The Material World of Ñatitas:
Personhood in Nonhuman Beings in Urban Bolivia

By

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Contents

List of Figures iv

Abstract v

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

Chapter 2: The Cultural Context of Bolivia 8

History.. 8

Politics 11

Indigeneity in Bolivia 17

Chapter 3: Methods 22

Semi-Structured Interviews 25

Photography 27

Grounded Theory 27

Ethical Considerations.. 28

Limitations 29

Chapter 4: Personhood & Identity 31

Chapter 5: Gifts and Reciprocity 42

Chapter 6: Agency.. 54

Chapter 7: Conclusion... 65

Appendix A: Interview Guide – Individuals 69

Appendix B: Interview Guide – Consultorio 71

Appendix C: Photography Guide 73

Appendix D: Events attended during fieldwork 74

Appendix E: Participants 75

Bibliography 76

List of Figures

Figure 1. Ñatita wearing military hat. 33

Figure 2. Ñatita wearing knit hat covered in jewelry. 33

Figure 3. Collection of ñatitas wearing knit hats embroidered with their names. 33

Figure 4. Infant ñatita wearing white baby clothes and veil. 34

Figure 5. Ñatitas at Dona Eli's consultorio, offerings wedged in mouths and around jaws: plane ticket, coca leaves, cigarette, printed image. 47

Figure 6. Shelves full of ñatitas surrounded by flowers. 48

Figure 7. Marcos, one of Dona Eli's 85 ñatitas, with his own small ñatita figurine, a gift from a visitor. 48

Figure 8. Salvador, Pancarita, Eduardo, and Leonarda, surrounded by this week's offerings: burnt candles (on plates), flower bouquets, drinks (water and alcohol), cigarettes (Astoria and Casino, mid-range name brands), and coca leaves. 51

Figure 9. Edwin, Mariano, and Rosalinda in their urns at the home of Doña Juana and Don Felix, surrounded by bouquets, as well as beer, wine, and spirits. 56

Figure 10. Table for Mariano, Rosalinda, and Edwin at the banquet hall. 57

Figure 11. Doña Juana's daughter and her husband inaugurating the evening celebrations, dancing next to the ñatitas' table. 57

Abstract

Each November 8, the *Fiesta de las Ñatitas* is celebrated in homes across La Paz and in the city's public cemetery. Ñatitas, human skulls that are kept in homes and said to bring good fortune and guidance to their keepers, are recognized by their caretakers and devotees as persons who play an active part in the world of the living. This thesis explores ñatitas through the lens of materiality, investigating their personhood as the product of an assemblage of objects. I identify the materials that are essential to the production of ñatitas as beings and divide them into three categories: those which imbue the skulls with personhood (accessories and ornaments), those which engage them in relations with humans (gifts and offerings), and those which mediate their agency (objects implying action and intent). This work contributes to anthropological literature on personhood and relations with nonhuman beings from the perspective of material culture.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"The story of the ñatitas begins here." Don Rene sat at a small table on the patio of his home, parakeets chattering to each other in the cage behind him, laundry strung across the courtyard below. The home we sat in was the one in which Don Rene had been raised, nestled on a slope in the Belén neighbourhood of La Paz. Though he didn't know it growing up, the first ñatita that would come to him was buried in the walls of the house, waiting to be discovered. After years away working as a miner in the countryside and several more spent obtaining a university degree, Don Rene returned home to help his family convert some rooms of the home into rental units. "When I was 25 years old, my father gave me permission to begin construction. And this is where the story begins."

During the renovations, a skull was discovered in the ceiling of an old bedroom, damaged and missing a jawbone. Given the age of the house and its tenure in his family, Don Rene guessed that the skull dated back to the colonial era. Though he felt that it was special and should not be discarded, he did not yet understand its true identity, and put the skull in storage – safe, but out of sight. It wasn't until Don Rene married his wife, Doña Maria, that the relationship with ñatitas began. Doña Maria, newly wed and settling into her new life, wanted to find a ñatita to complete their household. Don Rene recalled the skull he had found years earlier, and Doña Maria urged him to retrieve it. They brought the skull with them to their new home in El Alto and prepared a table on which it would rest. Then, they consulted a *curandero*, someone who specializes in traditional practices or medicine, whose expertise included ñatitas. He told them that the skull was a woman, and that they should offer her flowers. Soon, she appeared in Doña Maria's dreams,

telling her, “I am called Pancarita. Pancarita Janq’u.” ‘Pancarita,’ Don Rene explains, is the Aymara word for ‘flower,’ and ‘janq’u’ is the Aymara word for ‘white,’ “So, her name is White Flower.” From there, they nurtured a symbiotic relationship. Every week, they would ensure Pancarita had fresh flowers and candles placed around her, light cigarettes and place them in her mouth, and fill a small glass with water, soda, or beer for her to enjoy. In return, she would watch over the household and help ensure Don Rene and Doña Maria’s lives ran smoothly.

This dynamic can be found in households across La Paz. Luis and his family also have a ñatita, who they take turns caring for; each week a family member cleans him, lights candles for him, gives him fresh coca leaves, and leaves drinks for him to enjoy. Victor’s family eats meals with their six ñatitas every day, ensuring a portion is placed next to each skull. Doña Eli keeps an impressive collection of 86 ñatitas and opens her doors to the public so that others can benefit from their protection and contribute to their offerings. Doña Juana and Don Felix keep three ñatitas and have amassed a small group of followers who meet regularly to honour and socialize with the skulls. These gatherings help ensure that ñatitas are content, a crucial part of keeping a ñatita.

The skulls even have their own annual celebration in La Paz, the Fiesta de las Ñatitas, during which all ñatitas are honored as a thank-you for the help and guidance they provide throughout the year. On the morning of November 8 if you were to stand outside the gates of La Paz’s Cementerio General (the city’s main cemetery), you would be met with flocks of men and women pouring into the compound, many of them bearing boxes or glass display cases that house a ñatita, often adorned with a hat, jewelry, or glasses. On this day, they will also wear flower crowns, as many as can be balanced atop

the skull. People bring their ñatitas to be celebrated en masse, and those who do not own a ñatita come to make offerings to one and take the opportunity to ask for something in return. Vendors meander through the crowd selling bouquets, flower crowns, bags of coca leaves, packs of cigarettes, and small white candles – all gifts to be given to the ñatitas that now fill the cemetery. Musicians also gather – men wielding classical guitars, soloists holding microphones and dragging a wheeled amplifier behind them, brass bands – and will, for a fee, perform a tune for your ñatita. Priests circulate throughout the labyrinthine grounds offering blessings to the skulls, a service offered as a compromise between the Catholic Church, which has made every effort to banish the celebration from cemetery grounds, and the throngs of Bolivians who kept showing up with their ñatitas anyway; the priests agree to bless the ñatitas, but only outside of the church's walls. By mid-afternoon, the cemetery is empty. The people bring their ñatitas back home to celebrate privately (or in smaller groups), often extending the festivities well into the night. The festivities strengthen the bond between ñatitas and their keepers and give the skulls more power to carry into the upcoming year.

Back in Belén, in a small room off the foyer of his home, Don Rene introduced me to Pancarita, Salvador, Eduardo, and Leonarda, four skulls with cotton balls filling their eye sockets, each sporting a knitted hat and arranged on a table surrounded by flowers, coca leaves, cigarettes, drinks, and candles. It was clear that these skulls were cared for; all of them showed their age, but they were clean, odorless, and surrounded by gifts. But why were they there, displayed on a table, instead of buried in the cemetery a few blocks away? What differentiated them from a regular old skull? What made them

ñatitas? The accounts I had managed to find (both academic and popular literature) left these questions unanswered.

The annual festival has been featured in a growing number of popular media publications (some suggesting a correlation between this exposure and the festival's growing numbers), highlighting the eye-catching imagery of ornamented skulls to illustrate this unusual custom. These accounts provide a superficial introduction to the phenomenon but offer little information beyond a few brief quotes from participants, often presenting the event as merely a quaint oddity. Other scholarly works have excavated the history of the practice, tracing the tradition to its origins in the Andean countryside. Milton Eyzaguirre (2018) reaches back to pre-Hispanic Andean customs, connecting the tradition to Amerindian conceptions of death and ancestors, symbolism relating to heads, Aymara and Quechua spiritual ontologies, and the agricultural calendar. He follows the practice through history, highlighting the connection between metaphysical ideologies and the pursuit of fertility and agricultural productivity, anchoring the tradition in pre-Colonial ways of life. Miranda (2022) explores contemporary practices surrounding ñatitas, discussing the skulls' relation both to their keepers and to the modern plurinational state apparatus. Through her own experiences both as a researcher and as a devotee, Fernanda examines ñatitas as a locus in which tradition and modernity, indigeneity and state politics, and the living and the dead intersect.

While each of these offer fascinating perspectives on this extraordinary tradition, none fully dissect its material components. From my earliest encounters with ñatitas, through the images and accounts that circulated in popular media, it seemed that there

were certain kinds of objects that were intrinsic to the phenomenon (most notably the accessories the skulls wore). Yet apart from general remarks on their appearance, these writings largely overlooked the significance and function of these objects. As my research drew me closer to the phenomenon – exploring all of the literature and images I could find that related to the skulls – I continued to evaluate the characteristics that set ñatitas apart from other skulls and types of spirits; the objects surrounding them seemed critically linked to questions of the construction of personhood, relationality, and agency of the skulls. I will explore these questions through the lens of materiality in the chapters that follow, examining ñatitas as an assemblage of objects that, together, produce something greater than the sum of its parts: a social and agentive being. I conceptualize 'assemblage' following the work of Tsing (2015) and Nail (2017), who apply the term not as a group of static and autonomous objects or beings, but as a collection in which it is the relationship between elements that is essential to the characterization of the resulting aggregate.

In chapter 1 I explore Bolivia's complex history, following Spanish colonial intervention through to present day political movements, which provides important context for issues surrounding conceptions of indigeneity and syncretic religious ideologies. This history illustrates the complexities of categorizing people or practices as 'indigenous' in modern Bolivia and provides crucial context for my investigation of ñatitas and the practice of caring for them. This background informed my decision to investigate ñatitas as an assemblage of objects, examining the material world that surrounds them.

Chapter 2 outlines my methodological approach to this research, summarizing the methods I applied – participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photography – and the reasoning behind their selection. This section also discusses the limitations of this research – the duration of my fieldwork, the language barrier– and notes their potential impact on this study and its findings; primarily, the limited ability to extrapolate the significance of this practice in the broader Bolivian context.

In chapter 3 I begin my examination of ñatitas as an assemblage of objects, starting with those the skulls are seldom seen without: ornamentation. The aim of this chapter is to explore the objects that both visually distinguish ñatitas from inactive skulls and demonstrate how these objects impart personhood and identity on the skulls with which they are associated. Drawing from the work of Fernanda (2022), Hugh-Jones (2009), and Layne (2000), among others, I argue that ornaments, through the process of what some call 'envelopment' (Fernanda 2022, Raas 2019, Arnold 2017), imbues ñatitas with personhood and become tools for self-expression (Layne 2000, Handler 1988, MacPherson 1962, Miller 1998).

Chapter 4 explores a category of object that is integral to the relationships between living humans and ñatitas: gifts. In La Paz, objects form the foundation of this relationship, inciting a Maussian cycle of debt and reciprocity which embeds ñatitas in the lives of their human counterparts and the world of the living. This chapter argues that objects are a critical to the relational world of ñatitas, which, in the Amerindian world, is intrinsic to conceptions of personhood (Poirier 2004, Bird-David 1999, De la Cadena 2015).

In chapter 5, I outline the final piece of the material puzzle of ñatitas, examining how objects can express the agency of the skulls, acting as tangible representations of intent and action. Drawing from Gell (1998), Latour (1996), Ladwig (2011), and Walker (2012), I detail how objects carry meaning that can be interpreted on the basis of a concrete function (e.g. food, which is meant to be eaten) or a more abstract implication (e.g. ritual objects, which can convey the intent of the being who wields it). I conclude that in the world of ñatitas, material objects are used to express the realness of the immaterial (Ladwig 2011); in this case, the existence of a metaphysical being.

