeing a place and time for the interview to take place. These encounters allowed me to reflect about my own relationship and influence on the participants, the topics discussed and the setting. Further

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<sup>53</sup> See Annex 1: Interview questions

<sup>54</sup> Although only two thirds of participants provided me with pictures, all participants were interviewed, and their verbal accounts have the same value and relevance as those who sent pictures. I explained the aims of capturing visual images of the everyday lives of participants and negotiated with those who did not feel comfortable enough to share images but wished for their story to be heard and taken into consideration.

reflections on the insider/outsider role of the researcher in relationship to the participants and the context will be discussed in section 3.4.

Finally, qualitative interviewing was also used to explore Q3 through questions specifically asking about perceived safety levels in public or private during night or daytime, desired changes in the social fabric to improve participants' everyday interactions and navigation of private and public space, and addressing use and accessibility to public spaces and services. Q3 was also examined through ethnographic observations, as explained earlier, I met participants<sup>55</sup> at different times and contexts and had the opportunity of observing how different spaces are navigated by participants and how people negotiate their interactions with them. Pictographic data also supported enquiry into Q3, since many of the pictures provided depict quotidian intimate and public settings where gender and race play a visible part in how these spaces are navigated.

The qualitative approach is underpinned by semi-structured interview, pictographic data and ethnographic observations. This approach allows for a phenomenological analysis on the lived experiences conveying what it means to be Trans in Bolivia, and how the immediate social, private and cultural space is transited. It also situates gender and racial dynamics in a specific historic context, untangling issues of meaning, practices and representation (Towle and Morgan, 2006). Using qualitative interviews allows for a textual reading of individual experiences on many levels, and adding ethno-methodologies (pictures, interactions and observations) provides an analysis of the cultural and historic context of the participants implies looking at the material conditions in which their Trans identities and cultures are created (Namaste, 1996).

Drawing on the issue of Trans representation and mis-representation, stemming from criticism about how medical practice has narrowly defined Trans individuals (Rosario, 1996) and how queer theory has represented Trans issues and realities under ethnocentric lenses, Namaste (1996) encouraged queering the research approaches adopted in a way that could shed light on Trans lives without undermining them or their experience. This has been the underlying guiding principle I followed by throughout the different stages of the research, namely the choice of visual elements to support the accounts of participants (Pink, 2009; Mitchell, 2011).

### **3.3 ANALYSES**

As pointed out earlier, the analysis has consisted of developing ethnographic interpretations with some phenomenological aspects, congruent and fitting with qualitative analytical techniques (McKinney, 2005). Inspiration then to use a similar analytic frame within this research, comes from looking at queer feminist phenomenologies in the style of Crowley & Rasmussen (2010) or Ahmed (2006). Ideally the coding process should reflect a narrative parallel to that of Ariadne's thread, where the researcher's choices can be slowly traced through a labyrinth of data items. Due to the intrinsic qualitative nature of this research, I am aware the possibility of a single analytic solution is not only questionable, but also rather undesirable to approach the data and reflect my position as researcher.

One of the issues of phenomenological frameworks lies in the risky temptation of looking at human experience and the world and developing universal truths (Laverly, 2003). Since it is the situated nature of knowledge (Haraway, 1991) that is of interest within this research, the analytical approach to the data was partly loosely informed loosely by hermeneutic

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<sup>55</sup> This includes those who were interviewed through Skype too. I have had 1-1 contact at some point prior or post interview with everyone interviewed.

phenomenology. Lavery (2003) describes this interpretive approach as focused on historical meanings and their influence on individuals and society. This approach beckons for an ongoing exercise of self-reflection by the researcher in order to locate biases, tensions and how these are embedded in the interpretive process.

For analytic purposes, I drew on Haraway's (1991) idea of knowledge as situated, as it provides a rationale for the ecological validity of the experiential accounts provided by participants. This in turn links with the phenomenological emphasis on the historicity of understanding as an individual's situatedness in the world (Lavery, 2003; Smith, 2013). This element of historicity is defined as the cultural, social and historical background of a person, which permeates all the lived experiences and ways of engaging and understanding the world. Historicity is relevant to to analyse participants' memories of identity development, both in gendered and racialized terms, within the specific socio-cultural Bolivian contextual research which forms the backbone to chapter 2.3.

During the analytic process, I kept a detailed record of how the interpretive process unfolds, reflecting on the different analytic choices and the rationale for each step undertaken. Tracing my movement throughout the research process and reflecting on my position and relation to the data and participants draws on hermeneutic phenomenological approaches that acknowledge the key role of the researcher as agent in the process of meaning production (Lavery, 2003). An analysis of my research and fieldwork journal was also considered as secondary supporting data, in order to keep track of my analytic and thought processes during the data collection, transcription and analysis. Also, further readings took place on the concept of decolonising, to analyse what it means theoretically and for participants. Drawing on the originality of the data set, the analytic orientation focused on allowing the data to 'speak up' avoiding a grounded approach that aimed at letting the specificities and richness of the data to show.

For the sake of rigor, the methodology chapter was rewritten several times providing a rationale for both the method and methodological approach. While I initially considered carrying out a thematic analysis because of its epistemological and theoretical flexibility (Terry & Braun 2013; Yip, 2007; Lewis & Marshall, 2011, Clarke, 2017), it was deemed restrictive in the way it provides coding 'meaning units' (Willig, 2013) although possibly some conceptual tools of thematic analysis may have marginally remained in the analytic process. The phenomenological aspects were kept as a compass that helped producing knowledge about the subjective experience of participants (Willig, 2013) while keeping a critically realist foundation to interpret and analyse the ethnographical data, supporting images and some of the data included in chapters 4 and 5. The completion of this chapter was dependent of the researcher's engagement with the relevant literature from Trans studies, decolonial thought and some post-colonial and queer readings. This rewriting included rethinking the use of the photographs provided by participants as part of the main dataset. The issue behind this lies on the potential risk of perpetuating the objectification of Trans people, although from a different lens, and also on the relevance of what the images add on to the research overall. Eventually, some pictures were included as artifacts that support understanding the accounts by participants. The analytic process, and possibly the thesis as a whole, has resembled Penelope's weaving of a shroud, that rather than disappear overnight would find new threads that complicated its completion.

### ***Interview data***

The data was approached following an open coding and considering different possible interpretations (Patton, 2002). The themes resulting from the initial open-coding were neither be representative nor generalizable, but rather provided arguments for discussing and understanding how Trans Bolivians make sense of their life, identity, self and relationship with their surroundings (both people and places), accounting for the intersectional elements of their identities.

The intersectional theoretical framework has guided the construction of the semi-structured open-ended interviews and informed the interpretation of the data. In conjunction with a phenomenological approach, I developed a lens through which looking at Trans accounts intersected by gender and race. In the most basic phenomenological sense, the coding process also paid attention to issues of intersubjectivity, time, space and embodiment.

Despite this hermeneutic phenomenological influence, it was important to reflect on how verbatim transcripts of interviews did not capture all knowledge and meaning within a conversation, which linked to the rationale of including my observations as well as photographic data as visual support to better comprehend and grasp participants accounts and experiences (Mitchell, 2011). Keeping an open mind to the interpretive coding process allowed for what Lavery (2003) and van Manen (1997) call analysing what is said 'between the lines', highlighting the importance of not simply what is explicitly said, but also what is silent or cannot be spoken about, the absence of being. Looking at these silences also triggered self-reflection of the things we take for granted or think of as evident (Lavery, 2003).

### ***Photographic data***

The pictures produced by participants were initially going to be analysed but have since been incorporated as illustrative elements that accompany and support the findings. Drawing on Mitchell's (2011) and Pink's (2009) work on using visual data, I looked at the photographs as supporting evidence to underpin the participants' experiences, providing visual cues that helped understanding the meanings behind lived experiences. The themes identified within the interview transcripts were therefore challenged, supported or questioned by the pictures produced. I drew on the participants' own explanations (where they are available, in sort of photo elicitation exercises) of what the pictures mean to them, and looked for the elements that may be present or absent within them. Drawing on the earlier reflection on looking at what is said between the lines, I drew on Mitchell's (2011) advice to look at not only what is present within an image, but also what latent or absent elements were telling something important within the framed experiences.

### ***Reflective Journal***

Parallel to the analysis of interview and visual data, following on the hermeneutic phenomenological approaches (Lavery, 2003; Smith, 2013) I have included notes from my research journal in parallel to the interview data mostly through footnotes and other interpretations, in order to understand biases, assumptions and feelings as they unfolded during data collection in the field (Singh, 2013). The reflective journal was written looking at how personal biases and assumptions about participants may influence data interpretation and findings.



This self-reflexive practice is loosely informed by hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, whereby an ongoing conversation about the experience was sustained while living that very specific experience (i.e. data collection through direct contact with participants in the field and subsequent exchanges), revealing and questioning how my interpretations of participants experiences are constructed alongside my own subjective experience of navigating and sharing space with them (Laverty, 2003).

Drawing on Davis (2002), my practical introduction of ethnographic elements was done adopting a reflexive/organic approach. Within this approach, my role as researcher was acknowledged as central to the knowledge production and interpretation of the coding, adopting both a qualitative philosophy and technique. In practical terms, this meant looking at meaning as situated in context, acknowledging the existence of multiple realities and emphasising researcher subjectivity and reflexivity as resources (see Behar & Gordon, 1995). Coding became open-ended and fluid, allowing for depth of engagement which included conceptual overlaps, contradictions and limitations (Hodson et al., 2011). I reproduced this organic and iterative coding process where codes were not fixed so they could evolve and change, and several coding sweeps took place. This analytic process reflected an abductive logic of reasoning, which will be further explained below.

A reflexive/organic approach also allowed for an explicit social justice agenda to emerge (Clarke, 2017), where the voices of the participants could be echoed in a different light to that prevalent in existing literature (i.e. epidemiological work, NGO reports, etc). This also included a critique of how Trans lives have been portrayed within a Eurocentric and medicine-dominated discourses (Lugones, 2014). Finally, a reflexive/organic ethnographic approach fitted with my commitment to ethics of care as an ethical underpinning to understand my relationship with the participants and my role within the project (Gilligan, 1977 & 1982; Mendoza, 2014).

The coding process reflected how data was conceptualised and how the conceptualisation shifted and developed. This materialised through paying attention to concepts around embodiment and intersubjectivity as lens to explore how Trans Bolivians orient themselves in relation to lived experience and how they experienced the world surrounding them (Kafle, 2011). These ethnographic phenomenologically-informed tools have allowed me, on the one hand to identify ideas related to knowledge contained within the Trans body, and on the other to explore the personal relations and interrelatedness of Trans people with their environment, whilst keeping an open mind to other themes and ideas 'speaking up'. I aimed for a critical realist engagement, ensuring the coding process reflected the developing understanding of data following an abductive reasoning process. In short, my role within the analysis was that of a storyteller, engaged in interpreting the data through the lens of my own cultural membership and positionings, theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments.

The phenomenological orientation allowed attention to look at certain experiential knowledges, analysed in depth the role of the body as vessel of lived experiences, cognitions and knowledge, in contact with other bodies and the immediate physical space.

#### *Analytic process: abduction*

Abduction is widely framed as a flexible and more transparent way of navigating the gaps and exploratory process between the literature and the findings within the empirical data (Limpscomb, 2012; Reichertz, 2004). At the beginning of the research project I accessed limited grey literature on the subject of Trans experiences in Bolivia and the wider LAC region. While this provided an early understanding of some of the issues found in the field, I also read some

Trans studies literature with reluctance to go into in-depth reading at early stages. Some of these readings, alongside my preconceived ideas of the situation of Trans Bolivians helped to an extent with the qualitative design of my interviews following a quasi-deductive design. The preparatory visit I undertook to Bolivia in 2015 allowed me to hold informal conversations with Trans people and get some understanding of how their lived experiences unfold in the everyday. Although these conversations were by no means part of the data corpus, they nevertheless served to further inform my research design from an inductive viewpoint, mixing both deductive and inductive approaches. As the data collection unfolded, I kept on collecting relevant grey literature that contributed further to my understanding of Trans experience in Bolivia, alongside the accounts of participants, once again allowing a navigation between the literature and the empirical. Upon finishing the data collection and finishing transcribing, I was pointed towards abductive approaches to make sense of how my analysis and research logic were unfolding. Thinking of abduction, the literature review becomes an iterative process that explains the new findings within the analysis and vice versa.

In practical analytic terms, my coding was flexible and consistent, and informed by this navigation between the literature and the data items within the transcripts. It must be acknowledged that the first analytic interpretations took part during the interviews per se. As the qualitative interviews unfolded with each participant a conversation developed where I would draw on my semi-structured questionnaire to keep track of the items I wanted to explore, but leaving room for further exploratory enquiry. The very act of actively listening to participants and conversing with them has an implicit interpretive analysis of what is said, whether it is interesting or relevant, and therefore needs to be probed further. This happened to an extent in most interviews, where the majority of questions were answered consistently, but a plethora of related topics were visited through the pure art of conversation flowing and the rapport built between myself and the participants. The qualitative interviews at times included questions from the participants to the researcher, who gauged what information to disclose, and was compelled to think and rethink her position within the research and her own role within the gender spectrum and the Bolivian culture. Taking into consideration ethical issues around self-disclosure and safeguarding boundaries, I embraced my ethics of care commitments in order to open up to participants to the extent where they questioned my own worldviews, sexual orientation or cultural background.

### ***Contextual research***

Contextual research in the thesis refers to the collation and compilation of historic resources, ranging from essays, news pieces, historic accounts, NGO/development reports, magazines, letters and other resources that are mostly considered grey literature but help bridging the gaps in academic literature to contextualise better the current scenario inhabited by Trans individuals by explaining the historic developments that shaped understandings of gender variance.

This aspect of the thesis was initially triggered by the lack of specific academic literature relevant to the RQ and the overall topic, and has eventually contributed mostly to setting the historical context chapter and to underpin the analysis and conversations around indigeneity and decolonisation in Bolivia. As with any other method or data, there are ethical issues in using archives for setting the research context, namely epistemological ones in terms of validity of accounts and stories, issues of representations, competing accounts/discourses (Fogel et al., 2010). This type of research has had extensive use by queer and feminist scholars/activists (Frank, ) undertaking research with racialised and queer people, going beyond academic production into other sources that provide a more holistic and transversal picture of the

circumstances surrounding the participants in the research (while also fitting within a critical realist epistemology) as well as the language in which stories and accounts are produced. This approach research hence also incorporates the idea of orientation (Ahmed, 2006b) and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991). Frischherz (2019) goes as far as claiming that as queer feminist scholars the incorporation of archival research aspects to studies has the potential of queering knowledge production (Frischherz, 2019), possibly due to the limitations and epistemological considerations already mentioned, and possibly due to the centrality of the researcher navigating items whose relevance may be possibly gauged based on her own values, political commitments and moral compass. In the specific context of this research, I have adopted an ethics of care approach which extends to critically engaging and assessing the strengths, limitations and biases of all the resources used to carefully build the narrative and backbone for this thesis.

### 3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This section will analyse the ethical questions raised in relation to the methods used and a brief account of how my researcher role as insider/outsider has also played a role in relation to the methodology and the data collected. Whilst it is a work in progress, I am currently writing about ethics of care as the guiding principle behind the data collection and my relationship to participants. This section is not yet included within the work submitted.

#### Positionality: the Insider/Outsider role

One of the risks of this research lies in its geographic and disciplinary context and its focus (*who* is studied and *how*), and how this could potentially perpetuate an ethnocentric approach common of queer studies (Namaste, 1996) by exploiting the 'subaltern other' living in a post-colonial setting for the benefit of Eurocentric academia (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006; Kirkwood, 2012). Locating my researcher position and personal background is paramount to understanding the power dynamics at stake in this research, as well as the nature of the interpersonal exchanges that have taken place with the participant. Also, the eagerness of Western academia to absorb and reproduce exotic knowledge about the marginalised and subaltern (which have the power for disruption) while omitting the socio-historic and cultural context where it emerged, is a historic issue that requires special attention.

Failing to account for a number of potential projections from myself onto the participants, the setting and the topic researched would undermine the very purpose of engaging in research in the first place. Reflecting on the situated nature of knowledge production (Haraway, 1991) and the ecological validity of personal accounts, I have reflected about my own position and journey in relation to a series of identity aspects:

**Race:** I self-identify as a white Spaniard working in a post-colonial setting undergoing a strong decolonizing social process. My own whiteness positions me as an outsider in most Andean regions and mining areas, where locals mostly perceive me as a foreign traveller (usually from neighbouring countries like Chile, Argentina or Colombia) or an aid worker. Interestingly, my whiteness is heightened when in company of participants self-identifying as indigenous or mestizo. In places like Sucre or Cochabamba I have passed unnoticed due to the colour of my skin, but my gender appearance and expression has remained still noticeable across all regions. When I am in the company of people who identify as white Criollos, this positions me as an insider in relation to them, but this further positions them as outsiders in

their own context, namely in Andean and mining areas (in several occurrences of walking alongside a white criollo participant, the public have addressed the participant in English demanding ‘you speak Spanish?’).

**Gender:** I self-identify as a queer woman with a rather androgynous appearance at times. Whilst this positions me closer to most participants and mostly as an insider within non-normative gender and sexuality circles (Boyd and Roque Ramírez, 2012), it also highlights my position as a social *outcast* within the wider society, both in white and indigenous contexts (it must be noted that this is no different to my own experience of navigating space in my native Spanish context). While in public during daylight, the majority of women addressed me if I were a male, with children and men referring to me as ‘the one looking like a man’. At night time most people assumed I was a male, which I used to my own advantage to keep safer. Whilst in the company of Trans participants who can *pass*, their passing accentuated my own queer appearance and attracted scrutiny from passers-by. In contrast, when I was in the company of Trans people who do not pass, their gender variance would be accentuated when seen in public with myself, turning both of us into social outsiders/outcasts. Attributions change according to place and context, and this is no different in Bolivia, the UK or the researcher’s original Spanish context.

**Background:** My Spanish nationality positioned me as an outsider in the Bolivian context. Drawing on the colonial history set out in the introduction, this raised many questions and even triggered tense exchanges<sup>56</sup>. My nationality had a mixed reception, namely in places like Sucre or Santa Cruz, where many participants enjoyed being *seen* in my company making me feel an insider in some social contexts. This attitude was replicated in contexts where people identified as belonging to middle-upper class despite racial self-identifications. This problematic *passing* will be explored in-depth in the critical reflection chapter (not yet started). In terms of class, my family background is located in a mixed rural and urban working-class context, which granted me a certain insider role when travelling across mining areas (mostly Oruro and Potosí) once a relationship was established with participants and other acquaintances of mine. This aspect was outweighed in urban working-class areas (i.e. El Alto) where I would again become an outsider due to my perceived whiteness and queerness.

**Language:** Being a native speaker of Spanish facilitated my access to the Bolivian context allowing an insider role to be enacted. At the same time, the different accent and dialect would initially trigger participant’s curiosity in terms of origin (my nationality was never immediately obvious for the participants unless they asked me). At the

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<sup>56</sup> During a fund-raising charity event organised after a Trans woman was stabbed in El Alto, I engaged in a conversation which ended in a verbal confrontation with two attendees who were intoxicated with alcohol. The polemic aroused through a direct questioning of my motivations for attending the event (i.e., questioning whether I was a lesbian, queer or else) with the underlying motive of questioning my whiteness, class and nationality occupying a ‘poor, indigenous’ neighbourhood of El Alto. I explained my background in terms of class and gender/sexuality and provided some explanations as to why I was in Bolivia, and more specifically the fund-raising event, but all of these were dismissed with expletives and name-calling (i.e., *Queen Sofia*, in reference to the consort emeritus monarch of Spain). In retrospect, I attended this event with a white criollo Trans friend, who maintains a tense relationship with those involved in the event, so this probably heightened antagonism against me.

same time, the fact that many participants were native speakers of indigenous languages with Spanish being their second tongue, meant that in some conversations I became an outsider, although this proved useful in further probing about different cultural symbols, understandings and ideas. Also, issues with translating participants accounts into English will be further considered paying attention to the risk of losing contextually rich data and linguistic nuance.

**Knowledge/familiarity with space:**

The fieldwork period marked my fourth visit to Bolivia. Therefore, the country's geography, culture, politics and history were not new to me, as I have already navigated some of the research spaces before and have an established network of friends and acquaintances. This helped provide an insider view into certain issues and facilitated assessing risk and safety, but at the same time I may have incorporated some assumptions in relation to the research context, potentially hindering the collection of more in-depth narratives on specific issues (i.e. not probing participants on certain experiences taken for granted in terms of relation to the intersections between gender, race and space).

**Eurocentric background:**

My current position within Western academia (having attended university in Spain and the UK) positions me in a complicated outsider position that risks perpetuating certain discourses through the use of specific research methods and theories. At the same time, my upbringing and basic education in Spain meant I had historic and cultural knowledge of Bolivia and the Latin American region within a context of coloniality that influenced my filtering of certain information. Since the lens through which I see the world is influenced by my own lived experience, this unavoidably will also inform how I have related to participants and the post-colonial Bolivian context, namely an ambivalent feeling of colonial guilt echoing Jung's idea of the collective unconscious (Jung, 2016), a sort of painful connection through the problematic colonial legacy of having common ancestors bequeathing us all with trauma. Reading queer theorists, adopting inter-disciplinary methods or even applying snowballing can inform and influence research accounts (Browne, 2005). To mitigate this and record my feelings for transparency's sake, I kept a detailed personal diary of all the tensions and observations made in relation to my positionality. A deeper reflection into epistemological validity and *whose* knowledge is validated and *how* will be included in the critical reflection section.

**Research benefits:**

While part of the original interest in the topic emerged from questioning my own gender as an androgynous *bollo* (exacerbated by the condition of possibility opened by the decolonising conjuncture) and background (in terms of hegemonic discourses of what it means to be Spanish, mostly aligned with homogenous, Christian, white notions which ignore the complex history and blending of different civilisations), my previous experience of working and living in Bolivia put me in contact with gender variant and non-heterosexual people who became friends, and

who highlighted the different issues and possibilities faced by gender and sexual diversities in Bolivia. These friends, their shared knowledge and my own experiences all highlighted the saturation of the Trans population with specific NGO and development ideas of gender and sexuality, whilst acknowledging the plethora of opportunities for self-identification, integration with ethnic/racial/class identities, and revaluation of their position in the new nation. One of the observations that emerged was the limited availability of academic research (or any publication for that matter) that had focused on the experiences, knowledges and stories of Trans individuals beyond epidemiological, NGO and official reports, briefs and constrained lenses. On another level, the relevance of carrying out this research lies on the crisis of violence and invisibility experienced by Trans Bolivians, and the lack of interest shown by policy makers and academics on the topic. Exploring marginal discourses that capture the daily experiences of Trans people who may have an indigenous background in a post-colonial context is essential to understanding the wider implications and challenges that Trans people of colour and Trans people in general face in the Global South. An analysis of how the Bolivian equality legislation and human rights regulations trickle through into Trans people's daily lives by collating their narratives and experiences with public spaces will be a valuable tool for community groups and policy makers in the field. The idea of making a positive contribution to the people who made a research project is the motto advocated by many queer and Trans scholars (Goldman, 1996; Namaste, 1996) and other academics who also identify as activists (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006) in the field. But in getting tangled up with research it is easy to forget that Trans people's lives exist outside philosophical and academic discourses, which is one of the reasons why the present research frame and title have turned away from the initial enunciation. Another unexpected outcome of this ongoing research has been on my own personal journey since beginning the PhD. While one of the specific interview questions probed participants to speak about their identity formation and development throughout time, and the role their family played in this period; a similar parallel reflection process was triggered in my life. Since the PhD started I have undergone a series of personal transformations as a result of loss of loved ones, re-establishing contact with estranged relatives and the consequent restoration of family memories (through pictures and accounts) that were absent or discontinued. The relevance of this in relation to the research and my understanding of the role of personal accounts for identity formation will be explored in-depth in the critical reflection section, where both personal and academic growth are entwined.

Reflecting on one's lived experience through the body allows a connection with what people are saying. Hence, building on Namaste's (1996) reflections, I have tried to adopt a "related perspective" in order to prevent simplistic approaches to a post-colonial context. The underlying aim is to avoid framing the Bolivian (Trans) culture as monolithic and producing individuals whose knowledge is capitalized in neo-colonial cultural sites (including academia).

## Other problematic reflections

### *'Traduttore, traditore'*<sup>57</sup>

This Italian motto holds a certain degree of truth within the current thesis. Before engaging in this research, I worked for over 10 years as an interpreter, mostly in community settings. The people that have been encountered in such linguistic interpersonal exchanges have been involved in a myriad of situations, from academic conferences to court cases, going through banal occurrences of the everyday to more serious and life-changing situations. The role of the interpreter was never felt as that of an invisible agent that merely 'echoed' the voices of those whose first language wasn't English. It is usually said in linguists' circles that whenever a translator or interpreter becomes visible, it is due to an error or mismatched rewording. This rather simplistic claim frames the interpreter as little more than a vessel for words to be turned into a new code intelligible in another language. Needless to say, I have always resisted this naïve and positivist view of the 'invisible' interlocutor. There is a basic acknowledgment that without the interpreter's input two people would not be able to sustain a basic conversation, and at the same time the role goes beyond words. It is nearly impossible to translate cultures, backgrounds or symbols, but the interpreter's aim is to think of the ideas people are conveying and try to best accommodate them for the sake of communication and intelligibility.

This professional disclosure serves the purpose of drawing a parallel and explaining how the role of interpreter is embedded and influences my practice when I look at the world and interact with it. Therefore, I contend an unrelated neutral research position by acknowledging my visible filtering role reflecting on my gendered, racialized identity who belongs to specific class and cultural locations. This brief statement also introduces the reader the rationale for applying (or not) certain methodological approaches within the research context. Throughout the time spent reading, writing and interviewing people I have constantly experienced an internal tension stemming from my role as insider/outsider in the different spaces navigated, and how the relationship with participants has been negotiated.

Going back to linguistic considerations, the very idea of translation in this thesis is rendered impossible as ideas, realities and systems of reference may after all be untranslatable and any translation is a mere approximation, reduction and paraphrased regurgitation to get the reader closer to an alien mental and sociocultural reality (see the parallelisms with trying to translate gender variance across cultures and contexts with limited and reductionist terms). In basic psycholinguistic terms, I encountered the basic issues around semiotics where the signifier, signified and referent are completely random (Saussure, 1931), as well as the differences of systems of reference (Quine, 1997), not only in translating from Spanish to English, but also in comprehending and analysing the dialectal differences between my own idiolect/dialect and that of the participants.

This reflection aims at highlighting that in spite of the different language spoken and sociocultural space inhabited by the participants, this research will not provide a literal translation of the participants accounts (as this would be fairly impossible) but neither will it be a translation of a post-colonial context into a regurgitated version that can be easily accessed within Western and Eurocentric academia, i.e. the centre of knowledge production that uses the language of power –English. Instead, I will invite the reader to become uncomfortable in sharing a contended and complex position that requires straddling across genders, races, cultures and

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<sup>57</sup> Translator, traitor

spaces in order to begin to understand the different setting and quotidian experience of individuals situated in a given context and time (i.e. Trans people in modern Bolivia). This parallelism between the different roles enacted in my professional life echoes Anzaldúa's words in describing the frustration and alienation experienced by people living in the borderlands between races, cultures, gender, sexualities or class, who struggled and suffered a "sense of *language* inadequacy and its accompanying *discomfort*" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 83) when navigating opposing spaces and identities.

Despite the attempts to produce a faithful translation, one that bears truth, especially from a feminist sense à la Spivak (1993), there is an unquestionable border crossing where both Anglo-Spanish coloniality of power merge forces to transform the meaning (Mendoza, 2014) of the Trans Bolivians accounts, to an extent changing the contents and system of reference of their words. This tension of how global transnational exchanges de-territorialise knowledge (Mendoza, 2014) echoes the idea that adjusting and adapting the words of the minorities and marginalised peoples into the language of the majority (or the academic elite) represents a betrayal (Spivak, 1993).

#### A note on the involvement with INGOs:

The researcher acknowledges her past work and relationships with British (Servicio Británico, Aywiña Síndrome de Down) and Spanish (CIPE, Instituto para el Desarrollo Humano, Campaña Boliviana por el Derecho a la Educación, CIPCA) funded organisations in Bolivia, and having navigated as a *guest* the foreign development/diplomatic 'circuit' on a professional level (this included supported non-English speakers visiting projects in La Paz, as well as translating a book on Warisata, the indigenous school in collaboration with Campaña Boliviana por el Derecho a la Educación). Whilst this granted access to a vast amount of grey literature and practical knowledge it also raised some issues on a personal and social level due to some of the specifics associated with this scene: working in neighbourhoods where only mostly highly educated national workers and public officials share space with international diplomats and development workers, being placed in high-security accommodation in well-off suburbs, attending professional events where attendants are usually an economic or academic elite and so on. On a personal level this raised some ethical concerns and issues, especially as the researcher spent much of her time outside this development bubble with Bolivian friends more attuned to her in terms of class, background and interests.

However, despite personal concerns about the possibly problematic (neo-colonial) legacy of international development and its ties to national economic interests (Sanahuja, 2009) and plans (see the coca eradication funded by USAID before their expulsion from Bolivia) (Salazar, 2008), contact with these organisations led to being introduced to a grassroots group in Cochabamba staffed by locals, who had refused international funds in order to maintain a level of independence in their work. While this meant being able to publicly denounce harmful policies and abusive practices at national and international level, it also positioned them in financial precarity but somehow allowed them to work in a different way, enticing the researcher to balance where possible the recruitment of participants, search of resources, attendance of meetings and events in terms of participants who were part of this circuit, and those who were not. Both previous INGO contacts and grassroots groups were equally helpful and willing to help logistically and in pointing towards potential participants to partake in this research (see methodology chapter), and therefore this section is not aimed at tarnishing individual efforts, but rather expose the intricacies of their work.



However, as the recruitment evolved it was clear that even those participants who had never been part of collectives or NGO programmes did have knowledge of their existence through media or online outlets (with the only exception of one participant: Dani in Llagua, whose only affiliation was with their folkloric dancing group). This too, could lead to another chapter of its own on the overall institutionalisation of identities, social movements and groups.

#### **4. ANALYTIC FINDINGS I: 'BECOMING' TRANS (ISSUES INTRINSIC TO TRANS EXPERIENCE AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT)**

The present analysis chapter is the first of two discussing the main overarching interpretations developed from the data transcripts (see appendices for the specific questions asked as these were developed from the literature reviewed) in relation to the research aims (namely understanding the experiences of hardship as a result of societal and structural violence, and issues stemming from possible clashes between gender variance and race/ethnicity). This chapter focuses on exploring a snapshot of the issues intrinsic to Trans experiences and identity development as reported by Trans individuals in Bolivia that may be frequently experienced by Trans people elsewhere.

##### **Issues intrinsic to Trans experiences and identity development**

The aim of this section is to introduce the experiences around (Trans) identity framing, development, hardship and the subsequent reaction and resistance on the socioeconomic, political and cultural level, which can be found not only in Bolivia but in other cultural contexts across the globe (Feinberg, 2006; Halberstam, 1998 & 2005; Stryker, 1994; Stryker & Currah, 2014). These experiences can therefore be framed as *shared* by other gender variant individuals at different stages in their lives. The implications of introducing this divide lies not in an attempt to dissolve cultural specificity (Galindo, 2006; 2013) and dismiss the intricacies of postcolonial contexts (which will be explored in chapter 5) but rather to aim for the opposite: to avoid an exoticizing and voyeuristic perception of Trans experience (Raun, 2014) in the global South, such that it links with paternalistic discourses around the Trans identity as mystical (Jansen, 2017) or supernatural (Feinberg, 2006; Suess 2014).

##### **4.1 (TRANS)GENDER EPIPHANY DURING CHILDHOOD**

In lay terms, an epiphany can be defined as a “sudden [...] perception of the essential nature” or “an illuminating discovery, realization or discovery” of something (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Although these definitions convey connotations of a single point at which a person suddenly discerns or realises about a specific personal event or reality, the definition of epiphany that better illustrates how the word is mobilised in this section aligns with Biblical scripture (per antonomasia, the epiphany of Jesus). According to Britannica (2022), the epiphany of Jesus occurred in different instances, from the Magi’s arrival in Bethlem through to being baptised by his cousin in the Jordan, to the wedding at Cana. This idea of a gradual process whereby his divinity was manifested upon himself as much as upon others provides a more accurate idea of how a similar epiphany may come about to the Trans participants since their early years. This idea of epiphany does not imply that transness is a transient or gradual state (as this would be true of all gender identities, sexualities, etc as the researcher believes these exist in a continuum that is not necessarily linear), but that transness can be the starting original point (regardless of or notwithstanding metanarratives that will be critiqued herein) of an individual since birth but this gets limited or ostracised by the cisheteropatriarchal norm. Also, it could be possible that epiphany covers different stages of participants whose gender variance is more fluid and escapes more binary terms (both cisnormative and transnormative).

