

# WALKING, EXPERIENCING, CONCEPTUALIZING

## Methodological Approach from Sexgeneric Multiplicity

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### Abstract

This article emerges from the raw material of an ethnographic process that seeks to remain faithful to the overwhelming nature of juxtaposed spaces and times. The reader is invited to engage closely with the details as an exercise in recognizing how disorder reveals its own order within the very context in which it takes shape and meaning. We will walk through narrative figures in what I propose is a composed ontographic fractal, which outlines a portrait of two protagonists who are part of the sexgeneric dimension of a fieldwork carried out between two neighbouring cities, La Paz and El Alto, Bolivia.

**Keywords:** *affect, fieldwork, ontography, method*

### Introduction

This article emerges from the raw material of an ethnographic process that seeks to remain faithful to the overwhelming nature of juxtaposed spaces and times. The reader is invited to engage closely with the details, as an exercise in recognizing how disorder reveals its own order within the very context in which it takes shape and meaning. This narrative move, in what I name a composed ontographic fractal, is a portrait of two protagonists from the sexgeneric multiplicity, emerged in a fieldwork carried out between two neighbouring cities: La Paz and El Alto, Bolivia. Also, it explores three aspects of an ontographic methodological proposal: walking, experiencing, and conceptualizing. We will experience deep knowledge that emerges from intimate and informal relationships, framed within the methodological design of a research project focused on intra-actions. From an affective approach, knowledge emerges about the processes of discrimination, homo-lesbo-bi-trans-phobia, the impossibility of fixed identity ascriptions, social relations, relations with non-humans, emotional and sentimental complexities, and reflexive-cognitive confrontations.

### Walking Overture

After much frequenting it, but rarely inhabiting it, I finally took a closer look at the quick feet and worn soles of the inhabitants of the Zona Gran Poder in northern La Paz, Bolivia.

With a bundle on their backs and their purses and cell phones tucked out of reach of any would-be thieves, women come and go, sustaining a vast network of commerce.

The boundaries of one fair extend from the cemetery to the Rodríguez market, drawing porous borders between streets and things. If you walk downhill, you will enter through the Garita, with various streets of meat products displayed on tables. Then follows the school supplies, clothing, and suitcases. Long streets are dedicated to specific items, forming a large endless market. As well as movement, there is a constant buzz of voices in chorus, promising the best prices. In addition to the countless merchants set up in the middle of iron and wood structures on the sidewalks, another large number of vendors walk the streets carrying various products on their shoulders or pushing them in carts.

As we descend into this network of crowded streets—where everything is sold wholesale and retail—, we eventually arrive at the Rodríguez, a large market of food and household goods, set up along the streets of the San Pedro neighbourhood, where food is displayed between *polleras* (skirts) and over *yutes* (bags): everything the unwary chef needs for any kind of preparation of any origin or destination. At the Rodríguez everyone buys making personal and emotional relationships with those who sell, through *yapa*, Quechua term designating a free surplus that a seller gives to the buyer, as a reward for loyalty and in accordance with reciprocity as a principle of life.

The first day we walked those streets together, Daniel<sup>1</sup> was wearing white tennis shoes and baggy jeans with black lines designed across the knees, the fabric of his jeans looking worn. A loose-fitting light blue jacket covered his torso, and a thick hood fell over the back of his neck, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows despite the December chill. In his left hand he wore a black wristwatch among the multiple threads of bracelets he wove himself. On his shoulders, he carried a black backpack that covered his entire back, in the centre of which was one of his bracelets with staircase-shape motifs that he had also woven to protect himself—or summon help from more-than-human predators-breeders.

Short and black haired, lips thin, his brown-eyed gaze was deep and somewhat mysterious, his melodic voice had a particular tone that made everything he said sound deep. Scars of various sizes covered the exposed skin of his arms. A few small tattoos were visible here and there; done too long ago or with perishable ink, they already resembled faint outlines. His walk was slightly stooped, quick and wide-legged, he kept his forehead up and his eyes forward, his gait made his whole-body swing from side to side like a pendulum.