Chapter 2: The Cultural Context of Bolivia

To understand ñatitas and their place in Bolivian society, we first need to understand Bolivian society. Recent decades have seen a historic cultural revolution that transfigured its political institutions and brought about renewed cultural and political participation. In less than a half-century Bolivia has realized a transition to democracy, the emergence and ascent of progressive political movements, the election of the state's first self-identifying Indigenous leader, and the establishment of a new national constitution. This metamorphosis has been swift and profound, and it is surely far from over. The nation's unique sociopolitical landscape began to take shape centuries ago, when the arrival and dominion of colonizing Spanish brought a collision of cultural forces which still impacts the country today. A long history of anti-Indigenous oppression sparked a militant political involvement of Indigenous rights movements, which ultimately led to the 2005 election of Evo Morales and his *Movimiento a Socialismo* (MAS). After over a decade in office, his government evokes mixed feelings from the Bolivian people.

History

Like many Latin American nations, Bolivia's modern sociopolitical landscape has been described as "nineteenth century republics carved out of sixteenth century empires" (Abercrombie 2003, p.180). With the rest of the western hemisphere, Bolivia was profoundly and irreversibly transformed by colonial intervention in the 15th century. European settlers looking to both create a new order and solidify their place at the top of its hierarchy shaped the social, political, economic, and geographic settings accordingly; a new Bolivia was created in Spain's image, the Spanish assuming the role of the elite,

pushing Indigenous Bolivians to the margins of society. The Spanish elites were creative in their campaign to disenfranchise the indigenous population, arguing that indigenous collective landholding was antithetical to a progressive and productive model of capital development and imposing legislation that separated Indigenous peoples from their lands, forcing them to work under exploitative conditions for the Spanish elite (Postero 2017). A "two republics" system took shape, under which Spaniard and Indigenous Bolivians were subject to different categories of personhood and citizenship (Abercrombie 2003, p.195). The aim of this policy was to separate the Spanish and Indigenous populations, and enforced the creation of separate settlements for Spaniards in which Indigenous people were prohibited from living. The Spanish then had to solve the problem of manual labour in their settlements, which was below their station. "This meant that every Spanish town and city was soon full to bursting with Indians and Africans, who were needed not only in the mines and other types of manual labor… but also for domestic work in every would-be Spanish (and Creole Spanish) household" (Abercrombie 2003, p.195). Prohibited from living in the city center, settlements were created on the outskirts of cities to house non-Spanish labourers (Abercrombie 2003). As more peasants relocated to cities throughout the centuries, these peripheral settlements have grown, some so much that they now constitute cities in their own right, but they remain distinguishable from historic urban centers by both the ancestry of their inhabitants and the prevalence of poverty within their borders (Abercrombie 2003; Goodale 2019; Lazar 2008; Widmark 2006).

Other disparate convergences of European and Indigenous culture can be seen in the cultural institution of Latin American religion. Across the continent, Spanish colonial forces worked hard to expel Indigenous symbols, practices, and meaning from religious

beliefs, all to be replaced with Catholic ideologies. In Bolivia this operation was performed with the same zealous force as the rest of Latin America. Many Andean symbols and rituals, particularly those relating to death and burial, were interpreted as evidence of false idol worship, and were prohibited (Lau 2015). But the strategy of eradication eventually gave way to the acceptance of an amalgam of ideologies. The Catholic Church adopted the view that, though Indigenous beliefs and practices did not resemble Christian teachings at a surface level, they were a misguided expression of universal Christian values – and so was born the theology of inculturation (Norget 2000, Orta 2006). "Where colonial missionaries strived to convince Andeans to abandon their Indigenous ways and thereby to become Christian, inculturationists insist that Andeans were Christian all along" (Orta 2006, p.173). Though the Church maintained that this approach advocated an encounter between two equals, which "does not involve a usurping of either of the cultures" (Norget 2000, p.87), the preconceived notion of their own Christian beliefs as embodying a 'universal truth' betrayed the falsehood in this justification. The ideology of inculturation assumed a one-to-one alignment of Indigenous and Christian beliefs and rituals, but not all practices were analogous; what would happen to those Indigenous beliefs that did not have a corresponding Christian equivalent (keeping and communing with human skulls, for example)? From this disorder emerged a fusion of both Catholic beliefs and pre-colonial ideologies, symbols, and rituals, an arrangement often labeled 'syncretic religion'.

Some scholars, however, have pointed out the problematic nature of this classification. The concept of syncretism rests on an understanding of two separate bodies of knowledge, belief, or practice, bounded and distinct, operating in tandem. To engage

with this framework, one must accept a vision of religion which assumes fundamental cores and boundaries – in essence, a set of rigid and defined 'facts' which characterize the belief system (Benavides 2004, p.194). This returns us to the problem of 'universal truth' and subjective bias, two concepts that are entirely incompatible but feature prominently in discussions of religious ideology. "Definition and self-definition, legitimacy and illegitimacy are inextricably bound to one's unspoken point of reference and ultimately to one's political and material concerns" (Benavides 2004, p.209). It is impossible to make claims about what constitutes a 'true' expression of a particular religion without aligning oneself with subjective assumptions. This may leave behind a contentious assortment of uncategorized cultural constructions but it is better, according to Benavides, to leave difficult questions unresolved than to assume the false authority to confer legitimacy or illegitimacy on complex cultural matrices. This suggests that the practices and rituals involved in the tradition of communing with ñatitas are not necessarily understood as "conflicting" with Catholicism, though the Catholic church may beg to differ.

Politics

Although Indigenous, Spanish-descended, and mestizo Bolivians have lived alongside one another for centuries, the nation's history is fraught with oppression and prejudice stemming from colonial hierarchies. Only in recent decades has the nation seen any significant progress towards the recognition of Indigenous Bolivians as full citizens deserving of equal rights, opportunities, and respect (Goodale 2019; Goldstein 2012; Postero 2017). Until the 1950s, Indigenous Bolivians were not legally permitted to read, write, vote, or own property. 1952 brought a national revolution of Indigenous Bolivians who demanded recognition as full citizens, with rights equal to their non-Indigenous

counterparts (Goldstein 20120; Goodale 2019; Nash 1979; Postero 2017). While these reforms provided a crucial first step towards later progress, they did less to improve the lives of Indigenous Bolivians than to assimilate them into a certain kind of ideal citizen, attempting to produce a homogenous, compliant, and productive populace (Postero 2017). The failure of these 'revolutionary' reforms to enforce any meaningful transformation of the hierarchies and oppression in Bolivian society would eventually ignite further unrest among the Indigenous majority (Postero 2017; Goodale 2019; Albro 2005). In the 1990s, national policies and regulations were introduced that would see the emergence and growth of Indigenous political participation, strengthened, in part, by legislation designed to encourage the assimilatory policies these groups were rejecting. "For neoliberal politicians, the answer to the Indian Question was to transform unruly Indians into disciplined political participants and responsible managers of their own territories and communities" (Postero 2017, p.10). More Indigenous rights movements began to appear on the political scene throughout the 1990s, fighting not only for equal rights but recognition of cultural differences; the ability to access the rights of citizenship on their own terms, without conforming to the state's narrowly defined ideal citizen. The most popular movement to emerge from this social shift was the MAS, *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement Towards Socialism), which began as a coca growers' movement in the Chapare region in the late 1980s, and, by virtue of its demographic overlap, expanded to include broader peasant and Indigenous rights issues. The party, led by Evo Morales, garnered support on a platform of decolonization and reversal of the neoliberal policies that had kept much of the country in poverty for over a century.

The 1990s saw an escalation in Indigenous political organization and oppositional militancy as a response to the government's attempts to privatize natural and public resources like water supplies and gasoline reserves (Albro 2005, Canessa 2014, Goodale 2019, Petras & Veltmeyer 2007, Postero 2017). These political movements began demonstrating aggressive responses to government infringements on their rights. "This militancy was also encouraged by the arrival of ex-miners to the Chapare in large numbers after 1985, bringing with them their own radical union tradition and a long history of resistance to State oppression" (Albro 2005, p.438). Following the closure of several mining operations, many ex-miners had turned to coca farming as a means of subsistence. From the 19th century to mid-20th century, mining had been one of the country's most lucrative industries. Both privately owned and government-run operations had, throughout the years, turned to strategies of profit maximization that depended on wage suppression and a lack of reinvestment in operations resulting in perilous working conditions. Union organizations and uprisings were met with military force, in several cases resulting in massacres of mine labourers and civilians (Nash 1979), so former miners were well versed in political resistance and organizing against powerful adversaries; their support was instrumental in mobilizing opposition movements. This is one key example of how many contemporary issues – means of organizing and popular discourses that are still relevant in the modern political arena – were heavily shaped by economic and political history dating back more than a century.

The MAS harnessed the momentum of these oppositional movements to propel its ascent further into the national political arena, eventually making it onto the presidential ballot. In 2005 Evo Morales was elected president of Bolivia, the country's first self-

identifying Indigenous leader, with the largest electoral majority since the reinstitution of democracy in the 1980s (Goodale 2019; Postero 2017). He had run on a platform of revolution and decolonization, outlining a model of transformation that would benefit all Bolivians. Following his inauguration in 2006, Morales wasted little time before starting work on his revolutionary project. Within months he had nationalized the state's hydrocarbon industry, announced plans for land redistribution, and moved to convene a constituent assembly to write a new national constitution (Goodale 2019; Postero 2017). He also abolished the state's Department of Indigenous affairs, "because from now on *all* national affairs were Indigenous" (Canessa 2014, p.157).

But the MAS party's plan for a new Bolivia did not conjure universal support. A regional political divide produced vehement disagreement over the causes of the nation's troubles and their corresponding solutions (Goodale 2019). Following a turbulent campaign that included nationwide debate, protests, and, finally, a vote of confidence referendum, the constituent assembly convened to rewrite the national constitution. In 2009, the second national referendum in as many years was held, cementing the new constitution "which enacts fundamental changes in the form of the state; grants autonomy to departments and indigenous communities; recognizes indigenous cultures, languages, and customs; and institutionalizes a new land reform program" (Postero 2017, p.42). To many citizens, these promises signified the dawn of a new age of Bolivia, a turning point that would summon justice and harmony for all Bolivians. But, as Postero notes, "it is one thing to propose such an ambitious agenda, and quite another to put it into practice" (Postero 2017, p.33).

Advocates and critics alike can agree that the government that emerged from the election and held power for nearly two decades little resembled the one that was promised. Nancy Postero's *The Indigenous State* evaluated the impacts of Morales' first decade of leadership, summarizing a series of compromises and shifting priorities. Postero argues:

> "Bolivia's neoliberal multiculturalism was more effective as a politics of recognition than as a politics of redistribution. It did not substantially alter the structural inequalities facing indigenous peoples. Rather, it was a top-down effort by the neoliberal state to incorporate indigenous peoples into the national project as responsible, docile neoliberal subjects" (Postero 2017, p.30).

Several scholars point out Morales' unforeseen but tenacious interest in protecting the political systems and institutions through which he had gained power. Even in the early years of Morales' tenure, critical appraisals of his political undertakings indicate the MAS's obsession with the retention of political power. Less than halfway through Morales' first presidential term, critics noted a troubling pattern. "It is evident in his 'actions' and 'inactions' Morales was concerned with protecting and preserving the institutions that he intended to use as a means of achieving state power" (Petras & Veltmeyer 2007, p.107). Goodale's 2019 retrospective on the 'revolutionary' government agrees that the MAS government's primary goal was to realize and maintain the power of the state. "There is no question," he wrote, "that categories of law, reinforced by the ideological principles of the 2009 constitution, were used strategically by MAS officials – especially those in the president's inner circle – to consolidate power and suppress opposition" (Goodale 2019, p.93). An examination of the MAS party's approach to legal

decolonization reveals an inchoate interpretation of the concept which prioritizes the consolidation of power over any truly revolutionary transformation. In positioning the nation's legal system as the locus of decolonizing efforts, Morales and the MAS only reified the state's political hegemony, fashioning it into a centralized authority on indigeneity and decolonization.

