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INKING IDENTITY

Indigenous Nationalism in Bolivian Tattoo Art

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Introduction

In June 2016, I traveled with my friend Gus from La Paz, Bolivia to Sucre where he had been invited to work as a guest tattoo artist for a week. I met Gus in 2011 when he was still an apprentice, but by 2016 he had opened his own studio in La Paz, and occasionally traveled to other cities in South America to work as a guest artist. Though Gus identified primarily as mestizo (mixed Indigenous and Spanish ancestry), he was particularly interested in going to Sucre because the city was the site of the country's Museum of Indigenous Art.

Gus's primary style falls within "American Traditional" tattooing, featuring black outlining, bold colors, and familiar designs such as skulls, roses, daggers, and "pin up girls." But he also often catered to clients' desires for tattoos that had a particular "Bolivian" or "Andean" element. This might include pre-Incan or Incan symbols, elements of Bolivian folklore, and common fauna and flora of the region. Gus had recently taken a particular liking to designing swallows based on traditional sailor tattoos, but in his variations, he would fill the bird's outline with designs from traditional Bolivian textiles. At the museum, he took copious notes and photographs of textile collections to incorporate in his tattoo designs. A year later at a tattoo convention, one of his swallow designs was a finalist in the category for "Best Bolivian Tattoo."

When I first encountered this category of "Bolivian" or "Andean" tattooing in 2012, I asked Dylan, another tattoo artist from La Paz, what exactly it meant. He responded that "it's representative of history and culture … it's not about the technique or style, but the message that you transmit with your design. It has to show something distinctive about Bolivia." Designs deemed by tattoo artists and clients as "Bolivian" usually have symbolism related to Aymara and Quechua culture or broader notions of indigeneity. As a result of shifting definitions and social status of indigeneity in Bolivia since the early 1990s, "being Indigenous" is anything but straightforward. Most tattoo artists and clients identify as primarily mestizo/a, but often note that they have some Indigenous ancestry. Thus, these "Bolivian-style" tattoos demonstrate a particular orientation toward Indigenous symbolism as a more generalized identity claim available to anyone living in the Andes.

From 2009–2017 I spent over 24 months in La Paz while working on different ethnographic research projects. In 2011, I coincidentally became friends with Gus, Dylan, and several other tattoo artists in the city. Most were men (with the exception of two women) and represented

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a range of class and ethnic identifications. Most had been tattooing between 5 and 20 years when we first met. Over the years, I have spent many hours in their studios talking, eating, drinking, and trying to stay warm during cold altiplano winters. I rented rooms in their homes, spent Christmas and New Year's Eve with them, attended family weddings, and traveled with them to conventions. I connected with them on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, where I would see images of their tattoos and advertisements for their shops, in some cases, almost daily. When I began to think of tattooing through an academic lens in 2019, I already had a wealth of experience with these men and women, knowing their histories, challenges, and triumphs, based on both shared time offline and our interactions online. When I proposed to each of them that tattooing would make an interesting research topic, all were enthusiastic, and many ended up participating and connecting me to their clients with tattoo designs relevant to this project.

In this chapter, I discuss tattooing in La Paz, Bolivia, as an important medium in which identity is enacted—both for tattoo artists as well as their clients. Tattoos are at times a performance to the self, and at other times are an outwardly directed self-representation performed for those one encounters in daily life. But tattoos are not simply individual. They also reflect prevailing ideologies related to such realms as ethnicity, regionalism, and nationalism (not to mention gender, social class, and a host of other social categories).

I concentrate here on the ways tattoos are enmeshed in conceptions of nationalism that center indigeneity. Drawing from Néstor García Canclini's (1989) concept of hybridity, I explore tattooing as an identity-making project that draws from multiple referents—on local, national, and global levels. I argue that indigeneity in 21st-century Bolivia may be understood through the concept of suffusion,[1] in which representations of indigeneity have so thoroughly penetrated wider urban altiplano culture that separating what is "Indigenous" and what is "Bolivian" is no longer possible. I use suffusion here drawing upon its traditional meaning of the spreading of a fluid into surrounding tissues, resulting in inundation. Just as fluid may irreversibly spread, forever changing that which it penetrates, so too has indigeneity suffused urban altiplano culture. In part, this is due to the ways complex cultural knowledge can be flattened into recognizable iconic symbols of indigeneity divorced from historical meaning. While some suffusion of indigeneity into understandings of Bolivianness has happened as a slow seepage over time, there have been important state projects in which it has been a conscious process. This flattening of symbolism is obvious in tattooing and other forms of pop culture but is also central to political discourse of "indigenismo" in the 1950s, and discourses of "Indigenous nationalism" in the first decades of the 2000s.