We were passing through a perfumed corner of the market when Daniel stopped to greet a couple of women who were putting away their flower stall. They exchanged anecdotes about the ñatitas festival, one of the most important in the city and the world, as it connects animic dimensions between the living and the dead, and, in fact, I had met them there. In the second week of November, Daniel and I went to one of these festivals. When I arrived, I contemplated for a moment the festive ñatita in the middle of the main room of a cholet, on an altar. His name was Francisco, a perfect human skull, wearing an elegant hat and receiving offerings and flowers while he watched the crowd of living people gathered in his honour to celebrate death. I introduced myself to him by stating my name and lineage.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel and Juan Carlos are pseudonyms.

We soon left the remembrances, and the two women with their daily chore of putting away their stand, behind. It was not until we were far enough so they could not hear us, that Daniel pressed his lips to my left ear: “They’re just like us” he whispered smiling, hands in his pockets. I turned to look at them incredulous; nothing suggested that they were lesbians and a couple, except the talk about the ñatitas celebration we had attended, which now made sense.

The ñatitas is celebrated each year in the Bolivian Andes, through a system similar to the *prestazgo*<sup>2</sup> that is distributed among groups organized in “families” that operate in a manner similar to “communities”. In the gathering we attended, families are sexgenerically multiple<sup>3</sup> and formed by affinity once one comes out of the closet. Thus, every participant of the ñatitas festivity and belonging to the sexgeneric multiplicity<sup>4</sup> of La Paz was in that party.

As we left the market, we reflected upon the importance of invisibility. I realized through his actions that he did not reveal himself as a trans man in any setting where it was not strictly necessary to do so, such as the activist or *prestazgo* environment. His cisgender straight male friends would call him out when they saw him with “queers,” implying that he might become one of them, oblivious to the fact that he was already one of us.

The overture of a piece of music is not necessarily a beginning in the classical sense of the term, it is the intersection between one frequency (silence) and another (sound). In this case, this overture, as well as the epilogue, are part of the fieldwork experiences I undertook between December 2022 and October 2023.

### Epilogue

Overtures become epilogues, which are not necessarily an end, but a change of frequency. In mid-October 2023, the epilogue of the fieldwork process presented itself. Juan Carlos and I met at the Mirador de la Virgen, a lookout point in the Ciudad Satélite neighbourhood, where a tall white statue of a virgin watches expectantly from the heights. At 4200m, El Alto is the second highest city in the world and the first in terms of population density in Bolivia.

Since its foundation in 1985, it experienced accelerated growth, mainly due to the significant Aymara migration, making it a complex city, organized in hexagonal streets, except for its epicentre, La Ceja. The territorial distribution leaves the city exposed to the Cordillera Real, and from the edges of the city, you can appreciate a resplendent La Paz, with whom it has an ambivalent relationship.

<sup>2</sup> Institution of exchange through celebration: periodic elaboration of a community party in which a person referred to as *preste*, is selected to provide. Selection is mediated by abundance: when a family has excess wealth, they are called upon to redistribute it within the community through the party.

<sup>3</sup> From Spanish *sexogénicamente múltiple*: refers to a person who, as a relational pivot, embodies the *sexogenerica multiplicity*.

<sup>4</sup> From Spanish *multiplicidad sexogenerica*: refers to the multiple character of beings, as dividual meshworks, as well as on co-substantial processes related to the sexgeneric aspect of humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans. Unlike the category “sexual diversity”, this term seeks to transcend immutable identity categories and the identification by oppositions, see: “Más Allá de La Diversidad: Una Reflexión Sobre Multiplicidad Sexogenerica” (Solis Peña 2022). This concept also reflects an alternative to the concept “queer” because this has colonizing connotations in Latin America and does not reflect the reality of the territory.

We were sitting on one of those edges at sunset, in front of the sheltering mountains, the wind blew all over our bodies, taking away the invisible heavy burdens we were carrying. We felt meditative, in silence, and nostalgically recalled the moments we shared since fieldwork had begun. The first time we visited the same viewpoint, ten and a half months ago, between biting into a peach and taking pictures, we ended up talking about one of the most sensitive issues among the population of the sexgeneric multiplicity: Juan Carlos had changed schools countless times, between La Paz and El Alto.