The concept of decolonization employed by the MAS government, which before had included the termination of exploitative policies and projects that prioritized the potential for capital accumulation over the rights of Indigenous people, was redefined to prioritize economic freedom. Under this definition, exploitative projects could still be counted as part of the decolonial effort as long as they held the promise of economic opportunity. Postero characterizes this turn as a rejection of these communities' claim to the rights that Morales had promised them, a betrayal from the leader who had prompted so much hope. Goodale, conversely, argues that the changing discourse of the MAS party is not an indication of a duplicitous bad-faith government, but a government wedged between revolutionary ideals and economic realities. "The subtle transformations in MAS's ideological orientation," Goodale argues, "should not be read as a form of we-knew-it-all-along disingenuousness, in which… Evo Morales and other key protagonists were simply ethnic-extractivist-neoliberals in revolutionist clothing all along" (Goodale 2019, p.56). Both these assessments are likely true, to varying degrees. More recently, the 2019 national election further compromised Morales' public image when a series of irregularities in the democratic process ended in both political parties crying, "coup!" The shifting political landscape in contemporary Bolivia has renewed questions of what rights and resources should go to Indigenous people, in what ways, and how citizens lay claim

to Indigenous identity in a country whose population is largely comprised of Indigenous or Indigenous-descended people. It is against this political backdrop that the performance of cultural practices like keeping ñatitas should be understood.

Indigeneity in Bolivia

Although the rise of the MAS has revived questions about the meaning of Indigeneity in Bolivia, this has been the subject of debate for decades. The distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bolivians is "fluid, historically contingent and arbitrary" (Canessa 2010, p.227). It is an endlessly complex conception that seems to have no single reliable definition. "One central 'problem' in this debate is that in the Andean context, ethnicity is not easily assimilated to descent, but is tied to one's way of living. Being descended from a particular Indigenous group neither makes one a member of that group or even a generic Indian – the South American highlands are replete with people of 'full-blooded' indigenous descent who are not considered either by themselves or others as Indians" (Canessa 2010, p.228).

Adding to this complexity is the fact that the changing social and political scene of the last several decades has "radically changed the ways indigenous and indigenous-descended peoples experience their identities" (Postero 2017, p.180). Historically, the characterization carried with it the baggage of oppression and intolerance. Many who held this identity would not claim it publicly. Due largely to the work of Indigenous political movements, contemporary understandings of Indigeneity are now much less encumbered by many of the prejudices that burdened Indigenous Bolivians for centuries. Yet now, in some twisted reversal, many who would claim this identity cannot access it. "Who counts as indigenous remains a central question in Bolivia today, and one that is

susceptible to multiple and contested interpretations" (Postero 2017, p.96). Since the 2005 election, Indigeneity has become much more than an identity in Bolivia; many of the early policies and programmes of the MAS administration, guided by ambitions of decolonization and social harmony, were directed towards Indigenous citizens. Thus, Indigeneity is not just a characterization of one's identity, but the means through which citizens might access critical social support and public services. Many Bolivians who counted themselves among the country's Indigenous population found themselves discounted by the Morales government's narrow definition of the term (Canessa 2014; Goodale 2019; Goldstein 2012; Postero 2017). The 2009 constitution, for example, outlined recognition of 36 Indigenous nations within Bolivia's borders, an incredible victory for some. But definitions, by necessity, exclude. For many others, this marked the beginning of a new kind of relationship with the state, one in which they may not be openly oppressed, but rather, are ignored entirely. In essence, the state claimed authority on the demarcation of identity within its borders. "By silencing the heterogeneity and disagreement about indigenous life and throwing the weight of the state behind a particular version of indigeneity, the state acts as if there were a consensus about what decolonization is and who counts as the subjects of it" (Postero 2017, p.19).

Goldstein compares the MAS government's conception of Indigeneity to that of Spanish colonizers, whose essentialized portrait of the Indigenous Bolivian amounted to more of a caricature. "Both Spanish colonizers and Evo Morales's ruling MAS party invoke an implicit racial cartography as well, wherein the indigenous are the proper denizens of this timeless rurality, and rural areas are the best and most fitting sites for indigenous bodies" (Goldstein 2012, p.177). The government has directed its resources

accordingly, focusing its attention on rural Indigenous peasant populations and neglecting those who had migrated to urban centers. "There is a sense in which the rural-urban migrants are seen as already assimilated into Hispanic society, by virtue of simply having moved to the city, at best a sort of bastardized category of Aymara, lying outside of the essentialized scheme of identification that is perhaps necessary for Indigenous politics" (Lazar 2008, p.231). In some areas, like the impoverished barrios that are filled with Bolivians of Indigenous descent, this sort of oversight results in a devastating neglect on behalf of the government; programs targeting Indigenous citizens that fail to take into account the reality of urban migration and direct resources accordingly "[end] up remarginalizing urban indigenous people, whose basic reality does not conform with the spatial and temporal ideologies of race that are implicitly contained within the constitution" (Goldstein 2012, p.33).

Some argue that the root of the problem lies not in who counts as indigenous, but in our understanding of the concept of indigeneity. Much of the broader discourse surrounding indigeneity, according to Canessa, rests on a Western understanding of difference, an etic construction built on analyses of class and ethnicity: "From an emic point of view, ethnicity cannot be reduced to race, a conception rooted in inheritable physiological difference, or one's status as aboriginals in the sense of being descended from original inhabitant. It resides in the way one lives" (Canessa 2010, p.228). These parameters, though obscure, are understood to some degree by many citizens. The recent political atmosphere has caused more Bolivians to begin embracing connections to Indigeneity; Lazar reports some residents of El Alto with Indigenous backgrounds growing more comfortable invoking this heritage. "When leaders in El Alto talk of 'our

peasant brothers,' they make use of the rhetorical distinction between urban and rural which enables them to make claims upon an indigenous authenticity in opposition to the (Hispanic) governing elites" (Lazar 2008, p.232).

The nation's colonial history, recent political odyssey, and cultural constructions of identity combine to generate a contemporary setting in which concepts of tradition, modernity, indigeneity, and religion do not necessarily conform to circumscribed definitions. The rise and rule of the MAS government upended longstanding ideas about indigeneity that had been introduced during the early days of colonial intervention, only to later reinforce some of those same archaic assumptions. The conceptual lines drawn by the government in their revolutionary project resulted in inadequate redistribution of resources and a general disregard for urban indigeneity. Thus, attaching notions of indigeneity to people or practices in modern La Paz is no straightforward undertaking. While ñatitas are often discussed as an indigenous tradition (Bednarz 2018, Eyzaguirre 2018, Fernanda 2022, Nuwer 2015), tracing the boundaries of indigeneity in Bolivia is incredibly complicated. Indigeneity is understood and experienced in vastly different ways in contemporary La Paz; some may invoke indigeneity or a rural Andean background when discussing the modern practice of keeping ñatitas while, to others, this connection would be abstract at best. This background led me to focus instead on the materiality of ñatitas, examining the skulls as an assemblage of objects. There are no doubt multiple avenues to explore relating the tradition of keeping ñatitas to experiences of Indigeneity in contemporary urban Bolivia, but a material approach allows for a deeper exploration of the skulls' essential makeup, or those things that make them ñatitas.

The chapters that follow examine the various functions of the material things that shape the world of ñatitas in contemporary La Paz, analyzing how these objects coalesce to produce a person in the modern Amerindian world. To explore this process, I will draw from studies which theorize personhood, relations with the dead, and the agency of non-living beings, but these works will be discussed in the chapters that deal with each respective topic. In the next chapter I discuss my methodological approach to this study, detailing the methods I employed and the limitations of the project's parameters.

Chapter 3: Methods

The methods I applied to this research were those that I thought would best allow me to investigate the unusual world of ñatitas, their status as persons in contemporary La Paz, and the objects with which they are related.

Given the dearth of scholarly work currently available on ñatitas, I chose to take an inductive approach to this research. This meant developing theories by identifying codes, themes, and patterns as I worked, rather than testing a hypothesis by applying a pre-established theory or model to a particular case of interest (Bernard et al. 2017).

Participant Observation

The primary methodology employed for this research project was participant observation, a practice widely considered to be the bedrock of ethnographic research. This entailed taking part in ritual and habitual events, activities, and interactions, becoming part of the local community of people who believe in or keep ñatitas (Becker 1982, Musante & DeWalt, 2010).

The communities in which I carried out this research (within the cities of El Alto and La Paz) are largely comprised of people of Indigenous descent (National Institute of Statistics, 2012) who have been no stranger to extractivist research, one-sided undertakings in which the researcher siphons knowledge and data from marginalized communities and offers nothing in return (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, Goldstein 2012, Kennemore & Postero 2020, Rappaport 2008). For this reason, it was essential to foreground the importance of relationship building and establishing opportunities for reciprocity between me and the communities in which I worked. Participant observation as a primary methodology allowed me to do just that, approaching potential interlocutors

as equals, not from the authoritative and intrusive position of a researcher examining subjects. In practice, this meant living in La Paz for three months, becoming integrated in various social circles, participating in social events, listening intently, and having conversations with people who could illuminate different areas of interest relating to my research.

I flew to La Paz mid-September, my arrival planned to provide ample time to acclimatize and make connections before the festival on November 8. After spending some time familiarizing myself with the local area, people, and dialect, I realized that the region's colloquialisms and speech patterns were unfamiliar enough to create opportunities for miscommunication and confusion. I found a local language school that advertised private classes with options for off-site learning and reached out, asking if I might hire an instructor as an interpreter and use our class time to conduct interviews. The school obliged, and I met Josué, who accompanied me to several events and most interviews, and was an invaluable research partner. In the three months I spent living in La Paz, I sought out events and settings that centered specifically around ñatitas, like visiting personal collections of ñatitas that are made available to the public, attending a panel discussion that centered on ñatitas and relationships with the dead, attending the annual Fiesta de las Ñatitas, and participating in a private celebration held to honour ñatitas. Throughout this process I took extensive notes on experiences, interactions, and conversations in everyday life, as well as during the annual festival, which were complemented with photographs of my encounters.

Inherent to the practice of participant observation is the fact that the presence of an outside observer affects the knowledge that is disclosed to and co-created by them

(Becker 1982). To address this reality, sometimes known as the observer's paradox (Gordon 2012, Shanmuganathan 2005), I continually reflected on my presence and position within the research, journaling my own experience and noting potential areas of influence, wherever I had the ability to perceive it.

I endeavored to find multiple entry points into Bolivian life in varied social settings and geographic locations to avoid the potentially narrow scope of perspective that snowball sampling can invite (Gagne 2013; Radice 2000). These entry points included things like attending events that specifically centered around ñatitas (the annual festivities at the public cemetery, a panel discussion at a local museum), branching out to the social spheres of my new friends and research partners, and seeking out academics who are familiar with the subject. My aim was to speak to Bolivians of different age groups, sexes, socioeconomic background, work experiences, and geographic upbringing (for instance, rural vs. urban backgrounds).

The following is a list of the activities and topics I sought to observe and discuss with interlocutors:

- The prevalence of ñatita belief and ownership in contemporary urban Bolivia
- Interaction with ñatitas: how this occurs and with whom
- Contemporary practices surrounding the keeping of and communion with ñatitas
- The ñatita economy, services that relate to ñatitas (for instance, interpretation of spiritual messages or spirit mediumship)?
- Fiesta de las Ñatitas: how ñatitas are thanked and honoured

Most of these points I was able to cover, save for the economic world that stems from modern practices of keeping ñatitas; while some parts of this economy were visible (vendors selling offerings outside the gates of the cemetery during the Fiesta de las Ñatitas), others were more difficult to flesh out (the owner of the collection of 86 ñatitas maintained that the money she receives is used to purchase offerings for the skulls and did not discuss her role as a paid occupation) and thus did not provide for a fruitful exploration.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants who owned or were knowledgeable on the subject of ñatitas. These interviews allowed me to delve deeper into unanswered questions surrounding ñatitas, providing space for comprehensive discussion where participant observation would not. The semi-structured format provided interview participants the flexibility to expound on their answers, and to introduce new themes and considerations that were relevant to my research (Bernard et al. 2017).