As society has shifted, so too have the content and meanings of tattoos. Rather than considering tattoos as simply visual art, I understand them through the concept of ideology, which has been central to studies of media in Latin America (see Pertierra et al., 2019). By understanding ideology as embedded in various kinds of media, including visual art rendered in skin, I point to the ways hegemonic notions of the nation can become embedded in even the most "rebellious" of identity representations. As such, this exploration is not focused on whether these tattoos are "authentic" or not, but instead takes up questions related to the ways different forms of power may be advanced or diminished through self-representation and Indigenous symbolism in tattooing.

Tattoo, Identity, and Place

Most scholarly explorations of modern tattooing describe it as a mode of performing identity and belonging. In doing so, writers acknowledge that identity is not a static inherent aspect of

a person, but is a dynamic social relation that is actively produced and performed (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Bucholtz and Hall, 2004). As part of broader symbolic culture, tattooing is a medium through which individuals and groups constitute and represent themselves, both privately and publicly. Like other forms of art and adornment, tattooing has been described by anthropologists as a mode of claiming or being assigned subjectivity related to gender, ancestral lineage, social stratification, occupation, religion, personal experiences, and national patriotism (Caplan, 2000; Faris, 1988; Strathern and Strathern, 1971; Turner, 2012). Beverly Yuen Thompson also points out that some tattoo enthusiasts may be considered "collectors" as well, traveling far and wide to pay for tattoos from well-known artists. She writes,

> this leisure pursuit reflects the collector's identity, through the actual images represented on their body, which provide insight to their tastes and passions. It also makes them into a new type of "heavily tattooed" person, which they now share with a select group of Others.
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> *2019, p. 286; see also Kierstein and Kjelskau, 2015*

In this explanation, Yuen Thompson points out the ways that in the 21st century, tattoo-associated identity works on multiple levels—first, being "a tattooed person"; second, through meaning attached to the style(s) of tattoos; and third, in relation to specific imagery depicted in the tattoos. Each of these reflect choices the individual makes in creating a visible form of identification[2] and modes through which others evaluate the individual.

There is often a cleavage between studies related to tattooing and identity in contexts of global circulation, and those focusing on traditional practices that concentrate more heavily on indigeneity and the importance of place to tattooing. I attempt here to bridge this cleavage, again with reference to García Canclini's notion of hybridity, and make clear the ways that the local converges with the global in tattoo, rather than being subsumed by it.

As Kuwahara points out, in focusing on tattooing as an Indigenous practice, tattoos are often seen as deeply rooted in place. "They are invented in the place, belong to the place and consolidated in the place. Thus, styles of tattooing are often distinguished by adjectives describing the places they originated, such as 'Tahitian' or 'Japanese'" (2005, p. 19). In Bolivia, however, most tattoo artists describe the styles they tattoo as traditional/old school American [*tradicional, tradi, old school*], neo-traditional [*neo-tradicional, neo-tradí*], new school [*new school*], realism [*realismo*] black-and-grey [*negro y gris*], biomechanical [*biomecánica*], or watercolor [*acuarela*]. Rather than developing from an Indigenous tradition of tattooing, the practice in Bolivia has always been part of global circulations.

Though some of the oldest tattoos in the world have been found in the Andes among the Chinchorro civilization (Pabst et al., 2009; Allison, 1996), tattooing fell out of practice when the Spanish colonized the Inca. It did not resurface with any consistency in the Andes until the late-1800s, when tattooed sailors began docking in Chilean ports. The custom eventually made its way from the coastline up the mountains, but in Bolivia was primarily confined to career military men until the end of the 20th century.

In the 1990s, amongst the increasing circulation of media related to punk music, rock n' roll, and other "rebellious" artforms and lifestyles, young Bolivians' desires for tattoos began to surface. Many Bolivian tattoo artists who have now spent years tattooing note that their first exposures to tattooing were MTV music videos and tattoo magazines imported from the United States and Europe. Thus, the present-day style of tattooing in La Paz is more closely connected to global music that arrived via television and print media, than an ancestral practice of tattooing. For several years, these tattoos primarily featured global tattoo symbols such

as skulls, roses, Pacific Island "tribal" styles, ships, and classic lettering. Yet as tattooing in the city has developed, the use of Incan, other pre-Columbian, and Indigenous symbolism in those tattoos has proliferated. This shift has coincided with the emergence of important Indigenous movements in Bolivia, beginning in the 1990s, and increasing in the early 2000s with the political rise of Evo Morales, Bolivia's first Indigenous-identified president.