The subtheme ‘(Trans)gender epiphany during childhood’ is introduced as the point in which most participants first felt or realised their self-perceived gender did not match binary notions of biological sex assigned at birth, with the related social and normative expectations (Butler,

1990; Aranda, 2018). This idea of discovery is challenged by some of the more vocal and politically engaged participants (see CMM and Esperanza Gracia in subtheme coming out) as perpetuating the colonial patriarchal binary of heterosexual male-female (Lugones, 2007; Oyěwùmí, 1997) with everything in between or outside, being cast as marginal or abnormal.

The first memories of gender variance appear through some participants recalling early experiences of identifying with the opposite sex in daily activities and behavioural expressions:

*“Since I was three or four years old, I feel like a boy, a male, a... do you understand? A man, I think [I am] transsexual because I was born a woman”.*  
Omar, 26 [72-73]

*“As a child, since you don’t see your changes yet, so... I always felt male, so I got used to playing with the boys”.* Paco, 31 [30-31]

In Paco’s case, his claim of ‘not seeing changes yet’ as a child may be an indication that binary differences and gender differences are learnt and socially constructed from early years throughout adulthood (Butler 1990, Vidarte, 2006, Córdoba, 2005), with the young infant assuming whatever gender they feel more comfortable in being an actual possibility. There is another side to these ‘epiphanies of transness’, whereby the binary discordance identified as inherent since early childhood memories can also be understood as a way to essentialise the Trans identity, as some natural state of being prior to any binary imposition (Mieli, 1997). While this is a perfectly legitimate way to understand one’s history in terms of gender, it opens the space for questioning and reflecting about the possibility or risk of essentialising Trans experience as another *natural* state of being itself.

As seen in Paco playing with the boys, these early memories are expressed through a performance of normative gender (Butler, 1990) through games and activities that are viewed as either being masculine or feminine. These activities are validated by the other children who initially accept Paco’s role as a player among the boys, supporting the stabilisation of Paco’s early identity as another potential boy, but this would go on to change as the children start to gender and perceive Paco’s physicality as pertaining to females and girls. Omar shared a similar experience below, in this case the other children start to question why Omar does not wish to conform to roles, characters and colours perceived to be for females, hinting that there is a confusion between how the cousins read Omar physically and link these traits to a particular gendered behaviour. The playground and games expose in the same way that drag could expose, the heterosexual matrix of intelligibility between sex and gender (Córdoba, 2005), as the children are meant to conform to specific roles when playing, depending on their sexual attributes. In the specific cases of Omar and Paco the mechanisms that produce gender identity are somehow revealed, but the chains of causality (the relation between a supposed inner essence linked to an external appearance) are not broken as both children start to be questioned.

*“When I was 3, I used to play with male and female cousins\* and I’d be the [male] black Power Ranger and my cousins wondered why not the [female] Yellow or [female] pink. I didn’t feel it...”.* Omar, 26 [81-83]

Some of the participants who did not ascribe to the any of the Trans labels [transgender, transsexual, travesti, etc] and rather defined themselves through ‘man or woman’ describe having always felt this way. These self-definitions echo again an essentialist nature that can also erase the Trans identity (Galindo 2013 & 2017b; Álvarez Mollinedo, 2013). There is an underlying

greater discussion about identity modes and identifications, since identity can be as essentialising and singular as 'self' is. The implications for this for the Trans experience would include considering other ways of thinking and capturing it. Essentialising gender appears as a double-edged sword, on the one hand *transness* can be in itself an essential and natural way of being (prior to patriarchal binary impositions) and on the other binary genders are expressed as essential (either man or woman, without any other possibilities). As Fuss (1989) states, these tensions around human essence (around gender, race, sexuality) have beckoned for an analysis of cultural and historical specificities (which have been picked and developed by postcolonial scholars and feminists of colour) but also to specific differences that have led to an unresolved tension between essentialism vs. constructionism (one which will not be resolved in this research, but rather will be preserved in the proscenium as the analysis unravels). The discussion about essence often interlinks with terminology around nature and the natural, serving the purpose of dividing, creating hierarchies and organising individuals based on their perceived proximity to nature to justify social differences and inequalities (Haraway, 1991b) – this being gender, sexuality or race (as will be explored in chapter 5 when incorporating the decolonial context into the equation).

*“But I realised I felt like a man more or less when I was five years old, because it is the earliest I can remember. The oldest memory I have, to start feeling different and more comfortable with everything masculine and my desire was always to be a man, I mean I considered myself a man”. Marcos, 31 [53-56]*

*“Since... I can remember. And that’s why I consider myself a woman. Because, I mean, I’ve always felt like a woman... I’ve never had that feeling that men say they have. So since I can remember”. Maribel, 18. [28-30]*

In Maribel’s case, she assumes there is a way men feel or experience within themselves, and rejects having ever shared such feelings, having this as further justification of her identifying as a woman. As earlier mentioned, although these views support and perpetuate a binary divide, it is understandable that both Marcos and Maribel only want to carry on, especially in Maribel’s case as she feels she has been put through enough. There is no questioning of the legitimacy for these self-identifications, as both participants seek an identity frame that feels more authentic (Butler and Williams, 2014).

During their early years, some participants started wearing garments usually worn by the opposite sex. This choice of clothing becomes their way of performing their perceived gender (Butler, 1990) and tends to be an imitation of personal references close to them in childhood, a sort of gendered role model to aspire to for guidance and self-representation.

*“So, I saw my dad, how he dressed, and I wanted to copy some things, I saw him as an example, unlike... my sister who saw my mum as [her] example”. Omar, 26 [91-95]*

*“And I would wear my mum’s polleras, when she wasn’t around”. Maribel, 18 [30]*

*“I like my aunties’ clothes. I remember I’d wear their old satin robes, like silk. [...] I even wore their brassieres; I would do my hair... I didn’t have long hair but I did it. I’d look in the mirror... and so, [my aunties] were a point of reference”. Esperanza Gracia, 48 [38-42]*

The question of points of reference appears later on in life, when many participants speak of issues of visibility, intelligibility and making sense of their Trans identity in society, where the quest for references is paramount in their identity development (Feinberg, 2006). Interestingly, these early experiences cross-dressing or using the clothes of others are also marked culturally, as can be seen in Maribel's case where she would use the typical pollera. Not only then does she embrace and inhabit the clothes of her mum, but these are marked as pertaining to indigenous women and mestizas living in her community and surroundings, thereby showing the difficult inseparability of culturally-specific expressions and notions of gender (Horswell, 2003), these experiences would be different for other participants living in urban areas or where the gendered model to be embraced resembles one of hegemonic Eurocentric beauty standards of femininity or aesthetic coloniality (Valencia, 2014), see beauty contests as described by Aruquipa (2014) earlier and about beauty contests below.

*"Let's see... this was my conflict. Yes, for me it was a conflict when I was a girl, a teenager. The first time I tell my mum I wanted to have women's clothes I was four years old."* Zahara, 40 [250 -252]

*"I wasn't that conflicted, like other boys who have dysphoria and feel their life is conflicted. Not me".* Rober, 27 [45.28]

Most participants did not feel initially conflicted about 'feeling' and enacting their perceived gender, however through being challenged by their immediate family, they become uncomfortable. As a result, Trans identity is framed as deviant and taboo, something to be corrected (as seen earlier in the excerpt by Omar and his cousins) and becomes the reason for reprimanding the gender variant child to conform to the normative gender assigned at birth, as it is the case with Zahara below. There is also a collusion of feelings of transness with medical discourses around gender dysphoria as Rober's statement reveals. This conflation between individual accounts and the influence of medical terms is not specific to Trans people in Bolivia (Córdoba, 2005; Butler, 2014; Ekins & King, 1997). What is more particular to the Bolivian context is the parallel existence of different forms of understanding transness, one of which is materialised by the pathologized/medicalised lens, competing with other understandings that are very specific to the current socio-political context (this is explored in chapter 5).

*"And I pissed my mum off so much insisting she dress me with girls' clothes that she got tired. And [she responded] with a lot of psychological violence – I see it as such nowadays, not back then, neither did she, but now analysing current gender policies this would be called child violence. She dragged me on top of the bed very angry. She pulled my trousers down, showed me my penis and told me: 'you have a penis. You are a boy. If you had had a vagina, I could have dressed you in girls' clothes. But you have a penis. So I can't dress you in girls' clothes, my boy. It's not for you'".* Zahara, 40 [254-260]

Zahara's mother reminds her that she was a boy because she had a penis, therefore linking sex to gender as inherently natural and marked in Zahara's body. Reprimanding discourses ascribe to a definition of gender through biological divisions, although these very same discourses then become the basis through which many Trans people access medical procedures and biomedicalise themselves through hormonal and/or surgical treatments to ascribe to a Trans normative appearance that some see it as perpetuating the binary (Aruquipa, 2013 & 2012; Galindo, 2006 & 2017b). Some other scholars will see this reduction of gender to sexual dimorphism as a colonial Legacy (Lugones, 2014; Gunn Allen, 1992) but this will be further

explored in chapter 5. Another relevant point from Zahara's answer is her revival of the experience interpreted through current lens as psychological violence, whereas the traumatic load of her experience is not to be dismissed, perhaps her work with human rights at the Ombudsman office has vested her with the discursive tools and strategy to articulate her own experience in these terms.

Continuing with sartorial matters, in other cases, clothing become the punishing element for families to force participants to wear in order to conform to their sex assigned at birth (see Omar pictured below).



2 - Omar as a child

*"I even have this picture where my mum forced me into a dress, and I felt like I had been put... [...] I felt very uncomfortable, [it was] like an insult to me". Omar, 26 [84-87]*

In his statement, Omar feels his mother aimed at degrading by imposing a girl's dress. Whereas this memory accurately follows the normative nature of family that often portrays the familial space as one of rejection and discrimination (Whittle et al., 2007). In the case of expected normative behaviours at school, educators played a role in punishing gender variance and reconducting the participant to the expected normative behaviour and symbolic gendered spaces.

*"No, this is for men not women, huh?' And they wouldn't let me play [football] and I didn't understand why I couldn't go into the boys toilet, because the teachers would come and drag me out by the neck saying 'This is not the toilet for you, yours is over there'". Marcos, 31 [73-76]*

These early experiences of *transness* and non-normative expression appear both in familial and educational spaces, the first points of contact that many participants had with an awareness of

being different or somehow rejected because of their (Trans)gender expression, and therefore directed towards the 'right' spaces, clothes or behaviours in line with societal norms (Vidarte, 2005). The role played by institutions in shaping Trans identity will be explored in the following subtheme (4.2).

The contents and analysis of this subsection by no means aim at portraying Trans experience as universally intersected by accounts of 'feeling wrong' or at odds with one's body since childhood. Interestingly many participants quoted in the section frame a personal life story in line with some possible diagnosis or criteria of gender dysphoria to ensure future access to medical devices (Burlton Davies, 2013) as most of the participants who experienced these epiphanies later on embraced biomedical technologies. These epiphanies can conveniently fit into metanarratives of transness experienced through possible contradictions and justifications (Hausman, 1994; Bettcher, 2014). Highlighting these epiphanies serves the purpose of analysing the role that the institutions have played on the development of Trans individuals and their subjectivity from early life: either forcing it to conform into normative binary frames or possibly coercing Trans individuals to self-identify as pathological (blaming transness on family dynamics or lack of adaptation) to end up identifying as distinct from other marginalised collectives that they may have been grouped with (Skidmore, 2011).

In terms of the issue of truth in dealing with metanarratives and the contents of these, when issues of authenticity are at stake (the pervasive demand of authenticity from Trans individuals raised by Halberstam, 2005), it seems relevant and possible to claim the veracity and falseness of some accounts of the contents of these metanarratives. However, as Hale (2006) explained, this is different from claiming that the very metanarratives are true or false. However, Hale highlighted the importance of arguing that many of such metanarratives are false (Hale, 2006).

## 4.2 THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

This subtheme explores the roles that different institutions including the family, the church and the state (through educational and medical establishments) play in resisting, criminalising, pathologizing, normalising and regulating Trans bodies (Sáez, 2005). A good example of this is provided by Esperanza Gracia below:

*"[...] we are equally being restrained, we are being positioned from the view of what is natural, normal and institutional. Because those who give you permission to be normal are the institutions, you see? And there is the Church, the school, the Ministry and... even the Ombudsman Office. We are institutions. So, there you feel normal, you feel protected, nobody is going to say anything to you".*

Esperanza Gracia, 48 [515-518]

While Esperanza Gracia speaks from the perspective provided by her job within the Ombudsman office, her words resonate with the overarching role institutions have in shaping Trans people's lives, since they provide both a sense of normality and abjection in relation to gender. For a further analysis of her perceived privilege as a worker within an official institution see 4.3.3.

### 4.2.1. The family

The family –understood as the immediate circle of people who raise, care, and educate the individual, usually sharing blood-ties and providing some kind of economic support with differences across diverse cultural contexts (Sharma, 2013)– is dissected in this subtheme as having specific attitudes and roles towards shaping the Trans identity. As explored in 4.1, the

family space is usually the first scenario that bears witness of the gender variance and the emergence of Trans identities. Whilst in many cases the familial space reproduces binary gender and rejects the variance expressed by some participants, this very context presents the possibility and becomes the stage where gender transitions start occurring (Saavedra Montes de Oca, 2017) to an extent. On a different level, patriarchal capitalist systems use their other institutions (education, medicine) to manage, favour and locate sexuality and gender in the monogamous and heterosexual regime of the family (Córdoba, 2005), creating the family as a social institution with specific organisation, dynamics and roles (which are gendered based on sexual dimorphism, Lugones, 2014).

As explored in 4.1 although the family is also one of the first spaces to challenge and resist gender variance, this specific issue of family rejection is related and contributes to subtheme 4.4 (precarious lives) as a key element of rupture and hardship in Trans lives. Consequently, the present section will analyse three main responses given to the Trans individual once they start exploring or expressing their gender variance: Abuse, Shades of Acceptance and Taboo.

### Abuse

The subtheme of abuse explores family attitudes while the participants still have a relationship with their family, and the power imbalance or economic dependence means the Trans person stays in such dynamic out of fear (Wilkinson & Kirey, 2010;) or otherwise face homelessness (Camillo Bonassi et al., 2015; Forge & Ream, 2014). Abusive family attitudes encompass psychological or emotional maltreatment, reinforcing normative rules and names on the Trans individual, subjecting them to (psychological) medical treatment, denial or refusal to acknowledge the gender variance or outright violence. In the cases where there is total rejection and the ties and contact are severed (before any further abuse is enforced) is explored in '4.4 Precarious lives'. [rejection may be a form of abuse itself, but here we are dealing with how families respond to and how they play a role in the development of the Trans identity]

*"So, my father told me when I was 16 that I was crazy and that I was sick and things like that". Marcos, 31 [125-126]*

Not only is Marcos's father verbally abusive, his choice of affront co-opts medical discourses that equate gender variance with craziness (Hausman, 2006; Stone, 2014; Preciado, 2008) and abnormality (Romero Bachiller, 2005), framing his son's visible gender variance through a lens of pathology and sickness due to his own inability to grasp what is happening from his position within the binary gender hegemony. The obvious progression was for Marcos's father to send him to the psychiatrist to get an understanding of what was going on and bring his son 'back into normality' (Sáez, 2005). This however backfires when the psychiatrist hired supports Marcos emotionally in embracing his gender transition and summons the family for a joint session to support Marcos communicating with this father, in a sort of medically mediated 'coming out':

*"[The psychiatrist] explained [to my dad] what was going on and... well, I thought this would help the relationship with my dad. But it was all the contrary at the beginning, because he... he insisted on making me feel like a woman even more, like... he wouldn't let go any opportunity to remind me that I was a woman, he referred to me as 'she, her'\*, always highlighting the feminine. [...] he said my problem wasn't my body, that my problem was my head". Marcos, 31 [225-232]*

There are several issues in the last excerpt. Not only does the patriarchal family insist on reinstating and reinforcing the normative female gender upon Marcos, but they also cement



Marcos's gender variance as an issue, a mental problem. On another note, this very specific issue of forcing participants to undergo psychological treatment reveals Marcos's well-off background, as it comes at the very high financial cost that Marcos's father is paying for. While this may have positioned him in a more advantaged or privileged place in other aspects (see subtheme 4.3.3) when compared to other participants, here it provides an additional way to punish and make him conform to the norm.

*"My father who was a guerrilla fighter nearly took a weapon in front of the table to threaten me and tell me that he knew who I was, and that I wasn't a Trans [woman]. And now you have him behind you, those are his ashes". Zahara, 40 [64-67]*

For Zahara, the reaction of her father towards her Trans identity came with the real threat of violence and death. Her father rejected her gender variance completely arguing that he knew who her daughter really was, a sort of inner essence that was being lost by the transness of Zahara. The issue is dual: on the one hand, there is the outright rejection of her daughter Trans identity which is met with psychological abuse (threat of physical brutality); on the other hand, Zahara's family background in politics in Bolivia and the wider continent meant that her father had expectations of who she needed to become, following a certain behaviour in order to occupy her predestined position (Butler, 1990) in the patriarchal heterosexual system (Vidarte, 2005).

Finally, another form of abuse and one that is more tolerated by participants despite the harming and detrimental effects (Vance, 2018; Harrington, 2016) is that of misnaming or refusing to call the Trans person by their name of choice fitting their (Trans) identity.

*"She doesn't call me Omar; he calls me Carlota. So often she screams using it, and it is an insult for me". Omar, 26 [133-134]*

Both misnaming and misgendering are a recurring issue faced by Trans people in their early transition stages (and further on in life, in line with the never-ending and ongoing 'coming out' processes faced by other non-normative genders and sexualities when encountering new situations and contexts) and appear as interlinked (Finn Enke, 2016) as oftentimes names are gendered.

*"I went back again to live in Santa Cruz. I arrived now fully bearded and my mum... she was like 'ok...', and she kept on referring to me in feminine". Rober, 27 [35:34]*

When purposely done, misnaming serves the aim of denying the Trans identity and subject, in the same way that misusing pronouns in Rober's and Marcos's case is a way of using language with transphobic purposes or to resist or erase (Stryker, 2017) the transition participants were visibly undergoing as in Rober's case. Using the wrong pronouns and former names appears here as a reluctance to accept the (social) transition of the participant, as it is Marcos's case (see below):

*"In my family my dad and my sisters all kept on calling me by my female name". Marcos, 31 [432-433]*

Naming and pronouns serve a purpose for identity stabilisation (Romero Bachiller, 2005) and delimitation of gender (whether this is to be described as Trans man, Trans woman, or in the cases where Trans people simply identify as man or woman), naming the reality of the Trans

person even in the cases where this may appear to perpetuate gender binaries, but as Stryker (2017), pinpointed in current debates about post-gender or gender neutral contexts, many Trans people have historically worked hard in attaining a status different to their sex assigned at birth, and it is therefore legitimate to adopt these adscriptions as they feel most authentic to the individual (Butler, 2014).

### Shades of Acceptance

Shades of acceptance appear as a partial or gradual respect, tolerance and or incorporation of the Trans individual's gender and identity, or simply put the acceptance of the acquired gender (Whittle et al., 2007; Whittle, 2006). Full acceptance is difficult to define, although Towle and Morgan (2006) provide a broad definition whereby "acceptance comes through understanding and mutual respect" (p. 681). In the following excerpts the participants speak about different people in their immediate family who have shown acceptance of their Trans identity or transition, for instance Paco talking to his son:

*"So, we spoke about the matter, and my son took it very well. I mean, he understood what was going on." Paco, 31 [170-171]*

In Maribel's case below, her mother did not question her transness, the acceptance was conveyed not in words but by her mother's behaviour and reaction upon seeing her, treating her as a daughter by plating her hair and telling Maribel how to arrange it as indigenous women and cholitas usually do (in long plaits).

*"[...] even when my mum was around, she has never said anything to me, I have dressed [in pollera], and my mum has told me 'let your hair grow' then. 'I am going to plait you' she told me. Mum was quechua and didn't speak Castilian [Spanish]. And like that, I'm lower class, you see? [...]" Maribel, 18 [31-33]*

Aside from Maribel's mother's acceptance of who she is and how she presents, Maribel further explained that these exchanges with her mother happened in Quechua, and justifies that she is from a low class, making a rather revealing conflation between her indigeneity linked to poverty (this will be explained in chapter 5).

In other cases, acceptance is mediated by pre-conceived (and known on the media) roles preceded by social acclimatisation (Whittle et al., 2007; Whittle, 2006) as can be seen in Omar' excerpt below where he needs to defend himself from negative images and abject behaviours to gain some acceptance from his rejecting mother.

*"[...] and even the Bible says that God used many sinners, killers. [I told her] 'I haven't killed, I don't harm anyone, I'm not an alcoholic, I'm not a drug addict..." Omar, 26 [129-131]*

These very preconceptions informing acceptance of Trans people are also culturally specific (Lugones, 2014) and depend on the belief that such expressions are common or known as in Maribel's case with her grandfather, also below:

*"Maribel: –And this is how I started wearing full pollera, little by little.*

*Researcher: So, then your mum supported you?*

*M: –Yes, my mum when she came, she always has... my parents are from here a bit further [the town], but we lived in Cochabamba. Near Chayanta, beyond, my grandfather also, as well he tells me 'this is not rare'. Maribel, 18 [72-75]*

In the case of CMM, when asked about acceptance of his travestism by his family (in his own words) the situation of poverty and hardship that his family has endured is interpreted by him as the reason why they accept who he is, mostly because they do not care since they have enough on to worry about, than his sexual and gender dissidence.

*"I have a grandmother who had eight children, she was on the verge of giving one of her children away because she had too many. I had a mother who was a prostitute when she was 15, 16 years old, an aunt ill with cancer, an uncle in prison for killing someone. So, there are many more subversive things in my family than being a marginal faggot"* CMM [313-316]

The situation of difficulty eased his family' acceptance, something that did not happen with one of his lovers who condemned his travestism and rejected him on these grounds:

*"[...] this lover of mine who rejected me for being travesti, let's say, or for sometimes being travesti. For being at times a travesti, I don't know how..."* CMM [346-348]

Whittle et al. (2007) sustained that acceptance happens more frequently to female-to-male (FTM) Trans individuals than to Trans women, but the excerpts herein show a mixed reception of shades of acceptance regardless of the 'direction' of transition for the Trans individual.

Whilst the mixed receptions and acceptance depend on diverse factors (family socioeconomic situation, cultural understandings of gender, stereotypical views on Trans people), the Trans individual often has to bargain silencing aspects of their identity in exchange for acceptance, which links with the following point, taboo.

### Taboo

In the previous section the issue of acceptance within the family was explored through different levels, mostly mediated and achieved through conflict, justification and silence with the relatives. The issue of the Trans person's gender as taboo emerges here. As Stone (2014) rightly pointed out, acceptance can also require paying a very high price, that of silence. Taboo is interrelated and at times inseparable from silence and non-existence (Arondekar, 2009), an imposition that has the potential to both subjugate or liberate the Trans individual, keeping a very thin line between keeping the family bond and breaking it if the silence is broken.

*"[my ex told me] 'I'm never going to take him away from you, I want you to always be there for him [our son]. And well, if you have decided [being trans], that is ok, the only thing is that I don't want it to affect him, that's all'"* Paco, 31 [155-157]

In the lines above, Paco's ex-partner and biological father of his son 'grants' him permission to carry on seeing the child as long as his 'choice of' gender does not come into the equation, and negatively affects his son, a pact sealed with silence which can be difficultly refused by the high cost (the loss of contact with his son), which is possibly why there wasn't any direct conversations about it with his family either (below).

*"First for the family it was something shocking, because there is that part of my life where I didn't speak about it at all."* Paco, 31 [116-117]

In other cases, the Trans person feels compelled to keeping quiet, regardless of the fact that the family have noticed something 'out of the normal' but prefer to collude with silence and not delve into what that 'abnormality' may be. Such is Marcos's case, whilst initially he felt gaged, he eventually spoke to his mother about how he felt about his gender.

*"And I had to keep silent about it... my family didn't... my family always realised that there was something strange, but never spoke about it either, see?"* Marcos, 31 [82-83]

The policy of silence keeps the family stability and unity at the expense of the Trans person's needs of self-expression (Feinberg, 2006) damaging their relationships with others (Stone, 2014), as shown by Paco and Marcos's testimonies.

*"[my mum said] 'this is going to be our secret, don't worry, we won't tell your father if you don't want, I'm going to try to support you in every way I can, I love you, be calm'"* Marcos, 31 [159-161]

In Marcos's case, this agreement to break the policy of silence with his mum whilst hiding his transness from his father becomes 'an opportunity for increased surveillance' (Spade, 2006) and control over Marcos's transition, notwithstanding the initial supportive nature of the mother's words, which in time will end up with the father completely intervening by sending Marcos to the psychiatrist once the taboo is addressed (the role of medicine will be explored in 5.1.2.3)

Some other family members happily throw a heavy veil over the participant's transness that apparently suits both them and the participant unproblematically without causing apparent drama or trauma to the participant as Jota and Dani show below:

*"Look, my family have seen me [dressed as a woman] and have played dumb, they haven't touched the topic at all. So, since they haven't told me anything [...] About this topic of transformism they haven't said anything, never talked about it"* Jota, 36 [38-41]

*"[...] but I barely go out dressed as a woman, with my miniskirt, [my mother] doesn't know. She only thinks I do it for dancing wakitás, but I do it so".* Dani 27, [229-230]

In Dani case, this taboo is also supported by some of the cultural and social activities that they are involved in, in this case partaking in local ethnic dances (*wakitás*) that in and within themselves imply a rupture of the normal life of the town, as it is the case of other traditional festivities and carnivals where the social order and norms are often subverted (Aruquipa, 2014?), making it much easier to remain silent about Dani cross dressing and potential travesti identity. In Jota's case, his well-off family background may explain why the family decides to overlook his cross-dressing to avoid the potential scandal of non-normative gender expressions by their son. It is worth highlighting that Jota's gender variance was at the time of the interview only limited to beauty contests, cultural festivities and other traditional dances, and does not live fully in an *assumed* or stable Trans identity as a woman or a Trans woman. In this case, a similar acceptance would arise from these festivities and events being a diversion and disruption from the everyday.

As introduced earlier in the section, whilst 'taboo' here is analysed as one of the early responses that the family can have when faced with a Trans relative, silence itself as a response and a mechanism of survival (understood as passing) is separated from this section. On the issue of

silence regulating Trans subjectivity and experience (Stone, 2014) the subtheme 5.1.4.5 (Passing) will further explore this pervasive and intricate aspect of Trans lives.

#### 4.2.2. The Church

The influence of the Church and its legacy of colonial evangelisation (Quijano, Mignolo) on gender roles and sexual dynamics that affect and inform Trans identity will be explored with further detail throughout this chapter and chapter 6, because even though religious thought and dogma has condemned and informed state LGTB prosecution elsewhere for decades (Boellstorff et al., 2014), in this context there is a component of evangelising and colonising savages and their indigenous knowledge, with what Rivera Cusicanqui (1993, 2006) and Lugones (2008) called the coloniality of gender. Therefore, in this section only the institutional role of the church in terms of religious beliefs and how they influence the experiences and lives of Trans people from the onset of their transition or first expressions of gender variance will be explored here, as they are told by the participants in terms of how these have shaped or framed who they are.

Religious sentiments are positioned against sexual and gender dissidence (CMM) and used by the state to prosecute and tame poor and indigenous people. Christian hierarchy and practices have historically and currently also oppressed, segregated and controlled people according to a gendered and racialised matrix (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1993), at the crossroads of which we would find indigenous and poor people, sodomites and transvestites, and even more so when we consider the possible intersections (that these perverts and sinners belong to indigenous or mixed backgrounds). As Stephenson (1999) pointed out, indigenous peoples had to prove their worth to the state, and this often required relinquishing their belief systems and cultural traditions for the sake of evangelisation and modernity (in this sense, the decolonising endeavour would be rather complicated).

For the sake of clarity and transparency, while the term Church is used for linguistic economic reasons, the reference is made mostly to the historic colonial legacy of Christianity, namely the catholic church and to the emergence and strong presence of evangelic churches both of which are present in current day Bolivia in the testimonies by the participants.

Christianity emerged as the religion of the ruling classes (Feinberg, 2006) and it helped homogenise and dominate socially under the umbrella of patriarchal and capitalist systems (Lugones, 2007 & 2014; Quijano). This domination required heterosexual bonds as the only intimate dynamic that would produce offspring, under patriarchal rule, excluding women completely from all aspects of life, therefore its links to colonialism are almost inseparable (Lugones, 2014). In this sense, the colonial evangelic endeavour sought to prosecute and frame all non-reproductive and normative relations and behaviours (same sex encounters, cross gender practices and ritual, non-reproductive sex, among others) as aberrant and unholy (Cieza de León, 1880). Coming across any such individuals and practices granted in itself and justified the colonisation and evangelisation of native people on the basis of these practices (some of which may have been distorted or exaggerated, as is the case of the accusations of cannibalism and sodomy against Carib peoples in the time of the first conquest) (Suárez Saavedra, 2017). These legacies of prosecution of the abhorrent and the perverse date back from then to nowadays, permeating many aspects of the social organisation, personal dynamics and cultural aspects surrounding Trans Bolivians.

The following excerpt shows an exchange Omar has with his mother upon her finding out about his son obtaining his new legal identity as a man, and her response to it being bringing him back to God for the sake of implanting fear of doom and to bring him back to Heaven (his prior female identity assigned at birth, the only possibility to secure salvation and remain safe within the Church by perpetuating the binary norm):

*“My mum found out that I uploaded on the family [WhatsApp] group the picture from el Deber [newspaper] where I was getting my name [legally] changed, and she spoke to me a lot about God, damn... that I wasn’t going to Heaven and all of that...”. Omar, 26 [122-123]*

One of the aspects that better shows the influence of the church on Trans individuals is probably that to do with religious discourses that condemn transness as a sinful behaviour oftentimes drawing comparisons to evil Biblical figures (the devil, demons, different denominations of Satan, etc).

*“The first time we [girls] met, we were so pretty. We’d do anything and people wanted to faint and they would ask: ‘Where are you coming from? Daughters of the Devil!’ they’d call us”. Dani, 27 [149-150,]*

*“[People] think we are... Satan, that’s what they say to us. That is how they think here. Satan then... something which is a sin. But I don’t think it’s a sin. God will know how to judge and to forgive us”. Maribel, 18 [2-4]*

Dani does not have any remorse about his travestism and being perceived as a daughter of the Devil. Interestingly enough, whether it is due to lack of personal Christian belief (the majoritarian creed in their community) or because of the intricate matrix of cultural references to the devil in Andean rituals and traditions (el Tío inside the mines, the characters in the Diablada<sup>58</sup> dances, etc.) that have mixed with Christian dogma and mythology that have led to a syncretism of images, practices and beliefs (Gisbert, 1994 & 1999; Rivera Cusicanqui, 1993), making it possible to celebrate and uphold devil-like figures reminiscent of Satan in plain daylight. This conflation of transness and evilness through the lens of Bolivian religious syncretism leads to something else, not fully *unholy* and not fully *rejected*, which may have created the physical and symbolic contexts for ‘the daughters of the devil’ to parade, dance and display their subversive gender in the same way that the cultural relics of the devil disrupt normality (Figari, 2009 cited in Aruquipa, 2012) and attract the masses from without and within (the outside of the within as Romero Bachiller, 2005 and Córdoba, 2005 framed it). It is also possible, to see Dani’s devil-related travestism as a ceremonial transfer of gender from a more Eurocentric perspective (Bornstein, 1994).

On the other hand, Maribel rejects this view of being a produce of evil from her own beliefs, defending her transness as not sinful and conveying her own belief that God will be fair and forgive her if she is wrong. Keeping a sense of spirituality through Christian beliefs that often condemn Trans individuals is complicated (Dinnie & Browne, 2011), but remains visible and present in many Trans people such as Maribel.

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<sup>58</sup> Diablada stems from Diablo, The Devil.



3- Diablada sculpture, Oruro

When religious beliefs are used as threat of punishment to bring the Trans person back into the right track (their sex assigned at birth with its consequent gender expressions), a fear that possibly holds truth with the person who says it, but the fear of condemnation and rejection situates further the Trans person as outsider not only of gender normality but of holiness. The abject is also cursed for not conforming to the religious dogma. In Omar' case below, anyone who supports and respects the Trans person is also perceived to be dragged into the unholy and abject.

*"I went with my sister to the gay parade. The LGTBI... I took her. She runway [to see it] and my mum tried... she said to me 'you are condemning your family [to hell], you are condemning your sister'" Omar, 26 [138-141]*

Omar had expressed how his relatives were quite religious and fear of damning the family may have been key for their initial rejection of his Trans identity. In this case, the implication of his mother's words is that there is no heaven awaiting Trans people. Whether on a symbolic level in some instances, the Church still holds a lot of power in regards to how gender variance is perceived and portrayed in Bolivia, as Vanesa highlights:

*"And the [resistance of the] Church, unfortunately, but the government is the one responsible. There is a political constitution of the state, where Bolivia is declared secular but it's the same, we are still depending on the church, on the churches. And the catholic church is the one that holds more power. That's why we can't open up about this topic [gender and sexuality]". Vanesa, 54 [519-522]*

At some stage, even the Trans individuals co-opt and internalise the religious message, and reject who they are by turning into religious beliefs to make them 'normal', even though he is aware that asking for this is probably asking to conform.