At the outset of my fieldwork, I had planned to conduct interviews alone, but, as mentioned above, after arriving in Bolivia and encountering unfamiliar dialectical phrases and speech patterns, decided that an interpreter would be key to ensuring that no information or meaning was lost in translation. Josué, a local language teacher and interpreter, accompanied me to most of the interviews I conducted.

As mentioned above, the avoidance of the extractivist research model was a guiding principle of this project. I hoped to cultivate a rapport with participants to ensure a level of comfort that would both set the discussion on an even footing and invite the participant

to guide the conversation to topics they considered relevant. Here, too, Josué played an instrumental role; as a La Paz native, he established a rapport with each participant with remarkable ease. The interviews were informal discussions, cooperative efforts, in that all participants formed part of the generative force for the knowledge that is produced (Mason, 2002). Josué and I conducted interviews with six participants, and I did my best to foster open lines of communication such that further discussions could be held to deepen my understanding of the topics covered.

The interviews were recorded with a handheld audio recording device, in a few cases accompanied by written notes. My interview questions were guided by central themes that I hoped to explore with each participant:

- The place of ñatitas in everyday life
- How the dead become ñatitas, and expectations of continued presence after death
- Relationships of reciprocity between the living and the dead
- Ñatitas and Indigeneity
- Changing practices and traditions surrounding ñatitas

While, taken together, my interviews touched on all of these themes, I did not discuss each theme with every participant. In some instances, though I may have raised a particular question, interviewees were inclined to pursue a tangential path or idea rather than expanding on the primary topic of my inquiry. I had also underestimated the complexity of discussing Indigeneity in La Paz, though I adjusted my approach several times throughout my fieldwork, tinkering with the wording of my questions in an effort to more clearly elucidate the meaning of my query; in the end, it appeared that the topic simply was not relevant to the experiences of the people with whom I was speaking, so I

learned not to pursue these themes when participants did not seem to be picking up on them.

Photography

I also incorporated visual anthropology in my fieldwork to complement the above methods and illustrate the vibrance of ñatitas and the festival held in their honour, as well as catalogue the variety of gifts and adornments they are given. Photography can be extremely useful in facilitating field recordings; images can capture significant visual details and reduce the pressure of recording in-depth written field notes; one can review the photographs later and extrapolate on specific data (Collier & Collier 1986). Throughout my fieldwork, I sought to capture the following subjects, among others:

- Inventory of decorations/adornments (e.g., hats, flowers)
- Inventory of gifts/offerings (e.g., coca leaves, cigarettes)
- Fiesta de las Ñatitas events and celebrations
- Ñatita collections & the context of their environments

While I was able to photograph all of the above, I was not able to document many personal ñatitas in their habitual environments; many of the photos I collected of ñatitas were from the Fiesta de las Ñatitas in the Cementerio General, where the skulls had been transported for the day's festivities. Most interviews were conducted in a public place, so I saw only two residences where ñatitas were kept (though the collection of 86 ñatitas significantly skews the *number* of skulls I saw in their natural environments).

Grounded Theory

To anchor these methodologies in the inductive approach, I endeavored to integrate grounded theory in my data collection throughout my fieldwork. In practice, this

meant prompt review of field notes and other data collected, coding text, creating memos, and establishing theories (or at least the seeds of a theory) as I went; as I gathered more data, I continually weighed new findings against those that came before, comparing themes, concepts, and emerging patterns and hypotheses (Bernard et al. 2017; Charmaz 2002). Finally, I verified my hypotheses with those who are knowledgeable on the research topic to determine their validity, performing what have been referred to as 'member checks', "[taking the] model back to stakeholders in [the] study… and [asking] if the model rang true" (Bernard et al. 2017; Lincoln & Guba 1985). Due to the busy schedules of most participants, this approach evolved into what I came to think of as "rolling member checks", that is, inputting new information from participants into an evolving model, and verifying that model with subsequent participants during the course of our discussions.

Ethical Considerations

> The word itself, 'research,' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful… The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, p.1)

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Tuhiwai Smith (2012) writes of the longstanding relationship between research and colonial domination in Indigenous communities around the world. For centuries, Indigenous peoples have been the subject of research

endeavours, both insidious and well-intentioned, but consistently paternalistic. Given my position as an outside researcher, I recognized that approaching members of marginalized and largely Indigenous communities could elicit well-justified feelings of distrust or hostility. I undertook this project with an awareness of the complex history that might cause this reaction and a willingness to defer to the needs and wishes of the communities in which I would work. Throughout my fieldwork I remained open to adjusting my research and the manner in which it unfolded accordingly. I also made every effort to ensure interview participants had a thorough understanding of the project's subject and aim, and the opportunity to withdraw from the study – inclusive of all discussions with them and any photographs taken that relate to them or their ñatitas – should they change their minds about participating.

Following the completion of this research project, I will be offering a selection of the materials I collected and my finished thesis to relevant archival collections, such as MUSEF (the national Ethnography and Folklore Museum) and Museo San Francisco (a museum and cultural center in central La Paz), so that my interlocutors and research partners will be able to possess and easily access the knowledge that is produced by this project. I also offered each participant a brief summary of my thesis and its findings, translated into Spanish and highlighting their contributions to the project. I also offered to provide participants with photos I had taken of them, of events they had participated in, and of the ñatitas to whom they were connected, where relevant.

Limitations

The findings of this research were limited in several ways, the most prominent of which was collecting data in a non-native tongue. While I was comfortable making

conversation in Spanish and could communicate casually with my interlocutors, the local dialect was unknown to me. Each encounter with an unfamiliar phrase or speech pattern loosened my grip on whatever conversation was unfolding – perhaps due to the anxiety of missing some key point or significance more than anything else. This meant that my interactions with many participants were mediated by a third party (Josué), which left room for erosion of meaning for the questions and responses that flowed in both directions (Bendazzoli 2016). While my Spanish was good enough to understand much of what was said – and to see that Josué was a formidable interpreter – introducing a third party into the research process can nonetheless impact the interactions I had with participants and the information that was exchanged.

Another limitation of this study was the relatively short duration of my time in La Paz. While many fascinating questions emerged during the course of my research, addressing some of the more complex ones – the significance of ñatitas in the broader Bolivian context, the place of identity among believers and caretakers, the differences between contemporary urban practices and their rural analogues, for example – would require a much lengthier study.

Chapter 4: Personhood & Identity

The morning of November 8th, the *Cementerio General* was inundated with the dead, who spilled through each of the compound's nine gates in search of a resting spot inside the grounds. They were not here to be buried, however. They were here for the *Fiesta de las Ñatitas*, the annual celebration held in honour of the ñatitas of La Paz. The central gates were flanked by armed guards checking visitors' bags for contraband like alcohol. A man approached carrying a grey plastic bag and lifted its contents to show the guard. Inside was a weathered skull wearing a knit beanie and resting on a pillow. The guard glanced at the skull, then waved the man through. A small woman ambled through the gates next, carrying a glass case trimmed in gold-painted wood, the name 'Angelica' inscribed across the top. At first glance, the case appeared to hold small bouquets of hydrangeas, but nestled among the flowers was a small human skull, its age evident in its dark colouring and missing jaw, encircled by a gold necklace glinting in the sun. She brushed past the guards, turned right, and disappeared into the cemetery's labyrinthine grounds. A moment later, Josué, my interpreter, and his friend Luis emerged from a passing bus, and we joined the line of people waiting to enter the grounds. We followed the thrum of voices and distant music to a small plaza tucked between mausoleums. A crowd flowed through the cement paths, which were lined with people seated on stools and folding chairs. Next to them were tables, benches, and cardboard boxes that held the day's honorees, their ñatitas.

Most skulls were surrounded by gifts – coca leaves, cigarettes, drinks, flowers, even cash – their craniums piled high with flower crowns. Beneath these piles of riches, their habitual garb could just be seen, each ñatita sporting some kind of accessory. To our

right, a ñatita who wore a peaked cap, part of a formal military uniform, sat inside a glass case with his name (Claudius) printed across the top. A few feet down the path, seven ñatitas were displayed on a bench, each wearing a *chullo,* a traditional Andean knit hat, all varying in colour or pattern. One skull sat atop a cardboard box covered in yellow plastic foil, wearing a red knit beanie that was covered in jewelry. A small skull that had belonged to a baby was perched on a stuffed white onesie, draped in a crochet blanket and wearing an infant's sun hat covered by a white veil. A few attendees with larger collections of ñatitas had procured matching sets of knit beanies, each embroidered with the name of the ñatita to whom it belonged. Though there were hundreds of ñatitas in the cemetery, no two looked exactly alike. While most wore hats, these were all unique in either style, pattern, colour, or embroidery, and many wore other, more distinct accessories. These kinds of ornaments distinguish ñatitas, setting them apart from other skulls or inactive bones, and imbue them with personhood and identity.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the objects used as accessories and ornamentation, drawing from discussions of animism (Bird-David 1999, Long & Moore 2012), personhood (Raas 2019, Arnold 2008, De la Cadena 2015), identity (Hoskins 2005, Miller 1998), and materiality (Layne 2000, Handler 1988, MacPherson 1962, Miller 1998, Morin 1969) to demonstrate how these objects help to situate ñatitas as persons, animating them and instilling each with a unique identity.

Figure 1. Ñatita wearing military hat.

Figure 2. Ñatita wearing knit hat covered in jewelry.

Figure 3. Collection of ñatitas wearing knit hats embroidered with their names.

Figure 4. Infant ñatita wearing white baby clothes and veil.

Fernanda (2022) classifies the ornamentation of ñatitas as a form of "envelopment", invoking the work of Raas (2019), Arnold (2008, 2017, 2020), and De la Cadena (2015), who describe the envelopment of an object or being as a transformational phenomenon, a process which animates and constitutes personhood. These discussions are approached from an animistic perspective, which challenges the conception that personhood is a phenomenon unique to human beings. They raise questions such as "What, for example, is a 'person'? What 'other' can and should be included within our understanding of the relational matrix? What is the place of non-humans, objects, and 'thing' in a theory of sociality" (Long & Moore 2012, p.41). Discussions of animism often cite Indigenous epistemologies, many of which include beings like animals, plants, and geological arrangements in their relational matrices. Nurit Bird-David points out the

fundamental differences between some western and Indigenous understandings of personhood. Western views, he writes, understand 'person' to be a subcategory of 'human'; "The Ojibwa," on the other hand, "conceives of 'person' as an overarching category within which 'human person,' 'animal person', 'wind person' etc. are all subcategories" (Bird-David 1999, p.71). Though these categories of being may not interact with one another using language, they are recognized to play a role in an overarching relational ecosystem. Thus, the status of 'person' entails qualifying characteristics, engagements, and processes of activation or awakening.

For Raas and Arnold, personhood is linked to the practice of ornamentation, which can both signify personhood and animate inert objects. Both authors discuss textiles as powerful objects that contain a unique vitality, which is imbued to the object it encloses (Arnold 2017, Raas 2019). Joanne Miller echoes this notion, outlining the relation between objects and persons among the Mamaindê of Brazil. "In this ethnographic context, body ornaments may often be associated with the notion of spirit and are therefore considered to be a constitutive part of the person" (Miller 2009, p. 64). De la Cadena discusses "envelopment" or bundling as a component of a relational process or ritual which can animate or activate a previously inert object (De la Cadena, 2015). This process of envelopment is "something imbued with power; a ritual configuration, as defined by Arnold, because it helps to turn something material, like an object, into something living and animate" (Raas 2019: 46).