In placing tattoos within contexts of global media circulation and Bolivian social changes, I argue this art form is best approached using media anthropology. Tattoos may be understood as media in that they are a form of visual communication (see Worth, 1980)—a social practice resulting in cultural documents which circulate, mediate social relations, and can be "read" for indications of shifts in both individual identity, and larger social formations. Most anthropological explorations of tattooing, whether looking at contemporary practices (Kuwahara, 2005) or archaeological examples (Deter-Wolf and Diaz-Granados, 2013; Krutak and Deter-Wolf, 2017) focus on small-scale, "traditional," and "tribal" practices, echoing a focus on "primitive art" that can be traced back to Boas (1927). But as anthropological approaches to art have increasingly considered consumption, commodification, interpretation, circulation, and positioning in local, national, and global spheres, they now overlap with anthropologists' considerations of media. Indeed, both art and media may be understood as "space in which difference, identity, and cultural value are being produced and contested" (Marcus and Meyers, 1995, p. 11).

Considering connections between art and media acknowledges the ways media and art in the 21st century draw on the same symbolism and cultural understandings for meaning-making, creating inextricable intertextual linkages between them. Artworks and other forms of media may converge in some ways, conflict in others, but are always mutually influential, and significant to wide swaths of the population. In considering art (whether found in the museum, the Indigenous village, or the tattoos of La Paz) as media, we attend to a number of important considerations: the ways in which ideology is embedded within, contested through, or reinforced in representation and communication; the importance of circulation to meaning and interpretation; and the ways in which meaning and interpretation mediate relationships and notions of selfhood. Thus, these themes of ideology, circulation, and mediation of identity are central to my explorations of tattoo art using Indigenous symbolism in Bolivia.

The Politics of Indigeneity

Contemporary understandings of what it means to "be Indigenous" (*ser indígena*) constantly shift in the Andes. A vast majority of Paceños (residents of La Paz) characterize themselves as Indigenous to some extent, but do not necessarily engage in traditional or religious practices, speak a native language, or trace their lineage directly to Indigenous ancestors. There are people who may identify as Indigenous in particular situations and not others, leading Canessa to caution against falling into an essentialist trap in describing Indigenous peoples. He suggests that "who is and who isn't Indigenous and what it means to be Indigenous in Latin America is highly variable, context-specific and changes over time" (2012, pp. 9–10; see also de la Cadena, 2000; Goodale, 2006).

As a result, when I asked tattoo artists and clients about their ethnic or racial identification[3] most hesitated to give a definitive answer. Their responses included: Mestizo; Indigenous; from an Indigenous region; "It's complicated"; and "I can't define it." Many explained how histories of colonization had shaped Bolivia ethnically. Others contemplated the color of their skin, and how it related to that of their parents and siblings. Some chose to identify simply as "Bolivian,"

given that their parents were from different parts of the country, with different histories of colonization and even understandings of racial categories.

Vlad, a 40-year-old client with 10 tattoos, explained that he hadn't ever learned Indigenous languages and customs at home. He then continued: "I can't tell you 'No I don't have any Indigenous lineage in me,' because that would be lying, you know." Vivi, a Paceña in her mid-30s who is currently studying for a doctorate in psychology offered a more academic perspective:

> Well it's complicated because I think ethnicity is something we're always constructing, right? The theme of race is difficult, because I'm a person with … confusion. I can call myself mestiza, but that doesn't quite capture it. I'm also Indigenous, I have Indigenous roots. I have Indigenous [phenotypic] characteristics, but I don't speak any Indigenous language. It's difficult to define.

In many ways, these answers reflect the range of ways tattoos relate to indigeneity. Some tattoos present Indigenous imagery quite explicitly and in a more traditional looking manner. Others mix imagery into a "complicated" meshing of different regional, or local/global symbolism. There is no direct correspondence between the type of tattoo and the artist's or client's ethnic or racial identity. For example, Beto was the only person I interviewed to give a definitive answer of "Indigenous"—which was then followed by "We're a mix here because of Spanish colonization, in reality. So we're mestizos from Indigenous people, let's say." Beto tattoos almost exclusively in a black and gray style, highlighting horror and skull imagery. On the other hand, Nacho, a client in his early 40s who had five tattoos with explicitly Indigenous imagery, responded to the question with the longest answer of all my interviews. He began by saying "I consider myself Bolivian, but without any ethnicity," and continued clarifying for more than four minutes.