*"So, hummm. I've had this phase in which I asked God to make me a normal person, no? between inverted commas". Paco, 31 [51-52]*

*"So I got heavily involved in the church, I asked myself 'why me? I am a curse, I was born...'" Rober, 27 [14:19-14:28]*

In the last excerpt, Rober feels as though his transness is some sort of mark of the beast that has been bestowed upon him, which is why he got involved in church, looking for a way to be freed

from this heavy burden of the Trans curse. Paco on his part also acknowledges having begged to God to bring him back to normality, for his transness to be gone.

#### 4.2.3. Medicine, education and the state (interlinked)

Institutions such as the medical establishment also serve the purpose of normalising Trans identities (Hausman, 2006) through a series of devices and discourses around what the male, female and Trans body look like (Spade, 2006), framing an idea of transnormativity, usually intersected by the biomedicalization of the Trans body (Rizki, 2019; Puar, 2014).

There is a collation of discourses here to in regards to the influence and role that medicine has in Trans people. On the one side there's the litany of pathologizing approaches, interventions and justifications (See Johnson 2016, Stryker, 2006; Whittle, 2006) that medical institutions (mostly through their mental health practitioners and related disciplines) have subjected Trans and gender variant people to on the one hand. On the other, they mediate and equalise by providing care and attention regardless of socioeconomic status, meaning there is a reduction in risky behaviours (injecting engine oil, buying counterfeit hormones online without prescription, etc).

*“Maribel: Airplane oil, for instance, but please don't tell [person] I said it. A friend has told me that [person] has had surgery, and I wondered how she had the procedure, and what they said is, it is not...*

**Researcher:** *Not prosthetic?*

**M:** *That it's not silicone, she told me, I thought it was but she said 'no, it isn't, she's had airplane oil injected.” Maribel, 18 [271-276]*

*“Zahara: So, sometimes they take more hormones than their body can tolerate. They end up with cancer, issues and die. They inject liquid silicone or airplane oil.*

**Researcher:** *Is that true?*

**Z:** *Yes, very true. When I was in Argentina I found 20.000 such cases. Here in Bolivia I know more than five [trans] girls who've killed themselves because a bit of liquid silicone gets to their veins and that's it.” Zahara, [366-371]*

Medicine becomes the ever pervasive, unavoidable stepping-stone towards Trans self-realisation (needed to make sense of one's transness), although this has been challenged by all the debates about social identities of Trans people (Sánchez, 2021) and the de-medicalisation movement (Missé and Coll-Planas, 2010). On the other hand, many Trans people in line with the wider population fall into biomedicalising discourses and practices (Stryker, 2006; Foucault, 1984, Foucault & Chosmky, 1971) whereby they incorporate a series of elements voluntarily to adapt their gender (surgical transformations, hormone blockers or intake, voice therapy, blood tests in line with endocrinological guidelines, etc.) to suit or fit the binary norm or 'essence' (Stone, 2014; Newton, 2006). Perhaps Preciado (2008) presented one of the most critical but transparent analyses on the role the medicalisation (in the form of hormone intake) of the Trans body in terms of drawing the limits of sanctioned and regulated gender, while they experimented with testosterone themselves: “The process of isolation and technical production of the hormones allows drawing a cartography of disciplinary sexo-political spaces and locating the different institutions for locking and controlling femininity and masculinity as technical enclaves of gender production”<sup>59</sup> (p. 124). If as Preciado sustains masculinity and femininity are produced and controlled by specific devices and processes facilitated by medical institutions,

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<sup>59</sup> Researcher's translation of the original.



where these are absent, individuals may still feel constrained or seek to adopt such procedures in riskier ways (that is, without supervision), perhaps through the use of engine oils, liquid silicones or self-mutilations as mentioned by some participants. This problematises further the issue of medicalisation/medicine as an unavoidable but perhaps needed buoy to support Trans people who need it.

On the issue and tensions between pathologized versus biomedicalised identities, Rober expresses the following refusal of his transness being framed an illness:

*“I hope they raise more awareness and sensitise about the topic so we are not pathologized, because we are not sick or anything like that.” Rober, 27 [1.20.51]*

A conundrum is raised here, as Rober has undergone several surgical interventions including a mastectomy and takes testosterone on a regular basis. While his legitimate demand to not be pathologized is clear, his use of discourses and medical devices beckons the question of, what is the point of treating a body that is not sick? Other participants are advocates of social transitioning as opposed to incurring in this medical intervention and domestication of their Trans body, questioning what makes a gender in itself (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Lugones 2008 & 2014). Potentially, it could be argued that it makes perfect sense for the sake of authenticity to one’s own gender to make use of the devices and tools that support this journey better (Butler, 2014), notwithstanding the reflection that probably this kind of approach to medical interventions is more to do with a biomedicalised approach that supports and affirms the agency of the Trans individual, than a pernicious intervention inflicted by a pathologizing institution. The issue of raising this reflection is done consciously, being aware of the transphobic nature of the beliefs and rationale held by some radical feminists (namely TERFS such as Germaine Greer, Sheila Jeffreys, among others) and theorists who would exclude Trans women from the category women altogether (O’Donnell, 2019) on the basis that they use their male privilege through a series of body manipulations to intrude women spaces. Whilst the purpose of this section or let alone thesis is far from tackling or dismantling this current of thought, it is relevant to rethink how the inseparability of sex-gender are understood in order to know the different mediations, transformations and intelligible elements that make us read and embody our genders, in this case the Trans body through the use of medical interventions (being aware that the point itself renders the perpetuation of medicalising Trans identities). It is a legitimate reflection, made from a polarise opposite position and perspective held by TERFs, respecting and empathising with Trans experience, autonomy and identity itself.

This subtheme sees a continuity in the collation and interlinking of institutional transphobia mostly through medicine and education, a sort of running thread that draws and shares similar pathologizing discourses to force the Trans person to either conform to their sex assigned at birth or outcast them as pariahs.

*“[...] I visited like eight surgeons here in La Paz, a consultation to tell them that I wanted a mastectomy, and nobody understood why I wanted to do such barbarity [...] and even two ended up throwing me out of their consultation room, they said ‘get out of here, I don’t do that kind of stuff, that’s mutilation and only done with a cancer’ and things like that, so they ended up throwing me out” Marcos, 31 [243-248]*

*“Omar: [...] the doctora [female doctor] knows about human physiognomy, so I didn’t go to the doctors because of that.*

*Researcher: Are you afraid?*

*Omar: –Yes, for that, because I know that... the doctora... if she explores me well, she can be well drastic, it scares me. And seeing what [horrible things] they tell me at work, the response of the doctora will probably be worse” Omar, 26 [199-206]*

Omar is afraid of the potentially transphobic response of the doctora upon finding out his Trans identity from a physical exploration, a fear built on reminiscences of previous rejection and transphobic attitudes from prospective employers who turned him away.

*“I barely go to the doctor, but in the bank they do really ask me ‘is that your real name?’ –yes, it’s my name’, they asked me two or three times, when taking out my id... ‘have you had an operation?’ they ask me ‘no, I haven’t had anything done’ I said” Maribel, 18 [184-186]*

Here in Maribel’s case the institutional transphobia interlinks medical assumptions about Trans people within a financial institution, as Maribel attempts to go to the bank and is received with mistrust, questioned about any (irrelevant) medical procedures, making her otherwise mundane banking transaction difficult if not impossible.

In relation to the intervention of medical institutions and discourses there is the ever-pervasive drawing on biology to make sense of gender (the natural body – Vidarte, 2005, Romero Bachiller, 2005)

These excerpts show how the participants understand their Trans gender through biology that draws on terminology and ideas about dimorphism to justify binaries (Lugones, 2014).

*“A woman is a woman. In that... I mean, if we see it from studies and all that we have always learnt, the man [has] penis, the testicles and the woman has breasts and a vagina, right?”. Jota [132-134]*

*“The difference is only through the sex they are born [men and women] right? [...] it’s just that one of them can procreate” Omar, 26 [340-341]*

There is also the ambivalent role that both medical institutions and the state can have, both as mediator (equalising access regardless of socioeconomic status) and as criminalising, a rather complicated role with important implications for Trans people. In Marcos’s excerpt below, he had gone through many surgeons in Bolivia to find one that would support him with his mastectomy and wouldn’t judge him.

*“[...] until I got to the last one, who was a surgeon who was Bolivian and had studied in Mexico and he had seen [other cases like this], at least... at least he knew what I was talking about” Marcos, 31 [248-250]*

As Marcos pinpoints, if practitioners have lived overseas they tend to be more Trans friendly and open minded, again positioning Trans identity as something exterior to Bolivia (there could be a potential clash with decolonising, if people need to be out in order to accept what exists within, even when a lot of exists within in terms of discrimination has a colonial legacy trace).

Following on the perceived role of medical institutions, some Trans people see the possibility of transforming it to provide the support needed by Trans people who want to carry out physical transformations in safe ways (the issue of potential of transforming institutions is also explored below in regards to education).

*“My dream, more than being a doctor, is to be an endocrinologist, so that I can help the Trans population” Rober, 27 [1:01:08]*

The role of the state through the educational establishment is also clear and goes in line with church, to perpetuate the heterosexual, monogamous dynamics between genders, excluding Trans people on the basis of medical (psychological/psychiatric) discourses at best, and discourses of condemnation and damning at worst in religious establishments (which in Bolivia, tend to be elite schools). The collation between two arms of the state, church and education, also serves the purpose of reinforcing gender binaries. This liaison provides a very normative space to indoctrinate people. In this case, Marcos speaks of his experience in a private Catholic school (an elite school for well-off children).

*“[at school] they knew I was the girl who played football or who wanted to be a boy, and yes... I suffered a lot of discrimination, insults, they would speak behind my back, but all in all I feel I made myself be respected, because I... I made up lots of excuses to avoid using the girls’ uniform, because I was in a catholic school and so the differences between men and women were quite delimited”. Marcos, 31 [132-136]*

The role of education itself proves how the state uses this institution drawing on biological discourses of dimorphism and abnormality (Stoller, 2006) to explain the gender binaries and instil them in children so they internalise conformity.

*“In the very school they teach you that transsexuality is a distortion of identity” Omar, 26 [353-355]*

*“So, little by little I felt that society, my family, the school... the teachers sent me messages that what I felt was wrong... So, I learnt to hide it, see?” Marcos, 31 [77-79]*

In Marcos’s case, his awareness of being Trans and the messages he was getting from his family, and mostly school made him turn his transness into a taboo to be hidden, internalising both the abjectness of it and the lack of space for its expression in the realm of the social.

For Paco below, changes in the way that education works could help transform and mitigate transphobia from all angles (self-rejection of the Trans person and that of society).

*“they teach you ‘this is the body of a woman and this is the body of a man’ and that’s as far as the topic goes. So, there is no mention of how there are boys that are women with penises, and men with vagina” Paco, 31 [286-287]*

While the language of dimorphism is used to classify and exclude Trans experience, Paco proposes opening up the use of this language to introduce (and possibly subvert) other bodily realities and experiences.

### **4.3 FRAMING AND BECOMING TRANS**

This subtheme explores the key tenets identified in the participant accounts as to paving the way for their self-identification, framing and full (social, physical or both) transformation into ‘becoming trans’ that are also found in other Trans accounts outside Bolivia. The main aspects of which include ‘coming out’, ‘visibility’, ‘perceived privileges’ and ‘perpetuating binaries’. The negative or more harmful aspects are separately explored on 5.4 (precarious lives) as these

mostly explore hardship and traumatic events, whilst the ones on this section are merely 'rites of passage' that play a part in framing and becoming trans.

#### 4.3.1 Coming out

'Coming out' describes the process of self-acceptance, self-discovery and openness of non-heterosexual and transgender people about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Wilkinson & Kirey, 2010). Coming out appears as transness is situated as the 'internal outside' (Córdoba, 2005) of the binary heterosexual regime (both in functional and defining terms). Coming out implies leaving a moment of silence, a silence imposed as the technology resulting from heterosexual and cisgender power, where the Trans person (as well as the homosexual) are the abject, thus leading to a game between silence/disclosure (Sedgwick, 1990). The game of invisibility cannot work with other constructed characteristics (Lugones, Quijano) that underpin structures of difference and inequality such as sex-gender and race (Córdoba, 2005). In specific Trans terms, passing (see 5.4.5) plays a role through the implications of perceptions at first sight (so potentially those who do not pass are therefore not invisible and always automatically 'come out' in each situation whether they want it or not).

Coming out appears as the moment of communication to others of one's gender variance or Trans identity or feelings, when the participants assume their transness (Vanessa). For many this coming out to those closest to them can be liberating:

*"Yes, I told him. No problem, all passed and this time I felt like... say, like I was carrying a hundredweight of potatoes, say and... you offload it. Like that is how it feels..."* Maribel, 18 [54-56]

*"[...] and she said to me, I... 'now I feel like I love you even more than before, and I am going to support and love you as you are, be calm as everything is ok'. So, then I felt like I had this enormous weight off me".* Marcos, 31 [146-148]

Both Marcos and Maribel speak of this symbolic removal of a weight. The weight of the normative expectations of gender that they were carrying through not publicly assuming their Trans identity, and once this cathartic experience happens they feel reaffirmed and relieved. For Maribel and Paco their coming out happened in a work context, where they could first be and enact their authentic gender and be perceived and accepted as such, whereas for Marcos this happened in a conversation with a close friend. This assertive reaffirmation goes beyond the timid initial gender variant expressions that happened in the realm of the home and were met with the different reactions explored in 5.1. In relation to coming out at work, it often happens that moving away because of work to a new context opens the space of possibility for the individual to express comfortably and assertively who they are without fear, such as Paco below.

*"There was a time... when I was deployed in La Paz because of work, and it was there then... then I was able to be free and to say it"* Paco, 31 [68-69]

Despite these mostly positive aspects of coming out, there is inevitable another side of the coin, when coming out is a sort of social blackmail as pointed out by CMM below:

*"[...] But this served me to mitigate a bit the social blackmail of confession. And the social and neurotic dramatism about a person..."* CMM, [322-323]

As CMM points out there is almost an element of forceful confession to the family, a revelation of one's diversion from the normative gender carried out in a symbolic palaestra as it is demanded from the individual. Also, the symbolic terminology of confession conveys how far

religious ideology and discourse permeates the everyday, intimate and mental spaces of Trans people (and anyone in the Bolivian context to that effect). Confession, within Catholicism refers to the sacrament of penance (RAE, 2019), after confessing sinful actions or wrongdoings in the hope of attaining atonement. Such was the case of Maribel below who felt relieved after coming out that nobody had attacked her and feeling grateful for their tolerance or acceptance (understood as a lack of direct condemnation):

*“The good thing is that my family accepted it, all of them my aunties, my all. They didn’t... they haven’t insulted me”* Maribel, 18 [153-154]

Notwithstanding the positive aspects of Maribel’s family acceptance after her coming out, which she herself assesses as good, the words she uses express a level of uncertainty over the response that the coming out revelation will have on her family, as though the Trans individuals remain in a limbo expecting the sentence of a gender inquisition panel. Once the positive verdict (of acceptance) is given, the Trans individual is almost subdued to eternal gratefulness for not being punished or banished. In Omar’ case below, he is fearful that his coming out may be disappointing to his mother for breaking the image that she had or had expected of him:

*“The fear [of her finding out] is that my mother would be disappointed”.* Omar, 26 [116]

Coming out is therefore a sort of performative action (Sedgwick, 1990) that is done for others to name that which excludes the person from the realm of normativity. There are other types of exclusions that take place by coming out, naming or revealing someone as Trans, limiting people’s identifications (Trans and nothing else) and excluding other experiences (Singer, 2006) but this will be further explored in 5.3.4.

#### 4.3.2 Visibility

Visibility is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge, 2020) as “the degree to which something is seen by the public”. In other words, how visible it is, making reference to “something or someone that people notice or recognize” (Collins COBUILD, 2000, p. 720). A recognition of a gender expression that can be easily classified into the binary system by means of noticing the different traits, mannerisms and characteristics presumed of each gender. Applied to Trans experience and accounts, Sedgwick (1990) spoke of visibility as the risky and affirmative acts of explicit self-identification and expression made by members of a minority rising up. The challenges around visibility and the process of making visible stem from “the reclamation and relegitimation of a courageous history of [...] role playing and identification” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 37, *researcher’s omission*).

As defined above, visibility for Trans people mostly depends on the physical transformations enforced into the body (Hausman, 2006). If a body is so well-adapted that it can pass, its very visibility renders it invisible as a Trans body, and where the transformations are not enough for the Trans person to pass then their impossibility for invisibility puts them in a position of exposure and risk as the issue of visibility becomes one of (unwanted) distinction (Sharpe, 2006). Esperanza Gracia’s excerpt below conveys the degree to which this ambivalence around visibility heavily depends and relies on the extent to which Trans people can pass, and the very random possibility of being visible as Trans in some spaces and (*simply*) as a woman in others reveals how discrimination looms over Trans people wherever they go:

*“Whereas I’m trans. You may not even realise that I am trans, because maybe I’ve done such a perfect transition that I can pass as a woman, but when the moment arrives where you go to a hospital, to a trial, a forensic... There they will*

say: 'Ah, this one had been trans'. Therefore, they stop you there. So, whilst I can be visible, I also have this degree of discrimination in another space". Esperanza Gracia, 48 [1022-1026]



4-Esperanza Gracia (El Alto, 8th July parade)

By being visible a reference is created (Green 2006), a mirror in which to look at oneself for belonging, recognition and understanding. The issue of having reference figures who are Trans or gender variant is present among most of the participants interviews, as the lack of these casts a heavy slab over their aspirations, feelings and possibilities of being, especially when most of the references tend to be negative or associated with criminality and disease (Redlactrans, 2012 and 2014). Zahara speaks below about the importance that her visibility becoming a Trans role model for her fellow co-workers and her boss (*la ministra*, female minister<sup>60</sup>) had in terms of breaking stereotypes beyond the usual negative ones around delinquency, sex work, drug addiction (Benzi in Gibellino, 2009):

*"The executive wouldn't have signed [the law] or wouldn't have known what it means to be trans, because they didn't have an idea, they only had taboos, which we smoothed over little by little with my ministra. And then, all the ministers knew a Trans woman". Zahara, 40 [129-131]*

In terms of the taboos mentioned by Zahara above, and the limited views already mentioned that people hold on Trans people (mostly Trans women) these often go in line with the overtly

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<sup>60</sup> Due to the gendered nature of the Spanish language (in all its variations, Castilian in all dialects, Standard in all its national versions, and even [Ladino](#)), some nuance is lost in translation. In many cases the participants say '*las trans*' where it is implicit by the article used that they refer to Trans women, making the English text cumbersome at times. Where deemed relevant, the original is kept with a translation (being a female minister in a male dominated cabinet is relevant enough to highlight).

sexualised images of Trans women –the only apparent visible Trans, as they appear in beauty contests and other similar events with a public projection (Aruquipa, 2012). See Vanesa’s frustrations about this narrow view on the only apparent visible Trans stereotype and the implications it has on Trans women’s (sartorial) appearance:

*“[...] maybe our fellow Trans women go out at night in miniskirts and revealing cleavages and all that, but during the day they aren’t always [dressed] like that. Now there is... because the first thing they [TV staff] would ask: ‘will you be doing catwalk modelling? Are you not doing the catwalk?’ -No, excuse me, you have called me to do an interview on political issues, to talk about rights, and no, I don’t have to come here to do an exhibition”*. Vanesa, 54 [554-558]

Vanesa’s frustration may also stem from her activist role working around Trans empowerment, notwithstanding her legitimate will of wanting her voice to be heard, not to be simply objectified (Aizura et al., 2014) for her physical attributes. This objectification is itself something recurring that happens to cisgender women globally, in line with the issues of general sexualisation and objectification of femininity and anything related to womanhood (Swayne, 2019). Another reflection can be made from Vanesa’s words, as it seems that Trans visibility is negotiated by some powerful actors (in this case TV journalists). That is, visibility (being broadcast) is granted as long as the Trans person’s way of presenting and conducting themselves fits with the preconceived stereotypes already held, no matter how inflammatory or detrimental they may be, or whether the Trans people themselves choose to enact them in the first place or not. Therefore, it becomes a matter of imposition, rather than agency, verging on tokenism as Trans women are granted a limited space to show a certain degree of inclusivity (Gent, 2017) by the TV station which is rather voyeuristic.

This issue of stereotypical Trans visibility is also tightly knitted with the perpetuation of binaries (as the binary patriarchal system despite its domination and oppression is in itself a reference point) which will be explored in the next subtheme (5.3.4). Below, Zahara talks about being this reference figure that the media were after, in this case not with an aim of objectifying her like Vanesa, but rather because of her perceived political power (an underlying issue related to both Zahara’s and Vanesa’s background and socioeconomic position is also salient here).

*“[...] in May we started with the campaign against homophobia and transphobia. I was already a reference. Not as strong as today. But strong enough that the news media would come after me”*. Zahara, 40 [149-151]

This being a role model or a reference is a constant theme in Trans history, from Feinberg’s rereading of history (1992, 2006) looking for positive Trans characters, to the desire of finding examples in societies where cross-dressing and non-binary individuals have held a special place (Garber, 2006) at times without paying further attention to the ethnocentric bias and obsession this represents (Arondekar, 2009). The desire is legitimate although at times ill-informed (i.e.. talking about hijras as Trans, not appreciating the complexity of the caste system and the social place occupied by hijras in India) (Towle and Morgan, 2006). On the issue of looking for Trans references in other sociocultural contexts (outside Bolivia) to have an experience which is intelligible in their own society (Godoy, 2015) see 6.1 (global Trans terminology).

As has already been argued herein, visibility can be a double-edged sword (Fraser, 1997; Murphy, 2012), as it also means standing out, being exposed (unwillingly more often than not) and increasing vulnerability (Murphy, 2012). Visibility for Trans women often brings the implicit threat of violence and brutality, as the visible gender presentation is perceived as a threat to the established norm that dominates public space (Singer, 2006). As Rober reveals himself, Trans

women are usually and inevitably more visible than Trans men, and often this means they are more exposed:

*“Well they [Trans women] are more visible then, it is more obvious, pitifully”.*

Rober, 27 [1.13.48]

Highlighting this increased visibility (and potential vulnerability) of Trans women is supported by Vanesa’s words below:

*“[...] and this is what the girls say to me, they say: ‘if you are here, I think they [police] see you and say nothing to us. You aren’t here and then they start bothering us”.* Vanesa, 54 [453-454]

Here Vanesa’s visibility as a Trans woman and activist has shifted from a position of historic vulnerability in relation to sex work in a context of constant police harassment (Redlactrans, 2014) to one of authority from her visibility as a community reference. When her fellow Trans women are harassed by police for being on the street at night (possibly doing sex work, although this is inferred from the rest of the interview and Vanesa’s work) her very presence makes them go away (in a kind of reversal of vulnerability, where that which is seen –transness– cannot be used to subjugate). Again, visibility here appears in an ambivalent way depending on the individual, as the element that prompts police to stop and question them is their very visible transness (Aruquipa, 2012) and not necessarily whether they are suspect of being sex workers.

This process as admitted by Vanesa is the result of her years of activism and as a public figure (see below), therefore also hinting at a visible level of vulnerability, the more visibly vulnerable (through a lack of knowledge of the law, their rights, or not being recognised as a community or public figure) means the Trans person is potentially more likely to be subject to police and other type of abuse.

Visibility then can trigger these transphobic practices, which are enacted by different actors who exert their power and domination on small-scale everyday occurrences (Martínez-Guzmán, 2015), for instance Santi’ incident further on in this section.

*“[...] look what I am going to tell you. I feel safe [to be seen at night] because I am so empowered, so strong”.* Vanesa, 54 [445-446]

In the excerpt above Vanesa explains that she is safe being visible because she’s empowered, she’s shifted her position from one of precarious visibility to assertive visibility and authority (in terms of protecting other women, precisely because she is visible as having symbolic power in the realm of rights and challenging violence).

A further reflection stems here, as visibility becomes a by-product of empowerment which in Vanesa’s case is the result of her involvement in NGO programmes for women empowerment and LGTB rights. The role and influence of NGO’s and international development will be further explored in 5.2.

Santi also speaks about this perception of the visibility of Trans women drawing a comparison to the value given to Trans men as worthless, and equating visibility with quantity (implying there are more Trans women than there are Trans men). This also echoes the synecdoche of referring to Trans people when mostly referring to Trans women (Aruquipa, 2012; Redlactrans, 2012) resulting in this internalised invisibility and worthlessness expressed by Trans men like Santi below.



*“There are more [trans] women than [trans] men. We... aren’t worth a fuck [laughing]”. Santi, 18 [59:47]*

However, the moment his transness became visible during a rather mundane occurrence of Santi walking home at night, which nearly ended in a street incident, where he assumes his perceived mismatch of mannerisms, body expression and voice put him at risk:

*“[...] someone hears me talk, because my voice is very high-pitched, they already call me amiga [female friend]. If I go in the street looking like this and speak... I feel everyone looks. ‘It’s not a boy, what, what is he/she<sup>61</sup> doing?’. A month ago, two months, I experienced street harassment. Some blokes... [my friend and I] live very near, and I think I left him home, and I had to go up a small street in the dark. It was around 11 [pm]. This had never happened because the area is supposedly safe and there are police boxes everywhere. And there were two drunk blokes, and there I felt like ‘oh, no’, and went past to go up the street and I heard them ‘Fenómeno’ [phenomenon] and I was like ‘it’s me because there’s nobody else, but keep walking, it’s fine if you get a bullet, keep walking’. And the blokes started coming up the street too, and I was like ‘jay!’, and they started shouting and I was feeling really unwell”. Santi, 18 [192-202]*

*Fenómeno* is a rather ambiguous word in Spanish, depending on the context and circumstances it can either mean something positive or negative. The dictionary of the Real Academia Española gives several entries with its definition showing this: “2. *masculine noun, extraordinary and surprising thing*; 3. *masculine colloquial noun, monstrous person or animal*; 4. *Masculine colloquial noun, person outstanding their kind*” (RAE, 2019b). Listening to Santi’s description of the incident, it is reasonable to think that he felt this adjective to be used as a precursor to a potential risk (given the early description of his visible mannerisms, his young appearance and his potential campness) that he anticipates and which ended up in Santi getting into a neighbour’s house for safety. This incident also hints that there is a perceived confusion between gender and sexuality, whether it is his transness, campness or both (Namaste, 1996) that stood out to the two men (if at all, bearing in mind they were drunk and possibly looking to assault anyone crossing their way) that is what brings violence towards Trans people who may not pass (Namaste, 2006). While for men visibility may stabilise and give assurances to the individual, this very visibility implies the risk of violence and insecurity for Trans women. Both of these aspects are interrelated to passing (see 4.3.2) and perceived privilege, which will be explored next.

Not that it seems feasible or even necessary to reach an equilibrium, but as a reflection of this section, perhaps the most pragmatic way of attaining a balance between visibility and references would be to mix them in ways that are helpful and provide resources to Trans people, but this is rather complicated and comes at a great personal cost as has been argued. Green (2006) defended standing out as a Trans man to provide other Trans men with assistance, but also to help non-Trans people understand their experience. While this is a noble principle, many scholars have been critical of having to constantly educate people on respecting, understanding and tolerating their experience, and refusing to be a didactic tool (Lorde, 2001; Moschkovich, 1983; Koyama, 2004) for obscure or unclear purposes.

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<sup>61</sup> In the original the subject pronoun is omitted, in Spanish there is no need to include subject pronouns since the verb conjugation already indicates that the reference is made to the third person singular. However, the beginning of the sentence indicates confusion over whether Sebas is a boy or a girl, so this ambivalence is kept in the translation.

### 4.3.3 Perceived Privilege

While going over perceived privileges without further questioning may be tempting in a quest to not deepen the victimisation (Mujeres Creando, 2005 & 2010) and negative representation of Trans people (Halberstam, 2005), ignoring their lived difficulties may result in gaslighting or whitewashing experiences of hardship which serves of little if any purpose. This section therefore will allow the reader to better understand the complexities of being Trans in a decolonial context in line with the underlying research aims of this thesis. Perceived privilege includes the common perceptions both among Trans and non-Trans individuals around the privilege that some Trans people may have based on their social position, their appearance, background, or the fact that they are Trans men. The subsection explores and at times demystifies and/or challenges these perceptions. See below Esperanza Gracia, quoted earlier along these lines reflecting on her professional role:

*"[...] even the Ombudsman Office. We are institutions. So, there you feel normal, you feel protected, nobody is going to say anything to you".* Esperanza Gracia, 48 [516-518]

Drawing on Esperanza Gracia's position at the Ombudsman office, she acknowledges the level of privilege of being part of an institution, which keeps her protected and almost untouchable, but at the time she presents this ambivalence around the privilege of working there. On one hand she is free to be Trans within the institutional setting, but on the other hand this comes at the price of been *normalised* and keeping adherence to whatever tight gender norm the Ombudsman office enforces as a public institution, whether then her role is tokenistic to give an impression of openness or not is another story which is at times questioned by other participants (i.e. Zahara, Ali, CMM, and even Esperanza Gracia herself). In the previous excerpt, Esperanza Gracia seems well aware of the fact that she is constrained under the specific institutional label. So there is a question on whether she feels this to be a privilege, since her freedom is constrained within the institution (by keeping her transness within certain norms) and is potentially lost outside the Ombudsman's safe walls, where the symbolic privilege vested by her appointment is lost to the reality of many other fellow Trans women and the expectations they need to comply with:

*"Now, wanting to exert [my transness] in the street, it is more difficult. 'Let us see... wear heels, with shorts'. They are already questioning you, see?".* Esperanza Gracia, 48 [520-521]

It could also be that the institutional space provided by the Ombudsman's Office does not fully limit the Trans experience forcing it into the matrix of heterosexuality and binary representations of gender, but rather inadvertently makes transness visible in a space that can impose conformity on gender variant bodies whilst also allowing them to 'avoid confirming the inevitability of that system of difference' (Halberstam, 2005). Some others like Jota do not necessarily reflect about their supposed privilege (in his case class and socioeconomic status) but rather are thankful that nobody bothers them because of their gender expression, in his case his transformism:

*"In fact, I am super calm on this aspect, I think I have been lucky to have an angel that takes super good care of me".* Jota, 36 [141-142]

It may be unavoidable that some participants are blind to or unaware of their supposed privilege; in Jota's case above, the sense of calmness and non-disturbance because of his gender

variance is attributed to a caring 'angel', without further reflection. Whether it is an indication of acceptance by Jota's environment or that his other identity traits (class, status, race, etc) positions him in a safer and more powerful place is worth reflecting about. However, delving into finding negative reactions and experiences risks perpetuating the negative and contradictory portrayals (and feeding negative expectations) of Trans stories (Halberstam, 2005). Each participant has their own, and so it is shown here by contrasting Jota's and Esperanza Gracia's accounts. The aim of the current research is not to dig for negative or problematic stories, but rather explore the underlying reasons and factors that cause some people to have certain experiences and not others, and to support a reflection on the wider implications for Trans people beyond the Bolivian context.

*"I think so, yes... I mean, with Trans men we do not suffer so much because of this [being perceived as abnormal], right? Because, just through the mere changes that are very... they are much quicker than for a Trans woman. Let's say, in terms of hormones, for instance. Because losing many virile aspects is what takes longer". Paco, 31 [328-331]*

In Paco's case, he is convinced that it is easier to 'smoothen' female aspects in becoming a man, than the other way round, possibly conflating his assumptions about mannerisms or physical appearance. This perceived privilege for Paco stems from 'not suffering so much' and echoes some seemingly accepted beliefs around the wider public acceptance of Trans men linked to their appearance (Cromwell, 2006), whether this is an actual reflection of reality (obviously culturally specific) or the fact that there's been wider interest in exploring Trans women's experience should be considered, as it links with a historic invisibility (potentially lack of interest) of the experiences of Trans men (Hill and Willoughby, 2005).

The privilege of 'smoothing' physical traits in Trans men appears linked to changes that stem from medical interventions (hormonal therapy mostly), although it can be argued that there are other reasons beyond medically induced bodily transformations that 'help' a (Trans) person pass (Halberstam, 1998). Green (2006) also wrote about the easiness with which most Trans men are able to adapt to labour market and create social bonds, as this is eased by their masculine appearance which tends to render the visible invisible and undetectable in most social situations. In some situations, the Trans man can be taken for a younger male, and these confusions also extend to *masculine* women<sup>62</sup>. Some of the limited previous research specific on Trans men and the workplace (Schilt, 2010) echo this assumption whereby it may be easier for Trans men to have a leeway in changing their appearance (whether through use of sartorial choices alone, and/or medical devices along with other perceived behavioural adaptations) and being perceived more quickly and easily as male than most Trans women do. The mediations of medicine or medical devices (hormones, surgery) alongside physical and (normative) behavioural adaptations and their role in Trans experience permeate many of the themes explored in this analysis, but will mostly be addressed in the section on passing (and its role in Trans experience and *becoming* trans).