Miranda recalls being witness to the changing of ñatitas' hats during a gathering of a brotherhood devoted to three ñatitas, Mariano, Rosalinda, and Edwin:

> "Juana decided to make the change at that moment (usually the change of hats is done without the presence of devotees). Juana, sitting at the entrance of the room, facing the altar of the ñatitas, indicated to a devotee that she should carefully pass her the ñatitas, one by one. The music stopped playing, and we all remained silent, attentive to the maneuvers of the devotee, who carefully opened each urn, delicately took each skull, moved it to Juana's place, and Juana took it with the care with which one hugs a baby… The first change was to Rosalinda, the second to Mariano, and the third to Edwin. With each skull the only sound in the room was the multiple clicks of the reporter's professional camera." (Miranda 2022, translation mine)

I witnessed a similar (though less ceremonial) act of unbundling and re-bundling in Doña Eli's *consultorio*:

> Doña Eli selected a ñatita from the shelf and brought it over to me, carefully placing it in my hands. She introduced me to Justina, whose dark leather skin had begun to peel back in layers, sporting long grey braids that were carefully tucked behind her still-intact ears. Eli removed the beanie and the room became quiet. She whispered, "Look how well-preserved she is. See her beautiful hair?" and began fixing Justina's hat, flattening some wrinkles, adjusting it so that the embroidered name was centered on the band. Nobody in the room spoke, and I, too, felt compelled to maintain the silence, so refrained from asking any questions. Eli slid the beanie back over Justina's head. She then took the ñatita in both hands, kissed her gently on the forehead, and placed her back on the shelf.

> The task complete, she resumed her normal register and picked up our conversation where we had left off. (Field notes, La Paz, 2022).

The atmosphere of reverence and intimacy on both occasions adheres to the model of ritual envelopment. These rituals are acts of devotion that are filled with tenderness and reverence. Ñatitas' accessories are treated with the same care and attention as the skulls themselves because they are essential to the skulls' relational agency and personhood. "The constitution of the ñatitas is given by their clothing, which places them in the human, in the person, and above all in social interaction, that is, in the world where humans live" (Fernanda 2022).

Hugh-Jones depicts a similar concept present in Amazonian creation mythologies; in his discussion of objects and personhood in the north-west Amazonian region, he traces the journey of ancestral spirits from other-worldly beings to recognizable humans. Emerging into our world, they shed their previous forms "and put on ornaments. These ornaments," he writes, "are the final additions that allow the ancestors to achieve a new, definitively human status" (Hugh-Jones 2009, p.53). Here, the ornaments alter, rather than animate, but both cases argue for the transformational qualities of ornamentation and envelopment.

These accessories are more than vehicles for transformation, however. They not only imbue skulls with personhood, functioning in a broader sense of identifying a skull as a ñatita (rather than an inert skeleton fragment), but also with a distinct identity, specific accessories differentiating each ñatita as a unique individual. Luis spoke of the importance of identity, noting a connection between a ñatita's ornamentation and its life as a living human:

> "It all depends on the personality of the ñatita when he was, or she was, alive. For example, a person that used to wear glasses all the time because he just liked the way that they looked, so, for respect for the ñatita, they have to put the glasses. And the same thing about the jewelry."

He adds that it is the ñatitas themselves who choose their ornaments, appearing in dreams to communicate their wishes:

> "Juan Carlos asks my dad in his dream – more than anything he makes dreams to my father and to my brother – he says, "Change me, I want my pilot hat", or, "I want this", or, "Please, I don't want Coca-Cola anymore, a little water."

Doña Eli echoed Luis's words, emphasising the pragmatics of ensuring each of her 85 ñatitas is content:

> "Identity is very, very important. For example, in my case, where I have a lot of ñatitas, if they didn't have any hats, I mean, how could I identify them? And that is important because since the ñatitas talk to you, communicate with you through the dreams, they are going to tell you, "I like this," or, "I don't like this."

For some, it is the objects we possess that define us as people (Layne 2000, Handler 1988, MacPherson 1962, Miller 1998). The things we surround ourselves with become part of who we are, and both contribute to and reflect our identities. Morin (1969) distinguishes between a 'biographical object' and a 'protocol object', the latter being an object with which one's relationship is generalized and prescribed by some functional protocol (Morin 1969, Hoskins 2005). The 'biographical object', conversely, describes cases wherein a relationship is established between object and owner which entangles both parties in the formation of identity; the object is imbued with the identity of its

owner, and correspondingly, becomes a part of the construction of that identity (Morin 1969, Hoskins 2005). Persons "who surround themselves with biographical objects do so to develop their personalities and reflect on them"; these objects become "part of a narrative process of self-definition" (Hoskins 2005). They both add to and reflect the formation of the self.

Ornaments may also function as a proof of personhood which devotees and caretakers invoke when discussing their ñatitas. When I asked Luis and Don Rene about the hats their ñatitas wore, both answered that they had given their ñatitas these accessories so the skulls would not get cold. Don Rene added matter-of-factly, "It's just like a living person."

These accessories can also play a part in feeding the accounts that circulate about ñatitas in La Paz. Luis offered a story as proof of his ñatita's personhood (as well as his power and altruism) which hinged on the skull's primary accessory: the peaked cap from his military uniform. His brother, Andrés, had been out drinking one evening and arrived home late that night only to realize he had lost his keys. He fell asleep on the doorstep waiting for someone to wake up in a few hours to let him in. He awoke the next morning in his bed; he had no memory of being brought inside, but assumed a family member had found him and brought him to his room. Later that day, he was speaking to a neighbour, who exclaimed, "I didn't know your brother had joined the military!" Confused, Andrés responded that he hadn't. "Then why was he dressed in uniform last night?" asked the neighbour. "I saw him pick you up and carry you inside." The neighbour, Luis said, did not know that the family kept a ñatita, Juan Carlos, who had served in the military and always wore his peaked cap when he appeared to them in dreams.

Layne highlights clothing as "a marker of humanness, of personhood" (Layne 2000, p.327), citing Buck-Morss' assertion that "clothing is quite literally at the borderline between subject and object" (Buck-Morss 1989, p.97). In other words, this kind of ornamentation can be a key distinguishing factor between what is perceived as a person and what is perceived as an object. Layne goes on to argue that the "realness" of material things, like clothing, helps establish the realness of beings whose existence may be contested. "To possess… things is powerful proof" of existence. (Layne 2000, p.339). The story of Andrés and Juan Carlos combines Layne's application of ornaments as proof of personhood with the constructive approach discussed above. The peaked cap is a biographical object which invokes Juan Carlos' past as a living person, reflects his identity to his present-day social circle, and serves as proof of his continued existence in the living world by helping to solidify an otherwise abstract presence.

Milton Ezyaguirre, an anthropologist working at MUSEF (La Paz's Museum of Ethnography and Folklore) who has traced the practice of keeping ñatitas back to its rural Andean roots, told me that this kind of ornamentation is a relatively new phenomenon in the tradition.

> "I mean, now it's become a different tradition… That is a commercial issue. It no longer has anything to do with the Andean tradition. I mean, it's already, let's say, a readaptation of what the way of thinking is… There's a whole trade too, right? Because there are some places where candles are made in the shape of couples, phalluses, etcetera, and they sell you that, right? So, we say that this is the business. It's a transformation towards modernity."

Eyzaguirre suggests that the use of these objects stems more from the contemporary urban setting of La Paz, where Indigenous customs have collided with the modern capitalist market economy, rather than from rural Andean practices.

While their rural counterparts may look quite different, for the ñatitas of La Paz, ornamentation is intrinsic to their status as beings. The skulls' accessories do more than merely differentiate them from other inactive skulls, they imbue them with personhood and unique identities. But ornamentation is just one part of the process by which ñatitas constitute their existence in the living world. "Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled inter-relating" (Rosiek, Snyder & Pratt 2020, p.336). Personhood is not a fixed trait, but one that emerges and is reconstituted through one's relations with other beings. The following chapter examines the relationships between ñatitas and those who care for them and the materials that facilitate this connection, further bolstering the presence of ñatitas in the living world.

Chapter 5: Gifts and Reciprocity

A century ago, Mauss investigated the social mechanism of the gift, exploring the function of an offering and its reciprocation. The gift, he wrote, represents more than a singular gesture or the function of the object given; it embeds the giver and recipient in a relation of continued reciprocity, a cycle of obligation that sustains an alliance of goodwill (Mauss 1990). Though the solution he presented may not be beyond critique or expansion (Bourdieu 1997, Firth 1963, Levi-Strauss 1968, Miyazaki 2005, Sahlins 1997, Strathern 1992), the resulting model provided a valuable counterpoint to the prevalent understanding of exchange as a utilitarian undertaking (Mauss 1990). It is particularly useful for examining the relationships I found myself orbiting in La Paz, for gifts are the foundation of the bond between a living person and a ñatita. The connection begins with a material offering by a living person, which sparks a cycle of exchange between the living and the dead that often lasts until the living person is laid to rest themselves. Though the ñatita does not necessarily reciprocate with a quantifiable material offering, their help and influence is unquestionably felt by the recipient. As shown in the Maussian framework, these transactions do more than exchange material indulgences and metaphysical favours. They ignite and fuel a lasting relationship, and keep peace between the living and the dead.

These kinds of reciprocal relationships between the living and the dead can be found around the globe, each party providing the other with something of value – be it honour, gifts, or guidance – to fortify and renew the bond between them (Howarth 2000; Hunter & Luke 2014; White 2013; Brandes 2006; Ladwig 2011; Walter 2019; White 2013). The offering that the living person makes often entails a material object of some

kind, while the offering from the dead typically comes in the form of dreams offering guidance, or an esoteric sign that indicates some form of help or support on behalf of the deceased (Brandes 2006; Ladwig 2011; Walter 2019; White 2013).

Relationships are a fundamental part of indigenous conceptions of personhood (Poirier 2004, Bird-David 1999, De la Cadena 2015). As Poirier explains, “To contrast Aboriginal and Western notions of the person, one might say that in the former, networks of social relations are viewed as being intrinsically embodied within the person, whereas in the latter they are conceived as being external to the individual, who is constituted as an autonomous moral entity” (2004, p.68). In other words, relationality is inextricable from personhood; relationships with others are an essential component of being. In La Paz, the relationships between ñatitas and the living are mediated by materiality; the act of exchanging gifts and offerings “plays a crucial role in establishing a link between humans and the spirits of the dead” (Ladwig 2011, p.19).

On a hot Friday morning, Josué and I waited for Doña Eli outside her home at the end of a quiet street a few kilometers south of the *Cementerio General*. At the top of a sturdy wooden door was a sign that read: ‘Maestra Consejera Elizabeth’. Six skulls formed a pillar on either side of the sign, each with a name displayed beneath it (Oscar, Pancho, Francisco, Juvenal, Diego, and José). After some time, an old van pulled up next to us and a small woman in a purple wool sweater with a long gray braid spilling over her shoulder climbed out. Without asking our names she ushered us inside; “Come, come.” We stepped into a dark room, the only light coming from the open door to the street. A wooden bench lined the left wall, waiting to receive guests. On the opposite wall sat two tall metal bookcases, each shelf lined with a satin cushion and filled with skulls. Each of

them (85, at the time of my visit) wore a knit hat, baby-blue and custom embroidered with the name of its wearer. Doña Eli introduced us to her collection of ñatitas; telling us where some of them had come from and how they had made their way to her. Some of the ñatitas had areas of expertise. The smaller skulls that belonged to infants and children specialized in issues related to pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing. A skull that, in life, had been a police officer specialized in serving justice. One specialized in love, another in work and careers. Some still had skin (now a dark leather, the corners of their mouths turned up in an eternal grin), and hair (carefully braided, snaking around the lower jawbone on the shelf). One wore a pair of dentures, its tomato-red artificial gums and pristine teeth a stark contrast to the rest of the aged cranium. Bouquets of fresh flowers, small and large, sat on the floor surrounding the shelves. A small table next to the shelves held rows of empty candle holders. Around most of the skulls were small gifts for the ñatitas to enjoy: coca leaves stuffed into their mouths, money, cigarettes. Around the smaller skulls was scattered an assortment of candies ("They're young, they like sweets," explained Doña Eli). Some offerings were less immediately practical in nature. One (Juancito, as displayed by his hat) had a plane ticket wedged between his teeth and photographs printed on letter-sized paper tucked beneath his jaw. Another (Marcos) had his own small ñatita figurine. Though the ñatitas belonged to Doña Eli, the gifts were given by visitors of her *consultorio*. Throughout the week, Doña Eli opened her doors to the public, and people would come from all over the vast slopes of La Paz to give offerings to her ñatitas and request their help in return.

