

PORTRAITS OF QUEERNESS

Methodological and Ethical Challenges of Narrating Queer Lives

Introduction

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Abstract

How to narrate queer lives without reproducing the epistemic violence of abstraction? In this article, we address several tensions between portraying, as necessarily reductive process of description and representation, and *Queerness*, as performance of self-representation blurring cis-heteronormative categories, and therefore generating disciplinary processes. Drawing on these reflections, we also mobilize the flexibility of *Queerness* to highlight the articulations and assemblages between SOGIESC diversity and indigenous and/or racialized categorizations. Therefore, this article focusses on three key methodological challenges: is it possible—and even desirable—to translate *Queer* lives to make them intelligible? What is at stake when making visible some experiences and trajectories that somehow pursue the banality of invisibility? And finally, which kinds of light is shed on the knowledge production itself—through reflexivity and the elucidation of ethical dilemmas?

Keywords: *Queerness, Bolivia, plurinationality, intersectionality, translation*

How to narrate queer lives without reproducing the epistemic violence of abstraction? Drawing on this question, this special feature of the Swiss Journal of Sociocultural Anthropology addresses the tensions between portraying, a necessarily reductive process of description and representation, and *Queerness*, as assemblage blurring categories. Recognizing that defining what is *Queer* is almost as difficult as explaining what is not queer (Jackman 2016, 114), our article problematizes this tension to show its productivity and interest, but also the methodological and ethical challenges of making dissident intimacies visible. We also draw on the flexibility of *Queerness* to address the articulations and assemblages between SOGIESC diversity and indigenous and/or racialized categorizations in contexts marked by the presence of various systemic discriminations.

Individual Lives as Major Histories

Let's first draw attention to the issues of portraying. The notion of "portrait" that has guided our approach is mainly inspired by the recent collective volume *Portraits of Persistence* on inequality and hope in Latin America, edited by Javier Auyero (Auyero 2024). In this book, the Argentine sociologist deepens his commitment to exploring the potential of ethnography

and narrative writing by bringing together contributions that employ narrative ethnographic portraits to illuminate broader social processes and to capture the deep currents of emotion shaping present conditions and future aspirations. This book is part of a growing body of work in Latin America that explores the potential of anthropology to reveal the complexity of lives and the “minor histories” articulated in the singular (e.g. Franceschi and Villar 2025), which represents another source of inspiration for our approach.

Drawing on these pieces, our understanding of the portrait goes beyond a mere synonym of the classical notion of “case study”. As an artistic genre, the portrait is a physical and often moral representation of a human model through painting or sculpting. Using it to address anthropological knowledge is a deliberate choice that emphasizes the aesthetic, ethical, and political act of representing lives in their singularity and situatedness (Behar and Brink-Danan 2012; Clifford and Marcus 2008). Furthermore, portraits allow us to capture ambivalence, intimacy, and contradiction, attending to what Deborah Gould calls the affective dimensions of *Queer* politics (Gould 2009).

Provincializing Queer Studies

The meaning of *Queerness* spans across various significations, historically shifting from “strange” to “homosexual”, and in academic literature serving either as umbrella term to broadly encompass LGBTIQ+ issues or as synonym for non-binary gender performances (Dankwa 2025). We prefer here to refer to the acronym SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics) as it allows to escape categorical and therefore restrictive and exclusionary terminology such as the inevitably partial enumeration LGBTIQ+ (Ashley 2021; Kapferer and Dallinge 2025). Our focus on *Queerness* follows a similar reasoning as it draws on SOGIESC to refer to bodies that do not perform according to local cis-heteronormative norms. We therefore use *Queerness* to designate “bodies that matter” (Butler 1993), bodies burdened with the “weight of heterosexual hegemony [as they] do not perform according to society and state imposition on how they should as a gendered body” (Arisi et al. 2021, 6). Insofar, *Queerness* is both a way to designate out-of-place body performances and a “critical and reflexive stance toward any normative thinking based on naturalized cultural arbitrary imposed by modern biopolitical dispositives” (Arisi et al. 2021, 6). It thus points out normalization as site of violence, and not simply as intolerance (Jackman 2016).

In her critical overview of the usage of *Queer* in Swedish academic debates, Rosenberg underlines the necessity to consider the shifting and plurality of meanings of the term depending on the context and audiences (Rosenberg 2008). We follow her path to underline the necessity of situating representations and provincializing anthropological knowledge to better grasp lived experiences. In our perspective, this necessarily includes intersectional perspectives. Flexible and mouldable, *Queerness* is an opportunity, but also a challenge that highlights the articulations and assemblages between SOGIESC diversity and further systems of systemic inequality such as indigenous and/or racialized categorizations.