The issue of some of the literature explored on the (possibly advantageous) differences experienced by Trans men (Halberstam, 1998 & 2005; Schilt, 2010; Cromwell, 2006; Hill and Willoughby, 2005) in contrast to Trans women is based in Western contexts and mostly refers to or focuses on white populations (with the exception of Anderson et al., 2020 which look at identity formation both on racial and gender terms in the experiences of Trans men). In the case

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<sup>62</sup> This was the case with the researcher, who was often mistaken for a young gay man in some of the LGBT spaces, having at times to come out as a cis lesbian.

of the majority of the Trans men interviewed for this research, they self-identified as mestizo or of indigenous background, acknowledging their indigenous ethnic ascent with some visible implications for the researcher (as was the researcher's own ethnic and 'sexual' background visibly obvious and linguistically audible<sup>63</sup> to most participants). Some of these traits (skin pigmentation, height, bodily hair, etc) have extensively been explored (see Ibarra Grasso, 1997; for instance) with different and oftentimes problematic aims, and could in this case shed further light into the differentiated experiences of Trans people in Bolivia who have indigenous ancestry. In some cases, not only is the transition from a female to a male appearance vested with privilege of male symbolic power (Schilt, 2010) but in the Bolivian case, for some Trans men of indigenous or mestizo background it may be 'easier' to pass as a younger male, than it may for a whiter or criollo Trans man. While this may not be exclusive to the Bolivian context, it is possible that other Trans men elsewhere may 'benefit' from an androgynous appearance, more so than Trans women, but this specific reflection stems from the words by Paco and some of the other participants in this research.

On the issue of the differences in terms of privilege experienced (or lost) by Trans men and women, Abelson (2014) and Westbrook (2008) have also explored the dangers acquired by Trans men in their navigation of normative masculinity and the heightened violence pervading male lives. While it may be different types of violence that both Trans men and women experience (Abelson, 2014), it contrasts with the accounts of all Trans men in this research (with the possible exception of Santi and his night incident).

When speaking about perceived privilege, there are those who consider the privileges of others beyond their own, and tend to be critical of those who apparently have the privilege and take advantage of it. Such is the case of Jota, who after saying his transformism has never caused any troubles, goes on to raising their criticism of those who use their gender or sexual variance to their advantage in public occasions or disputes even when a confrontation or issue had nothing to do with their gender or sexual variance:

*"[...] In reality, I think people are the ones who create difficulties for themselves, we are the ones who have this... this chip that, 'if the nurse treated me badly, jah! It is because I am gay. I mean, people are thinking that they have this on their mind, and I have even seen some... how do you say? Taking advantage [...]"*  
Jota, [164-167]

In Jota's case as well, at times during the conversation there is confusion over the terminology used to refer to his transformism and to other fellow gay and/or transvestite friends. This echoes Maribel's confusion upon 'coming out' to her boss, when she initially refers to herself as gay (male) when people perceive her transness. This confusion over terminology and the blurring of labels collapsing gender and sexuality will be explored in 5.1.4.2. Although Jota's words may hold truth to some individuals 'mishandling their status', there is also an expectation of people who do not conform to gender and sexual norms (although it can apply to other identity-based traits considered marginal) to enact and measure life by impossibly high standards (Halberstam, 2005).

There is a reflection on how Trans men may have more privilege when they pass, as they attain a symbolic powerful figure status within the patriarchal system (Schilt, 2010), but this is

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<sup>63</sup> The researcher speaks Castilian Spanish in its Meridional (Southern) variety, which at times produces a *soft lisp* sound for the /θ/, easily identified by other speakers of Spanish who conflate /θ/ with /s/.

challenged if ethnic or racial features are added to the conversation (Rogers, 2019), as Omar says below:

*“If you are mestizo you have more access, but not if you are trans. Not at least here in Santa Cruz. There are many people who are transphobic, right? And homophobic”.* Omar, 26 [270-271]

Omar touches upon a rather interesting issue here, he refuses the view that Trans people have it easier in contrast to Jota’s words, and he speaks from his experience as a Trans man in financial difficulty. Having previously self-defined as mestizo in the interview, he acknowledges having some privilege stemming from this in comparison to other ethnic groups [*“the Quechuas are different to mestizos here, you see?”* Omar (278-279)]. For a deeper reflection of these specific ethnic and racial tensions in Bolivia see chapter 5 (Clashes between gender identity, sexuality and race). Also, in the previous quote Omar touches upon homophobia when describing the overall attitudes of people in Santa Cruz towards Trans people, whether it is to do with his own confusion, or the fact that usually stigma and discrimination conflate in relation to gender and sexuality, and where a context or person is transphobic they will also be homophobic (both go hand in hand).

Further to this perception that Trans men have more privilege, Rober below reflects about the fact that *becoming men* means better access to work opportunities and the labour market, possibly echoing Schilt’s (2010) findings and in a wider context, seems to perpetuate the existing inequalities between gender and pay among the other societal groups.

*“As a [trans] man you have many more work opportunities. One. And two, when I go out clubbing I can get drunk, walk on the street, I can be robbed, that’s it. But I don’t have the constant [sexual] harassment of other men”.* Rober, 27 [56.54]

Here, Rober’s perception of having more privilege is asserted beyond the labour market, as he reflects about the differences of violence that men and women can expect or be subjected to. During the interview Rober revealed that his transition happened in his early twenties, meaning he probably experienced sexual harassment as a woman, and can now draw on those experiences to reflect about an aspect in which he is better off and is a noticeable advantage. Rober’s words convey his expectation that men can usually confront violence and petty crime, but not the type of sexual violence or rape that women usually fear and are systematically subjected to (Abelson, 2014).

In terms of the perceived privilege of being a Trans man, Rober also reflects about a (male) Trans friend of his from a wealthy background and high social status, reticent to coming out for fear of losing his privilege and bringing shame to his family. Socioeconomic status may grant ease of access to certain biomedical devices and prevent Trans people (mostly men) from a life of material hardship (Budge et al., 2016). See Zahara for instance, who was also able to keep her position within the government, or Marcos who has inherited his father’s contacts in the field of law. However, higher socioeconomic status can also mean an added pressure to the Trans individual to conform for the sake of the family status (Baudoin, 2010), which echoes the story of notorious Trans figure Roberta Benzi, a reference to some of the older Trans participants in this research, which was herself grateful to not have lost her status and money (Baudoin, 2010), hence not having had the need to be a *prostitute* [sic] despite people expecting the contrary (Gibellino, 2009).

*“Damn, at the financial level they also define you. I have a friend who is a Trans boy, his parents bathe in money literally, and he doesn’t want to come out as visible Trans man because of the status he has in Santa Cruz”. Rober, 27 [1.08.33]*

Another salient element here is the perception of wealth among those individuals originally from Santa Cruz, which alongside the apparent greater visibility of Trans people (women) in the city may be one of the reasons for Trans individuals to move there to find economic opportunities, such as the notorious case of Dayana Kenia Zárate<sup>64</sup> (Baldivieso, 2018). In relation to Dayana’s story of violence in Santa Cruz and the higher vulnerabilities that Trans women face, Paco earlier was aware that Trans women had it more difficult than Trans men, in his case referring to the intake of hormones and how it is easier for Trans men to *become themselves* quicker. In Rober’s case below, he further supports this view that Trans women are worse off than Trans men, but as Abelson (2014) and Westbrook (2008) pointed out, narrowing the experiences of Trans people (namely women) to those of violence, sex work and hardship does not only imply that all Trans people (women in this case) undergo the same processes and experiences but also renders them inherently vulnerable. The tension between the stereotype perpetuated, and the other realities emerges as salient again.

*“As I was telling you, the change from woman to man, now I feel much safer, because the constant harassment that girls experience isn’t there.” Rober, 27 [1.13.28]*

Here Rober perceives his transition to put him in a safer position than that of Trans women (and possibly the rest of women too), but this goes in line with the overall reality affecting men and women, where anything feminine or related to women is always subject to greater vulnerability, violence and risk (Serano, 2007). As Omar mentioned reflecting on the status of the Quechuas and Mestizos, the issue of increased vulnerability is worsened when the Trans individual is also non-white (Cosenza Krell, 2017), resounding the need for an intersectional lens to approach these themes and unveil their complexity.

Continuing the analysis of perceived privileges, the aspect of loss of privilege (while still maintaining some) also arises, as is the case of Zahara and her family background:

*“Us as [trans] women we go down. Even more...picture it, I was a white guy in Latin America, bearded, intellectual, from a political family, with very high studies. I was at the cusp. I mean, I could’ve been a member of parliament”. Zahara, 40 [380-382].*

In the quote above, the reference to bearded guys plays a role in perpetuating the stereotypical view of powerful left-wing figures in the Latin American collective consciousness (i.e. Castro or Guevara) (Dusster, 2016). In further conversation with Zahara (see below) she narrates her complex relationship with the patriarchs of her family. In the eyes of Zahara’s father, her predestined symbolic position of power (in parliament or government) may have been jeopardised by her embrace of her Trans identity. Zahara’s father may have feared the loss of the son who would continue the family tradition in politics, or perhaps the negative reactions towards his family, but his reaction could also stem from the unconscious assumption that Trans people are relegated to powerless and marginal positions that may cause damage and pain to his daughter.

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<sup>64</sup> Dayana was a 26-year-old Trans woman who moved from La Paz to Santa Cruz to transition looking for work and a new life and was brutally murdered in her own bar. The case became notorious as it was the first time a Trans femicide made it to court in Bolivia and the killers were convicted.

*“Where my grandfather has been a candidate to the vicepresidency with Evo Morales Ayma. He’s been member of parliament twice and a senator once, with Evo. And, also, it was when Evo wasn’t president yet and had to endure the worse political times. My grandfather was also a member of parliament of the second generation, you see? And among them is my grandfather. So... and my father has been Viceminister of the Interior.”* Zahara, 40 [36-41]

The complex issue of privilege permeates other aspects beyond gender (race, class, rural or urban background, sexuality, etc) and appears as a source of tension and quarrel in the accounts of the Trans individuals. In Zahara’s case, it has helped her to keep some position of power and secure hers and her children livelihoods, but her perceived privilege has come at the great cost of the family pressure, public scorn<sup>65</sup> and the estrangement from some of her closest relatives during periods of her life.

These perceptions of privilege either from the self or as perceived by others, whether lost or gained as a result of the physical and social changes Trans individuals go through link with the following point on Perpetuating Binaries (5.3.4). Picking on Serano’s writings (2007) about the erosion and disdain of the feminine, and how this becomes an impediment especially for Trans women who in some cases (Zahara, Esperanza Gracia, Cris, Georgina in her brief account) may have experienced a certain advantageous position from previous embodied male experience, these perceived privileges eventually show an issue more deeply rooted. Namely the fact that some of the identity-based expressions by Trans people inevitably fall in the perpetuation of binaries, and this either happens *motu proprio* or by societal and institutional influences and pressures, as Esperanza Gracia mentioned. Therefore, agency and free will (in the Spanish sense of *libre albedrío - liberum arbitrium*) when expressing a certain gender *authenticity* may be hobbled and limited by a certain collective resistance, which has very narrow notions of (binary) gender. Whilst it is difficult to escape this conundrum both for Trans people as it is for cis individuals, it appears understandable that in many cases Trans people just want to lead a calm and honest life as they are without being scrutinised on their perceived privilege, even when this means adhering to the binaries. Halberstam (2005) reflected on this pervasive issue of authenticity required from Trans experience, which has also been revisited by others (Chase and Catalano, 2015) and when to stop demanding ‘proof’ of authenticity from Trans individuals.

Interestingly enough, the supposed privilege that some feminists such as Greer (Wahlquist, 2016) or Adichie (Telesur, 2017) –who have been accused of upholding transphobic views– confer to Trans women because of their simplistic judgement that they (all) have grown up as men has not been discussed in this section, not for lack of relevance in academic scholarship (see Raymond, 1994; Stone, 2014; Jeffreys, 2014; O’Donnell, 2019; Hines, 2019), but simply because it has not emerged as an issue or even been mentioned among the participants in this research (being Trans is in no way perceived to be a privilege in any spaces). The assumption by some of these writers that the (male) privilege Trans women have is more “dangerous to others than any other privileges (i.e. being white, middle-class, etc.)” (Koyama, 2006) links only tangentially to Omar’s reflection on being a Trans mestizo.

This does not mean that such is the overall view in Bolivia about Trans women’s privilege: it may be or not at all that the general public uphold these views, in the researcher’s experience and

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<sup>65</sup> In recent years, political opponents have attacked Zahara’s family online using Zahara’s previous (male) legal name to tarnish her work and denounce her deceased father through insults and transphobic comments aimed at her.

field observations, it is not the case. But this does not signify that Trans individuals face no other challenges, perhaps the absence of this criticism against Trans women is related to invisibility but also the fact that there are other pressing issues or views on Trans people. The most relevant mention of a potential exclusion of Trans women is that which happened historically within gender and sexual minority spaces, but not on the grounds of 'protecting women spaces' but rather as they considered Trans issues as secondary and easily included under gay-led demands (Estenssoro, 2012; Vargas, 2012) which led to the departure of Trans individuals (mostly Trans women) to create their own groups and collectives. At times some of this rejection was also simply on the basis of transphobic ideas unrelated to any privileging Trans women may have.

#### 4.3.4 Perpetuating binaries

This subtheme picks on the previous subtheme's final remarks on how at times intendedly or unintendedly Trans individuals end up perpetuating binary expressions of gender. The aim of this subtheme is not to criticise Trans individuals for not being more queer or radical (Vidarte, 2005) in transgressing the norm through their transness (Serano, 2007), but rather exploring how binaries are perpetuated through a series of elements salient from participants words, namely: 'Transnormativity vs. cisnormativity' and 'The good, the bad and the ugly... trans'.

##### Transnormativity vs. cisnormativity

Transnormativity and cisnormativity cover participants' individual efforts to conform to their ideal self following certain (apparently) pre-established gender canons. In this sense, two main versions appear in most participant's accounts. On one hand transnormativity, as the type of almost compulsory nature of being Trans, whereby Trans people pursue certain interventions (mostly biomedical) to attain a uniform transmasculine or transfeminine reality (Bradford & Syed, 2019). On the other hand cisnormativity, which mostly encompasses patriarchal and heterosexist ideas about binary gender, which can also serve as reference point to be incorporated or imitated by Trans individuals. In the case of cisnormativity, as a hegemonic canon, it is so deeply embedded culturally, and so socially expected that it can be difficult to recognise or articulate until it is disrupted (Bradford & Syed, 2019), echoing the saying 'fish don't know they're swimming in [cisnormative] waters'. At times, both norms are so enmeshed and closely knit that they are difficult to understand as separate entities.

Johnson (2016) initially developed the idea of transnormativity and positioned it on the same lines as homonormativity and heteronormativity in order to understand it as an ideology that both constrains and empowers "Trans peoples identifications, characteristics and behaviours as legitimate and prescriptive" (Johnson, 2016, p. 466). See below in Maribel's words this seeming contradiction about being liberated (not wanting any surgery and being content with her body) whilst feeling limited (by *feeling the need* to take medicines to *shape* her body).

*"Maribel: And how you call it... further down the line, this thing of... the thing about hormones.*

*Researcher: Do you take them?*

*M: Yeah, but they are contraceptive pills.*

*R: Ah.*

*M: That's it, I take [them], because they also have oestrogen, right? A little, not a lot but it contains it." Maribel, 18 [692-697]*

Initially Maribel had no intention whatsoever to transform her body in any way (beyond taking oestrogen) as she was content –or so it seemed until her incident with the knife. When asked in conversation about her view on the surgical interventions other Trans people undergo, she refused even considering it:



*“No. I am fine like this. I do not want anything [surgery wise]”. Maribel, 18 [242]*

Bodily transformations appear deeply embedded in transnormativity through the biomedicalization of many participant’s bodies. The biomedicalization of Trans bodies is closely knit to the idea of trans/cis normativity as it helps the Trans individual materialise their ideas of gender authenticity and legitimacy through shaping and transforming their bodies, often in line with established ideas of gender expression. Effectively, to an extent, the cisgender body acts as a point of reference to be imitated through biomedical interventions. Many participants unquestioningly engage in these procedures as the main way to attain their desired embodied expression:

*“[...] when I left school at 18 I started working in a call centre to pay for my operations, because I was certain that my father wasn’t going to pay for the [mastectomy] operation.” Marcos, [235-237]*

In a way, hegemonic transnormativity creates a biomedicalised [trans] body. Transnormativity parallels and reflects the cisnormativity of divisive/differentiated bodies under a well designated sexual dimorphism. Transnormativity becomes hegemonic when transformations and changes emerge as rites of passage (as Esperanza Gracia claimed in conversation, Trans women are expected to get breasts, wear high heels, etc). In relation to the transnormative body, there may be those who like Paco or Marcos followed specific steps for (medical) physical transition but this does not extend to every participant (and Trans person in their full diversity), as some like Cris acknowledge the stereotypical presentations expected from gender variance:

*“So, I had to make a decision to leave the labour market. To take a pause, for the sake of my transition.” Paco, 31 [94-95]*

*“[people] have a mentality about transgender as someone who wears miniskirt and heels and... but with me they have realised that I dress more in black, I define myself with an androgynous destiny, gothic, I like that aesthetic and I don’t go beyond, let’s say, always in black. Supposedly that way of thinking [transness]... high boots up to here, a pink miniskirt and a doggie in your handbag [laughing]. That is how we define Trans [people]” Cris, 38 [27:18-28:02]*

It must be highlighted that both positions above (Paco and Marcos’s, and on the other side Cris and any of the other participants making contributions to this research) have consciously or unconsciously conveyed their varied gender subjectivities (Burlton Davies, 2013), and the analysis herein and throughout mainly engages with the tensions of normative and mainstream gender ideas and expressions present in the specific sociocultural context of the research (and the influences playing a part). Cris above refuses what they believe to be the aesthetics expected of dominant womanhood and is somehow critically reflective of how Trans people (namely women) are expected to continue the dominance of gender roles forged in reference to heteropatriarchy (Skidmore, 2011). On the other hand, Paco not only followed through with the demands for transitioning (as he did not feel his appearance fit or allowed him a normal livelihood), these also included him giving up his work temporarily. In relation to work and the labour market, another rite of passage closely related to transnormativity is that of sex work among Trans women.

*“It is unbelievable, I know cases of leaders of Trans people who are Trans themselves and have been at some point... they have worked as sex workers, and*

*I know of girls who are starting their transition process, and [the leaders] send them to prostitute themselves as if it was the only option” (Paco, 332-335)*

Sex work as a rite of passage or only option for some Trans women will be further explored as one of the aspects of hardship that Trans women face. While in this case it is debatable whether Trans women are obliged to do sex work. Sex work in itself can represent a rite of passage as an affirmative performance of their embodied femininity in the street, but also some women take for granted that this may be the only way to earn a livelihood and the only job they can do (in which case, it provides a good example of Trans hardship) (RedlacTrans et al., 2012; Godoy, 2015). Incidentally, among the participants, only four Trans women<sup>66</sup> work or have worked as sex workers (two of which felt sex work was their only option, whilst the other two felt empowered by sex work and combined it with other jobs).

In terms of cisnormativity, a key aspect emerges through the desire of some Trans individuals to create nuclear family units where the bond uniting the parents is a heterosexual one. Maribel below wants to follow in the steps of established patriarchal gender roles, self-defining simply as a woman (although initially coming out as a gay man when questioned), who just desires to lead a normal life selling cakes in the plaza, and creating her own [heterosexual] family unit.

*“This is what I think, I believe that... let’s say a baby, I can have my partner and adopt a child, but it is not going to be the same as me, or maybe it can be”.*  
Maribel, 18 [108-109]

It is possible that her self-identification draws on both Trans and cisnormative elements in a sort of syncretism, including ideas not only about her body and how it should be (mixing both the intake of (unnecessary) pills with the refusal to undergo surgical treatment) but also ideas about her social role and status (through her desire of becoming a mother in her own heterosexual relationship). This interlinking of Trans and cisnormativity is deeply embedded in culturally-accepted ideas around masculinity and femininity, with Trans people inhabiting “the borderland where notions of masculinity and femininity collide” (Koyama, 2006). Besides Maribel mentioning the family aspect in terms of the possibility of adopting a child within her straight relationship, Paco and Omar below also speak about their desire for being family men:

*“More than my career, I want to be a dad, I want to have my family, my pretty child, to be cooking for my child and that my wife works.”* Rober, 27 [1.01.34]

*“Yes, I want to have a family. But it will be as son as my wife finishes her studies, when she gets her full diploma so we would try the in vitro fertilisation. But yes, a family.”* Omar, 26 [404-405]

There is a slight difference between how to achieve these family aspirations. Maribel and Rober are inclined to adopting children, possibly as it is more practical but also possibly in line with cisnormative ways of having children in the same way heterosexual couples have them (when they cannot conceive). However, in conversation with Omar, the idea was for him to stop taking testosterone and become pregnant so his wife could work after graduating. Upon reflection, the whole idea about LGBTQ+ not having family was a formulation of queer theorists (Vidarte, 2005), framing those on the gender and sexual diversity spectrum as more marginal and anti status-

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<sup>66</sup> While it may be obvious from some of the excerpts who these participants are, it seems irrelevant and unnecessary to name them specifically, despite their fully informed consent and openness to talk about their experiences as sex workers.

quo in relation to patriarchal societal rules, when the reality is many LGBTQ+ people do happily fit into these categories and aspirations, and not merely because they long for passing.

The aspect of the influence of cisnormativity appears in Marcos's interview as a societal imposition, so to an extent cisnormativity is enabled and enforced by the institutions already examined, whilst transnormativity comes from *within* trans-specific experience, it is informed by what goes on in the patriarchal locus surrounding the individual oftentimes, and also is perpetuated by the Trans collectives and groups which sometimes also perpetuate marginal practices (sex work) or risky behaviours when Trans lives are intersected by poverty (i.e.. Trans women injecting themselves with engine oil to develop breasts or hips) (RedlacTrans et al., 2012).

*"[...] to dress myself as a girl or have long hair and those kinds of things, right? So, little by little I felt that society, my family, the school, the teachers sent me messages that what I was feeling was wrong."* Marcos, [76-78]

Therefore, transnormativity appears as an assimilation of both cisnormative values that include patriarchal hegemonic elements (heterosexual family units, longing for parenthood) with other elements which are more easily integrated in the Trans experience (such as the hypersexualisation of Trans women through beauty contests or sex work, the exaggeration of gendered behaviours or physical expressions, the erasure of androgynous or ambiguous embodiment, etc). An observable part of transnormativity is the perpetual reference to gender as the structural and almost only existing aspect in the life of Trans people: if a person is Trans, their gender variance remains their only horizon and no other dimensions of their cultural reality are prioritised, rendering them as little more than case studies of an abnormality (Juang, 2006). The interlinking and blending of transnormative and cisnormative precepts may eventually be what *helps* Trans people come back to the flock (as explored in 7.4.2 Precarious lives 'prodigal children' and the sacrifices that they need to do) notwithstanding their agency and lived experience when doing so.

#### *The good, the bad and the ugly... trans*

The ways in which Trans experience perpetuates other pre-established normative (gender) expectations is limited in ways not imposed to other gender expressions (namely being a 'good' Trans person, or being condemned to marginality and criminality through being the 'bad' trans). The figure of the good Trans appears first:

*"[...] you see me now as an upstanding man. Now I don't drink, I don't have the need to. Now I am good, right?"* Paco, [184-185]

This being a good Trans man in pursue of social acceptance clashes with societal expectations of manly accepted behaviour, i.e. drinking. Alcohol consumption among Bolivian men (particularly young men) is widely spread (Ticona Mamani, 2015; Ministerio de Salud, 2016 & 2017) and to an extent accepted to a higher degree than women's consumption of alcoholic beverages (Balda-Cabello & da Silva, 2011). In Paco's excerpt a question arises, between how he behaved before his transition and how he behaves now, and the implications of this (namely, transitioning turned him into being a *good* person in his own words, which he may not have been before).

*"I haven't murdered anyone, mum', I said to her. I haven't murdered, I don't harm anyone, I am not an alcoholic, I am not a drug addict [...]"*. Omar, 26 [129-131]

Once again Halberstam's (2005) idea of the unattainable high standards expected of Trans people echo here, in this case Trans men not only have to behave better than the average men, but they also have to prove it, even when these behaviours are somehow tolerated among cisgender men in the patriarchal order.

*"So, I said to her: 'Do you see me [doing] badly? You see me...' Maybe, I don't know, she thought it was to do with drugs at some point [...]"*. Paco, 31 [182-183]

The bad and ugly Trans appear through Omar reaffirming the absence of negative aspects in his behaviour, as a way to confirm that he is a good man, and therefore deserves recognition and acceptance on those grounds. In Paco's case he challenged his mother who thought him being Trans meant he was engaging in drug consumption and *doing badly* in life. Goodness and honesty become a sort of symbolic social blackmail to make sure Trans individuals conform to pre-established and unrealistic social standards that are rarely requested with such insistence from anyone else. It could also be that despite ascribing to pathologized and/or medicalised notions of transness (naturally grouping together Trans individuals apart from other marginalised groups subject to medical scrutiny, Skidmore: 2011) the Trans demedicalisation movement (Missé and Coll-Planas, 2010) alongside recent narrative developments around sexual and gender subjectivities have encouraged some Trans people to reinterpret Trans subjectivity as healthy and functional (Burlton Davies, 2013).

*"It's very common among Trans boys to become the worse of the worse. Remachistas. I believe that it's in order to reaffirm their masculinity. I don't understand, I wouldn't be able to because I've been on the other side"*. Rober, 27 [56.29]

As Rober says, some Trans men he knows seem to need to become super violent machos in order to reaffirm their manliness. In his case, he distances himself from them by drawing on his prior experience before transitioning, and this serves him as deterrent to embrace the uglier and worse aspects of manhood as he keeps reasserting his position as a polite gentleman when dealing with women. Rober's positioning echoes Califia's (2006) statement whereby some Trans men reject a form of masculine personhood more easily adopted (the undesirable aggressive macho) based on their past lesbian history and possible feminist leanings.

*"And there's another thing, for instance, I have many lesbian friends, you see? But more than friends, they're acquaintances, among themselves they're super vulgar and I'm very calm, like a lil' gentleman, well polite<sup>67</sup>, I don't like referring to women as sexual objects because they are not"*. Rober, 27 [1.18.00-30]

Despite these words, a deeper conversation with Rober about personal relationships post-transitioning revealed some comments verging on misogyny as he resented cis women and lesbians for their reluctance to have him as an intimate or romantic partner. Rober was popular among his lesbian circle before transitioning, and his rancour against their apparent refusal to date him may explain his framing of them as vulgar and objectifying other women. This positioning himself in line with a respectful and almost paternalistic masculine stance could be moulded by his expectations and experiences of class, occupation, subculture and ethnicity

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<sup>67</sup> In the original, Rober refers to himself using diminutive suffixes, "caballerito" and "educadito" both of which are lost in translation to an extent. These suffixes are very common in Meridional Spanish and Latin American variations and denote affection and familiarity (RAE, 2019c).

(being a young upper middle class mestizo doctor from Santa Cruz), making him draw on his own system for conferring and acting “manhood” (Rubin, 2006) in seemingly contradictory ways. These contradictions emerging from Rober’s previous experience as a female who suffered harassment and his current thoughts about sexually objectifying women while sustaining sexist views, echo Schilt’s (2006) reflection on Trans men’s experiences refusing that critical perspectives on gender discrimination are inherent to them. On a different perspective, Hale (1998) pointed out the hard balance between having lived experiences of moving in a feminist world whilst adopting masculine enactments that respect the values held in those contexts is a difficult one, not only as it positions the Trans men as inhabitants of a symbolic border, but also because of the many assumptions held by non-Trans feminists who may ignore transphobic gender oppression (Hale, 1998). As seen in the different excerpts by some of the Trans men interviewed, this positioning also depends on the type of identifications Trans individuals ascribe to (Bettcher, 2014).

Some of the gender norms discussed have implications in terms of the visible Trans references discussed earlier, informing ways Trans people can behave and navigate life through their gender. This throws the burden and the dreariness of goodness and integrity, of being eternally good, standing in the right place inside the pen. Although references and norms help reaffirm individual’s transness and create the possibility for being Trans and living one’s identity, the visibility created is positive but possibly also shapes a sort of limited expression constrained by binary parameters. Institutions also have a role in contributing to the shaping and framing of Trans identity but also to an extent they add to the hardship and precarity that will be explored next. These difficulties stem partly from what Anzaldúa (1987) referred to as “despot duality” where the possibility of inhabiting, embodying and embracing border positions between apparent absolutes (in terms of race, gender, sexuality) is erased (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Finally, questioning the perpetuation of binaries and gender norms beckons for reflection on the rigidity of ideas around gender when examining Trans experience. In this sense, Prosser (1998) and Hok-Sze-Leung (2006) have argued that transness is not necessarily a fluid experience embraced by Trans people, but rather a category that looks for stability, aiming at attaining a more or less stable identity. The obsession about the transgressive disruptions and instabilities posed by Trans experience is a by-product of queer theorists writings (Hok-Sze-Leung, 2006; Vidarte, 2005; Serano, 2007). It could be that transnormativity and cisnormativity are closer than it seems, and although are culturally dependent, in the Bolivian context they mix colonial gender binary elements with an indigenous understandings of what womanhood and manhood may mean. A further reflection on the analysis of transnormativity interpellates the work of Hausman (1994), who somehow dismissed Trans agency and identity (beyond the medical model) (Hemmings, 1998) failing to acknowledge the reasons and intentions behind the metanarratives and identity-based presentations embodied by many Trans individuals (Stone, 2014; Bettcher, 2014; Stone). While some of these metanarratives and gendered presentations may seem to perpetuate a certain gender binary or norm (be it cis or trans), the reflections contained herein steer clear of Hausman’s blaming of Trans people (particularly women) for ‘normalising, naturalising and codifying a bipolar gender system’ that fixes cis women into a traditional feminine frame (Boyd, 2006; p. 430).

#### 4.4 PRECARIOUS LIVES

This section refers to the difficulties that often seem intrinsic to Trans experience in Bolivia on the basis of being Trans. These often deepen the vulnerability and risk of further marginalisation faced by Trans people (Baldivieso, 2017; Los Tiempos, 2017).

##### 4.4.1 Violence: self-inflicted and otherwise

Violence appears as one of the main elements condemning many Trans people to a certain precarious existence. One of the key issues of violence is that usually, it is assumed that Trans people are highly vulnerable (Redlactrans, 2014; Aruquipa et al, 2012) when in fact these assumptions refer to Trans women's experiences on behalf of all Trans people (Godoy, 2015) and omit the possible acts of physical or emotional violence suffered by Trans men. Violence can appear physically, inflicted by the police, by random individuals, or relatives through active beatings or aggression (Aruquipa et al., 2012). Or it can be emotional violence through discrimination and harassment, the result of which affects Trans people psychologically and also pushes some of them towards self-harming (Conexión Fondo Emancipación, 2011). In the cases of self-harm it is not clear whether the self-rejection comes before external rejection of the Trans identity, but the assumption will be such due to the pressures to conform to normative gender (Stryker, 2006; Stryker & Currah, 2014). Maribel provides an example of the latter below, who was tired of people's taunting and discrimination and ended up chopping her penis:

***Maribel:** It's awful too, I've done to myself... how do you call it? A self-aggression. And because... that, because of this, because they discriminate you, I mean, you feel like a woman and you have that thing men have, and you want [the penis] to disappear and don't want to have it. And this is what happened to me, where I even cut myself. Because I didn't want to have... but after that, there was no way, I had to put up with it, what else can I do?*

***Researcher:** But did you go to the doctor afterwards?*

***M:** Yes, because I fainted then... there was lots of blood like... everything became blurred. Then I woke up like that in the hospital." Maribel, 18 [231-238]*

This incident was the most serious instance of self-harm she reported, however in further conversation she explained of other times when she was underaged and worked in a chichería where miners would get drunk and harass her. The intersection between discrimination with feelings of frustration and hopelessness about feeling 'trapped' in a body<sup>68</sup> and mostly an identity which does not feel the right one to Trans individuals seems to be the main reason for them to self-harm and engage in behaviours that affect their health, including suicidal ideation (Whittle et al., 2007). See below Marcos and Zahara who also engaged in harmful behaviour and seriously considered committing suicide on different occasions after being rejected by their closest ones and their social environment.

***Marcos:** So, really I started drinking even earlier, at 15... I thought I was going to stay like that with that body and that feminine identity, with that woman name all my life, right? I didn't know you could do things to change. Erm, and this hurt a lot, and I preferred hurting myself, even there was a rather long time*

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<sup>68</sup> Although this definition may resonate with a gender dysphoria diagnosis (APA, 2013), it will only be referred under such terminology when used by participants themselves, in order to avoid imposing medicalised views on participant's experiences.