As we spoke about the skulls, two women entered, greeted everyone in the room, and seated themselves on a bench. They placed a white plastic bag between them and got

to work. The bag was filled with cigarettes, which they pulled out one at a time, writing something in small lettering on each of them. The gifts they offered in this way were small but imbued with meaning. They chatted amiably with Doña Eli as they worked, discussing why they had come. "They are here seeking justice," Josué explained, translating bits of their conversation. "They have brought a cigarette for every ñatita – except the children, because they don't smoke – and are writing their request on each one. But they will ask their favour only of Oscar, who specializes in justice."

Soon, it was our turn to make an offering and ask a favour of the ñatitas. Dona Eli urged us on; "Ask them something. Ask from the heart. Don't be afraid. They wish to know." Josué and I stood before the wall of skulls, said a silent prayer, and took a moment to address the ñatitas. I hadn't brought any gifts, so I instead gave a donation to Doña Eli so that she could refresh their flowers when it was needed. As we stepped away from the shelves of skulls, one of the women told us, "You'll be back." I thought I had misheard her and asked her to clarify. "Whatever you asked for," she responded, "it's going to come true, and you'll come back here again." In essence, she had told me that I'd just initiated a relationship with Doña Eli's ñatitas. I had prayed, asked for their help, and then given them a gift (or at least given Doña Eli the means of procuring one). What was expected to happen next was the ñatitas' repayment, followed then by my return to the *consultorio*, sooner or later, to thank the ñatitas, offer another gift and, presumably, ask for something else.

It's understood by those who deal with ñatitas that one cannot simply ask for something concrete like money and expect a stack of cash to appear. One may, however, ask for good fortune in their career, and soon after the request has been made receive a

promotion. A skeptic might call the outcome a coincidence and argue that the skull played no part in fulfilling the request, but the believer does not doubt the power and influence of ñatitas.

These skulls are not necessarily benevolent beings, however, and can be invoked for nefarious requests as well. “A politician came to me once,” recalled Doña Eli. “He wanted the ñatitas to bring harm to his opponent. I sent him away. I don’t allow that kind of thing here.” Ñatitas can cause as much damage as they can good, which is why one must be careful not to anger them. Dona Eli warned what can happen if a person fails to uphold their side of the bargain. “The most important thing for you is always to remember to bring them gifts, to make them feel special. That is something very important…If you come here and you ask for… I don't know, if your cat was stolen, and you ask for a ñatita to help you to find your cat, and you promise that you are going to bring flowers, but you forget. So, if you forget, the ñatita is also going to forget about you. But not just forget, even do you some kind of harm.” As Mauss wrote, when one has entered into a reciprocal relationship, “to refuse to give… is tantamount to declaring war” (Mauss 1990, p.13). Ñatitas do not take kindly to a promise reneged.

Figures 5, 6 & 7: Doña Eli’s *consultorio*.

Figure 5. Ñatitas at Dona Eli’s consultorio, offerings wedged in mouths and around jaws: plane ticket, coca leaves, cigarette, printed image.

Figure 6. Shelves full of ñatitas surrounded by flowers.

Figure 7. Marcos, one of Dona Eli's 85 ñatitas, with his own small ñatita figurine, a gift from a visitor.

Don Rene and his wife Sandra experienced both the highs and lows of this social contract with their own ñatitas. Rene launched his tale with the wonders their four ñatitas, Pancarita, Salvador, Leonarda and Eduardo, have performed, reaching back decades to their early days in El Alto, when their relationship with the ñatitas began. He and his wife had just moved into a new home on a quiet street nested in El Alto's sprawling plateau when they began throwing parties to celebrate their ñatitas. It started with a few friends coming over to drink and chew coca, also bringing a small offering for the ñatitas out of

respect for their hosts. Guests would bring candles, flowers, coca, and other offerings for the ñatitas, make their requests, and resume socializing with the living. Soon, they began to find that their requests were coming true, and word started to spread through the neighbourhood. "'Let me tell you that my *compadre* Rene and *comadre* Sandra have these miraculous ñatitas,' they would say." Every Tuesday and Friday, Rene and Sandra would open their doors and guests would pour in, staying until the early hours of the following morning, almost all of them paying respects and offering gifts to the ñatitas throughout the night. The ñatitas were well attended to and very happy, and so, Don Rene says, were he and Sandra. For the biweekly event, he began buying beer in the market and reselling to guests with an added convenience fee. After, he would collect the empty bottles and return them to his supplier, which would grant him a discount on his next order, and the cycle continued, making the parties into a small revenue stream for the household. Sandra had begun preparing meals for the events, which were so enjoyed by guests that they urged her to open a restaurant. She did, and it was a great success in the neighbourhood, bringing more money into the household each day. Rene and Sandra ensured a regular and robust flow of gifts to the ñatitas, and the ñatitas ensured a regular and robust flow of money in return.

But Rene and Sandra experienced the downfalls of the commitment they had made when they moved from El Alto back to La Paz, to Rene's childhood home, and began failing to meet their obligations to their ñatitas. After the move, they had planned to throw a celebration for their ñatitas on November 8th, as was their tradition in El Alto. It was a busy time, however, and they could not make the necessary arrangements, so the day passed with no acknowledgement. The pace of their lives did not relent, and in the

months that followed they continued to neglect their commitments to their family of skulls. They felt the weight of their transgression in short order. “It quickly took its toll on us,” said Don Rene. “Suddenly, we had bad luck in everything. Anything we tried to do, it went wrong… We were being punished.” After some time, they realized their mistake, tracing their run of bad luck back to the skulls they had forgotten about. They had stopped making offerings to the ñatitas, so the peace and prosperity they had known was no longer secure. They began to atone for their misstep, making offerings regularly, and even bringing a priest to the house to bless the ñatitas. Don Rene echoed Doña Eli’s warning; “You must not neglect them. You must be careful and attend to them.” Now, the table on which the ñatitas rest is always full of offerings, which are refreshed each week, if not more frequently.

Figure 8. Salvador, Pancarita, Eduardo, and Leonarda, surrounded by this week's offerings: burnt candles (on plates), flower bouquets, drinks (water and alcohol), cigarettes (Astoria and Casino, mid-range name brands), and coca leaves.

Everyone agreed that offerings were an indispensable part of the relationship between people and ñatitas. Each person I spoke to described an obligation to their ñatita to supply regular offerings in order to keep their ñatita happy, and thus keep the peace in their household. When neglected, ñatitas can become mischievous, if not categorically adversarial.

Miranda (2022) argues that the Maussian model does not adequately reflect the transactions that occur between people and ñatitas: "It is not possible to quantify what [the ñatitas] give, receive, or return to the living, since these relationships involve emotions and sensations that are only possible to capture in practices and discourses, and not in an a priori system that establishes a logic of reciprocal exchanges of gifts" (2022,

p.72, own translation). For instance, a person may bring some cigarettes to a ñatita and ask for help with a pain in their hip, and find the next day that the pain is ameliorated. But how could one objectively measure the level of pain that was reduced, the benefit to the recipient's life, or even the involvement of the ñatita? For Miranda, the empirical discrepancy between what is given to the ñatitas and what is returned by them makes the Maussian model ill-suited for the discussion of gifts and offerings in this context. However, this perspective places undue emphasis on what is circulated rather than the function of the transaction itself. What does it matter that the scales of an exchange cannot be objectively balanced? The recipients obviously feel that the return on their investment is satisfactory. What the living receive – or give, for that matter – does not need to be quantified. Indeed, the essential component of the gift economy is the relationship that the exchange reinforces, rather than calculated transaction; it is a social contract that serves to bolster a relationship between two otherwise alienated realms. Gifts create a relationship of generalized reciprocity between a ñatita and a living person, instigating a cycle of obligation which, once entered into, must be upheld (Sahlins 1972). These objects serve a critical social function that is independent of their economic value. Coca leaves, cigarettes, flowers, and any other offering, large or small, become a representation of commitment between two beings. These material offerings are the lifeblood of the relationship between the living and their ñatitas not because of their utility to the skulls, but because they tether the ñatitas to the world of the living and solidify their place in it.

"Existence is not an individual affair… rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled inter-relating" (Rosiek, Snyder & Pratt 2020, p.336). The exchange

of gifts is the foundation of the relationship between ñatitas and human beings; the offering of a gift instigates an ongoing connection, or “entangled inter-relating” that helps to affirm ñatitas’ personhood and embed them in the habitual lives of their living companions. Materiality creates and strengthens a connection between humans and non-humans, ensuring each party maintains an ongoing presence in the life of the other.

Chapter 6: Agency

I spent the day of the Fiesta with La Hermandad, a brotherhood devoted to three ñatitas, Mariano, Rosalinda, and Edwin. After spending the morning in the cemetery, the Brotherhood returned to the home of Doña Juana and Don Felix – the ñatitas' primary caretakers and leaders of the Brotherhood – for a private celebration. In a small, windowless room, a group of approximately 30 people huddled, some chatting quietly with their neighbours, many sitting in silence, attention directed at the altar in the corner of the room. It appeared, at first glance, to consist only of elaborate floral arrangements and some framed photos, but tucked deep in three gilded urns buried behind bouquets were the group's *raison d'être*: the three ñatitas. As Josué and I entered the room, we were directed to the altar and told to introduce ourselves, each of us offering a flower crown to one of the skulls.

A priest arrived, out of breath, forehead glistening; this was one of many house-calls on his agenda for the day, an attendee informed me. Out of a small briefcase he pulled a bible, a white cloth, and a glass bottle filled with water, which he arranged on a small table. He turned towards the altar and the room stood to join him in reciting Our Fathers and Hail Marys so many times I lost count. A woman near the altar stepped closer to the skulls, speaking quietly between restrained sobs, asking them for help. Doña Juana put an arm around her, and the room recited more Our Fathers and Hail Marys, this time directed at the woman. The priest then pulled a yellow rose from one of the bouquets, dipped it in his vial of holy water, and blessed each of the three skulls, waving the flower to sprinkle water over them before turning to spray water into attendees' outstretched hands. The priest then turned back to the altar and recited a prayer for Mariano, Rosalinda

and Edwin before packing up his things and leaving. This signalled an end to the formal ritual, and Doña Juana and Don Felix posed for photos in front of the ñatitas holding a framed portrait of the skulls as I and several other photographers snapped away, commemorating the event.

After the photos were taken, the room relaxed, some people picking up conversation with those around them, but most continuing to sit in silent contemplation, eyes on the altar. Bags of coca leaves were passed out, and Doña Juana sprinkled some leaves in front of the skulls.

Soon after, lunch was served. Juana brought bottles of beer and wine over to the skulls, tucking them among the flowers next to each urn, and Don Felix carried in a crate of beer cans and passed them out to attendees. When each person had a can in hand, a man stood, raised his can to the altar, and cracked it open, the rest of the room following suit. Though the hosts had just distributed the makings of a lively party, people ate, drank, and chewed coca leaves quietly. This event was for mingling with the ñatitas more than with the living. As the afternoon wore on – Don Felix distributing more beer and mixed drinks, ensuring no guest had an empty hand for long – conversation began to fill the room as the living began socializing with each other at last. After some time, the party moved to a banquet hall down the street that the Brotherhood had rented for the evening, which was decorated with streamers, skull ornaments, and a large table at the front of the room that was filled with flowers, skull figurines, candles, cakes, coca, cigarettes, and a fountain. The skulls themselves did not join the party at the banquet hall, but Mariano, Rosalinda and Edwin were represented by a recent portrait propped in the center of the table, ever the focal point of the congregation.

Figure 9. Edwin, Mariano, and Rosalinda in their urns at the home of Doña Juana and Don Felix, surrounded by bouquets, as well as beer, wine, and spirits.

Figure 10. Table for Mariano, Rosalinda, and Edwin at the banquet hall.