“I didn’t defend myself; I just left,” he replied when I asked him why he had changed schools so many times. He had been bullied in several ways, and all for one reason: homophobia. After leaving school, however, he had enjoyed the sweetness of love and passion in the arms of several men who had sincerely loved and/or desired him, and he learned to deal with the discriminatory moments by, as he says, “defending” himself.

That October day we hardly spoke, it seemed like we had already told each other everything, and we could barely look into each other’s eyes due to the deep sadness that flooded us. Suddenly it occurred to us to go to the “Open Mind,” the favourite gay nightclub of the middle class in La Paz, to say goodbye properly. Before we knew it, we were intertwining our arms as we descended the stairs that lead to the centre of El Prado, in the heart of La Paz—a long boulevard, always clean and illuminated, with fountains, sculptures, and gardens.

We walked slowly, contemplating the city. A few blocks away from the Open Mind, we were terribly exhausted, but my heart did not want him to be sad, so I motivated us to keep walking until, finally, we arrived. Open Mind is located underneath a Chinese restaurant, which gives its entrance an exciting air of clandestinity.

We went through the glass doors and walked steadily along the walkway that runs the length of the restaurant, once it closes its diurnal doors to make way for the building’s night-life. We showed our IDs at the front door and the open gates of the venue let out a spectral blue light. Synthetic smoke pierced our lungs while we majestically descended the spiral staircase. To my surprise, I saw many familiar and dear people I had not seen for a while, including Devy Cepeda, a well-known artist, who greeted me with a warm hug while asking me what had become of me. I realized then that my distance from LGBTIQ+ activism—which once made me who I was—had not only distanced myself from the false hopes of awareness workshops, but also from people with whom I genuinely had built community.

It was the first time Juan Carlos and I danced together in the middle of a crowd, barely stopping to go to the toilet or buy alcohol. Our affection overflowed in a farewell worthy of the end of intense fieldwork. We let our bodies flow in the frequency and resonance of the cadenced music, attracting each other, moving in pleasurable and quasi-erotic positions. We converged, consubstantiated, and became one among sweat, breath, and affection on the dirty and slippery platforms of the Open Mind, under its gloomy illumination and percussive music.

## Experiencing

Relational syntonies demarcate affective confluences (Deleuze and Guattari 2020, 317), which emerge in mutable dynamics of frequency and resonance (Deleuze and Guattari 2020,

107) and of proximity and distance. To create them implies constancy and continuity, therefore, in order to achieve this affective proximity, we, the protagonists of this research, had to share a lot of time and space, being together practically every day.

Such syntonies delimit both what is done and said (fieldwork) and what is recorded, systematized, and edited (writing), so that the greater the emotional resonance—understood as a deep connection with another's emotional state so that it is experienced materially (Barad 2003, 820) as one's own—the greater the trust, openness, and vulnerability, and the lesser the shame. Thus, the knowledge that emerges here is based on intimate and informal relationships, framed within the methodological design of a research project that focuses on the affective dimensions of everyday experience (Overing and Passes 2000, 9).

Walking, experiencing, and conceptualizing are part of the same action: knowing. I understand them as a continuum process beyond mind/matter dichotomy (Ingold 2008; Ingold and Lee Vergunst 2008, 6) and the abstract/concrete dichotomy. Walking is understood not only as what a body does, but also as what a body is (Ingold and Lee Vergunst 2008, 2). Thus, walking is a co-substantial procedure that can foster an intra-active process because it is not limited to the action as such, and instead refers to the bodily performances involved: observing, monitoring, remembering, listening, touching, climbing, etc. (Ingold and Lee Vergunst 2008, 5). Likewise, seemingly simple actions such as chatting, whispering, smiling, dancing, are in fact complex relational processes that become from and towards this methodological approach.

We are affective entanglements. The person, in this sense, is understood as *dividual* in its derivative (Gillespie 2013) and *partible* (Strathern 2018) potentialities. These potentialities enable the fluctuation of affect, allowing the confluence of emotions and feelings, which are themselves interchangeable substances, that generate an intra-active process (Barad 2012; Barad 2003).