*in my life where I... there's a psychological condition called self-infliction<sup>69</sup>, where you wound and cut yourself, and I always hurt myself because I didn't feel pain. It was like I had to do it, because I hated the body I inhabited, I detested it, so I hurt myself all the time, right? From here also stems the alcohol consumption for instance, cause... It was also, I don't know, like escaping and not thinking in the reality I had... towards 18 my best friend who I knew from school, who was a girl older than me realised that I was really unwell, those two years from 16 to 18... I even tried to kill myself twice.*

**Researcher:** *Your family knew? Or nobody found out...*

**M:** *No, nobody found out but well... One time I took all the pills I found in my house, and the other I cut myself. Fortunately, nothing happened, nothing grievous... but with the pills I ended up in the clinic because I had also consumed alcohol and I was intoxicated and well... I survived. But they [my parents] didn't know I was trying to kill myself". Marcos, 31 [102-118]*

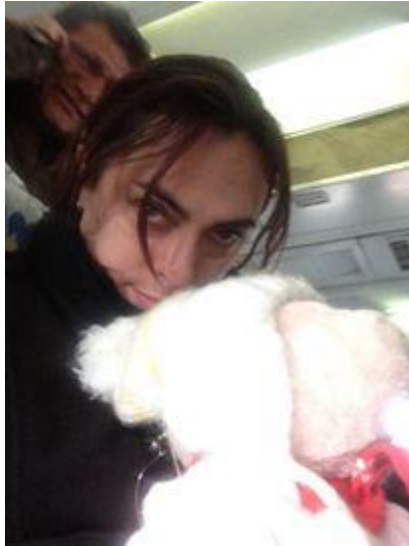
*"We [my dad and I] quarrelled six months, very badly. We didn't speak, erm... I decided to leave Bolivia. I left more or less for almost eight months to the United States where I could... I mean, had I stayed here [in Bolivia] I would have ended up suiciding myself because here I wasn't... I couldn't be well. I couldn't be healthy". Zahara, 40 [75-78]*

In Zahara's account she had to leave her family, her work and her country in order to escape the backlash she was facing after telling her family she was Trans and planned to undergo both a social and physical transition. Her story aligns with many accounts of Trans people in Bolivia who are forced to leave the family home upon acknowledging their transness (Conexión Fondo Emancipación, 2011) some due to the real threat of physical and psychological violence (Ross Quiroga, 2013), and in her case to the very prospect of her remaining alive and healthy.

*"I didn't have that family harassment. I didn't have... didn't feel the loss of Friends. I was in a country where I didn't know anyone. So I preferred not knowing anyone that knowing everyone and that nobody wants to talk to you. So, really the feeling of solitude I had to live in that moment was so abhorrent... so abhorrent that I thought of killing myself a couple of times. It was very tough. I mean, the only ones I could talk to were... these two little things I'll introduce you to in a bit. One is called Puchi and the other is called Pachi. They're my two piglets". Zahara, 40 [85-91]*

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<sup>69</sup> In the original Spanish Marcos says 'autoinfligencia' which is neither a medical term nor a word in itself, probably a confusion between auto [to oneself] and infligir [inflict]



8 - Zahara with one of her piglets

Despite being married and having two children, Zahara's family unit broke upon the initial rejection of her transness. Only then, with her new anonymity as a foreigner the only source of support and solace she had were two teddy bears in the shape of little pigs that she took with her when she left Bolivia to start her transition. In further conversation, Zahara explained that her therapist recommended having a pet, or something external to focus on, take care of, or use as strategy to stop distract herself from her feelings of self-harm and pain. Needless to say, her case is somewhat an exception in that she had the means and capacity to emigrate to the US with a certain material and economic comfort, something that rarely happens to other Trans people who are forced to leave their home facing poverty and homelessness (Ross Quiroga, 2013; Camillo Bonassi et al., 2015; Forge & Ream, 2014). In this research most of the participants who left their family on the same grounds moved to another department to do sex work (Vanesa, Esperanza Gracia) or a menial job (Maribel and Paco).

In the instance of Marcos, despite his comfortable middle-class status he followed on migratory flows of Bolivians moving to neighbouring Argentina (Castronuovo, 2010) to complete the surgical transition he had attempted to start in Bolivia (with a botched mastectomy). The threat of psychological violence instils the fear of suicide among many participants enticing them to leave and endure further violence, in many cases from the police (see both Marcos and Vanesa).

*"[...] my idea was always to leave, and I even looked for a totally crazy degree that wouldn't exist here, as an excuse to leave this country, because I felt that I wasn't going to be alive long here, because I was going to end up killing myself or I would have ended up being murdered and it would have been... I don't know, a totally painful life". Marcos, 31 [172-175]*

Marcos's exile to Argentina happened before the introduction of Law 807, which caused the unwanted scrutiny and the unjustified humiliation and harassment by the Bolivian border force of that time due to the apparent mismatch between his physical appearance and the name on his ID. Although most of the literature on police violence against Trans people in this context focuses on the experiences of Trans women namely in the context of sex work (Ross Quiroga, 2013; Redlactrans, 2014), Marcos's ordeal falls within the historic accounts recorded by Estenssoro (2012) of gender and sexually diverse Bolivians who have been subject to police violence due to their non-normative identities.



*“Marcos: So in the... when I left for Buenos Aires I had a woman’s name, and I went alone, 52-hour trip with 80 kg of luggage.*

*Researcher: On the [bus] fleet?*

*M: On the fleet, 52 hours and when I got to the border and I had to do the migration [procedure] on the Bolivian side, they treated me really badly, they didn’t understand, they laughed at me, ridiculed me, they didn’t let me cross.*

*R: What?*

*M: And they put me in a room to verify, because they thought I was using a fake document, because obviously physically I looked like a man... I had short hair and was operated and had started hormones, so my voice had changed a bit but my name was a woman’s. So they thought I had stolen a document or I was a crook trying to escape. And they didn’t let me cross and I missed my bus, the other [connecting] bus that had to take me to Buenos Aires.*

*R: Ay, no.*

*M: They kept me 4 hours in that room, and loads of policemen came and asked me questions, why I was leaving and where I lived, and who were my parents and they checked my fingerprints to check if it was really my ID”. Marcos, 31 [370-385]*

*“[...] but this was during the night, when engaging in sex work I did... we had groups of young men who would come [to us], those high-class boys who came to insult and beat us, everything. But during the day in my environment not really, mostly because I was well-behaved, and I was well received. I don’t think... the toughest has been my father’s rejection, my family’s [rejection] at the beginning, and then here the societal [rejection], because back then they didn’t have that much information”. Vanesa, 54 [336-340]*

The above account by Vanesa of violence and harassment appears in the context of sex work and specifically during the night, in line with further research on the heightened vulnerability of Trans sex workers who experience similar levels of aggression and death when night falls (RedlacTrans et al., 2012). For Vanesa, despite having suffered beatings her experience of total rejection by her father was worse. The socioeconomic context of Trans women and the unfavourable labour situation often makes sex work the only feasible possibility for some of them (Godoy, 2015; Aruquipa et al., 2012), and this is something that Trans men are also aware of (Paco and Rober below). In the case of Esperanza Gracia, before transitioning she had stable employment as agronomic engineer, but this changed with her transition and she had turn to sex work as often happens with the loss of economic and social status endured by Trans women when they transition (Koyama 2004). Later on, Esperanza Gracia recovered stable employment with the local authority and kept sex work as a way to educate and empower others, from a stronger personal position.

*“In my transition here in Bolivia I have had complications, you see? I’ve had to work as sex worker. I’ve had to transition from my agronomic [engineer] self into my tarty self, a prostitute [...]”. Esperanza Gracia, (557-559)*

*“So, I think this is what complicates things more, [is] the fact that many Trans girls turn to the first thing [available] which is prostitution, for instance.” Paco, 31 [331-332]*

*“Sadly, Trans girls are more visible and because they’re kicked out of their homes at early ages they have to engage in prostitution as a need because they can’t study. They have no papers, they can’t enrol in school, even at school they’re*

*discriminated, they can't achieve, can't access university, have a career or earn money otherwise. It's a vicious circle."* Rober, 27 [1.09.45-10.11]

When sex work is the only choice to earn a living, this renders Trans women vulnerable to high-risk situations in terms of exposure to STIs (Ministerio de Salud y Deportes, 2013), physical violence and the intake of drugs and high quantities of alcohol (UNFPA & Mesa de Trabajo Nacional, 2011):

*"Now the life expectancy of a Trans woman in Bolivia is about 30-35 years old<sup>70</sup>, because they murder them, kill them. The majority die with... advanced AIDS, with tuberculosis, with hepatic alcoholic conditions, with drug addictions or abandonment, right? So they die of malnutrition, many kill themselves, they let themselves die of alcoholism".* Esperanza Gracia [740-742]

In conversation with Esperanza Gracia, she revealed some scars around her neck and throat suffered during an attack that happened years earlier when a client tried to kill her using a pair of scissors to stab her. She publicly denounced the attack despite the risk of doing so in order to challenge the impunity of violence towards Trans women and sex workers (RedlacTrans et al., 2012; Redlactrans, 2014). Her case made it to the local news (see below) and started making visible a recurring reality in Bolivia (Ross Quiroga, 2013b/c). Both Esperanza Gracia's and Vanesa's experiences of violence and sex work happened under the impunity of the night.



7-News of the attack

<sup>70</sup> This is her view, possibly lower than the LAC average which according to ONUSIDA (2020) is estimated to be 35.5-41.2 years old across the region.

Finally, the difficult story by Paco provides a good example of family and loved ones exerting what can be considered both physical and emotional violence. Before transitioning Paco felt the pressure and badgering from his family to conform to his gender assigned at birth and comply with heterosexual norms by deciding to date a friend to get his relatives off his back. However, despite the sham nature of the relationship with a close friend, a problematic incident<sup>71</sup> occurred that led to his pregnancy. Paco then desperately sought an abortion that was hampered by his family in collusion with the child's biological father.

*“Paco: [...] look, I was just trying to have a normal life quote unquote. Erm, I met the guy who is my son’s dad, who was a good friend of mine. So then, I kind of started a relationship with him to show my family and... because of their insistence ‘when are you bringing someone?’ and all that. So, that pressure, I wooed him, so [I said to them] ‘leave me in peace now’. Erm, for me he was like a friend with many things in common, but one day it happened I had one too many drinks...”*

**Researcher:** Yeah.

*P: And that happened, without me being conscious... the fact is I found out I was pregnant. And it was a very, very hard blow for me, because I couldn’t accept my body as it was, so it was worse to have a body with a baby inside let’s say, right? So, it was a blow at first, I thought of having an abortion, it was my first thought. But the first thing he [the friend] did... because I told him ‘I’m not going to have it [the baby], I’m not consulting with you, it’s the decision I have...’. But the first thing he did was to tell my family.*

**R:** Oh, no...

*P: Then my... family’s reaction, I mean I was young, 21. Usually mothers, parents are annoyed when their daughter is pregnant that young, right? But my mum’s reaction was totally opposite: happiness... and it was because, I later realised, because she wanted this [pregnancy] to make my [trans] feelings to pass. So, they had me... they didn’t leave me on my own, all the time there was someone with me.” Paco, [120-139]*

The family kept guarding Paco for 9 months so he would not run away and have an abortion. To an extent the incident may have been an attempt at the pregnancy acting as corrective for the gender variance Paco was already explicitly showing and conveying to his family. An act of double violence: the unintended conception with his friend and the unwanted pregnancy forced upon by his family keeping him almost captive, all whilst *knowing* and *feeling* he was a man who already rejected his female body. Effectively not only did he had to endure this ordeal, but also he had no right to act or feel as a man, as his gender was also policed. There have been instances of Trans men willingly seeking pregnancy in the Latin American context, including notorious Trans couples in Ecuador (BBC, 2016) and Puerto Rico (Pulzo, 2020), so the argument is not about the legitimacy or the possibility of Trans men *choosing* parenthood through becoming pregnant, but rather the use of such possibility as a way to punish and make the Trans person conform and prevent them from transitioning (or possibly erasing their transition). On this note, Verlinden (2012) reminds us that these instances of male pregnancy are still rare due to the gendered nature of pregnancy and its related technologies, mostly only intended for women, whether biological or socially female.

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<sup>71</sup> For the researcher, the fact that Paco got pregnant from a close friend who had intercourse with him [her then] whilst passed out due to alcohol intoxication (according to Paco’s account) is very problematic, even if Paco did not frame this incident as rape.

Paco went on to say that once his child was born, he reflected and did not feel angry or rancorous towards the baby and thinks of him as one of the main joys in his life despite the way it was conceived. In spite of how Paco has been able to reflect and overcome the trauma of this incident by focusing on the joy of his son, the whole story echoes Namaste's (2006) reflection on how sexual assault against Trans men serves the purpose of reinscribing their social gender and biological sex. In this specific case it is possible that to a degree both Paco's friend and his family were reminding him that his real essence was that of a woman, and as such his biological destiny (Namaste, 2006) was set in motion.

Paco's reframing and acceptance of these incidents echo the words of Maribel, who acknowledged feeling angry and responding with rage when people were discriminating her but having developed a sort of resilience to stomach these situations and get on with her life. In short, the message about Trans experience is that survival and resilience against violence may be key (Higgins et al., 2016).

*"But I can't either go and tell him, a person who's a discriminator, 'you don't have to think like that' you see? I mean, I have to try to get people to accept me, but I can't... everyone has their own way of thinking, what they think and else"*  
Maribel, 18 [225-228]

*"So sometimes I have to react aggressively, and finally with insults. If you respond with insults then you say 'you've won this fight' because in the end you go down to their level and you end up losing. You regret what you say, but we are human and wrath leads you to this [response]."* Cris, 38 [38:37-39:01]

Trans resilience is also present in Cris above through the anger and verbal retaliation when faced with verbal abuse in the street, and how despite the regret for reacting, the very wrath expressed can be understood as an actual positive feeling as it constitutes a key element towards self-defence and rejecting discriminatory attitudes. Resilience may simply and on the most basic level be understood as the ability to 'bounce back' when faced with a difficult or challenging experience (Singh, 2013). Despite the title of this section, hardship is not to be portrayed as a specific or key domain of transness but rather a common human experience that in the context of this research is analysed in relation to other issues (the postcolonial legacy where issues of race, ethnicity and class intersect other patriarchal values, present elsewhere). Resilience thus is not to be dismissed among the accounts of participants who react to negative incidents and potential discrimination, and was an aspect that oozed through the conversations and accounts of all the participants in this research, including those whose lives may be perceived as having been more difficult.

#### **A note on sex work:**

As seen in previous sections sex work is salient among different participant accounts, either through reflection about other people's experiences or personal ones. Despite the fact that some of the literature referenced in this research points towards sex work being the main occupation for Trans women in Bolivia (Conexión Fondo Emancipación, 2011; Ross Quiroga, 2013; Aruquipa et al., 2012; RedlacTrans et al., 2012; RedlacTrans, 2014; etc), the fact remains in this research that only a few participants have been sex workers. Whether this is a reflection on the profile of the Trans women recruited (mostly in urban areas with an activist profile, middle aged) the changing context (passing of the Law 807 and wider visibility of gender and sexual diversity) or the diverse reality of Trans women's experiences and roles (Towle & Norman, 2006) needs to be considered by the reader.

Therefore, while it is important to highlight the violent incidences reported by participants in relation to sex work there is a conscious analytic choice behind not conferring sex work its own section as this would unequivocally embed sex work with [female] transness, serving the purpose of further victimising Trans women and perpetuating a certain framing of their accounts as vulnerable (Westbrook, 2008). Also, it would not be an accurate analysis of the issue of sex work in the context of this research. While most Trans women become sex workers due to hardship and other underlying systemic oppressions (i.e. poverty, limited work opportunities, economic hardship), to others, it almost served as a rite of passage towards womanhood, some others found it empowering and a proactive choice in line with Latin American discourses around the legalisation of sex work (Redtrasex, 2019; ATB, 2015; RedlacTrans et al., 2012). Not everyone was coerced, and framing all of them as such would not be fair or respect their agency and voluntary adoption and maintenance of sex work (Redtrasex, 2019).

#### 4.4.2 Trans rebirth and the prodigal children

The metaphor of Trans rebirth (Haraway, 1991) appears when Trans people emerge from their initial instances of hardship and violence and start living their life in line with their assumed identity (Machuca, 2019). This subtheme mostly applies to the older Trans people and the middle-aged ones who despite always *knowing* they were Trans, only assumed their authentic identity (Chase, 2006) later on in life. While the myths of Trans rebirth are mostly explored in the literature in regards to surgical procedures on Trans bodies (Haraway; 1991, Stryker, 1994; Elliot, 2014) in this section it will include mostly a sense of symbolic cultural and social mutations (Hernández, 2019; Machuca, 2019; Durban-Albrecht, 2017) that may at times be accompanied by individual's surgical transformations.

In the case of Marcos below, despite undergoing a surgical intervention that was not fully successful and required further treatment, this intervention made him feel like he was born again after the difficulties he confronted up until that point.

*“Marcos: [...] the surgery they did was peri-areolar which doesn't leave a scar, but my operation didn't turn out as expected. They didn't remove all the tissue they should have, so there was still some [breast]. And I was super frustrated because I'd saved for more than a year and I didn't have a peso left to fix it.*

**Researcher:** *And what did you do?*

**M:** *Well, I had to stay like that for a while, you see? And that was... I got the surgery on my 19th birthday on the [DATE], when I turned 19th for it was like being born again. Very symbolic for me.”* Marcos, 31 [259-266]

For some of the Trans participants assuming their gender means a rupture with their life, taking distance from the life and people they have known, leaving or taking a break from work, and sometimes starting their lives over in order to embrace who they feel they really are:

*“Mostly what Trans people do when they change their identity, or because of their transition, is that they go to another city and start from scratch, you could say”.* Paco, 31 [111-112]

An aspect linked to the rebirth of some Trans people comes with their attempts at regaining the acceptance and love of their families and relatives. In this sense, the idea of the prodigal children emerges. The prodigal Trans children return transformed physically, psychologically and socially, looking for the conditional tolerance and acceptance (Spade, 2006) of those whose conformity and imposition to norms made them leave in the first place.

*“They... they received me well, the first... after so many years, a good reception and something I liked about my dad –because he made a family dinner with all my brothers, cousins, uncles and the whole lot–. ‘You respect her as my daughter’. [...] ‘she is my daughter, for me she is Vanesa’. And we didn’t have the law [807] or anything. ‘She is my daughter and she is Vanesa, if you respect her you are welcome, if not you can get out’. And this was the greatest joy, and... the big openness of the whole family”. Vanesa, 53 [250-256]*

In Vanesa’s case, it took her nearly 15 years of being estranged from her family for her sisters to come looking for her at the request of her elderly father after her mother had died. Further into the conversation, it transpires that the family had known of Vanesa’s whereabouts through her activism being reported on the TV and the press which prompted a reconciliation. Notwithstanding the positive aspects of her reuniting with her family, this acceptance comes at a huge personal cost, as previously explored the initial family rejection costed her many years of sex work, police harassment, homelessness and illness before becoming an activist.

*“[...] I said [to them] ‘I just wanted to assume my identity and [if] you had supported me I wouldn’t have gone into the street at night, I would have... I would have been another person, I would have studied, I would... but I didn’t have your support, you had to be there [for me], and I was obliged to leave. But don’t you worry”’. Vanesa, [247-250]*

Vanesa tried to explain to her family that their lack of support and rejection forced her into hardship, and despite the resentment and confrontation she lets go of their affronts as a sort of requirement for acceptance (Space, 2006). This acceptance and tolerance are facilitated by the fact that after transitioning most Trans individuals conformed to normative and acceptable forms of self-representation to avoid further aggression (Namaste, 2006). This is also obvious by Paco’s words, especially after his problematic pregnancy and his *wandering in the desert* of precarious work (as a waiter where he was overqualified), alcohol abuse and rejection from some of his closest friends when he completed his transition (through intake of hormones and legally changing his name). Once he obtained his new ID and got a new job, Paco’s mum started talking to him again, possibly due to his efforts of showcasing his new respectable life and heterosexual relationship that his mother could approve of.

*“And so, a year passed where my mother didn’t talk to me at all. Now she has changed totally, now we talk about it, she gives me some advice. She already knows my partner... she knows I live with her because I have formed my own home”. Paco, 31 [187-189]*

These stories of prodigal children coming back from their deviation and criminal behaviour (Juang, 2006) into the bosom of their formerly abusive loved ones convey another aspect of the precarious lives some Trans individuals endure. This overcoming the past rejection and aggression is also a result of their resilience (Higgins et al., 2016) and longing to belong and be loved.

*“you have often failed me and I still love you and still want you to accept and love me’, and so with time, after treating me [like that] [...] she ended up accepting me a little, now she talks to me [...] at least she accepts more or less me being by her side, at least a trans, a gay or me. But she doesn’t fully accept it, you see?”. Omar, 26 [131-133]*

In the instances where Trans people have been estranged after being forced to leave their life, the silence that pervaded the space between them and their loved ones represents another form of violence. A violence that draws on heteronormative prejudices that disqualify Trans people, equating silence not only with rejection but also neglect and abandonment (Vital Pinto et al., 2020). A darker and less hopeful take on the parable of the prodigal son is staged here: the Trans individuals are mistreated and lambasted to the point where they are forced to leave, and once they are *reborn* in their assumed identities, a readiness overcomes them to seek and embrace those who hurt them for going astray by being Trans. Once again, a reflection on Trans agency and resilience needs to be considered here in order to avoid victimising accounts.

However, the recurring discussion around agency and resilience risks ignoring the obvious and often implicit victimisation of Trans people. It is relevant to remember that the reality of the Bolivian context for most participants is one of invisibility, discrimination and hardship (Baldivieso, 2017; Los Tiempos, 2017). Victimhood is a legitimate response to some of the themes covered in this section, and ignoring this would be akin to perpetuating another kind of epistemic violence that downplays suffering in favour of resilience in its darkest form (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021). Although I am reluctant to further victimise individuals by casting labels such as '*vulnerable*', the reality of the Bolivian context for many Trans people is one of invisibility, discrimination and hardship (Baldivieso, 2017; Los Tiempos, 2017).

## 5. ANALYTIC FINDINGS II: (IM)POSSIBILITIES FOR DECOLONISING TRANS EXPERIENCE

The present chapter introduces the second part of the data analysis will pick on the specificities of the Bolivian conjuncture to explore the impossibilities of decolonising Trans experience. Specific discourses on decoloniality used by participants are analysed in relation to their specific Trans experiences in Bolivia in a more socio-political and collective sense. This is so due to the impossibility of disentangling the experience of coloniality with that of gender variance in this context, and to that extent, in any context with a colonial past. The following subsections structure this chapter: Global Trans terminology vs. autochthonous knowledges (5.1), Influence and role of International and local NGOs (5.2), and The influence of the MAS project of political decolonisation (5.3).

These subsections include the specific issues that are particular to the Bolivian conjuncture and stem from the racialised and ethnically divided society, the links of which can be traced back to colonial times, the hegemonies established after the independence of Bolivia, and the influence of international development programmes and funding that were brought into the country during the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all of which have had an impact and influence in how Trans people experience their transness (in terms of alliances, discourses, self-image, cultural associations and roots, and their understanding of gender). The background to these subsections is rooted and explained in the extensive introductory chapter.

### 5.1 GLOBAL TRANS TERMINOLOGY VERSUS AUTOCHTHONOUS KNOWLEDGES

The majority of participants reflected about the difficulty of developing their gender identity without the linguistic means to *label* their lived experience and feelings about their gender. For the younger participants, the tools to express this usually came from accessing the internet, joining online groups from neighbouring countries (namely Perú and Argentina) or simply browsing through medical materials to understand their feelings and adopt the terminology to address it. In most cases this related to incorporating terms such as transgender or transsexual, shortened to Trans in their everyday speech to refer to their gender variance and transness.

*“I’m a Trans woman. I say Trans woman because I do not want to ascribe and label myself too much within the transsexual, travesti, transformist, transgender, transqueer and all of those. I could even be transporter or transgenic, no?”* Esperanza Gracia, 48 [7-9]

*“I am a transexual man. Heterosexual. [With] the extra of the sexual orientation.”*  
Rober, [7:21-7:28]

Global Trans terminology is somehow appropriated to mean different things depending on the individual, so to an extent it is resignified. This appropriation/resignification of Trans terms is at times closely linked to confusion around the relationship between gender identity and sexual orientation. While sometimes this is purposely intended by the individuals (see Ali below), other times it links to the overcomplication of activist discourses and linguistic choices (see Vanesa). The role of medicine previously explored is revisited here, whereby the assimilation of global terminology includes medicalisation as an almost exclusive vehicle for some participants to understand themselves.

*“How difficult! I think [my gender] is always under construction. And I think it’s Trans because I’m in that transition of constructing, no? And because my identity has always been validated not just for being that man who is represented in the*



*public realm only in a masculine way, but also from a Trans gaze. Trans because of my character, which is not just artistic, but also political and also because sexuality is always exposed in my case, very deliberately". Ali, 37 [3-7]*

*"Because we were all born with a defined sex, but we believe, construct or identify with the gender we want to belong to. So, I don't think that... because I was born in the male gender, it doesn't mean that I have to stay with the masculine gender for life. I was born in the masculine gender but my body, my biology, my psychology tell me to go to the other side. That I was a woman, that I was feminine, not a woman, that I had these feminine traits... that... how to explain? I felt more satisfied, more attracted... towards the feminine. Now we can discuss, 'were you born or have you become?'. You weren't born but we have constructed our gender, we have constructed our orientation" Vanesa, 54 [461-469]*

In Vanesa's case, possibly her participation in NGOs may have contributed to the mixing of concepts when trying to explain her transness (this influence will be further explored in 6.2.). Notwithstanding this mixing of concepts, Vanesa also draws on her indigenous background and mestizo upbringing to explain other ways of understanding her transness although using medical terminology:

*"But in reality, yes. Historically, [in] the pre-Incaic years transsexualism existed, the transgender, and even there is a work [that says] Trans women were deities, they were known as adorers, and were treated as deities. So, when we say 'this is not a thing from nowadays, it is [existing] from yesteryear'. It has just been hidden; it was concealed. Or not, [perhaps] there weren't people who have made it public, we have made it public now, because it was a life need for us." Vanesa, 54 [435-439]*

In Vanesa's words, she reflects about her knowledge of pre-Hispanic gender variance, an idea which partly collides with Feinberg's (1992, 2006) mythical ceremonial and quasi sanctified Trans existence. In Vanesa's case, this idea departs from her own self-knowledge and lived existence (as opposed to the more romanticised Eurocentric view held by Feinberg and their quest for Trans historical references), whereby a sort of gender syncretism appears. This specific blend of global and local influences in her case facilitated and allowed to open up political spaces, maximising not only the voice and visibility of indigeneity in its width and depth (culturally, linguistically, politically) but also of Trans people through the incorporation of gender and sexual diversity into the constitution and the political debate.

*"Esperanza Gracia: [...] my queer self. I have even practised... how is this called? Transformism, no? In English they call it...*

*Researcher: Drag queen?*

*E. G.: The drag queen. I have done drag queenism, etc. And well, now I am here." Esperanza Gracia, [559-562]*

In some instances, participants have become weary of adopting global terms that do not convey cultural specificity. The use of the global Trans terminology becomes associated with certain discourses that bear little relevance to their everyday life. This is clearly remarked in some individuals who ascribe to indigenous identities (Vanesa, Maribel, Dana, Esperanza Gracia). Participants outside urban centres are more likely to reject embracing Western models of Trans identity (whilst using the terms for the sake of clarity when speaking in specific contexts) and give more importance to their indigenous rootings:

*"[My grandfather tells me], 'this has always existed'... 'Ma pijchua iku i piasca kaskan' [speaks in Quechua], 'there are many people [like you]'. Maribel, 18 [76-78]*

*"My grandparents raised me. And we were once in the countryside and I was still a child playing, and I understood Quechua. And my grandad told my Granma 'Look how he plays', I was looking at them. 'Kawali kaichi chitu warmisita sinai. Ki'na ichi stu warmisita sinai', 'Look at this boy, he looks like a little woman, right?' And my grandma would laugh. I kept looking. Somehow I had a certain type of expression, maybe feminine, so my grandparents recognized this already." Esperanza Gracia, 44. [12:50]*

In Esperanza Gracia's case, her activist background as well as the influence of the medical readings of her grandfather may have possibly informed her handling and assimilation of anglicised terminology and concepts, however, she has created her own blend of transness whereby she fully embraces her indigenous upbringing to frame and understand herself in terms of gender, culture and social power, see below:

*"I called [myself] the Ullupako Dominatrix. Ullupako means in Quechua... Yes, Pako is young woman and Ullu is penis. Then, I'm a woman with a penis, no? Also, I'm a dominatrix, no? As I've done sex work I have developed this sexual practice that is domination. It's one of the social and cultural getaways that we have. Back then, the majority –when I did sex work– of my clients were members of parliament, senators, priests, archbishops, army officers, doctors, jurists, judges. They were tired of dominating women, so they wanted to be dominated... not by a woman, but by a trans, no? Even being penetrated, beaten up, humiliated, spat at, urinated". Esperanza Gracia, 44. [1:06:45]*

Esperanza Gracia also acknowledges that labels can be confusing and tighten people's expression, further supporting the idea that no identity is monolithic (Toranzo, 2008; Romero Bachiller, 2005) at any given time.

*"However, these are labels that are quite strong. They position you and tie you a lot. And sometimes we create spaces that are very discriminatory to ourselves [Trans women]. So, at some point, in some space, whether cultural, political or quotidian... we have to open up. That's why I simply call myself a Trans woman. Simply trans." Esperanza Gracia, 44. [11-15]*

Whilst some Trans people assimilate this Trans terminology, the reason to do so varies, for some it means adopting a meta-narrative of transness that will eventually facilitate access to certain medical or legal devices in line with the scrapbooks or 'obligatory transsexual files' (Stone, 2014; Hausman, 1994) used by Trans people namely in the US and UK to present themselves successfully before medical gatekeepers (Soley-Beltran and Coll-Planas, 2011; Burlton Davies, 2013). As was the case in subtheme 4.1 (*(Trans)gender epiphany during childhood*), these metanarrative recollections may hold a certain level of truth in their contents (Hale, 2006), not as universally true or false narratives, but rather in themselves conveying a sort of duplicity of vision and consciousness (Stone, 2014; Anzaldúa, 1987; Lugones, 1987) that represents the diverse and rich agency of Trans people, positioning their subjectivities as legitimate in their own right.

In terms of how this terminology is accessed there, for the younger generation the internet (Marcos, Rober, Santi) serves as a portal to materials and a sort of symbolic Trans community. It is possible that online peer support and information overruled or dismissed the authority of medicine when it comes to Trans experiences (Wiggins and Woodams, 2020; Sherman et al., 2021), this claim obviously implies that it should be the medical professionals who have the higher hand on determining one's transness and how it should manifest.

*"I was able to name what I was feeling more or less at 16, see? And thanks to the internet I found the information and found that there were a million other people in the world that felt as I did, so from 16 I discovered myself as a Trans man, right?"* Marcos, [58-61]

*"I went to uni... when I was in my prom, I was still with this girl, I looked on the internet. I thought, 'damn, her parents will never accept me [as a lesbian], I must do something'. And I looked and found the term Trans, doing transition, something to do with hormones, surgery, lalala'. Then I said... In that moment it felt like a need to adapt to society, you understand? I related to it but didn't want to admit it".* Rober, 27. [16:20]

*"[...] I came across the term transgender through an exhibition at school. I could never attend it because... well, it was a national holiday or something. I found the term transgender and said to myself 'hey, calm down, I think I found my way of life'".* Santi, 18. [5-8]

During the interview, Santi revealed to have missed the school exhibition about sexual and gender diversities, but after hearing about it he went into the internet to find out more about the contents, finding the terminology he now embraces to describe himself. The internet plays a role here beyond facilitating global terminology, it also informs to an extent the construction of the Trans identity (or the transnormative) as hinted by Rober. Perhaps the globalisation of identities facilitated by the internet is positive as shown by the words of Marcos or Santi (who met his only male Trans friend online) as it connects people, despite potentially reducing or limiting the fluid expression of gender that would have happened otherwise, as witnessed by the words of older Trans women in this section.

Stryker (2006) challenged how queer studies often facilitated the perpetuation of homonormativity in its analysis of sexuality and desire, and proposed how transgender studies were more attuned with issues of embodiment and intersecting identities (paying closer attention to class, ability, race, etc.). While this may be the case, unavoidably the antipathy towards Western (hetero-patriarchal) cisnormativity can also create "a normative template of the presumptive alternate gender role [...] privileging certain narrowly defined cultural scripts over others and ignoring the possibility of diversity within roles" (Towle & Norman, p. 678, 2006, *researcher's omission*). A sort of culturally-dependent transnormativity.