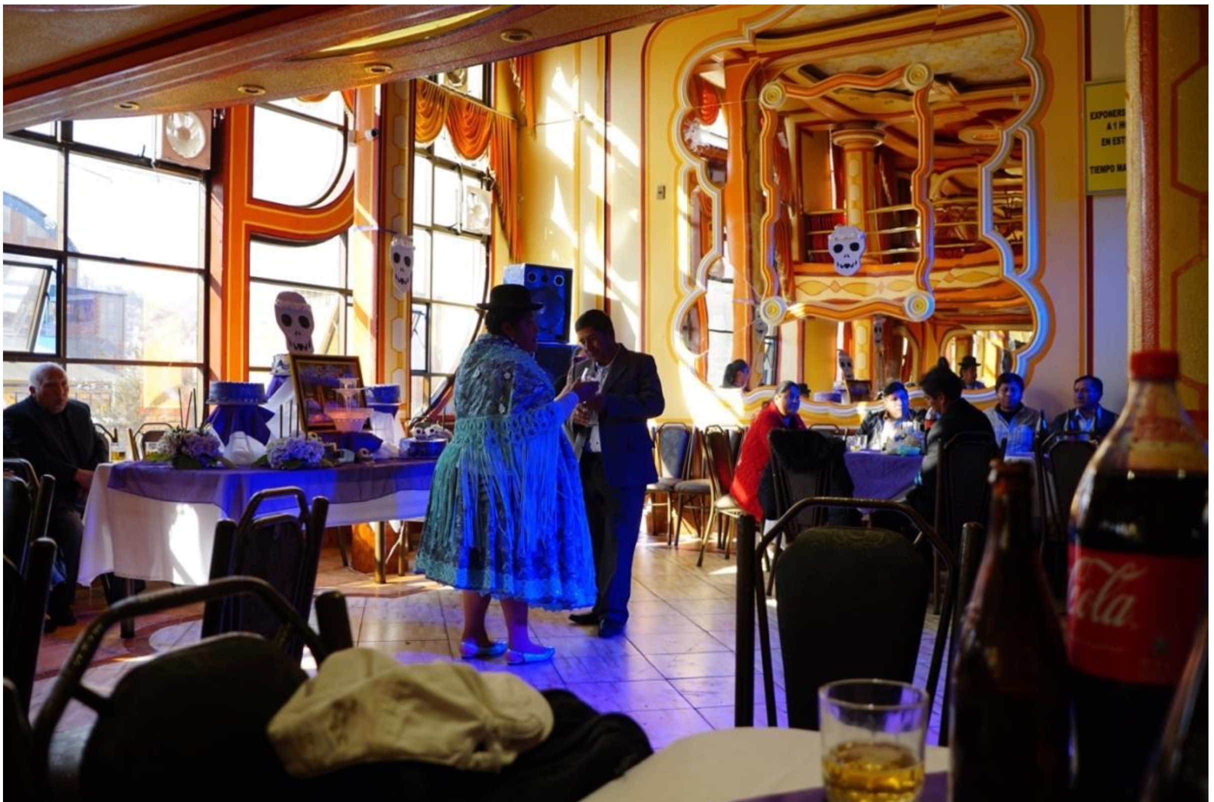

Figure 11. Doña Juana's daughter and her husband inaugurating the evening celebrations, dancing next to the ñatitas' table.

When considering questions of agency in non-human beings, it is imperative not to center Western ontologies in the concepts of agency and personhood. For many people around the globe, the agency of other-than-human actors is accepted as a known fact (Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt 2019, De la Cadena 2015, Pitrou 2016, Poirier 2004, Santos-Granero 2009). A preoccupation with the exact nature of an actor's agency – be it human or non-human – can distract from other important questions when non-human agency is considered to be a "general abstraction" (Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt 2019, p.337). My investigation here focused not on the boundaries of the skulls' capacity to act, but on the material world that reflected that agency.

Many authors have written on the usefulness of objects for expressing agency and facilitating relations with actors cut from a different ontological cloth, particularly in the Amerindian world (Ingold 2013, Latour 2007, Pitrou 2014, Pitrou 2016, Santos-Granero 2009, Hoskins 2005). Pitrou explores the concept of materiality and agency in non-human actors in his work detailing agricultural rituals in the Highlands of Oaxaca, Mexico, where the Mixe people execute a number of ritual acts to instigate a coordinated response from nonhuman entities, all in an effort to produce favorable agricultural conditions (Pitrou 2015, 2016). For Pitrou, interactions between human and non-human persons sometimes go beyond the structure of offerings and exchange, implying a system of co-activity between living and non-living agents. "One of the goals of the ritual process," he writes, "is to achieve a kind of calibration such that various participants can take part in a shared enterprise" (Pitrou 2016). Pitrou points to rituals using material objects which, while they may be manipulated by living persons, represent an expected action by non-human persons. In these cases, the objects and materials put to work are

"irreducible to food offerings" (Pitrou 2015, 93). He further suggests that agency, as represented in these rituals, is a key feature that is often neglected in examinations of human and non-human relationships, and that accounting for the agency of non-human actors not only contributes to our comprehension of personhood in different contexts but enriches our understanding of these phenomena as they are perceived by the living persons who participate in them. "Only the concept of agency allows us to see life as a plural process, and not merely as a movement, while also leaving room for nuanced analysis of the modalities of interactions between ontologically different beings that life causes to emerge" (Pitrou 2015).

The celebrations of the Brotherhood on November 8 – the Catholic rites, the meal, chewing coca leaves, and drinking – are all undertaken not just to honor the ñatitas, but to socialize *with* them. It is understood by all present that the ñatitas are participating in the celebrations as much as the living attendees. All of the day's proceedings are oriented towards the table in the corner of the room; orations are given, and glasses are raised in the direction of the ñatitas. The morning's events, bringing the skulls to the cemetery to receive the gifts and admiration of strangers, were *for* the skulls. The events of the afternoon are what Pitrou would call a "shared enterprise" (Pitrou 2016). The celebration is a form of collaboration between the living and the dead, an occasion in which the ñatitas participate just as much as the living. Mariano, Rosalinda, and Edwin are drinking and chewing coca alongside the living guests; the party is not just in their honour, but for their appreciation and entertainment. They interact not only with their caretakers and devotees, but with the environment, culminating in a celebration that is created and enjoyed by both parties.

Other scholars have explored the function and significance of ritual offerings and their transference to the deceased (Brandes 2006, Kearl 1989, Ladwig 2011, Pitrou 2014). In a Laotian Buddhist monastery, Ladwig (2011) inquired about the gifts he saw being given to the monks by visitors, which, he was told, had been requested in a dream by the deceased. These objects – umbrellas, combs, and clothing, for example – were to be passed on through a ritual act to the deceased souls that had requested them. Brandes (2006) chronicles the ritual offerings made to the deceased during the Day of the Dead celebrations in a small Mexican village; freshly baked bread (shaped into people, ladders, and horses – representations of the deceased and a way for the soul to return to heaven after the day's festivities were over) and small toys can be seen scattered around the altars prepared for each soul that is celebrated. Brandes describes the day's events and these offerings as "recognizing, honoring, and even nourishing deceased ancestors" (2006, p.8).

Yet in these cases and others like it, there is debate surrounding whether these offerings are actually thought to reach the dead. Some argue that the gift is intended as a donation for the keepers of the deceased, who will use the object themselves but pass along the sentiment behind the offering (Ladwig 2011); others believe that while the physical object may remain behind, the essence of the gift is ritually transferred to the intended soul (Brandes 2006, Kearl 1989, Ladwig 2011). In either case, the offering is understood to be appreciated by the dead and critical to their relationship with the living.

As we explore the significance of these materials and the relational paths they travel, it is crucial to recognize that objects have multiple modes of being (Santos-Granero 2009). Certain contexts evoke various interpretations of objects and their intended use. Things like food and drink may function as gifts on one level, but on

another they serve as demonstrations of agency. They are a means of interacting with the world of the living not just through relationships with their caretakers and devotees but through action. During gatherings like the one I describe above, the ñatitas consume offerings with their devotees as a shared social experience. When items are left at their altars as gifts, they initiate a cycle of debt and exchange, but when consumed together, they generate co-activity between ñatitas and the living. But the objects that make up the world of ñatitas do not necessarily represent a concurrent and collaborative experience between actors.

Pitrou's model of co-activity between living and non-living beings builds on the foundation of Latour's Actor Network Theory, in which human beings, non-human agents, and objects all play a part in a network of social relations and structural outcomes (Latour 1996, 2007, 2011, Ireland & Lydon 2016). Latour describes 'actants' as persons, objects, or aggregates that are the source of an action (Latour 1996). For Latour, objects are participants in an act as much as the human actants who manipulate them, and through these objects we can trace agency and social connections (ibid). Not unlike Gell's outline of agency in art, in which objects are recognized as mediators of social agency (Gell 1998), this theory rejects the idea of dichotomous characterization of social and material instruments. In the world of socially active skulls in contemporary urban La Paz, this can be traced over a number of interactions, from the November 8 festivities to everyday interactions between ñatitas and caretakers.

The morning of the festival, in the *Cementerio General*, I had spoken to a man who stood before a collection of seven ñatitas, all of whom had been related to him in life. He said his family eats meals with the skulls every day, serving them drinks and

plates of food. “We look away, and when we look back, the food has been disturbed, there are crumbs next to the plate.” It is important to the ñatitas, he said, that they continue to feel that they are a part of the family, so the family ensures their happiness by sharing their table with them. The food they share reinforces the connection between the living and the dead, acting as both an offering and a generative force of co-active experience.

Luis told me his family also gives drinks to their ñatita, Juan Carlos, who consumes the beverages as well. “It’s how he lets us know what he wants, what he feels like having. We put three glasses in front of him, one with beer, one with water, one with soda. We leave them there for a while, and when we check on him later, we will see, in one glass there is less. So, we know that this is the drink he wants more of.” Here, the food is both an offering and a representation of Juan Carlos’ agency; it is the vehicle through which he expresses choice and makes himself felt in the household. In these cases, the food and drink not only represent the *expected* action of the ñatitas, but are recognized as actually having been consumed by them. While meals are not always undertaken as a co-active experience, the food and drink signify the ñatitas’ agency and presence among the living.

These frameworks also help us to further explore the relationship between the ritual offerings made to ñatitas, the living person and the nature of their request, and the ñatitas themselves. As Doña Eli explained, there are certain offerings, such as black candles, that are reserved only for evil entreaties. The consequences these kinds of materials and requests impart on the spirits of the ñatitas are such that Eli will not allow

such objects in her *consultorio*; they are said to effectively poison the soul of the ñatita who participates in theses rituals.

Luis recalled a time when he discovered an appeal to his ñatita for harmful deeds, which he put a stop to as soon as he found evidence of the request: "Yes, there was [sic] some people that tried. I even once found a picture of lady in the mouth of Juan Carlos. They do that so the ñatita will appear in their dreams, just disrupt them and bite them. It's a general belief that if you ask for bad things then, Juan Carlos, or the ñatita, becomes a bad spirit. It might have been a good person, but it becomes a bad spirit." Luis then spoke of a group of ñatitas at the *Cementerio General* who don't belong to anyone, and therefore have no one monitoring the kinds of requests they receive. They are the ñatitas to whom people go for "bad" requests, where black candles are burned and the skulls are asked to do harm to the living. "They are the '*almas olvidadas'*, the forgotten souls." Though Luis could not speak to the character of these skulls firsthand, he assumes that they are malevolent and unpredictable, not spirits with whom one enters an engagement lightly.

These examples outline how agency can be traced between actants and objects in either direction: the agency of the ñatita impacts the living world, causing harm to the target of the living person's request, and the agency of the living person alters the ñatitas' spirit or soul through the nature of their request. The objects involved – black candles, photographs – are part of a network of cause and effect in which the nature of the outcome flows in both directions; in isolating the material component of these processes one can accurately infer the essence of the other elements (Gell 1998, Walker 2012). In short, "the observer can make a causal inference of some kind - in particular an inference

about the intentions or capabilities of another person" (Walker 2012, p.152). If one sees a black candle burning in front of a ñatita, one can safely infer the motivations of the person making the request and the disposition of the soul fulfilling it.