Though a majority of Bolivians have similarly complicated relations to Indigenous ancestry, there is certainly still much discrimination levied against those who appear as unmistakably Indigenous in Bolivia.[4] While somewhere between 40 and 60 percent of Bolivians identify as Indigenous in national censuses (INE 2003, 2012), there is enormous diversity among those who do. Differences between urban and rural Indigenous-identified people, as well as among different highland and lowland groups are notable. Those who are more visibly Indigenous—usually through their style of dress and language use—are easily distinguished from a more "Westernized" majority and, as a result, face social exclusion. Their educational and literacy levels lag, and poverty levels far surpass those of non-Indigenous Bolivians.

However, the first two decades of the 2000s have marked important changes. Beginning with his first term in 2006, Evo Morales appointed many Indigenous people to head government ministries, and championed a new 2009 constitution which guarantees Indigenous representation in congress, community control over justice, and other forms of sovereignty for Indigenous communities. The World Bank has reported significant increases in Indigenous communities' access to electricity, potable water, and sanitation. Morales also made great strides in combating lack of education and poverty (decreasing rates from 59.5 percent in 2006 to 36.4 percent in 2018) which both affect Indigenous peoples at a much higher rate. But Morales, and those in his political party MAS (Movimiento a Socialismo) who continue to govern, have not been able to entirely reverse 500 years of colonial legacy. "Evo," as he is often called in Bolivia, has been a figurehead for MAS and progressive politics in the country more broadly. However, it's important to see his accomplishments as embedded in historical, social, and political processes that pre-empted his rise to power (see Farthing and Kohl, 2014, pp. 5–7; Postero,

2017, p. 26), represented a movement made up by diverse social actors, and have already proven to outlive his position in office, after his ousting in 2019 amid accusations of election fraud and then civil unrest (Farthing, 2020).

As part of this broader movement, Evo Morales was instrumental in promoting discourse that framed Bolivia as an Indigenous nation. Previously, Bolivian governments had promoted mestizaje as an ideal of cultural sameness which erased Indigenous culture (Martinez-Echazabal, 1998). This national project of mestizaje was particularly prominent in the 1950s, when Indigenous folklore began to be valorized as national culture, even as real Indigenous peoples remained divorced from political power—a phenomenon referred to as "indigenismo." As Himpele points out, since the 1950s, "conspicuous scenes of native Andean peoples have been attached to the national project in photography, film, dance, and music, originated and disseminated from the rising non-Indigenous mestizo middle class of politicians, artists, intellectuals, and writers" (2008, p. xiv).

Hempele suggests indigenismo of the 1950s is an important context for understanding the current politics of indigeneity in Bolivia. He sees a relationship between "the popularization of indigenismo and the indigenization of the popular." Imagery of Indigenous folklore was previously depoliticized and framed as quaint tradition, important to Bolivia's heritage, but no longer a living reality for the modern, mestizo nation. This visual and performance-based discourse has recently been reconfigured to frame the nation as deeply rooted in and re-politicized through these traditions. Albro has described Morales as replacing the ideal of mestizaje with a new framework focused on Indigenous plurality as the articulatory focus for a new national project (2005). Yet, this re-envisioning of Bolivia as an Indigenous nation has not been positive for many Indigenous peoples (Hempele, 2008, p. 9). These discourses have served to highlight the political stakes of more populous and politically connected Indigenous groups over others (see Fabricant & Postero, 2015), and have been critiqued as yet another homogenizing rhetoric which takes emphasis away from the most vulnerable by framing all Bolivians as similarly positioned.

Postero draws attention to the importance of representation within this shift, suggesting MAS has united its diverse constituencies within an ideal of "Indigenous nationalism" with a focus on a politics of recognition (2017, p. 26). This is exemplified by Evo's attention to the symbolism of indigeneity in state ceremonies and his general self-presentation. This institutional use of symbolism amplified a rising appreciation of the aesthetics of indigeneity and a more general cultural valuation of indigeneity which has resulted in Indigenous identification across a much wider swath of the population. A variety of cultural forms now incorporate Indigenous symbolism in the ways that would have previously been seen as "backward." Youth listen to rap music in Aymara, Quechua, and Spanish with lyrics that speak to Indigenous or otherwise marginalized identities (see Goodale, 2006, p. 634). Graffiti art combines Indigenous imagery with more widely recognizable tagging style. Fashion designers incorporate Aymara textiles in their garments. And it is not unusual to find an upper-middle-class home decorated with Andean art that two decades ago would have been considered vulgar. This has led to a cultural conundrum in which the bounds of indigeneity appear to be ever-elastic, resulting in debates about who and what might be considered "authentically" Indigenous, with not even Evo Morales escaping critique (Albro, 2006, p. 417). These cultural forms also contribute to nationalism by framing Bolivia as an Indigenous nation whose streets, entertainment, and styles of self-expression reflect this heritage, without questioning "who owns Native culture" (see Brown, 2004).