The autochthonous understandings are not necessarily referring to an isolated exoticized way of understanding gender, but rather a way to embrace an idea of transness that resonates on a personal level with cultural and personal understandings of gender in a wider sense, see Yago below:

*"I define [myself] as Trans masculine, not Trans man [...] for me being Trans masculine is much freer than being a Trans man, because I think the word man has a historic context that is very bound to being macho".* Yago, 28 [2:33-3:05]

As the width of gender variance also includes those not only ascribing to more or less stable Trans identity but also includes people who are outside the gender binary, namely non-binary, fluid and possibly intersex people, the same is reflected in the accounts of Cris below, who seems to need to justify their position as a way of keeping the distance from Trans identity (although further on in the conversation at times this label is also applied to their experience). Despite using global Trans terms and ideas, Cris tries to frame their gender variance and transformism more on what could be fluid or non-binary gender assumptions coming up with their own terminology, not fully medicalized, not necessarily global per se, and not indigenous at all (the issue here is assuming that anything autochthonous or local is necessarily indigenous, when it is not, there are other local ascriptions that can be grassroots without being indigenous):

*"I find it difficult to understand [Trans identity], even if it sounds ironic coming from me. Let's say someone could tell me 'ok, you are dressed as a woman'. I am playing devil's advocate, let us say. So [that] you understand that also I... there are prejudices out, and [I have] a fight with [my] own prejudices but I always have this mentality of trying to understand others. Personally, I struggle a bit... precisely more or less I have come to define myself as, if we had to find a definition... the closest... to say it somehow would be androgynous, intergender [sic.]"*. Cris, 38 [10:21-11:13]

Although earlier in conversation about gender variance the labels for non-binary and gender fluid were discussed through access to internet resources and groups, Cris still refused these labels<sup>72</sup> and instead went with intergender (not intersex, as biologically they do not fit into the intersex medical category).

At times, the autochthonous idea of transness inevitably blends with other more European transphobic or traditional ideas of gender variance and the travesti, it would be worth acknowledging that this view and way of understanding is also autochthonous, and not just anything stemming from indigeneity or an assumed indigenous pre-Columbian romanticised locus. See Zahara:

*"And the reference of Trans wasn't... not to be redundant. I mean, I don't mean to discriminate, it's not the right term... but there's an assumption of what it means to be Trans in Bolivia and Latin America overall all. If you're trans, you're a whore. If you're trans, you have high heels, miniskirts, large cleavage, exaggerated breasts and... you do too much make up. Otherwise, you're not trans".* Zahara, 44. [133-137]

Here Zahara is also criticising the monolithic stereotypical vision of what it is to be Trans through terminology and suggesting what it should really be, although she excuses herself for condemning her other fellow Trans women that are sex workers (acknowledging not everyone had the same political and social influence as her family). Although her criticism of stereotypes is well-informed, somehow she perpetuates these through her oversexualised description of Trans women in Bolivia and LAC (once again linking them to sex work).

The assimilation of global Trans terminology is closely tied to the medical jargon and the medicalisation of Trans identities that is also pervasive in non-colonial contexts. Although this fits into meta-narratives of transness which helps the individual achieve a medical treatment

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<sup>72</sup> Both words in Spanish would be "género no binario" (non-binary gender) or "género fluido" (gender fluid), and the term chosen was "intergénero".

and terminological framework of self-identification and ascription, unavoidably it also perpetuates a homogenous Trans identity, as mentioned before, conforming a sort of transnormativity (see 5.3.4 Perpetuating binaries).

*“I have very little knowledge about neurology, but as far as I know, according to what I’ve read, there are... I’m not sure, there is a neurology based on the brain of a woman, let’s say. I think there are those who disprove this that there are not differences between a masculine and feminine brain and others say there is, I don’t know more.”* Cris, 38 [6:54-7:26]

The medicalisation of Trans identities is closely tied to the pathologizing of sexual dissidence, in the following excerpt, Rober explains how his parents sent him to the psychiatrist when he came out as a lesbian prior to transitioning.

*“I was interviewed by a psychiatrist and we spoke about it. Here, I told my parents again that I was a lesbian and I wasn’t gonna be able to change. As much as I’ve tried, I couldn’t”.* Rober, 27 [23:48]

Although the psychiatric and psychological professions intersect Trans accounts (see Cris explanation of transness in neurological terms), in the case of Rober it served the purpose of reaffirming who he was, and in Paco’s case it somehow improved his resilience, as it made him feel better about who he was without questioning his transness and rather focusing on his relationship with himself and the bond with his child. This could be the acknowledgement that the medical establishment despite keeping a thin line of tension from pathologizing Trans experience (having produced the term Trans to historically frame transness throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a mental ailment) it can also provide the support and tools required by some Trans individuals to lead a more authentic life despite their socioeconomic status (seeing the examples where those with money have been safer in their practice than those who did not). To an extent, the (contradictory) rejection of Western understandings of Trans identity, namely the medicalised nature of the idea of Trans, echoes efforts in other contexts by Trans populations to de-medicalize and de-pathologize Trans experience and identities.

The older participants<sup>73</sup> are more likely to use other terms such as *travesti*, which are more culturally embedded into practices of marginal cross-dressing. These participants, however, have also incorporated some of the terminology used in neighbouring countries (namely Argentina and Perú) following on medical models of gender identity diagnosis and legislation. As previously mentioned, some of the older ones, had access to other Western literature and medical sources, although this served the purpose of facilitating intelligibility through medical materials and philosophical stuff, it also served to inform the ways in which they understand their transness and potentially trigger their comparison to indigenous knowledges, this will be further explored in the conclusion, where the difficulty of decolonising Trans experience is analysed based on the three subsections explored herein.

*““That is where my adult identity, I just realised about these things and... what you call the infamous paraphilias that were called as such before and even now we call like this, no? I remember my grandad used to buy an old North American magazine called Luz [sic.], by renowned sexologists Masters and Johnson who were pioneers in sexuality. However, the magazine didn’t have pictures, just*

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<sup>73</sup> People over 50 are considered ‘old’ in the Bolivian legislation and enjoy a series of social benefits (cheaper transport, avoiding queues in public services, etc). The oldest participant in this research was 54 years old at the time of interviewing.

*drawings, sole illustrations, and that was the first time I saw at eleven or twelve a drawing with a bearded person and hairy arms dressed as a woman. I wondered 'What's this?' and it said 'fetishized transvestism'.*" Esperanza Gracia, 48. [97-106]

In the excerpt above Esperanza Gracia is the perfect example of having full access to Western academic work on transgenderism, and then incorporating this. There is an issue around epistemology and legitimacy of access, does it mean they cannot critically engage with it? LL did when framing her gender drawing on a hybrid mestizaje of both medicalised-global and indigenous Trans identity.

*"I don't self-identify; I fully identify as a transgender woman. I'm transgender and my transition started aged 13, 14 and I fully assumed my gender by 16, 17 with a complete psychologic change and starting my... physical change, starting with my hormonisation. More than 20 years ago, I was already doing sex work, because I started transitioning very early on."* Vanesa, 54 [14:32]

In the case of Ali, there is criticism of embracing European and Western beauty standards in detriment not necessarily of indigenous ones, but of traits assumed to be regional to the Latin American context.

*"In this modern, contemporary time, we have always looked to the West as something supreme. Aesthetically, for instance, misses [in beauty contests], Trans women, their wanting the perfect body, the big tits, and all of those very Western things, no? Of having the perfect and slim shape. Because us Latinos we are much more solid, with wider hips, no? Latinas in general have bigger bodies, not those long lanky ones."* Ali, 37. [18:33]

Embracing indigenous and autochthonous understandings of gender identity comes also as a result of rejecting racist ideologies within LGBTB communities and the wider society (see Vanesa below). Valuing the openness of gender identity within indigenous tradition separates Trans identity from the whiteness of Trans identity, often perceived as something foreign in the same lines that homosexuality is often perceived as not being originally Bolivian (through the adoption of terms) (See Ali below).

*"To piss them off I'd say I'm gay<sup>74</sup> [laughs]. Because I tick all the boxes of a gay. And I don't reject it. Because one way or another, all these classifications or characteristics or labels... I'm representing myself, and I can go both ways and play with it. Many people feel uncomfortable with it, to tell you better, the gay man is the pretty, the one who takes care of himself, is the one who dresses well. In opposition to Marica [faggot]. Here to be the gay is to lift weight, to look after yourself, to be more masculine, perhaps. And you also have a specific social status or class".* Ali, 37. [8:47]

*"Sister, this is the problem. We have been whitened even in the [LGTB] communities, they tell you you don't look pretty if you look half india... and I have to be like these modern European women and no, I have nothing to do*

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<sup>74</sup> 'Gay' used in English in the original Spanish transcript. Gay is the word usually used to depict middle class white homosexual men, in opposition to other Spanish words including *homosexual* or other derogatory ones like *maricón*, *mariquita*, *joto*, *bujarra*, *bujarrón*, *mariconazo*, *mariposa*, etc.

*with that. We play with the ch'ixi, these tension zones that have little to do with what's been sold from the outside". Dana, 45.*

Dana who is also an activist with an educated profile and interest in Bolivian cultural and artistic traditions and expressions quotes the ch'ixi concept framed by Rivera Cusicanqui (2006, 2010, 2015) to somehow explain this complicated tension and imperfect blend of identities materialised in the body of some fellow Trans individuals.

In most cases however, despite acknowledging the cultural specificities of the Bolivian context, many participants embrace the use of global terms uncritically and take pride in using them as a means to belong to something greater, i.e. the global Trans community (see Paco below) to help them break alienation.

*"We're Trans boys, we organise these meetings where we go to big cities and learn what they do in Peru or even Spain. Some though don't want to be called trans, just men, but it's ok in these groups because we come together and stop being alone". Paco, 37. [follow-up conversation]*

## **5.2 INFLUENCE AND ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL NGOS**

The introduction of international aid and development funding channelled through international and local non-governmental organisations (often supported by or partnered with other international organizations) shaped the discourses, reference points and existence of Trans people in Bolivia (Vargas, 2012). This was particularly notorious since the 1980s -namely in poorer indigenous areas of Bolivia, see Le Gouill, 2015- with the governmental embrace of IMF and World Bank policies (see chapter 2.3) which paved the way for neoliberal reform and opened the gateway to many NGOs targeting Trans people (under the umbrella of gay collectives) with epidemiological and women empowerment discourses (Alvarez, 1999) and practices amid the AIDS pandemic (Estenssoro, 2012; Monasterios, 2007 and 2007b).

Whilst this influx of INGOs can be seen as a result of the Bolivian postcolonial context which can be found in other places (Alvarez, 1999; Mullenax, 2018), the focus of many of them on gender/sexuality (most notably the latter) can be linked to the consequences of globalization and a globalized world (the exchange of Trans terminology in international rights fora, the greater interconnectedness of Trans people facilitated by the internet, etc.). The most noteworthy aspect of the influence of these INGOs in the Bolivian context is how through the partnership or support of local LGTB groups a series of empowerment and rights discourses and practices around transness and gender variance have been incorporated, having an impact or taking root with any prior sociocultural understandings on the subject. This will be the key element explored in this section, highlighting the extent to which the participants may have benefitted on a personal and community level from the sometimes-complex involvement in LGTB groups and NGOs backed by international bodies.

At some point in their lives, some of the participants interviewed had dealt with Adesproc<sup>75</sup>, one of the most notorious LGTB NGOs in Bolivia (see chapter 2.2 and 2.3) holding differing views on their experience and acknowledging the 'institutionalisation' and gay-led nature of the organization (Aruquipa et al., 2012) that made some form other groups (see Vanesa further down this section).

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<sup>75</sup> LGBT organization co-funded by HIVOS and other international funds

*“Then Adesproc got hold of us, and trained us, gave us leadership workshops, activism workshops and trained us around human rights. Then CDC<sup>76</sup> also came to support us... to read the public policies where we were interested in being referred to as travesti and transsexual and transgender. You are a person, a human being so learn that human rights are universal, whether you’re young, a girl, tall or fat, they’re for everyone. And here nobody can tell you that you have no rights.”* Vanesa, 54. [16:25]

The contact with these organisations is usually complex at the individual level, and many participants can acknowledge that despite the benefits of being part of such collectives, there is a cultural and personal prize to be paid too.

*“They label themselves for the money, so the organisations give them money [...]”*. Ali, 37 [off-the-record remark]

Many participants (see Ali post-interview comment above) acknowledge the role of LGTB organizations (mostly funded through international development programmes) in providing them with the terminology and strategies to talk about their ‘rights’ and empower themselves in pursuing a rights-focused agenda. The influence of NGOs in everyday language is interconnected to the internet media, as they provide an apparent accurate and appropriate corpus of terms to use to refer to the Trans reality and experience, and at times this goes as far as confusing people (see Maribel below) and potentially making language cumbersome and repetitive (see the analysis on ‘empowerment’ further down).

*“So, I arrived here [Llallagua]. Afterwards, I was discriminated at school. So I left. I got another job. It was a hotel, doing cleaning. Then my female manager she asked me directly, face to face. [...] ‘Are you gay?’ [...]”*. Maribel, 18. [52-54]

The NGO-influenced terminology and discourses also extend to labels people ascribe to or are allocated by others, as was partly explored in the previous section, and they tend to be more prevalent in poorer areas with a higher NGO presence such as Northern Potosí (Le Gouill, 2015) where Maribel was based. In Maribel’s case, she accepted the ‘gay’ label initially as this was possibly the only word available to her (university educated) manager to make sense of her female appearance and also provided her with some acceptance for her gender identity. It could be argued that for years the only contact the mainstream Bolivian population had with gender variant people publicly was as part of gay-led collectives/NGOs that tended to mostly benefit and echo the demands of gay men (Mullenax, 2018) favouring the use/order of some terms<sup>78</sup>, and therefore limited words transcended the public sphere. After the schisms and divisions that triggered the departure of Trans and lesbians from these groups (Aruquipa et al., 2012), it was decided to change the names of many groups and refer to gender and sexual diversities in general as TLGB in order to highlight Trans and lesbians (although this change may not have seeped through the bulk of society yet). In this case, this could also be the result of not only this

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<sup>76</sup> CDC stands for *Capacitación y Derechos Ciudadanos* [Citizen’s rights and capacity building]

<sup>77</sup> The original word used in Spanish was ‘gay’.

<sup>78</sup> The choice of words such as gay over homosexual, or transgénero/transsexual over travesti, etc. has implications of class and status in Bolivia (as well as Latin America and to an extent Spain) as explained by Ali. In recent years, there has been a political shift with the reclamation of more local terms with different purposes: one to reclaim and resignify historic insults (maricón, marica, tortillera, bollera, travesti, trava), and another to value and highlight local specificity versus lgbt identities perceived as anglicised and globalised.



overexposure of the word 'gay' to refer to everyone within the gender/sexual diversities, but once again the ever-pervading confusion between gender and sexuality previously explored.

The influence of internationally funded NGOs (Adesproc, CDC or Colectivo) in providing platforms for *empowering* and training mostly Trans women within the realm of HIV and human rights programming is questioned by some (see Paco further down) but also raises the privilege and influence of those benefitting from these programmes. In Vanesa's case, she acknowledged that her contact with these organizations helped her becoming empowered and adopting a discourse to do activism when police raid against Trans sex workers. Hence, not only did the NGOs in this case improve her material livelihood (by reducing the amount of sex work she did and becoming a paid officer for a HIV organisation) but also vested her with a symbolic power capable of deterring police bedevilment. This is also Esperanza Gracia and Zahara's case, whose highly public/political profile acts as deterrent in potentially discriminatory situations where not only their position, but the fact that as some point they have been part of an INGO increases the threat of public condemnation if they are targeted. The latter aspect would deserve a section in its own right, since the idea that sexual/gender diversity in general –rather than specific LGTB approaches/discourses/identities as hinted by Fanon<sup>79</sup> (1986)– is an external imposition introduced by NGOs and other development agencies as a sort of neo-colonialist decadent endeavour is a common motto among some local decolonial proponents used to justify their repudiation of gender variant people (in this case) and their demands (Towler & Morgan, 2006; Besnier, 1994). This also highlights another collateral result of the influence of NGOs and their perceived 'meddling' in national affairs (Associated Press, 2013).

*"Look what I'm gonna tell you. I feel safe even at night with those bloody raids against our colleagues working the streets. They [police] use the excuse of citizen safety as an excuse to bother them. And when I hear about these raids, because I have official contacts. I say 'I'm coming out tonight' and I'm no longer doing sex work but I go with them. [The police] come in groups and when they see me they get scared [and say] 'no, we're only asking for IDs to check they all have them' [and I say] 'You needn't bother them'. So, they leave, and then they [sex workers] tell me 'when you're here, they see you and say nothing to us. When you're not here they harass us'." Vanesa, 54. [334-341]*

A recurring theme of people in contact with these organisations and collectives is that of empowerment and being empowered (as explored in 2.1 through the brief analysis by Hennink et al. 2012 and Sen, 1999), which is the case of Vanesa above and Jota below. Most of the participants who mention feeling empowered describe it as being the result of a process that starts with them feeling misunderstood and rejected (often by family and the immediate community), then coming in contact with an organisation which provides them with the right tools, and eventually becoming proactive and self-assured individuals who take over new spaces (political, social, work). Whether these accounts hold truth or fit within a metanarrative that is a by-product of INGOs influence and objectives applied to gender and sexual diversities (see

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<sup>79</sup> In *Black Skins, White Masks* (1986) Fanon suggests in a veiled way that only the white man (and the negro [sic.] that travels to the Metropolis) is a homosexual. While this has been framed as homophobic (Macharia, 2019) (the analysis of sexuality and psychopathology), it may be possible to adopt a different perspective and realise that the homosexual identity per se is a Western/European construct, which is not necessarily universal or representative of all same-sex desire/practices, resonating with Foucault's work on the birth of the homosexual in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1984).

MDG3<sup>80</sup> or SDG5<sup>81</sup>) remains unclear. Some like Jota, did not question the empowerment process and felt rather positively impacted by the experience, as is shown by the excerpt below which stems from a conversation about family rejection on the basis of his gender variance and how he found support through Comité DSG Cochabamba and became empowered – this local organisation also being a recipient of different national and international funds and programmes.

*"[...] and then I met the Collective... back then it was the committee for the sexual and gender diversities. Maybe the Collective... and I became involved precisely to empower myself, to know, to learn all the information because for me it was... for me it actually is the fear of the unknown." Jota, 36 [102-105]*

The issue at stake is not whether the inequalities or issues addressed and supported by the INGOs exist, but rather how they are framed by an (often opaque) global agenda that aligns the local needs with its own development priorities (Alvarez, 1999) through a series of professionalised and technical jargon (Monasterios, 2007 and 2007b) instructed upon participants, hence limiting the scope of action for these organisations and individuals, if they are to receive the funding and support needed. In the case of Esperanza Gracia, she had her own indigenous ideas around gender variance and denomination [*ullupako*] which to an extent could be compromised by the influence of these organisations. A similar issue is relatable to Maribel, who earlier mentioned how in her indigenous community there had been other gender variant people with their own denominations, despite her accepting the label 'gay' at times and subsequently 'transexual'.

*"So this is the label that we cast upon ourselves now, which is the label for the sex we express or we choose by definition. Because the PAHO, the WHO, the Gestar, the UNESCO tell you. And because these are big words by global organisations you have to pay attention. An also, if I'm gonna do activism I have to fly that flag [of labels] because that's how I'm gonna receive the funds, you see? So I adhere to [the label] and believe it and get defined by it. And sadly, many of us [Trans women] live like this." Esperanza Gracia [240-244]*

Unsurprisingly, official membership of NGOs (through being both a member of the community and employee) and the the power/status conferred by this produces clashes and divisions among individuals for different reasons. While some of the obvious ones<sup>82</sup> are related to competition over limited funds (as would happen in any other community development sector elsewhere), some others are more specific about the way personal interests may constrain the scope of activities and actions carried out by participants in these organisations, namely Trans women in the context of sex work. A specific example is that of Paco below, who revealed his personal scuffles with individuals working in organisations backed by HIV-programming internationally funded.

*"And I have clashed with many people [who are] very influential, with a lot of influence at departmental<sup>83</sup> level, maybe even at national level. So, they are*

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<sup>80</sup> UN Millenium Development Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

<sup>81</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

<sup>82</sup> During the course of data collection, the researcher witnessed a series of heated arguments in public between LGBT members of community groups and NGOs.

<sup>83</sup> Bolivia is subdivided in 9 Departamentos, state-like subdivisions that hold special rights under the constitution. Holding a departmental role is therefore regarded as having both political and symbolic power among communities.

*already loaded and see the [NGO] projects as something to fill their pockets and that's that. So, if the project has to do with [trans] women who do sex work in the street, they insist more so the Trans women keep soliciting for their projects, so you can see it's about their personal business rather than helping out and getting them out [of sex work]" Paco, 31 [337-342]*

Here Paco is critical of the pharisaism of some community leaders that have held positions of certain power in LGTB organisations that get funding for sex work and insist that Trans women remain sex workers, so the projects remain funded and they keep their stronghold and position as leaders, putting their individual gain above the communal benefit. This of course, is reflective of Paco's experience and his views which are not favourable of Trans women and sex work. Obviously, it would be unfair to portray everyone in the organisations in the same light as those mentioned by Paco, however it seems Paco may not realise that by confronting sex work he himself is imposing his own abolitionist views that *Trans women can do better and more* [sic.]. He provides himself as an example of how some NGO leaders could behave, not just to comply with an established agenda, but to become a different community leader:

*"To [achieve] this change, I am a different person [to them], you see? I'm also a leader in an LGTB organisation in general, so I like dealing with people and talking to them so they eventually do better, right?" Paco, 31 [344-347]*

Obviously Paco is being critical of those who enjoy and reap the benefits of being part of NGOs perpetually. This could definitely be something that happens elsewhere, the only person really critical of the constrictions of gender variance imposed by the funding-dependent activities is Esperanza Gracia, but this does not go against the fact that she has also benefitted personally from participating. Again there the delicate dance on a knife-thin line between hypocrisy and survival in the more extreme cases (benefitting and being perpetuated as outcast while reducing the realm of Trans following global binary gender trends).

Other participants have simply occupied spaces in NGOs to benefit from an identity-based (gender variance) without imposing detrimental agendas whilst acknowledging the criticism this has drawn to them from other members of the community, as shown by Ali reflecting on their trajectory working in LGTB organisations.

*"I have always been very positive in that respect. I use all that is... all that is not correctly good for [my] benefit" Ali, 37 [84-85]*

Further in conversation it transcended that at some point Ali decided to shift a potentially victimised situation and use it to be able to attend international events and meetings for gender and sexual diversities, acknowledging that probably their middle-class status, education and whiteness helped with this too. Once again, this resounds Monasterios (2007) framing of the gender technocracy (expanded to the LGTB scope); in this case Ali seems rather honest as they do not pretend to be saving or representing anyone but themselves and their experiences through their work whilst 'getting something back' from the discrimination previously suffered.

On a side note, these issues have mostly involved Trans women in the context of sex work and HIV, showing how the work of NGOs focuses in the female Trans body with an epidemiological lens that used to group them among MSM, and now completely frames HIV/AIDS (and other health issues) as something concerning exclusively Trans women and gay men, disregarding (and invisibilising) the health concerns of Trans men (and lesbians to that extent) (Gallagher, 2015; Arend, 2003).

The aim of this section is not to diminish the positive aspects or legacies of NGO-propelled interventions among the participants (notwithstanding the agency and efforts made by the participants choosing to work/engage with the NGOs in the first place). For as Vanesa very rightly pointed out, her partaking in and rupture from Adesproc not only helped her feel more vocal about her transness but also encouraged her and other Trans women to create a network of small local Trans groups in different regions across Bolivia, these being more communal spaces bringing Trans women together without the immediate initial intervention of INGOs or any other local authority.

*"It was there where we started to be more empowered and had more knowledge, so we began fighting the police, there was a moment where we were very empowered, that's why we went away and replicated this in the other [Bolivian] departments and created the union of travestis of Cochabamba, the union of travestis of Santa Cruz, and in all departments they started having [groups]" Vanesa, 54 [202-206]*

This subsection somehow provides a brief analysis of the issue of the role of INGOs and their influence on many Trans people/groups. Despite the worthy and positive improvements on individuals' lives, their presence and influence creates a dependence that cramps the freedom to act, feel and think oneself as Trans. In this specific context, INGOs align with LGTB and feminist agendas (as highlighted by Monasterios, 2007 and Mullenax, 2018) that are often more concerned with issues and specificities of other contexts that at times ring bells with the demands and needs of small educated middle-class groups (Alvarez, 1999). It would be futile (and rather judgemental) to question the intentions and motivations for participants to join INGOs, or for local groups to seek the support of international organisations; nonetheless the idea of agency reverberates as some participants regarded INGOs as 'owing them' in the wider picture of the decolonial project, and the same could be true of groups seeking international support to advance their own agendas (in exchange for some realignment with external objectives).

Another reflection from this section links back to the socio-political context starting in the 1980s which acted as the perfect breeding ground for the introduction and creation of many of these organisations. As Mullinax (2018) rightly points out the gradual disengagement of the government from its responsibility towards social development and protection as well as the increasing external demands for neoliberalisation and modernisation of the state (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010) created the perfect setting for NGOs to take over that space in supporting the needs of a population that was often oppressed and ignored but not necessarily disenfranchised (namely the indigenous women's and miners' movements, not so much LGTB people who only became the focus of scrutiny with the advent of the AIDS pandemic, hence the pervasiveness of HIV funding/support in almost every LGTB collective/NGO). How this responsibility of care was reabsorbed and gradually shared by the state with the advent of indigenous politics through the arrival of Morales with the MAS (and the influence this had on Trans people) will be explored in the following subsection.

### **5.3 THE INFLUENCE OF THE MAS PROJECT OF POLITICAL DECOLONISATION**

A recurring theme emerging in conversation with most participants was that of the influence the arrival of Morales to the government and the decolonising project by the MAS had had on gender variant people. For those ideologically closer to the MAS the advances in rights and policies granting the protection of Trans people (see law 807) was the result of the government's general compromise to fighting for the oppressed (see law 045), whilst for others in the NGO

circuit these advances were the result of their decades-long work empowering individuals and advocating at a local level. These diverging views convey two main aspects that will be explored in this section: the internal clashes among Trans individuals stemming from their intersectional identity; and the apparent contradictions within the government in terms of their position toward gender and sexual diversities.

***“[...] change is also difficult because it requires a redistribution of privilege”***  
(Schilt, p. 7, 2010)

The issues explored here are inextricably related to one of the main legacies of colonialism in Bolivia, which is the constant conversation about the colony, colonial times and the presence/absence of indigeneity in public/power spaces in everyday conversations, possibly fuelled by the government’s political project. From this ongoing conversation about what decolonising means most Trans people had something to contribute without being probed, but some were more proactive in reflecting about how this actually permeated the way they understood their transness, gender variance and the dynamics within and without other groups (other than those conformed by and aimed at Trans people).

#### ***Clashes between identity-based aspects***

As previously happened in the history of Bolivia since its independence, the modernising endeavour that started in the 1950s brought about a certain indigenous racism (Stephenson, 1999) that forced many people from indigenous communities to give up their language, culture and identity in order to form part of the new nation. Some traces of this mentality are still present nowadays in people as young as Maribel (see below). This racist whitewashing of indigenous linguistic and cultural expressions and exclusion was challenged in the advent of the MAS and the indigenous uprising, giving way to a new space for challenging these tensions, which included Trans people and their own demands for recognition on different levels.

***“Maribel: [They] have told me that it’s ugly to speak in that [Quechua], but what do I care?”***

***Researcher: Where have they told you that?***

***M: Here [in Llallagua].***

***R: Here? But everyone speaks in Quechua here.***

***M: Precisely, but other people... let’s say, they’re like refined, they pretend to be refined. Because people who aren’t like that [refined] don’t tell you these things”.***

***Maribel, 18 [166-171]***

It is interesting how Maribel speaks of being refined, speaking Spanish means being refined, if one formerly spoke Quechua they must now whitewash their speech and not speak it anymore. However, despite being aware of this, she asserts her indigeneity and speaks in whatever she wants, as was the case during the different conversations held with the researcher. Maribel revealed that thanks to Morales now she could be herself (in terms of her transness and her Quechua background) and speak how and what she wanted. This could be seen as a result of the indigenous uprising and the revaluing of the many ethnic heritages coexisting under the Bolivian reality, where people no longer stand back.

Most participants acknowledged the issue of racism and the changes triggered since the arrival of Morales (see Paco), while some go even further reflecting about what this may mean for

sexual and gender diversities within indigenous communities (Cris further down) with all the complexities for individuals in those communities (Vargas & Aruquipa, 2013).

*“Then, here in Bolivia before there was this issue, it was very strange to see a woman wearing a pollera working in a bank. It was rare, like the father would get home and say ‘I saw in the bank a woman wearing a pollera’ and it was strange news”. Paco, 31 [306-309]*

*“It is possible, yes. Because there has been lots of racism, and so now people look at gay and Trans as if it was foreign... and it’s criticized and it shouldn’t be like this, because there’s people in [indigenous] communities who are also gay and trans, but it must be complicated”. Cris, 38.*

Cris above introduces an aspect mentioned previously, where gender/sexual diversities are conflated with an external and foreign import, which consequently clashes with a potential decolonising project. In the field observations and daily experiences of the researcher in Bolivia, this issue appeared at times in political and academic conversations. While some political actors supporting the government were quick to denounce the LGTB agenda as a Western colonial import with an aim to support their discriminatory views without further reflection, other advocates of the decolonial project reflected on how it was precisely discrimination towards gender and sexual diversities which was an introduction of Western powers through evangelisation during the time of the colony as supported by Lugones (2008) and Suárez Saavedra (2017).

The increased presence of indigeneity in public spaces, contexts and situations also had an impact on Trans individuals who ascribed to multiple identity-based traits beyond their gender variance, leading to more complex situations where the issue of intersectionality became apparent in their own experience, rather than as a mere reflection/conjecture.

*“It was during a national assembly. I was challenging [the gay male leaders] because they always use us Trans women, but they never give us spaces for leadership, of power. Every time there’s a national meeting it has to be a gay man, a gay man, a gay man who represents us all nationally and everywhere. And I challenged this, until one day, one of them [said] ‘So what? Who are you? You may be a fighter; you may be very public but you’re an india potosina<sup>84</sup> ¡Ah! And I was like... ‘I may be india potosina, but I’m much more courageous than you’”. Vanesa, 54. [37:21]*

The excerpt by Vanesa above captures the interweaving of the hostile environment with struggles around Trans liberation, indigenous’ rights, class struggle and tensions within LGTB communities. The clashing between one’s intersections produces ambivalent and tense spaces that are negotiated differently by participants. In Vanesa’s case, it was others within the LGTB community who dismissed her on the grounds of her ethnicity. Unfortunately, nobody is exempt from holding exclusionary views nor holds the monopoly to oppressive attitudes. There are those who maintain that indigenous communities are rather discriminatory towards gender/sexual diversities, but they often support their views by semi-racist arguments related to the idea of modernity (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006; Stephenson, 1999) and the historic influence of evangelisation among many indigenous communities.

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<sup>84</sup> *India potosina* literally translates as Indian woman from Potosí, with derogatory (racist) connotations.

*“Mmm... Yes, yes, there is a relationship. Suddenly the people... [see] something different... the Quechuas here are different to the mestizos, right? So, I don't know, they [Quechuas] have a way of thinking which is very malicious and see it [transness] as something ugly, something like that, and something they notice in their circle and Trans people can see it, because the Bible tells [them]... that's what it is [ugly], so maybe they see it as normal, so I think there's a connexion, only because it's different, they're not used to it". Omar, 26 [277-281]*

While Omar holds that indigenous communities can be quite harsh towards Trans people from an outsider position (partly based on his own experiences with religious groups), others such as Vanesa speak from within when reflecting about some of the difficulties faced by Trans people (namely women) in indigenous areas:

*“Well, we believe that Trans people only live in the cities, in the urban areas, right? But the majority live in rural areas. And it's hidden, despite their families knowing their daughter or niece is trans, but they totally hide her because of this same reaction and customs of the indigenous or Aymara communities”. Vanesa, 54 [427-430]*

Finally, Esperanza Gracia acknowledges the complexity of this ethnic/transness division in relation to political leanings, and how those divisions may be deepened because of ideology:

*“Some people say: ‘I'm indigenous, damn it, I'm well Aymara or well Quechua, but I hate these bloody queers’. As well others say: ‘I'm well gay, can't you see me? Whitey, beautiful, pretty, with money. I hate these masistas<sup>85</sup>, these indigenous bastards’ they say ‘these k'awa<sup>86</sup>, these indios’. So, we cannot separate ourselves from this”. Esperanza Gracia, [271-275]*

Some of the reasons for these divisions on the basis of transness/ethnicity potentially stem from the perceived historic homophobia/transphobia associated to indigenous communities due to evangelical influence (Cieza de León, 1880; Suárez Saavedra 2017) by some whiter or mestizo Trans people, this is also disputed by those who have historically claimed gender variant figures in indigenous communities (Maribel, Esperanza Gracia, Vanesa) who nevertheless also acknowledge there can be difficulties within the communities. Another reflection is triggered, if the wider mestizo and criollo society has historically held discriminatory views towards Trans (and indigenous) people, the expectation that within the inherited patriarchal colonial order (Lugones, 2014) the indigenous populations should be any better than their fellow counterparts seems pharisaic. This is in no way a condonation of discriminatory beliefs, but rather a reflection of certain currents of thought in regards to gender variance and non-normative sexuality, which resonate with homonationalist discourses seen elsewhere.