Forming a dense and dynamic amalgam of feminist currents, debates, and praxis orientated against the hegemony of Western feminism, Latin American scholars’ perspectives have included a gender and intersectional perspective to the issue of “internal colonialism” and its

weight in the formation and development of Latin American national societies (González 1969). These new feminist perspectives have taken and deepened the notion of “coloniality” proposed by authors linked to the so-called “decolonial turn” as a broader and more encompassing conceptual alternative to “colonialism”, in order to link the Latin American state projects of modernity and the shaping of epistemologies, imaginaries, and subjectivities. This aims to convey, as Margot Weiss states, a “profound scepticism toward stable, cross-historical or cross-cultural identity categories” (Weiss 2024, 2). *Queerness* here is mobilized to challenge traditional Western and colonial models of gender and sexuality, while foregrounding the methodological, epistemological, and ethical questions that accompany researching queerness.

From Bolivia and Beyond

These portraits of *Queerness* not only document specific experiences but also enact an epistemological and ethical commitment to representing and narrating queer lives in all its multiplicity, ambivalence, and situatedness. Such a collaborative, context-sensitive ethos was at the core of the project *Queer and Indigenous (Dis)Encounters. Exploring Multiple Gender and Sexual Indigenous Identities in Plurinational Bolivia*¹, which provides the foundation and inspiration for the present introduction. One main feature of this project was to foster academic collaboration and exchange between Swiss- and Bolivian-based scholars.² While most of them are trained anthropologists, constituting this team also meant bringing together diverse backgrounds, statuses, positions, and academic experiences. This diversity was intentionally cultivated to foster productive and relevant collaborative dynamics grounded in multiple national, socioeconomical, cultural, and sex-gendered realities.

Bolivia offers a highly interesting space to explore the intersections between SOGIESC diversity and issues related to either class, racialization, or indigeneity. Officially labelled as a “Plurinational State” since 2009, it is one of the few states in Latin America—and indeed in the world—that uses this novel political reconfiguration, not without ambivalences and contradictions in its implementation, emerging from the landmark 2009 constitutional reform and rooted in decades of indigenous struggles for recognition and inclusion (McNelly 2023; Postero 2017; Schavelzon 2012). While it relates first to the recognition of indigenous people, its loose official definition has been expanded beyond the frameworks of ethnicity to encompass other forms of diversity, thereby opening spaces for the recognition of sex-gender diversity—albeit timidly, ambivalently, and contested—, for instance through the legal acknowledgment of the possibility of changing one’s sex in the civil registry (Absi 2020). Still, the 2019 political crisis, as well as the recent reactionary turn across South America—whose echoes have also reached Bolivia—have shown the frailty and limits of that relative space for recognition.

The research team traced the intersections of indigenous, gender, and sexual identities, focusing on the everyday lives of queer people in Bolivia. In this context, our research used

¹ <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/208550>.

² The project involved six contracted researchers: Pere Morell i Torra and Jos (José) Meléndez, in Switzerland, and Catalina Wins Porta, Jhesmin Solis Peña, Daniela Toledo, and Valentina Fernández in Bolivia.

Queer perspective as theoretical framework that has allowed us to analyse heteronormative behaviour and binary gender expression in different dimensions of the Bolivian social reality as a neo-colonial practice. The project spanned across different parts of Bolivia's diverse geography: from the bustling streets and markets of the neighbour cities of La Paz and El Alto, to the colonial central plaza of the prosperous city of Santa Cruz, as well as the relegated Chaco region in the southeast of the country, constructed as peripheral in Bolivian national imaginary.

Crossing Queer Perspectives, Crossing Perspectives on Queerness

One original feature of our collective research is to extend the notion of portraying beyond individuals to include situations, landscapes, affects, and relational constellations. By putting on the foreground portraits of diverse experiences (vignettes of ethnographic encounters and everyday situations, fragments of life histories or field diary's, dense descriptions of objects, emotions, and spaces, accounts of memories and oral stories, etc.), the current special feature broadens the conceptual scope of *Queerness* and offers more flexible, contextually situated understandings of *Queerness* as an ever evolving and encompassing category.

Drawing on these considerations, "*Portraits of Queerness*" encompasses six articles emerging from and reflecting on a broader process of collaborative inquiry and shared reflection carried out between 2022 and 2025. The contributions are not, however, limited to the South American country that has been the main setting of the project in which we participated. Arising from the encounters, debates, and exchanges along this scientific and human journey, they consider contexts and realities beyond Bolivia, where similar issues resonate, such as the entanglements between sexuality and colonialism/whiteness, the shifting ethical and methodological challenges of researching (and defining) *Queerness*.