These objects and the rituals they are a part of serve as material expressions of ñatitas' active presence in the world of the living, something that would otherwise be difficult to articulate, given their metaphysical nature. As Ladwig concludes, "immateriality can only be expressed through materiality… the more humanity reaches toward the conceptualization of the immaterial, the more important the specific forms of materialization" (Ladwig 2011, p.24). In other words, material objects help to assert the authenticity of ñatitas' existence, the intangibility of which necessitates some form of substantial expression. The objects discussed above demonstrate ñatitas' ability to act and exert their will, thus helping to authenticate their personhood and their presence in the physical world.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

When I was first introduced to the concept of ñatitas through popular media accounts of the annual festival, I was left with the impression that the skulls were mere representations of departed souls, footprints of beings that had long ago vacated the world of the living. What I found instead were beings that are much more than objects that represent shadows of the deceased; they are an active and palpable presence in the lives of their devotees. In the context of modern Bolivia, where indigeneity is a complicated subject that many Bolivians do not agree on (Canessa 2010, Albro 2005), historically rural Andean traditions have changed throughout time and space. Canessa describes indigeneity in Bolivia as "the way one lives" (Canessa 2010); for many, according to Canessa, one's lifestyle is of more significance to one's identity than things like ancestry. "The way one lives" can be articulated in where one lives, what one wears, how one interacts with the world around one, including the material objects that permeate contemporary life. So, accordingly, I began this study by thinking about the way ñatitas live. What do they look like? How do they differ from inactive skulls? How do they interact with the world – and people – around them? In essence: what makes a skull a ñatita? In the context of the ñatitas of modern La Paz, these questions could all be traced back to materiality, which led me to the material approach laid out above. The objects discussed here are an inextricable part of the contemporary iteration of this tradition. They embody an Andean conception of personhood, they facilitate and strengthen relationships between the living and the dead, and they help to mediate the agency of beings whose presence in the world leaves fewer traces than that of the living.

In modern La Paz, where rural tradition now brushes with modernity and confronts different conceptions of life and death, where the terms “Andean” and “indigeneity” have been transformed in both meaning and perceived status (Canessa 2010, Postero 2017, Lazar 2008), the tradition of keeping ñatitas has been reestablished in this contemporary urban setting through a series of negotiations of materiality which both challenge and leverage our understanding of the relationship between “people” and “things”. The skulls, which, in many cases, become “things” once the person inhabiting the body has died, use other “things” to substantiate their presence, sociality, and agency in the world. I define three categories of objects through which ñatitas’ status as beings is realized: ornaments, which transform the skulls from objects to subjects; gifts, which create and strengthen relationships; and agentive objects, which legitimize ñatitas as agentive beings (Latour 1996, Ladwig 2011, Pitrou 2014). It is through various assemblages of these objects that a person is produced.

The appearance of ñatitas sets them apart from other skulls that are not encumbered with consciousness; the ornamentation found on the ñatitas of La Paz – either a representation of the living person that became a ñatita (if this person was known to the caretaker), an identity that the ñatita communicates to the caretaker in dreams, or simply adornments that chosen for their visual or practical qualities – envelop the skulls and imbue them with personhood and identity (Pitrou 2016, Raas 2019, Arnold 2017, De la Cadena 2015, Miranda 2022). These objects are material evidence that these skulls are persons that have physical needs (glasses or cotton balls for eyesight, knit hats to keep them warm), pasts (peaked caps representing old military careers), and personalities and preferences (for they often choose their own accessories). Ornaments, as a general object

category, act as signifiers that these are not inactive skulls but persons. These accessories situate ñatitas as subjects, not objects themselves, as many might presume of a form which does not breathe. The *kinds* of ornaments a ñatita wears are what embody and represent their identities. Things like the style of hat or glasses frames one wears function the same way they do for the living; they represent the self – our personal style, our occupation. They become part of the physical traits that identify an individual, that distinguish one person from the next.

Ornamentation may establish ñatitas' status as persons, but it is gifts that solidify their place in the world of the living. This exchange is the foundation of the relationship between a living person and a ñatita. The form a gift takes is of less significance than the fact that it has been offered; this exchange of gifts is a representation of commitment between two beings, a tangible symbol of a relationship for which it is both parties' responsibility to uphold. Once the Maussian cycle of exchange has been instigated, both participants, living and dead, flow between states of owing and owed, often until the living party themselves expire. The entanglement tethers the ñatitas to their living counterparts and solidifies their place as a fixture in the lives of their devotees. In the relationships I encountered in La Paz, all caretakers attributed the good in their lives to the careful attention of their ñatita, who watched over and guided them. Conversely, they assured me that any shortcomings they encountered in their lives was surely due to their failure to uphold the cycle of reciprocity that kept their ñatita(s) happy.

The final category of objects I explore here is those which mediate ñatitas' agency in the living world. The function of these objects differs from ornamentation or gifts (though the objects may serve all of these purposes) in that they signify action and intent.

The interaction between persons and things offers evidence, to those looking for it, of ñatitas' presence and their will; here, objects form part of a social network between people, materials, and non-human persons, each connected by pathways through which agency can be traced in either direction (Latour 1996, Gell 1998, Pitrou 2014). These objects can be traces of a largely metaphysical presence and its ability to manipulate and draw from the material world as well as any living being (food and drink); they can represent the disposition of the soul who is party to a request (black candles); they can signify co-activity and collaboration between ñatitas and the living (ritual or celebratory offerings). In short, these objects help solidify ñatitas as agentive beings not just in the metaphysical realm but in the world of the living. They are concrete representations of ñatitas' capacity to act.

The practices outlined above are one of many ways of making a person in the Amerindian world (Santos-Granero 2009, De la Cadena 2015, Pitrou 2014). In this case of ñatitas, the process of tethering a metaphysical being to a palpable existence occurs largely by grounding it in materiality. But where this plays out is as important as how; these practices represent a rural tradition as it has translated to a contemporary urban setting. The legacy of colonialism and the nation's recent history continue to inform daily life, still fueling the practices and perceptions that play out in the modern era. How much this urban setting may have influenced the trajectory of these practices and how closely this urban iteration of the tradition resembles contemporary rural customs would be a compelling exploration for a lengthier study.

Appendix A: Interview Guide – Individuals

What is your ñatitas name?
How long have you had your ñatita(s)?
How did you get it/them?
Had you wanted a ñatita before getting one?
Did you have a ñatita in your house growing up? How did you learn about them?
Are you from La Paz originally?

Can you tell me how you typically interact with your ñatita? How often?
Do you ever eat meals with them? Chew coca? Drink?

Do you ever give them cigarettes to smoke? Do you smoke with them?

It seems that things like chewing coca, drinking, and eating food with ñatitas are very common – can you tell me a bit about why these activities are so important?
Are there other activities that are also very common or important for keeping ñatitas happy?

What kinds of offerings does your ñatita enjoy?
Are some kinds of offerings more special than others?
Does the offering you give your ñatita depend on the kind of help you are seeking?

Can you tell me about the accessories your ñatita wears?
Many of the ñatitas I've seen wear hats – why is that?
Do you ever give them a new hat?

- Do you make them or buy them?

I noticed in the cemetery during the festival that most of the ñatitas I saw wore some type of accessory, like hats or glasses or jewelry. Can you tell me a bit about why these sorts of things are important to ñatitas?
Is identity important to ñatitas?

How did you celebrate the fiesta de las ñatitas this year?
Do you do the same thing every year?
Are there any special offerings you give your ñatita(s) only on the 8th?
Can you tell if your ñatita is satisfied with the celebrations?
Do you ever give gifts to other ñatitas, or only your own?

Do you think the belief in ñatitas is quite common in Bolivia?
Have you noticed any changes in the public perception of ñatitas over the years?

Would you say keeping a ñatita improves your life? How so?

If you were speaking to someone who was inheriting a ñatita that did not own one before, what would you tell them is the most important thing to know about taking care of a ñatita?

Appendix B: Interview Guide – *Consultorio*

How long have you been keeping ñatitas for?
How do you get them?

Do you remember when you first learned about ñatitas? Did your family keep ñatitas when you were growing up?
Are you from La Paz originally?

Do you socialize with them? Like chewing coca with them, drinking with them?
Do you ever eat meals with them?

Can you tell me about the relationships between the people who visit the *consultorio* and your ñatitas?

- Do people come in on a regular basis, or does it depend on whether they want to ask for something?
- Do people come here to chew coca or have a drink with the ñatitas?
- What kinds of things do people come here to ask the ñatitas for?

Are certain offerings more popular than others?
Does the offering depend on what the person is asking for?

Do you think the belief in ñatitas is quite common in Bolivia?
Have you noticed any changes in the public perception of ñatitas over the years?

It seems that things like chewing coca, drinking, and eating food with ñatitas are very common – can you tell me a bit about why these activities are so important?
Are there other activities that are also very common or important for keeping ñatitas happy?

In the cemetery a lot of ñatitas were smoking cigarettes – is this something most ñatitas enjoy?

I also noticed in the cemetery during the festival that most of the ñatitas I saw wore some type of accessory, like hats or glasses or jewelry. Can you tell me a bit about why these sorts of things are important to ñatitas?
Is identity important to ñatitas?
Do you make hats for your ñatitas yourself? Do the ñatitas let you know if they're happy with their hats?

Are there things you can tell about a ñatita just by looking at it? Like from how old it looks, its accessories, or the things around it?

How did you celebrate your ñatitas during the fiesta this year? Do you have to do something special for each one of them?
Are there any special offerings you give to your ñatitas only on the 8th?
How do you choose which ñatitas to take to the cemetery?

I've read that ñatitas that weren't someone related to or known by its caretaker when it was a living person can be more powerful than ñatitas who were once a family member or friend – is that true?

I've also read that ñatitas whose image has been seen by a lot of people – like when a photo of ñatita is published in a newspaper or magazine – are more powerful than others. Is that true?

I read a report about ñatitas that said that the belief in ñatitas was more common in the popular class but that wealthier people don't appear to participate in the tradition – would you say that's true?

If you were speaking to someone who was inheriting a ñatita that did not own one before, what would you tell them is the most important thing to know about taking care of a ñatita?

Appendix C: Photography Guide

The following is a list of items and subjects I hope to capture photographically. Any image featuring the identifiable possession of an individual that is not captured in a public setting will be included in my thesis only with the consent of relevant parties.

- Inventory of decorations/adornments on ñatitas (e.g., hats, flowers)
- Inventory of gifts/offerings (e.g., coca leaves, cigarettes)
- Public interactions between people and ñatitas
- Fiesta de las Ñatitas events and celebrations (in public space)
- Ñatita collections (with consent from owners)

Appendix D: Events attended during fieldwork

October 21	'*Los tres rostros del Señor del Gran Poder'* ('The three faces of the Lord of Great Power') presentation at Simón L. Patiño Cultural Space; discussion of religious depictions in Andean art.
November 2	*Todos Santos* (All Saints Day) in the *Cementerio General.*
November 5	*Encuentros con los Ajayus* (Encounters with the Spirits) Seminar at *Museo San Francisco.*
November 8	Fiesta de las Ñatitas in the *Cementerio General.* Ceremony for blessing ñatitas with *la Hermandad Martin, Cirilo, Rosalinda y Edwin.* Party with *la Hermandad* celebrating their ñatitas.
November 26	Funeral for cousin of Don Felipe.

Appendix E: Participants

Don Eduardo	Member of *la Hermandad*, loyal to the ñatitas Martin, Rosalinda, and Edwin. Interviewed November 5.
Doña Eli	Operates a *consultorio* west of the *Cementerio General*, owns 86 ñatitas. Interviewed November 18.
Don Felipe	Shares a ñatita with extended family. Interviewed November 26.
Don Luis	Shares a ñatita with extended family. Various Interviews.
Don René	Owns four ñatitas with his wife. Interviewed December 3.
Milton Eyzaguirre	Anthropologist working at MUSEF (Museum of Ethnography and Folklore, located in La Paz) who has written a book about the history of ñatitas (*Los Rostros Andinos de la Muerte*); does not own a ñatita himself. Interviewed December 8.

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