Vanesa's excerpt earlier (where they called her india potosina) also suggested that she was dismissed by male gay leaders not only because of her indigenous background, but also because she is a Trans woman and therefore was perceived to be secondary to the demands and priorities of the wider collective (Estenssoro, 2012; Vargas, 2012). A similar issue was faced by Rober, although in his case, the incident described next may align with the transphobic attitudes

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<sup>85</sup> Masista is a supporter of the MAS, at times used in derogatory ways towards people perceived to be indigenous.

<sup>86</sup> Term used for gay men in indigenous communities.

held by so-called radical feminists, even if oftentimes Trans women are the ones targeted by their vitriolic erasure and resistance (Stryker, 2017).

*“I’ve had clashes with a lesbian [activist], I didn’t tell you... the ex of the choca loca<sup>87</sup>, with her I clashed... last time, before coming here she saw me in the club, came to me and said ‘you’re never gonna be a man, you’re a repressed lesbian’, then called me by my previous name, my name was Consuelo Jaquelin, I don’t like Consuelo, never liked it, she said ‘ah Consuelito, you will never be a man’ she whispered in my ear” Rober, 27 [01:13:45]*

This deplorable incident in a rather mundane nightlife context echoes Martínez-Guzmán’s (2015) framing of transphobic practices as simple mechanisms used to dominate Trans individuals in everyday situations. Another salient issue is that of the (in)visibility of Trans men and their dissolution among Trans groups in favour of Trans women’s issues and priorities (Aruquipa et al. 2012; Redlactrans, 2012), also raised by Rober as other Trans women questioned his very existence:

*“The thing that bothers me is that people from our very own [trans] population do that, it’s even happened to me with some Trans women in a meeting they organised to inform us about the gender identity law last year. They looked at me and said ‘And you, what are you doing here?’ and I said ‘Well I’m a Trans man’ [and they said] ‘Trans men don’t exist, no’. Like that, and I... ‘Look, you’re a Trans woman, there’s the same but the other way round, I was born a woman and I identify as a man, and I’m doing my transition’. They’re left confused because they think they’re the only ones who exist” Rober, 27 [1.14.50-1.15.28]*

The naive idea about homogeneity within the Trans identity (within the collectives) underlies these divisions. The very same idea about homogenous indigenous identity is questioned too (Toranzo, 2008; Stephenson, 1999; Harris, 1995) as Trans individuals who also ascribe to an indigenous identity get discriminated regardless of their ethnic background while also conveying their own reservations and mistrust of other indigenous identities. The suspicion between Quechuas and Aymaras already highlighted by Crabtree (2008) is better portrayed by the words of Maribel (first excerpt), who otherwise is able to acknowledge in another conversation the fact that Trans women of colour are worse off than the rest of Trans women (second excerpt), potentially differentiating the situation between indigenous people and Afrobolivians<sup>88</sup>.

*“Yes, well the Aymaras are more wretched then, they are more closed [minded]”.*  
Maribel, 18 [362]

*“Sure, black women are discriminated, you see? Here there are also black people, more in La Paz, more in the Yunga[s]”.* Maribel, 18 [159-160]

The issue of whiteness among Trans participants was also analysed by those who embraced or were cast that label. In Ali’s case this goes hand in hand with their social and family background (mestizo-criollos from Sucre), resulting in ambivalent consequences as they are also recipients of stigma and see themselves attacked by other people within gender/sexual diversities who may be from indigenous and/or humble backgrounds.

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<sup>87</sup> Literally means ‘the crazy chic’, an ex-girlfriend of Rober before transitioning.

<sup>88</sup> This is another complex issue, as there are communities where indigenous and Afrobolivians miscegenation has resulted in unique cultural and identity-based expressions (Reyes Escate, 2017).



*“Being the whitey, all these things, consciously or unconsciously, has always helped me. Because this is a country where they look at me and think ‘you’re foreign’, and they keep asking me ‘where are you from’<sup>89</sup>. I’m from La Paz, but sadly when I don’t speak people have prejudices about me, about what they see. And before meeting me they think I’m full of myself. So everyone has this perception, and it’s related to the aesthetics of being white, of having... not just whiteness, but also being pretty. If you’re only white it’s fine. But if on top you’re pretty... in my case, aesthetically I’ve been questioned from within [the collective]. They always called me ‘la bonita’<sup>90</sup>, la bonita y la bonita’ and I’ve always carried the stigma of being ‘la bonita’ and the tontita<sup>91</sup> too”. Ali, 37 [22:34]*



Ali (pictured above) also raises an interesting point regarding their image and the stigma received due to the privilege of beauty, intersected by whiteness and the status given to the ‘foreign looking’, perhaps supporting the fact that some people feel suspicious or resentful towards them. Their reflections echo the concept of aesthetic of coloniality that Valencia (2014) explored in terms of the beauty standards that are acceptable, desirable and also perceived as foreign (Eurocentric) (Valencia, 2014). In this case, these beauty aesthetics position Ali in an outsider position within some local LGTB collectives. This aesthetic of coloniality could explain the resentment that is deepened by the fact that Ali often dresses in cholita’s clothes when in public events. This may be regarded as cultural appropriation by a whiter privileged individual with the power symbolism this entails (García Pacheco and Lazarte, 2012). Nonetheless in Ali’s own view, they feel like they are reclaiming and adding value to their own identity through this sartorial choice.

Some participants try to make sense of their different identity-based aspects but acknowledge that they are difficult to conciliate (especially those who have held political positions supporting the MAS administration) as is the case of Zahara below. This process seems to have been

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<sup>89</sup> Said in English in the original Spanish interview.

<sup>90</sup> The pretty one, referring to a female.

<sup>91</sup> The little stupid one, referring to a female.

accelerated due to recent socio-political events, i.e. the decolonising agenda triggered since the approval of the Constitution (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006 and 2015).

*“You see I’m from an educated background, my family is quite white and I haven’t faced much difficulty economically. But now, it’s been difficult to come out as Trans and lesbian. In the [LGTB] community the gays and lesbians don’t see me as their own because I’m trans, and then some Trans see me as not having struggled because I’m not a sex worker, and then the rest of society just see my family status...” Zahara, 44*

In the excerpt above the issue of sex work (condemning or distancing oneself from it) and the division it sometimes creates among Trans women is also salient. In terms of class, some Trans people belonging to more accommodated social strata reject the view of Trans women as prostitutes, sex workers and looking unclassy. This echoes the experience of some former sex workers who become ‘empowered’ through the NGO and community programmes (see Vanesa). In the case of Esperanza Gracia, she challenges this by embracing her activist and ‘rowdy’ self to challenge preconceptions of the ‘good’ woman (one which is chaste, educated, quiet, etc.) (Aruquipa, 2012), advocating for a sense of sorority to overcome intersectional discrimination.

The pyramid of privilege creates a complex hodgepodge of identities that often position Trans individuals at a disadvantage or in tension with different aspects of the self in cultural, social or financial terms. But not all differences necessarily trigger division and discord, some Trans individuals who are mestizo/white are very aware of ethnic and class differences and reveal their concerns, whether it is in terms of improving fellow Trans people’s livelihoods or that of others, see Paco below talking about the inclusion of Trans women in the work market (not sex work) in the same way that indigenous women have been:

*“Then, why can’t a Trans woman do it? Before it was the issue of discrimination, since this president... Before Evo Morales it was terrible, women with pollera could only be housewives, let’s say. Because if they were more intelligent, they went abroad to make a living. So, that was the society we lived in”. Paco, 31 [311-314]*

Paco acknowledges that the change in perspective towards indigenous people (women in this case) is thanks to the MAS government, and wishes the same advances were to happen with Trans women. His words also echo Stephenson’s (1999) analysis on how historically the only position allocated to indigenous women and cholitas was that of domestic labour at the service of mestizo or criollo families, a degraded and racialised economy which favoured the proliferation and development of the bourgeois (Preciado, 2008) classes embracing modernising endeavours. While Paco equates the struggle of indigenous women with that of Trans women in their quest for wider public inclusion, he does not consider an individual could be both indigenous and Trans, but he still acknowledges that advances in antiracial discrimination are thanks to the Morales administration.

### **Government’s contradictions**

The apparent clashes examined in the previous section (gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, political ideology) could be seen as a by-product of the emergence of the MAS and their political agenda which initially claimed to be challenging the white colonial status quo reclaiming the public sphere for marginal people, namely the indigenous majority. However,

despite the advances in terms of recognition of ethnic identities and groups, at times the MAS followed parallel neighbouring political trends (Ecuador, Venezuela, Cuba) in a more traditional internationalist Marxist sense (Mamani Ramírez, 2016; Quispe Quispe, 2011; Mariátegui, 1924) that produced problematic hegemonic views of indigeneity under a homogenised (Toranzo, 2008) and at times anachronistic views (Stephenson, 1999), which inevitably also reproduced more patriarchal, bourgeois (and discriminatory) moves (Galindo, 2013; Mujeres Creando, 2010; Mariátegui, 1924). This section will explore some of the contradictions and paradoxes within the government (statements by members, legislation passed) in relation to the issues faced by Trans people, and how this also influences certain contradictions among the participants themselves.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, some figures in the government such as Calvimontes or García Linera made public statements questioning the sexual orientation of political opponents in a degrading manner in order to criticise them (EFE, 2014; Página Siete, 2015) problematically rejecting the feminisation of racialised males in a way that perpetuates colonial harmful practises (Méndez & Figueroa, 2019). This went as far as some unfortunate declarations by Morales linking the consumption of farmed chicken and GMOs foods to homosexuality and baldness (EFE, 2010), a statement he later on recanted claiming his words had been misinterpreted (El Mundo, 2010). On another note, there were some widespread rumours about the sexual orientation of Linera (Martín, 2016), who was also hailed as promoter and stalwart of the LGTB agenda by some participants who sympathise with the MAS. See Dana's words when reflecting about the changes triggered by the government's emphasis on decolonisation and the issues with some supporters:

*"But obviously, it's all been triggered by decolonisation. It was needed, but now we see the tremendous machismo of these groups of population, indigenous, workers. And it doesn't have to be like that, but they see us as something foreign, which wasn't known here. And maybe they'll call you a faggot because they don't know what a Trans woman is"* Dana, 45

Some of the political agenda of the MAS held in check the traditional powers in the country, namely the church and conservative big family names, especially those in the 'half-moon'<sup>92</sup> (Albó, 2002; Rivera Cusicanqui, 1993 ) while giving rise to a more educated and progressive middle-class. In a way, some Trans people have incorporated this challenge to historic traditional powers and used their transness as a tool to challenge and question those powers, insofar as they also represent a sort of cis-heteropatriarchal establishment (Galindo, 2013 & 2017b) underpinned by religious power, which is the case of Ali below, reflecting about their family background of criollos from Sucre and their evangelical standing.

*"I always exhibit [my transness] as a personal decision, also because I come from a very conservative, traditional, evangelic background. And doing this for me is very important, [it's] of transcendence, since everyone at home is evangelic. It's a very strong tradition. So, it's breaking that a bit to put them under pressure, and not only them but everyone"* Ali, 37 [8-12]

*"The colonial process in Bolivia has racialised has a lot, and has negated sexuality to such an extent that has hidden them [LGTB], right? So, the gay, the k'ewsá, the k'ewa in native language is... has been negated. The church has been tasked with hiding it."* Esperanza Gracia (303-306)

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<sup>92</sup> Santa Cruz, Pando, Tarija and Sucre (see chapter 2)

Although Esperanza Gracia's account stresses the constant conversation about the colonial legacy, her words are somehow problematic, namely the indigenous terms used as they are literal translations meaning deviant, abnormal, although in indigenous languages (Quechua and/or Aymara). They link to the binary myths of the chacha-warmi: the man-woman complementarity upheld in some indigenous communities (Le Gouill, 2015) and sometimes supported by the government, a rather patriarchal construct debunked by scholars such as Rivera Cusicanqui as a way of essentialising patriarchal subjugation through the lens of indigeneity (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2013) and/or racialised individuals (Méndez & Figueroa, 2019).

While some participants favourable social class and ethnicity has helped them in terms of being articulate (Ali, Santi, Zahara) and abstaining from publicly acknowledging the role of the government, it was the passing of specific legislation that granted individuals (who were aware of the law) the tools to challenge discriminatory and transphobic attitudes, something previously not attainable by Trans people regardless of their ethnic or social background.

*"My mum is a lawyer and said to them [at school]. 'If you don't accept him, cos you don't have any evidence [of misconduct], and I trust my son more than yourselves, I'll make your school shut down'. We were only 200 in secondary... and the heads of school were looking for excuses. We already had Law 045 [against all forms of discrimination]. [...] Hadn't it been for my mum's knowledge and influence I would have dropped out [of education] like many other Trans youth". Santi, 18 [11-15]*

Although the rise of the MAS implicitly brought about a change of references and promoted a shift towards more popular and historically repressed groups (also veering from an aesthetics of coloniality, Valencia, 2014) as pointed by CMM below, to an extent the union embodied by Morales-Linera within the MAS government may have also favoured those who were already accommodated and Trans, by providing them the legal framework to improve and expand their livelihoods (Rober, Ali, Dana, Zahara), whilst also helping the poorer and racialised Trans people who were probably more their natural electorate (Maribel, Vanesa, Esperanza Gracia, Cris). Even if this could be seen as paradoxical (the government took pride in conforming an administration of lay people not educated in elite schools, overseas if at all, or coming from powerful families), it portrays once again the complexity and hodgepodge within the Bolivian cultural, social and political spectrum.

*"Because the indigenous here for years has been the worse, they didn't even have permission to go into the main squares in the cities. Today there's already a self-affirmation as I said earlier, there's a self-affirmation by popular sectors, see? And this isn't something minor, I mean, the indigenous, the person from El Alto or Plan 3000<sup>93</sup>, or the boy from Achacachi... they don't want to aspire to another model that is not their own, they want to improve their space, obviously, right? They want to transform it, progress and all that... in their popular sectors, see? Effectively it is a self-affirmation of wanting to be that [popular]." CMM, [470-477]*

Beyond these contradictions and paradoxes, the words by CMM convey the change of references and model of transformation (from racist modernity to popular self-identificatory

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<sup>93</sup> Plan 3000 is a peripheric marginalised neighbourhood located in the outskirts of Santa Cruz, home to CMM.

progress) that was started by the political conjuncture brought about during the constitutional assembly (triggered by the MAS) which also opened the socio-political space for gender and sexual diversities to reclaim their rights within the new constitution and state (Vargas, 2012) despite resistance from religious and conservative sectors, and possibly some members and supporters of the MAS. Despite the potential perpetuation of patriarchal and discriminatory views held within sectors of the government, perhaps harnessed by internal divisions based on the background and trajectory of some key figures in the MAS government (in 2.2 and 2.3, see the symbolic union between Morales and Linera), the legal framework granting protection of sexual and gender diversities was most prominently advanced during the MAS terms. This refers to the passing of law 045 against all forms of discrimination and namely law 807 on gender identity. Although their passing does not necessarily mean the government is fully responsible or credited for it, it is fair to highlight that their political majority in parliament allowed for their legal approval. (Divisions on the individual contribution towards passing law 807 will be explored further in this section).

*“You had to be dressed as a man otherwise you couldn’t study, and so on, that’s why I left [school]. So I’m about to change my identity with the law that has been passed, I hope I can, cos they’re trying to eliminate it.” Maribel, 18 [92-94]*

*“[...I] work to help people so they don’t suffer as I did, and don’t have to have a trial like I had. My trial was terrible, the evidence I had to show in court was terrible, I mean I had to show I had no police or judicial records... I had to show before and after [transitioning] photos, bring witnesses, have certificates from the psychologist, psychiatrist, endocrinologist, family doctor and surgeon... loads of things that invade my privacy and my... and why? Also I have to prove myself to a judge so he tells me who I am, I am me, a judge can’t... my identity can’t be in the hands of a judge [to tell me] who I’m gonna be for the rest of my life. The majority of Trans girls who had started the legal process [before law 807] had their application denied and the judge said no because he was transphobic and didn’t understand... and this was a process that lasted years to have a judge say ‘no, because you don’t seem woman enough, or you haven’t had surgery’”. Marcos [856-866]*

Unquestionably, law 807 marked a tipping point among most participants in the research, with many having already made use of it in order to have greater access to education, health, work and other public services with greater safety and in keeping true to who they are. See Marcos explaining the lengthy and painful process he endured before the law was approved in order to have Bolivian courts accept his change of name (although he succeeded eventually, this came at a heavy personal and professional cost that would have been simplified had the law been approved earlier). Maribel was also reflecting about her own hurdles at school before the law, in further conversation Maribel also revealed her intention of going back to education once her new ID card was issued, as this would reflect her name/gender and prevent any backlash from misnaming/misgendering her in the classroom. She also refers to her fear of the appeal made by the Plataforma por la Vida y la Familia<sup>94</sup> before the Constitutional Tribunal arguing this law was unconstitutional and allowed homosexuals to marry and adopt (El Diario, 2016). In relation to the latter, law 807 initially allowed some Trans people to marry within a heterosexual relationship (see Omar below); whether this was a loophole or intended remains uncertain, however the (discriminatory) claims about gay marriage by the Plataforma were made on the basis that they question the very existence of Trans people, and possibly see them marrying (anyone) as gay marriage.

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<sup>94</sup> Pro-life and pro family platform, a religious CSO challenging abortion laws, law 807, etc.

*“Researcher: Do you mind me asking, have you done the procedure for the identity card? For everything?”*

*Omar: Yes, that’s why I was able to marry [my wife].*

*R: Oh yeah, sure.*

*O: Of course, because of the law [807].” Omar, 26 [181-184]*

*“Yes, if they [Trans individuals applying to law 807] are married already, they override your marriage so it’s not homosexual marriage, such assholes. And if you’re divorced you have to present these [papers] anyway and your [ex] spouse has to sign I don’t know what things.” Santi, 18 [01:02:21]*

As well as Omar’s low-key wedding after obtaining his new ID, there was another notorious marriage by a Trans activist from El Alto who married her long-time boyfriend (Velásquez Loaiza, 2017). The publicity this marriage garnered triggered the backlash of conservative groups leading to the rejection of further marriage applications by (straight) couples where one or both partners were Trans (Hannover, 2017). Also, as Santi points out, acquiring the new ID document is not a straightforward process if the individual has been married before, both a criminal record statement as well as some other documental modifications are required, although there seems to be confusion in regards to ex-spouses ‘signing’ documents as Santi claims. See below the exact wording of the law (Tribunal Constitucional Plurinacional, 2017):

*“The **change of birth name and sex information** in the birth certificates of their descendants and of marriage or civil unions with their ex-spouses will only be recorded on side or additional notes on each document registration, without recording the change on the corresponding certificates nor in the family book”. (art. 9, section VII)*

One of the main advances of law 807 was its depathologizing nature, as its development was inspired partly by the Argentinian gender identity law and purposely parted ways with more Eurocentric legal frameworks (i.e. the Spanish or British one at the time) that required surgical interventions (and/or hormonal treatment), and/or a psychiatric diagnosis of gender dysphoria and at times a psychological report confirming the person had lived as Trans for a number of years (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2007; HM Government, 2019), whereas law 807 allowed for the self-definition of gender in a more simple procedure (although a psychological assessment certifying the person voluntarily and willingly takes the decision and understands the implications is required). See Zahara’s insider knowledge about the development of the law:

*“Bolivia’s gender identity law has three things that not even the Argentinian law has, right? First, that it is depathologizing. Second that... wow, I’m already forgetting, so long I haven’t seen the law. Erm... second, it obliges the state to do the procedure ex officio, and directly. So the user or beneficiary of the law only has to wait sitting at home.” Zahara, [211-216]*

Nevertheless, law 807 presented other issues, as the one relating to the compulsory military service required for men, which after the passing of the law also applied to Trans men. In conversation with some the Trans men participating in this research, they explained that in order to be able to work in public institutions, obtain education certificates or hold public elected roles it was necessary to have fulfilled the military service, otherwise they could expect being fired (if they already worked in the public sector) or even fined (Los Tiempos, 2018). Paradoxically, the majority of Trans women over 25 who were interviewed had their military service booklet. Also, even though the law initially aimed for a deeper modification of official documents (where no

sex information whatsoever would appear on the official ID card) and may have risen concerns on a political and philosophical level (see CMM below) among some activists and proponents of less binary and hegemonic gender views (Santi), it is mostly perceived to be beneficial, regardless of whether Trans individuals have made use of it or not (Paco and Esperanza Gracia below).

*“when the gender identity law in fact, even if we vindicate and accept and celebrate it... I don’t know, we think it’s an important advance, but is also a normative question, right? It’s come to reaffirm the gender binarism, see? So, a transexual woman for instance, ambivalent or transexual woman in an ID card, then you’re either man or woman, right? The state has to read you within a conceptual framework, which the state establishes, no? So, I think... the compañeras Trans nearly did it, the discussion about the gender identity law wasn’t about being man or woman, but getting rid of that category [sex/gender] in the ID document, no? So it was discussed at the time, the compañeras Trans started reflecting, so it’s not my reading [of the process] eh?, it was them feminists themselves. And these laws also are here to impose a norm, no? It seems... you may think it’s a space of freedom this gender identity law, and these progressive norms, but in the end they’re also normative, right?” CMM, [395-398]*

*“Now with my identity that I have, my [ID] document, I think it made me a more confident person” Paco, [221-222]*

*“But the good thing about the gender identity law is that it has achieved that, right? If you want to take hormones, if you want to change your sex [information], the state supports you. But still, on the other side you still have ‘if you are a travesti, I don’t employ you easily, I make you suffer, I kill you’”. Esperanza Gracia [751-753]*

*“I was drinking my water and my friends were drinking [alcohol] and we got in [the bar] and they [bouncers] look at me funnily. ‘Your ID’, and I didn’t want to show my ID because of that<sup>95</sup>. So I said ‘No, you know because of law 807 that...’ and something else. And the guy was like ‘Yeah, I want to see the ID’ and he was like ‘It’s not about your age, it’s about how you look’”. Santi, 18 [170-172]*

The excerpt above by Santi shows further pitfalls of the law. Despite providing legal protection for those who change their official ID card and documents, while the application is being processed individuals can still be refused access to places as their documents reflect their sex assigned at birth and many are accused of having counterfeit documents (due to the apparent mismatch between the photograph and the name). Also, as CMM points out and Santi highlighted in further conversation about his non-binary friends, although law 807 provides the opportunity for Trans people to change their official documents, it does so within a binary normative framework where the only options are man/woman. Some of the participants showed reticence towards erasing part of their Trans identity being absorbed within a man/woman label. Unavoidably, due to this binary reduction, non-binary, gender non-conforming and other gender variant people are still left ‘unprotected’ by the newly introduced

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<sup>95</sup> At the time of this incident, Sebas had already applied to change the information on their official document but was awaiting the outcome, so their ID card still reflected their sex assigned at birth

legal framework and remain outsiders. It could be argued then, that despite the progressive nature of the law and the perceived progressist moves by the MAS government to advance the agenda of discriminated people, the law somehow helps the perpetuation of a patriarchal binary order that rigidly fits gender variant individuals into rigid binary labels (with some happier than other about this). Another perspective is raised by Esperanza Gracia, who despite acknowledging the benefits of the law, also admits its approval does not immediately stop Trans femicide and violence, partly supporting DeLaet's (2018) analysis of human rights legislation being characterised by aspirational rhetoric (the publicity engulfing the issuing of law 807 in this case) and the reality of limited implementation, something that was held by many participants, some of whom agreed it was difficult for the state to provide full provision for their demands.

*"they said to us 'ok, we will adapt, we will do the regulation adapting to the law [807] but please don't ask the same as Argentina, because we cannot cover the sex reassignment, implants, everything, but the rest we can do... even accompany through the hormonal treatment, we can'. But not surgical operations."* Vanesa, [100-104]

*"I mean there aren't even treatments for people with cancer, and there's many [patients], there aren't places or beds in hospitals. So, in general the health system is deficient for the overall population, so obviously they'll never cover the hormonal treatment for Trans people, it's ridiculous to think of it"* Marcos [847-851]

In further analysis of both Vanesa's and Marcos's excerpts, some participants revealed that hormonal treatments for women were much cheaper and readily available than those of Trans men, and at times some Trans women had had hormones prescribed by their supportive doctors underpinned by the law's framework. Both Marcos and Vanesa had also somehow been part of consultations and meetings throughout the years law 807 was being forged, leading to the next point. Some of the internal discussions among Trans people around law 807 delved on disagreements on who was responsible for the approval and realisation of law 807 both on a community and political level.

*"[...] but Rayza is a good person because she's the one responsible for the approval of the law [807], because she's gone everywhere and done the initiatives, she's gone to talk to the president, she's done it all. So I don't understand why it was Zahara who received the law, it should have been Rayza right? If Rayza is the one who's done so much..."* Maribel, 18 [282-286]

Maribel refers to Rayza Torriani, a Trans activist who was instrumental in leading the movement of Trans women highlighting the issues of Trans sex workers and Trans women living with HIV. Torriani is credited with having held a long complicated legal battle against the Bolivian state for her right to change her name and gender, and having had a key role and influence that contributed to the approval of law 807 (Martínez, 2016). Maribel's opinion about Torriani been side-lined was also held by other Trans participants from Cochabamba (and also those who did not sympathise with the MAS). Interestingly, Torriani stood for election as a member of the Partido Verde in Cochabamba, so perhaps her political affiliation could be part of the reason why she was not publicly acknowledged by the MAS government when law 807 was issued. This could be further supported by Zahara's explanation of the public proclamation of the law:

*"So [both chamber representatives] decide I should be the person to receive the law [807], but I refuse. Because if I'm gonna be in trouble between institutions*



*[ministry and ombudsman], no way, they'll both hate me. 'Think about it Zahara, tomorrow at 10 am we're going to present the law and want you to receive it. - Ok, I'll think about it'. I spoke to [person in ministry] and [activist leader] 'You bloody well are receiving it, call now and accept because you worked for it and deserve it'. I was like 'Sure? but the [trans] collective will kill me'. [he replied] 'what do you care about the collective? We'll stick up for you.' Ok, I call [viceminister] and said [viceminister] I have the authorisation of two of the five most important of the country, so yes'. I leave the restaurant and an unknown number calls, I thought it must be my [viceminister]. I answer saying 'Jefa?' and they answer 'Compañera'. And I was thinking who's this? I said 'Who is it?' 'Álvaro', he said. 'Álvaro, I don't recognise you... Álvaro García [Linera]? ¡Ay! ¡Vice[presidente]! How are you brother? How can I help?'. [imitates deep voice] 'Please I'll be waiting for you tomorrow at the Palacio [Quemado]<sup>96</sup> at 10 to hand you the law. -Yes, Jefe'. My [viceminister] had rung Álvaro and told him 'la Zahara doesn't want to receive the law' so the Vice rang me. 'I expect you there', so he didn't ask me, he gave me an order. [...] So the next day we danced in the Gran Poder. I finish dancing in el Gran Poder, go to Palacio and want to change but didn't have my clothes. So I had to stay dressed with the Gran Poder clothes. [...] So, I receive the law in these circumstances. That's why I was the one who received it. And [viceminister] herself told me 'you're one of ours, you are neutral for the [LGTB] population and after all, if someone is to appear, it has to be one of ours''. Zahara, 44 [732-754]*

As Zahara describes herself, she was favoured by higher instances to receive the law, as she came from an established career within different government departments and was politically and personally loyal to the MAS (even before their election, as she recounted through her family history). Therefore, on a political level it seemed natural that she would be the one favoured as opposed to the other activists that contributed to the law but may have not always aligned with the government or held the same close relations. The contradiction here perhaps is not such, the government may have had internal divisions about the passing of the law, but when it eventually decided to pass it (as it also conveniently positioned them in a more progressive and oppositional place than other traditional political parties), it seemed that Zahara's political affiliations were rewarded by this public proclamation, despite antagonising and creating distension among other Trans individuals along the way. During the data collection phase, the researcher attended several events organised in La Paz in relation to the rights of gender and sexual diversities and witnessed the confrontations among Trans activists and members of community groups who at some point publicly clashed with Zahara and other public officials over who was to take credit for the law and who should have been at the forefront of its proclamation.

Beyond the divisions stemming from the responsibility of passing the legislation, the critical stances on the normative nature and limited scope of the law, or the divisive statements in the bosom of the government, the law was eventually passed and put in force. A final thought by CMM captures in lay and clear terms some of the underlying reasons why people may have clashed acknowledging what the conversation was really about: privilege.

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<sup>96</sup> Palacio Quemado is the Bolivian Palace of Government, based in La Paz.

*“Yes, but while I say this [criticism], it’s not the same when you Ana or I critique the law [than when] a person who has all the identity privileges criticises it.”*  
CMM, [764-765]

CMM reflects on the same lines as the researcher, that despite conceptual and philosophical conversations and considerations about the law 807, it was essentially good for Trans people, and fully supported it.

On the governmental level, despite their attempt at rebelling or challenging some of the traditional values associated to the old colonial powers, some of the comments by high governmental officials and figures were extremely conservative (read patriarchal) in nature, and at times aligned with religious discourses (see the Platforma) therefore falling into old myths about conservative/progressive overlaps in sexism/homophobia (Rottenbacher de Rojas, 2011; Zarur Osorio, 2017) which could explain the difficulties in enacting and approving the rights for Trans people. Whilst this may have also created confusion and some confrontations among the LGTB population (namely the discussions around whether gender/sexual minorities were degenerate colonial exports) and was challenged by the likes of Mujeres Creando (Galindo, 2013; Monasterios, 2006) or Rivera Cusicanqui (Jiménez España, 2019) and other decolonial feminists (Méndez & Figueroa, 2019), a greater space was opened thanks to the long struggle of Trans activists and individuals and other figures in the government (Linera, Canelas, and others at different levels). As Aruquipa (2014) pointed out, these complexities also highlight the importance of recovering the local and autochthonous stories and memories of gender and sexual variant people (as defended by Esperanza Gracia or Dana) and understanding how they fit (if at all) with the global influences stemming from other contexts outside Bolivia. Whatever the case may be, the issue of what decolonizing means possibly lies at the heart of the melting pot of identities, social movements and groups that were attempting to refound the nation (Artaraz, 2012).

*“[I could be] Mestizo because I don’t know where my roots come from. My dad is paceño, my mum is cochabambina and I was born in Santa Cruz. Guess I could be Quechua, but I don’t know because my mum’s from the countryside and speaks Quechua fluently but that doesn’t identify you as Quechua either. I couldn’t really tell you”* Rober, 27 [1.07.03-1.07.24]

Finally, some of these tensions may also stem from confusions around ethnicity and race (used interchangeably by participants and in the mainstream in Bolivia), whereby the constant discussion of racialised colonial divisions eventually makes it difficult for people to decide what makes them indigenous or not (See Rober). Some participants try to explain their indigeneity based on language, pigmentation and cultural tradition, whilst others embraced the mestizo label due to their urban living, also influencing how they framed their transness. As explained in the literature review section, when coming in contact with the city many people from indigenous communities ascribe to the acculturated mestizo label (Harris, 1995) at times passing as white (Stephenson, 1999; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2015) and therefore holding greater symbolic, economic and cultural power (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2006) as was the case with Rober, Marcos or Paco, something that was after all embodied in the MAS union between Morales and Linera (La Razón, 2005; García Linera, 2008). Also this confusion conveyed by Rober is deepened by Maribel’s

words below describing times of harshness that jumble indigeneity peasantry and poverty<sup>97</sup>, echoing the words of Albó (1993, 2008) who sustained that indigenous cultural identity had been lost and buried under campesino culture and identity-based labels (Stephenson, 1999; Crabtree, 2008; Albó, 2008), a move partly overturned by Katarismo (a leading member of which was Linera).