The notion of intra-action emerges in 1996 as a physical and conceptual process, not an ideational one (Barad 2003, 820), transcending the mind/matter dichotomy based on Niels Bohr's atomic model. Enriched by Butler's material performativity (Butler 1990; Butler 1993) and Haraway's notion of refigurative materialization (Haraway 1991), Barad proposes relational becoming as a continuum of things and persons that not only interact with each other, but also intra-acts. This implies the exchange of invisible elements that are part of the quantum continuum (Barad 2003, 808–13). Hence, intra-action accounts for the potentiality of substance exchange (Barad 2003, 822). In turn, this conceptual proposal aims to transcend the dichotomies of agency/structure and idealism/materialism (Barad 2012, 124).

## Conceptualizing

Naming things that always seemed to have been one way in another manner, is also a result of change in the everyday way of experiencing life, in fact, conceptualization and everyday life enter a co-constitutive metamorphosis. In anthropology, the challenge of conceptualization is also empirical, as it emerges in a conceptual crisis, based on a categorical insufficiency to account for what is experienced from a relational perspective (Strathern 2018, 239). In this

paper, the reader finds infrequent concepts, because each one owes its existence to the correlation it establishes with the others. They explain themselves in relation to others; they co-constitute themselves in order to exist.

As part of a series of academic products related to this research, this paper deals specifically with methodological procedures in ontographic terms.<sup>5</sup> To this end, I draw on concepts already recognized in anthropology by the ontological turn, such as intra-active.<sup>6</sup> From these comes the proposal of intra-actions in affective terms. The richness of the notion of intra-activity in combination with the concept of affect is that it can shed light on the molecular movement of matter and, therefore, on the ontological character of relationships.

The notion of ontography (Holbraad 2014) emerges in this mutable field of writing, in constant dialogue with field experience, which is also based on the principles of radical reflexivity, experimentation, and conceptualization (Rozo 2022, 21). This approach also aims to transcend the dichotomies of concrete/abstract, physical/mental, material/social. Under this inspiration, linked to reflections on the material spatial-temporal dimension of an intra-active process (Barad 2012, 125), I propose the term: composed ontographic fractal.

The ontographic character of this research consists in thinking and doing anthropology beyond dichotomies such as self/other, individual/society, human/environment, at the heart of which is the nature/culture dichotomy. This implies methodological challenges, such as naming beyond essentialisms. Phrases such as “They’re just like us” or “the fact that he was already one of us,” unfold in an ambiguous and indeterminate field where “us” refers to all the sexgeneric multiplicity.

Time and writing are not linear processes. In this sense, existence is lived rhizomatically (Deleuze and Guattari 2020, 14). By experiencing the course of time in a non-linear (Ingold 2015, 17), non-unidirectional (Ingold and Lee Vergunst 2008, 17), and non-evolutionary (Ingold 2015, 18) way, one experiences the times we know—past, present, and future in any of their degrees or scales—perpetually juxtaposed. This way, reality is not conceived as fragmented but entangled.

We are therefore talking about fractals (Wagner 2013, 87) of reality that become text in the chaotic meshwork (Ingold 2015, 118–28) of becoming rhizosphere (Deleuze and Guattari 2020, 315). They are composed because they correspond to a multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari 2020, 16) of space–time experienced through fieldwork and do not follow a continuous line. For example, sometimes an image of a moment  $a$  is used to illustrate a moment  $n$ , just as a conversation  $x$  can describe exactly what happens at a moment  $x$ .

Therefore, even though the protagonists of this research are still apparently only humans (Daniel, Juan Carlos, and me), the landscape takes on equal prominence, diluting the context with the centre, diffusing dichotomies such as self/other, individual/society, human/environment. In that sense, this research does not seek to omit the presence of the researcher. On the

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of the research regarding economic, political, and social positions, see: “La materia en clave individual: experiencias aymaras con el dinero y la multiplicidad sexogenérica en el Chthuluceno” (Peña 2025a). For more on the relationships between humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans, see “Relaciones con lo no visible” (Peña 2025b).

<sup>6</sup> For information on how the author of this paper applies this category to a methodological framework, see: “Caminar(se): devenir individual en investigación antropológica” (Peña 2024) and “Trans-relaciones y Cotidianidades en Devenir” (Solis Peña 2021).

contrary, it is constantly announced through the experiences narrated in stories that apparently belong to “other” people. This is an intentional device that aims to highlight the construction of the self not in opposition to others, but in material co-substantiation.

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