Within these *Queer* constellations, the emergence of locally situated categories has revealed particularly fruitful. Used to refer to non-heteronormative and/or non-cis subjectivities, they entail specific logics, which are not necessarily positive but neither unidimensionally degrading. Pere Morell's contribution addresses this issue through the analysis of the Guaraní term *kuña-kuña* to qualify some men perceived as "effeminate" and/or "homosexual". Morell shows that, while reaffirming the exclusive boundaries of legitimate masculinity, the term also opens symbolic and material spaces for recognition of sex-gender diversity within the Guaraní society. In a similar way, the *koti*, a category present in southern India at the core of Stefan Binder's article, entails comprehensions of non-normative forms of male erotic subjectivity, which in this case also intersected with lower-class status.

A common axis running through all six contributions is the issue of the (in)visibility of *Queer* subjects in often hostile and violent contexts. Researching *Queerness* often involves navigating the tensions between, on the one hand, the strategies individuals often adopt to remain "invisible" and, on the other hand, the anthropological necessity of making *Queer* lives and experiences visible in order to analyse them—what is more, when we chose the genre of the portrait. Another challenge linked to in-visibility is the analytical framework we mobilize to make sense of our research partners' intimacies: how accurate are our analyses of homogamous couples, entering or wishing to enter into marriage, or driving a life

without a partner as “strategies”? And how reductive are our interpretation of *Queer* intimacies as strategies aimed at surviving and/or forming sexual/affective boundaries in environments framed by heteronormative cis-normative regimes? Lots of the questions on interpretation and representation of others’ agency would apply to anthropology more generally; yet they take a specific turn in the context of this research. While the constraints imposed by such regimes entail several forms of violence that threaten dissident bodies, are these constraints the only explanation to frame their choices? These questions underly Catalina Wins’ article that shows how several of her non-heterosexual and transexual interlocutors in a small city of the Bolivian Chaco navigate the “mandate of visibility”.

Queer subjectivities might also suddenly and unexpectedly emerge in public spaces. This is what Jos Meléndez experienced as they arrived in Bolivia to begin their fieldwork. The letter- and travel-journal-style article thematizes the unexpected encounter with two photographs representing “*Queer* bodies” displayed in an open-air exhibition in the central plaza of Santa Cruz. This was all the more striking as the city is the epicentre of the colonial legacy and of the whiteness in which the elites of eastern Bolivia reflected themselves (Fabricant 2009). In their analysis of these portraits, Meléndez also reflects on the processes of academic knowledge production and the urgent need to decentralize, decolonize, and localize ethnographic practice.

Such dual movement—between the unexpected visibility of queer images in a public space marked by colonial hierarchies and the simultaneous questioning of how we, as researchers, represent and theorize such moments—encapsulates one of the central methodological dilemmas running through this feature. As José Esteban Muñoz has shown, visibility is never a given, but the result of active processes of visibilization (Muñoz 1999). It is therefore always situated, ambivalent, and politically charged. Questioning these processes highlights the ethical entanglements of engaging with *Queer* lives in practice, as addressed by Jhesmin Peña as well as Adriana Franceschi, Anne Lavanchy, and Yosef Mar’s pieces. Jhesmin Peña begins with a narrative description of a series of walks through the markets and streets of the neighboring cities of La Paz and El Alto with her interlocutors. Drawing on these embodied and sensorial momentums, the article reflects on how walking and experiencing affects can serve as a basis for rethinking the very nature of categorization and how to write about it. In their collective article, Adriana Franceschi, Anne Lavanchy, and Yosef Mar also address the process of writing, through what they call the politics of pronouns. Their analysis includes the topic of administrative transition to a feminine identification, which echoes the interplay of pronouns I/us in the anthropological analysis. The closing piece is Stefan Binder’s reflection on his encounter with two *kotis*. His portraying of two non-heterosexual individuals’ banal everyday scenes in urban southern India reminds the limits of using *Queerness* as category by highlighting the tensions and contradictions they navigate within normative social and cis-heteronormative structures.

All the articles have been written in liminal moments, while the research was still ongoing and evolving, changing alongside the interactions with interlocutors and the evolution of the “field” as iterative and relational. Their reflections are therefore an invitation to keep thinking through and with *Queerness*. Privileging narrative ethnography and rich description of social interactions and experiences as a means to address theoretical and epistemological questions, they also avoid pigeonholing lived, ambivalent, and vibrant realities into this kind

of grey and managerial academic writing that Michael Taussig has called “agribusiness writing” (Taussig 2015). These *Portraits* make explicit—without ever aiming to fully resolve—dilemmas of representing a moving, complex reality, of making visible lives that might aspire to forms of invisibility, by attempting to offer translations of emic categories that escape cis-heteronormative and binary thinking. And finally, through these contributions, we encourage further reflection to deconstruct scholars as “pure minds”, denying their embodied experience as an experience of desires (and dislikes), in which “the field, as it is conceptualised in the social sciences, requires the censoring of ethnography for desire and the denial of eroticism in fieldwork encounters” (Jackman 2016).

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