*“Ayllu it is, then. Ayllu, my village is where... far it is [from here], there is no light nor water”. Maribel, 18 [328]*

*“You can notice it a little, here scabies has appeared [pointing to her hand], and from that it has become crooked”. Maribel, 18 [496]*

Perhaps at times the decolonial project intended by the government had more to do with the socialist internationalist anticapitalist endeavours of the 1960s<sup>98</sup>, also inspired by the alignment with allies including Cuba, Venezuela or Ecuador, rather than a more anticolonial, antipatriarchal project. This would explain why the strong sexism from some sectors in the MAS government echo those same historic sexist and discriminatory views toward gender/sexual minorities found in the other leftist ideological allies in the region (Zarur Osorio, 2017; Sierra Madero, 2016; Acevedo et al., 2009). But perhaps, another reflection is possible if the initial assumption made was that everything done by the MAS government was meant to be decolonial because the head of the government was (in theory) indigenous, as well as many other members occupying high positions. Conceptually, what the decolonial project meant is somehow blurred and unclear, but there was a strong link between the president’s ethnic background, his role as one of the leaders of the indigenous movement(s) and the postcolonial conjuncture the country found itself in. The alignment between this materialised through a discourse around decolonising which meant breaking with the previous regime that had reigned Bolivia (see chapter 2.3) and imposed a racialised and gendered socio-economic hierarchy. If this regime were patriarchal, capitalist, and (neo)colonialist, the implication of the government’s decolonising discourse and agenda would be to challenge the three tenets. However, the concept of epistemic populism (Grosfoguel, 2008; Andrade and Grosfoguel, 2013) becomes relevant to understand the complexities, tensions and potential disillusiones triggered by the MAS government’s actions, not only in regards to gender variant people, but the wider struggling population. Grosfoguel explained epistemic populism as a way to challenge simplistic and manicheist philosophical formulations and assumptions using the very example of Morales (Andrade & Grosfoguel, 2013) to illustrate that just because he was from an indigenous background, this did not mean that everything he said, proposed or did was decolonial or pro-indigenous –see the reinforcement of the Aymara hegemony or the TIPNIS dispute for instance (BBC News, 2012). In this case this proposition would help to understand not only the possible contradictions within the MAS government in their positioning towards Trans people, but also the very positions and actions of Trans participants themselves in regards to the issues that may divide/unite different individuals and communities (for instance, assuming that every Trans woman would act in solidarity with all the other Trans women, or be antipatriarchal, etc or any assumptions made on the basis of their identity in simplified terms).

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<sup>97</sup> Although her experience is not representative of all communities, material precariousness is closely linked to indigenous communities across Bolivia, at least through the modernising lens that focuses on basic sanitation, notwithstanding the positive aspects of communal indigenous ways of living.

<sup>98</sup> After all, Che Guevara died in Bolivia attempting a popular/indigenous revolt in the Cuban and Angolan style, and was being reclaimed and celebrated by the Morales administration, to the dismay of some senior figures within the armed forces.

Finally, analysing the key role played by Linera and the development of his thinking from the katarismo days (Rivera, 2006) could explain how potentially the decolonising push by the government was mostly driven by him and his sympathisers, and not necessarily by the more visible indigenous face of Morales, therefore supporting Grosfoguel's reflection on the expectations from individuals based on their perceived identity-based traits and backgrounds. This also echoes early reflection's by Mariátegui (1924) who suggested the main emancipatory and decolonising endeavours were the initiative of bourgeois intellectuals which often relegated or not included indigenous communities and movements despite constituting the majority of the population.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This final chapter wraps up the analysis into a deeper discussion of the findings in relation to the research aims. It also includes some further reflections triggered by the research process experienced by the researcher throughout the whole thesis.

### Reflexivity

Expanding on the reflections and self-disclosures made in the ethics section of the methodology, there are a series of reflections worth introducing into the final discussion of this thesis. Not only in terms of problematising my position as insider/outsider who is not a Trans Bolivian, but also in terms of the academic quest located in a Northern institution. Drawing on Grosfoguel's idea of epistemic populism (in his critiques of Mignolo's essentialism) and Quijano's extractivism, it is possible to follow on the steps of da Sousa Santos in his decolonial work situated in Southern Europe, aiming to hold a negative universalism (Andrade & Grosfoguel, 2013) that holds critical dialogues between equals in the global South. On this note of epistemic populism, a difficult conversation and reflection opens up. The researcher's legitimacy in carrying out the current research may be questioned due to issues of representation, the co-opting and perpetuation of practices (academic extractivism, speaking about Trans and colonised people not belonging to either category, etc), in line with what identity politics postulates and challenges. In a strict sense, identity politics poses a threat to individuals in powerful positions. It may also be argued that in relation to the participants and the researcher, the academic imbalance positioned at times the researcher in a position of power, despite attempts to mitigate this throughout the whole research process. As Appiah (2006) points out, identity politics may give the illusion of certainty about specific identities as being homogenous, or the fact that the multiplicity of identities may lack any interesting/relevant common traits. There is also the epistemological consideration in regards to whose voices count, which provides a good framework to differentiate the thin line dividing appreciation and appropriation of peoples' knowledges and experiences for personal/academic interests and self-promotion. This can perpetuate the silencing and absence of groups from conversations and processes that directly affect them.

At the other extreme there is a risk of essentialising and limiting individuals based on certain aspects of their identity (the epistemic populism of Grosfoguel). For instance, whilst it is valuable and refreshing to have scholarship on same-sex desires written by and researched by gay, lesbian and queer people; it does not mean that this should be a tacit requirement to engage in the topic, as this risks further marginalising these groups: for example, if only lesbians should produce and engage in work on the experiences, rights and issues of other lesbians, there is a risk of ghettoising this topic and issues, letting the rest of society '*off the hook*' of caring about, challenging and doing something about the issues faced by lesbians. Also, reflecting on the legacy of Vidarte (2005) it may have become the norm in certain circles (namely within queer and radical scholarship), to have to prove a certain level of marginality (taken to extremes) and abnormality in order to get a sense of authenticity that mostly only concerns the proponents of certain theories and studies.

On a personal level, I have struggled with negotiating my interest, position and approach to the topic of my thesis, my own gender and ethnicity, but most importantly in relation to the idea of hegemonic discourses and worldviews. The lure of de Sousa Santos idea of a non-Occidental West echoes certain beliefs and ideas I have had for a while: the whitewashing of *Spanishness* and consequent denial of our Islamic/Jewish background in terms of culture, language, ethnicity,

politics and history (see Antonio Manuel, 2010 or González Ferrín, 2017), which can also link to different understandings of gender variance and sexuality beyond psychological and religious considerations (another link between decolonising ideas around transness in Bolivia, and the demedicalising movements in Spain, providing a non-hegemonic framework and system of references). It may be therefore, and after all, possible to acknowledge one's advantageous position in any specific research dynamic and encounter, whilst building bridges and creating spaces for meaningful, open and honest exchanges that don't oppress, erase or exploit any of the parties.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this thesis was to look into the lives of Trans Bolivians under the current decolonising conjuncture, both at the social and political level, as well as the individual through the lived experiences of Trans people as shared with the researcher.

Three salient aspects are worth highlighting in terms of which mirrors of identity Trans people are using. Whether inwards towards historic and precolonial understandings of gender, or outwards by incorporating the discourses by NGOs, academic and the global LGTB movement.

Contributions by southern scholars are key in this discussion, both as an ethical commitment to respect the tenets of a decolonial epistemology (engaging in a critical dialogue with southern thinkers and academics, by acknowledging their valuable and rightful contributions to the decolonising endeavour), and due to the depth and relevance of their insights and applications to the conversation about what it may mean to be Trans in the current decolonising context.

As such, Rivera Cusicanqui and Lugones' contribution is paramount by introducing concepts of the coloniality of gender and internalised colonialism that are relevant to explore the aesthetics (of coloniality perhaps, as Valencia highlights in regards to beauty standards in music) and canons internalised or resignified by Trans Bolivians. We also learn of a struggle shared by many, mostly those racialised and gendered, in this thesis. This would be those identifying as indigenous as well as Trans, for instance, Maribel or Vanesa. Both of whom were exposed to greater levels of violence and hardship than the other participants. In comparison, those who were mestizo, whiter or more educated, faced different issues which did not necessarily compromise their physical integrity.

It is worth reintroducing the research question and aims to cover specifically how these have been addressed throughout in the data interpretations, theoretical analysis and literature reviewed.

In regards to the research question '*How do gender variance and race shape Trans people's lives in Bolivia?*', echoing Quijano and Lugones, and to a lesser extent Fanon, race was framed as a fiction drawn upon by the colonisers to establish hierarchies of oppression and exploitation (disguised under social organisation) in the new colonies. These hierarchies were also gendered (as Lugones points out in her analysis of the coloniality of gender). The conclusion, therefore, is that both race and gender are strong fictions and myths which beckon for an inseparable analysis that informs the situation and experience of Trans people in Bolivia. Whilst some participants do not ascribe to a particular ethnicity but do self-identify as Trans, the decolonial context and historical tensions derived from this stratified division in terms of race/ethnicity and gender permeates the views, loyalties and gender expressions embraced by participants. These in turn, influence their life on different fronts (labour market, social class, family relations, access to public life and services, risk behaviours, marginalisation and their cultural cosmivision). The

data has shown that for some participants, being Trans and indigenous or mestizo, is deeply embedded with their social class. In turn, this determines their level of access to public life in line with their Trans identity, their symbolic power and the level to which they can lead a 'normal' life (this is understood as free of violence, marginalisation and with their identity respected and unquestioned). No categories of race have been imposed on any participants as this would go on to perpetuate the labelling and stratification on individuals based on ethnocentric and fictional terms (issues around this are explored in the methodology chapter under ethical considerations). However, what is salient in most accounts is how the decolonial agenda and context have influenced their experience: whether through influence of official political discourses around decolonising, or through participation or support by international NGOs, which often incorporate and disseminate Western understandings of gender and sexuality promoted by UNAIDS and other agendas that go hand in hand with economical and medical objectives of development.

For Q1, which looked into the experiences of hardship faced by Trans Bolivians to better understand their life conditions, some of the accounts expressed by Trans people go in line with other widely known issues around Trans liberation in collective spaces (the collation and pushing of Trans people in LGTB collectives where both Trans and lesbians are excluded and managed by gay men in the sense of Eurocentric gay men – the good gay, who speaks on behalf of the others following misogynistic and IMF funded programmes that portray narrow ways of being, and that also collaterally keep on framing sexual/gender dissidence under the prism of epidemiology and cast the doubt of infectious minority). Another issue talking about the experiences of hardship follow other more general issues faced by Trans individuals: conforming to narrow binary opposites and the pressure to be 'truly Trans' (either through conforming to the stereotypically misogynistic and marginalised view: the sex worker HIV-positive and poor Trans woman fighting for survival and recognition; or to be the optimal uber-feminine straight woman that partakes in beauty contests and shows subservient behaviours in the domain of the straight domestic sphere). In both cases the reality of Trans men keeps on been ignored or subordinated. The use of Trans mostly references women. This includes talking about the average Trans life expectancy being 35, which mostly applies to women. This is not to deny or ignore the vulnerability and acquired risk experienced by transitioning socially/physically to a feminine identity. The latter brings another commonality of hardship experienced by women elsewhere, which is the degradation of the feminine, juxtaposed in this case to the acquired vulnerability and risk of violence of being Trans per se. This hardship can further be theorised by analysing the coloniality of gender and reflecting on the work by Oyěwùmí (1997). The colonial legacy that is imposed on 'females' à la European (i.e. subservient, oppressed, with such agency of that of a little animal), which rendered them helpless and more prone to be exploited in this case, due to their racialised nature (such as feminists in the second wave pointed out about lesbians not being women, neither are colonised women of colour considered women either as Lugones highlighted). Other commonalities in hardship include issues around (not) passing, and legal recognition.

In terms of the specificities in Bolivia, another hardship stems once again from the post-colonial context and decolonial movement in the country. While some Trans people embrace, recover and reclaim non-Western and precolonial understandings of gender (in line with 'third gender' individuals found in anthropological works), some indigenous communities reject Trans individuals as an import of Western decadence and corruption, seeing the intersection between patriarchal indigenous beliefs and strong religious influence in indigenous communities. Both could still be questioned as colonial exports, notwithstanding the risk of romanticising

precolonial times as egalitarian, *solidarious*<sup>99</sup>, and more respectful or embracing of females, the feminine or other 'third gender' individuals.

Question 2 on the ways in which race and/or ethnicity influence the lives of Trans Bolivians is possibly the question to which the answer is most salient and pervasive across the whole thesis. This is due to its inextricability from colonial legacies still present in the gendered racialised societal relations, and organisations that persist in Bolivia today. Analysing how race and gender intersect in the body and experience of Trans people in Bolivia, beckoned for a deeper understanding of the decolonial tensions present there. Issues around the coloniality of gender, racial and gendered hierarchies inherited from colonial times, and their influence on social organisation and dynamics are key to understanding how Trans Bolivians see themselves, how their identity is formed and thus, how these tropes influence their lives.

The third research question focused on how non-normative gender and race/ethnicity interact in the decolonising context of Bolivia, from the analysis of decolonial literature and its complementarity with Trans scholarship. One of the salient themes of the data analysis points towards the inseparability of (Trans)gender and race, in terms of how Trans people navigate and occupy public spaces. In the decolonial context, Trans individuals occupy the public (and private) space differently depending on their race, their assumed gender and social class. This means their experience is, therefore, varied depending on several factors that share similarities with the experiences of Trans people elsewhere. For example, (passing, access to public services with their own identity, exposure to symbolic/physical violence, perpetuation of binary and traditional gender roles, the systematic degradation of the feminine, as well as others that are very specific.

Based on the above, it is therefore possible to conclude that Trans identity in itself is far from a monolithic construct, and in the Bolivian context, due to the complexity of the decolonial colonial history and decolonial present, there are several parallel currents of thought and sources of experience. This is a mirror in which Trans individuals look to for a reference point, validation and reaffirmation in social, historic and cultural terms. The presence of international development agencies, NGOs and other foreign organisations have brought an influx of Western and global discourses around gender and sexuality, informing the ways in which some Trans collectives and individuals have organised, developed personally and embraced a series of discourses. Whilst this has local implications on different horizons, transphobic accusations claiming that Trans identity, as much as homosexual identity, is a foreign import from a decadent West (Zarur Osorio, 2017), or the inner clashes within LGTB organisations that reject Western medicalised Trans identities and the Western aesthetics and understandings of transness in favour of other local historic accounts of gender variance in accordance with precolonial and decolonial gender dynamics. There is at times the possibility of complementarity between opposing and sometimes excluding approaches and manifestations of Trans identity: for instance, the case of Vanesa or Esperanza Gracia, who embrace their indigenous roots, claim their sex workers' street activism and also challenge the reduced binary identities imposed by

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<sup>99</sup> The researcher acknowledges that this is an adjective that does not exist, and the more appropriate expression would be 'acting in solidarity'. However, the lack of such adjective in the English imaginary and idiolect is rather revealing and should be challenged (after all, words to an extent produce reality).



the Western binary, whilst working in NGOs or having benefited from some institutionalised programme funded internationally.

Another conclusion is related to the latter point. If the challenge to Western ideas of (Trans)gender identity is so fierce, and constructs the (gendered and racialised) colonial legacy as pertaining to a whole people (Spanish colonisers, Spanish settlers and other European settlers), seeing “the West as Occidentalist” (de Sousa Santos), is it possible to look for dissenting voices and alternative paradigms within the West to build bridges, encounters and alliances? Trans identity in Bolivia is as heterogenous and diverse as that of any other group. Whilst there is always a risk of portraying ‘marginal’ groups as a homogenous entity, we have learnt from the participants accounts, the divergence and diversity of their experience. Some of this experience is specific to the racialised stratification of the decolonial context, and other, works in line with more ‘traditional’ Trans divisions. For instance, the synecdoche of using the term ‘las trans’ to refer to all Trans people when it mostly provides information about Trans women; or the internal divisions between Trans people critical of traditional gender roles that portray the objectification of women and misogyny; or the tensions between social and medical gender and procedures and validation. Some participants understand themselves in a complex way where their body is at the crossroads of historic colonial oppression, abject poverty, class oppression, and gender-based violence (both physical and symbolic), and their identity-based ascriptions are divided between their racialised and gendered experience, e.g. being indigenous and Trans, being middle class and travesti, being a wealthy Trans man who passes. Their lived experience unfolds in a context informed by a hybrid influx of Western and local stream of ideas, theories, institutions, education, political division and historical interpretations of the past and the present. Notwithstanding the ‘fictitious nature’ of both gender and race (Lugones, 2007, 2008, 2014; Quijano, 2000 & 2007) and the historic implications they both had historically in Bolivia (and the region), the participants hint at something deeper and salient in this context. The fact that there is constant tension between their gender, their race, where they live, how they’ve been educated, to whom they look at for reference and find alliances and whose discourses they embrace, all under the precarious umbrella of ‘Trans’. Precarious as it has been explained before, can be a misnomer to cast the label ‘Trans’ upon realities stemming from a context far from where they emerged in geographic, cultural and epistemological terms. This can be so, even though the constant influx of information, writing and other products of globalisation may have influenced some gender non-normative people who self-identify as Trans. For the sake of this thesis the term has been widely used and where other additional denominations were used by the participants, these have been explored. On top of the risks of ethnocentric views of gender, there is also a tendency of romanticising and misinterpreting precolonial times in terms of what it may have meant for early ‘Trans’ people. Some of these stories are drawn upon some of the participants from this research to make sense of their gender identity. Some read Trans identity (in the current Eurocentric informed way) in past accounts of non-normative gender expressions, such is the case in some Trans scholars like Feinberg, drawing a history of Trans figures in a legitimate attempt to reclaim and resignify past accounts. This is their attempt at rethinking history in less ostracising and (Trans)gender oppressive ways. This provides an alternative view to the established one where the lack of further evidence and the colonial lens of the anthropologists, historians and ethnographers (the most common sources reporting precolonial artefacts or early colonial behaviours and relationships among native peoples – see Guamán Poma, 2006; de Sahagún, 1829; Cieza de León, 1880; de las Casas; 1552) may have influenced the interpretation of ritual behaviours, non-binary and non-patriarchal social organisation and communal dynamics, as abject and perverse attitudes. In some cases this

would justify and legitimate colonising, such as was the case of accounts of sodomy in the Carib people (Suárez Saavedra, 2017). For instance, the *tinku* in some Andean regions in Bolivia, where there is a conflation between gender subversion (cross-dressing) and homosexual practices, which at times is referred to as 'third gender' by Western scholars. These understandings of subversion, perversion and abject behaviour only make sense from a binary heterosexist point of view, one that conflates practice with identity (as Foucault rightly pointed out in his writings about the 'creation' of the homosexual identity in the XIX century, whereby a practise that had previously been identified as sodomy, now became the defining trait of an individual, all-encompassing of their experience, relations and motivations. This could also be the case when interpreting past accounts of cross-dressing or ambiguous depictions (in terms of anatomy) of human bodies. This does not go to question the legitimacy and implied political stance of recovering and claiming a perceived legitimate 'native' Bolivian understandings of gender, some which value ethnic aesthetics, expression and communal relations not based on a patriarchal, colonial binary system (Lugones, 2007; Galindo, 2013; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2013) while also claiming and reinterpreting the colonial exports (education, epistemologies, political and find complimentary (although nonetheless problematic and tense) as their own. Therefore they make it possible to incorporate certain medical discourses (if these as seen as Eurocentric), or a certain sense of (Trans) solidarity and movement across the region and with some other Trans collectives internationally.

This beckons to an assessment and analysis of the *ch'ixi* identity postulated by Rivera Cusicanqui (2006, 2010, 2018), which also echoed other writings of brown feminists including Anzaldúa (2009 & 1987) or Gunn Allen (1992). Tensions and intersections are found in the gendered and racialised bodies of Trans Bolivians, who find themselves at a cross-roads between opposing and contradicting loyalties in terms of groups (the minority within the minority), and never reach a homogenous, harmonious 'hybrid' equilibrium between different identity-based traits. Rather they keep challenging each other with challenging implications for the individual (i.e. Rivera Cusicanqui referring to herself as both *mestiza* claiming indigenous bond, upbringing but benefitting as well from a Western education and thinking that does not quite conform or coexist unproblematically with her indigenous/*mestiza* background. The same is true for many Trans people who claim indigenous roots, upbringing and challenge the medicalised and colonial view of binary gender and misogyny, yet, at the same time find value and relevance in incorporating Western notions of Trans gender identity. However, these do not always sit straight or comfortably with their other identity-based traits. Far from resolving this tension, Rivera Cusicanqui embraces it, as an invitation to keep exploring the complexity of the context and human experience. This can be also extended to the participants in this research. Rather than aiming to resolve the complexity of their experience and attempting to homogenise it under totemic and monolithic identities that tend to erase for the sake of normalising; considering its different strengths, contradictions and challenges serves the purpose of furthering knowledge of the Trans experience in Bolivia. This includes gendered racialised bodies there as well as in Western contexts. There is a reflection and learning to be made in general terms about the experience of these participants. What they mean to the wider Bolivian context, to the interlocking of race-gender itself, and also to explore the other hegemonic discourses imported through the colonial enterprise. This questions what de Sousa Santos referred to as non-Occidental Europe and Grosfoguel reflected upon in terms of 'epistemological populism'. If the experience of Trans Bolivians shows such width of diversity and difference, bringing 'together' a collective of individuals under the virtual construct/label of 'Trans' with all the

underlying clashes, contradictions and allegiances, perhaps it is possible to reflect in equal terms about the possibility of rethinking Trans(gender) experience in the global north. This is especially so since there also exist dissident movements that question and challenge the positivism and medicalisation of Trans identities so deeply regulated by institutions. These institutions historically served to dissect and 'correct'. They can also have the ambivalent power to legitimise and normalise, providing equal access to public services – as long as people conform to a certain frame of transness, 'the ideal trans' just as it happened with 'the good gay'.

It is always difficult to ascertain what the practical uses of any research may be, other than to open new bridges for understanding. In the case of this thesis, the work produced delves into Trans experiences in Bolivia, revaluing their socio-political and historical relevance, rethinking gender and Transgender dynamics and framings in the researcher's Eurocentric academic context and aiming at capturing the wealth of knowledge and contributions by the participants in their context. In specific and practical terms, there was a question asked to participants regarding the mechanisms that they had in their lives to overcome hardship or keep going when their gender variance had seen them punished or discriminated against. This question was a trigger for reflection about the aspects most important to the individuals, regardless or aside their gender, that helped them carry on, and also with the idea to collate a compendium of elements that could become support toolkit or symbolic beacon to inform other Trans people in times of struggle, and also for non-Trans folk to better learn to understand, support and empathise with the experiences of Trans people, avoiding erasure, stealing voices or perpetuating damaging attitudes and discourses.

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## **8. APPENDICES**

### **EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH PHASES**

This section provides a simplified breakdown of the different phases of the research with specific time benchmarks to avoid unnecessary repetition. Throughout the full research process the researcher funded her studies and practice through being an hourly paid lecturer at the School of Applied Social Science (University of Brighton), working as a freelance community interpreter and translator, teaching Spanish (BHASVIC) and carrying out different consultancy and development roles within the community and voluntary sector in Brighton and Hove. This alongside the impact of COVID-19 on the researcher's family explains some of the periods of slower progress as well as the detrimental impact on her economic situation and emotional wellbeing.

#### 2014

October: Registration & Doctoral College Induction

November: Attendance to the University Researcher Development Framework (URDF) workshops on:

- Ethics and governance
- Grounded theory
- Research Observations
- Qualitative Interviewing

December: Attendance to URDF workshop on Focus Groups

#### 2015

January: Attendance to URDF workshops on:

- Phenomenology
- Self-ethnography

March: Travel to Bolivia. I visited La Paz and Cochabamba to scope the field and explore safe spaces to carry out the research interviews. Collection of grey literature and informal discussions with potential participants ahead of the fieldwork.

May: Submission of Research Plan Approval (RPA) documentation and meeting. RPA completed and approved.

#### 2016

May: Progression overview documentation submitted.

Attendance to IUHPE 2016 conference (International Union for Health Promotion and Education) in Curitiba, Brazil. I participated in a symposium chaired by Prof. Johnson on global perspectives of Trans wellbeing.

Submission of application for College Research Ethics Committee Tier 2 approval.

June: Progression overview approved & CREC Ethics approved -college research ethics committee Tier 2

## 2017

May: Visit to Hamburg, Germany. I participated as speaker in a seminar organized by Dr Tolino on Postcolonial theory and intersectionality, part of the Masters in Middle East and North African studies at the University of Hamburg.

June: Travel to La Paz, Bolivia. Beginning of fieldwork period.

July: During the course of the fieldwork I travelled across the country (see fig. 4) and also got involved in other research-related activities including:

- a workshop on wellbeing directed at young adults at the Unidad Educativa Martín Cárdenas in Llallagua (Potosí)
- a session on gender identity and sexuality in childhood in Uncía (Potosí)
- a short presentation of preliminary research findings during a conference on primary education in Universidad Católica San Pablo (La Paz).

During this time, I also wrote a short article on space, gender and ethnicity that was published by Colectivo TLGB La Paz.

August: As the data collection progressed, certain ethical issues raised. An updated ethics application was submitted to CREC. Approval subject to small modifications was made.

September: Fieldwork finished and return to the UK.

October: Transfer from MPhil to PhD

## 2018

Carrying out data analysis, reviewing methodology chapter, write up of Findings chapter

Submit Methodology chapter reviewed

Submit findings chapter to supervisors

Application for write-up status (reduced fees)

## 2019-2022

Submit complete draft Thesis to supervisors

Final revision of literature

Review supervisor's feedback into draft Thesis

Submit updated final draft Thesis to supervisors

Review feedback and submit thesis for examination

Preparation for examination of thesis

## [Interview questions]



University of Brighton

### Preguntas de orientación

1. ¿Cómo definirías tu identidad de género?
2. Cuéntame cómo ha sido el desarrollo de tu identidad de género durante los años.
  
3. ¿Cómo describirías tu orientación sexual?
4. ¿Cómo ha reaccionado tu entorno a tu identidad de género/sexualidad? [familia, amigos, compañeros de trabajo, vecinos, extraños]
5. ¿Cómo ha influido tu identidad de género/sexualidad en el acceso a servicios públicos? [atención médica, educación, trámites burocráticos] ¿y en general a la vida cotidiana?
  
6. ¿Has encontrado alguna dificultad o reacción negativa relacionada con tu identidad de género/sexualidad?
7. ¿Qué mecanismos o herramientas has desarrollado para superar las dificultades que te han planteado tu identidad de género o sexualidad? [rasgos de la personalidad, grupos de apoyo, amigos]
  
8. ¿Cómo te identificas desde el punto de vista étnico?
9. ¿Cómo afecta tu identidad étnica en tu vida diaria? ¿Cómo afecta el acceso a espacios y servicios públicos?
10. ¿Has tenido algún incidente relacionado con tu identidad étnica?
11. ¿Has pensado alguna vez en la relación entre etnicidad e identidad de género y cómo afecta a tu vida diaria?
  
12. ¿Te sientes segurx caminando en público? ¿Tanto de día como de noche? ¿Por qué?
13. ¿Cómo definirías ser hombre/mujer?
  
14. Piensa en las experiencias positivas y negativas que has tenido, ¿qué cambios de gustaría ver en la sociedad? ¿cómo afectarían esos cambios a tu vida cotidiana como Trans?

¿Algo más que quieras contarme o preguntar?

### DEBRIEF SESSION:

- Mirando estas fotos, cuéntame un poco ¿qué significan? ¿por qué son importantes?
- ¿Hay algo que te haya hecho sentir mal durante nuestras conversaciones?
- Cuéntame algo más sobre...





**Título del estudio:** *Descolonizando intersecciones: cuerpos, espacios y género. Las vidas cotidianas de personas Trans en Bolivia.*

### **Invitación**

Le he invitado a tomar parte de este estudio de investigación, pero antes de decidir si quiere participar, quiero que entienda el objetivo del estudio y qué tendrá que hacer usted. Le explicaré la información en esta hoja y responderé a cualquier pregunta que tenga. En total, tardaremos 5 minutos en explicar el estudio. También puede consultar con otras personas y preguntarme cualquier cosa que no tenga clara. Usted dispondrá del tiempo suficiente para decidir si quiere participar y podrá quedarse con esta hoja informativa.

### **¿Cuál es el objetivo del estudio?**

El objetivo del estudio es recopilar las historias diarias de las personas Trans en su relación con los espacios públicos y privados recopilando historias de vida y fotografías (las fotos no son obligatorias).

### **¿Por qué me han invitado a participar?**

Usted se auto-identifica como Trans y actualmente reside en Bolivia.

### **¿Tengo que participar?**

Su participación es voluntaria y como tal, puede abandonar el estudio en cualquier momento sin explicar la razón. En caso de no querer participar, esto no le supondrá ningún perjuicio o problema.

### **¿Qué tendré que hacer?**

Se espera de usted que se reúna un par de veces con la investigadora. Durante estas reuniones la investigadora le explicará el estudio y le pedirá que tome algunas fotos de su vida diaria. Una vez hechas las fotos, la investigadora le hará preguntas sobre su importancia y significado. También negociará con usted qué fotos usar en el reporte. Las entrevistas se grabarán para poder facilitar la conversación y transcripción.

### **¿Me pagarán por participar?**

Usted no recibirá ningún pago por participar en el estudio.

### **¿Qué riesgos o problemas pueden surgir si participo?**

Es posible que usted se disguste al hablar o recordar experiencias duras o de discriminación. La investigadora intentará reducir este riesgo proporcionándole contactos de otros servicios comunitarios que apoyan a personas Trans.

### **¿Cuáles son los beneficios de participar?**

Aunque no hay beneficios directos al participar en el estudio, el hecho de hablar sobre experiencias traumáticas o difíciles puede tener efectos terapéuticos. Además, su historia puede ayudar para que otras personas se interesen y se reciba apoyo del colectivo, autoridades locales u organizaciones educativas en torno a las experiencias de personas Trans en Bolivia.

### **¿Será confidencial mi participación en el estudio?**

Su información será anónima para proteger su identidad y confidencialidad. La investigadora y sus dos supervisores serán las únicas personas que tengan acceso a las entrevistas (en audio y escritura). Cuando sea posible, también se intentará mantener el anonimato en las fotos que usted tome, aunque siempre es posible que alguien reconozca las zonas fotografiadas. La información que usted proporcione será guardada durante 5 años después de finalizar el estudio, y entonces será destruida.

### **¿Qué pasa si no quiero continuar participando en el estudio?**

Podrá abandonar el estudio cuando quiera sin dar razón alguna y sin perjuicio para usted. Si decide abandonar, todo texto o imágenes que hayan sido analizados o enviados para publicación no podrán eliminarse, pero no serán utilizados para otras publicaciones o actividades. Antes de analizar y escribir el reporte, usted tendrá acceso a las entrevistas para clarificar o alterar cualquier información.

### **¿Qué pasa con los resultados del estudio?**

Los resultados y algunas de las fotos serán incluidos en el reporte final y serán divulgados en contextos académicos. Usted podrá ver los resultados del estudio. El objetivo de la investigación es presentar los resultados en un capítulo de un libro o en artículos que puedan presentarse en conferencias académicas.

### **¿Quién organiza la investigación?**

La Universidad de Brighton ha organizado este estudio.

### **¿Y si tengo problemas?**

En caso de que haya problemas durante el estudio y usted quiera quejarse formalmente o tiene dudas, puede contactar a los supervisores de la investigadora.

### **Información de contacto**

Investigadora: Ana Carretero [A.CarreteroResino@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:A.CarreteroResino@brighton.ac.uk)

Supervisores: Dra Katherine Johnson [K.E.Johnson@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:K.E.Johnson@brighton.ac.uk)

Dr Kepa Artaraz [K.Artaraz@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:K.Artaraz@brighton.ac.uk)

### **¿Quién ha revisado el estudio?**

El estudio ha sido revisado por el Comité de Investigación Ética de la Universidad de Brighton, otorgándole su opinión favorable.

**[Consent form] Formulario de Consentimiento**

Gracias por tomarse el tiempo de participar en este estudio. Antes de empezar le ruego que lea la siguiente información y marque las casillas para mostrar conformidad. Si tiene dudas pregunte a la investigadora para que le explique o dé más detalles sobre el formulario, el estudio y su participación.

*Descolonizando intersecciones: cuerpos, espacios y género. Las vidas cotidianas de personas Trans en Bolivia.*

Marque una cruz

Acepto participar en este estudio que busca **explorar la vida diaria de las personas Trans utilizando historias de vida y fotografía.**

La investigadora me ha explicado apropiadamente el objetivo, los principios, procedimientos y riesgos del estudio.

He leído la hoja informativa y entiendo los principios, procesos y riesgos del estudio.

Entiendo que tengo que tomar fotos y responder preguntas.

Consiento que la investigadora grabe nuestras entrevistas y recoja las fotos que yo tome.

Entiendo cómo se utilizarán los datos recogidos, y que toda información confidencial será solo vista por la investigadora y sus dos supervisores, y no será revelada a nadie más.

Entiendo que soy libre de abandonar el estudio en cualquier momento sin dar razón alguna y sin que esto me dé problemas.

Acepto que, si abandono el estudio, los datos recogidos hasta entonces serán destruidos, a menos que ya hayan sido analizados o remitidos para publicación académica.

Consiento que los datos recogidos serán archivados y usados para divulgación académica.

Consiento transferir los derechos sobre las fotos a la investigadora.

Nombre .....

Firma ..... Fecha .....