The resulting brand of Indigenous nationalism conflates and claims indigeneity as part of globally marginalized identity. These discourses rightly point to the histories of colonization that

have positioned Bolivia as one of the "least developed" countries in the hemisphere and despite recent advances, a country that still has low GDP and high poverty rates. At the same time, they collapse diversity within the country, at times subsuming the interest of the nation's most vulnerable Indigenous peoples within a majoritarian claim to indigeneity. From some perspectives, this reinstantiates earlier forms of indigenismo, once again divorcing real Indigenous peoples from Indigenous aesthetics taken up by the majority. This is not to say that most Bolivians have un-critically taken up the notion of an Indigenous nation. Rather this ideology has set a backdrop for more subtle ways in which many Bolivians reinforce this discourse implicitly, even while they may recognize it as regressive or opposing the politicians who are the architects of this positioning.[5]

These discourses were partially founded as a conscious effort to promote Indigenous nationalism by MAS and sympathetic media producers (who may have had quite good intentions of acting against anti-Indigenous discrimination). But these messages have worked iteratively, making their way into films, television shows, music, fashion, and art that young Bolivians encounter every day. Media has become one of the primary vehicles for ideological dissemination in modern society (Althusser, 1968), and as a result has contributed to shaping national imaginaries (see Anderson, 1983; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin, 2002, p. 11). As these discourses are naturalized, they are less likely to be critiqued and are reproduced unconsciously, and in increasingly mundane and independent ways—including individuals seeking out "Bolivian tattoos" which incorporate Indigenous symbolism.

Tattoos with Indigenous Symbolism

In a discussion of tattoos with Indigenous symbolism, it would be inattentive to omit discussion of the particularities of race, identity, and tattoo directly in relation to skin. Though anthropologists recognize race as a social construction—a way in which people delimit categories and attach meaning to otherwise neutral biological variation—in the collective consciousness of most of the world, race is most often conceptualized and recognized through skin color. Tattooing places imagery not *over* the skin, covering it, as we might describe for clothing, but creates images *in* the skin in such a way that not only is the skin color (and other attributes) visible through the tattoo, but affects the ways tattoos are planned and executed. Darker skin tones require additional attention to creating contrast, selection of colors, ink types, and other considerations in the actual tattooing process.

Of course, many Indigenous scholars from across the globe note that lighter-skinned Indigenous individuals are often erased through representations of Indigenous peoples as exclusively dark with quintessential features, which in the Americas usually include dark straight hair, large noses, and hairless bodies. While certainly there are Bolivians who are lighter skinned while having every claim to indigeneity, the colonial history of the country has resulted in understandings of Indigenous peoples as darker. As a result, lighter-skinned Indigenous Bolivians have not been subjected to the kinds of discrimination darker-skinned Indigenous peoples face. Given the contextual nature of "being Indigenous" in the Andes discussed above, skin color remains a central organizing referent in understandings of indigeneity. Thus, the skin color on which Indigenous-related visuals are tattooed, immediately serves as a layer of meaning which melds with the inked image such that it is *part of* the tattoo, rather than simply a neutral canvas on which the tattoo is applied. Indigenous symbolism on lighter skin then may be interpreted differently than the exact same symbolism would be on darker skin—each inflected by the interpretant's own understandings of the relationship between indigeneity and skin tone.

With this in mind, many "Bolivian" tattoos combine locally recognizable cultural icons with globally circulated tattoo aesthetics. These hybrid forms reflect García Canclini's (1989) understanding of the ways global media and consumer goods combine with Latin American cultural formations. He argues that globally hegemonic products never entirely override national, regional, or local popular culture. Further, Latin Americans do not simply modify these forms to fit the new context, but *remix* (Rivera-Rideau, 2015) such forms in ways that de-hierarchize the assumed prominence of media and goods from Western industrialized countries. Yet, these concepts of hybridity and remixing may not fully capture the ways in which the Indigenous, the local, the historical, and the global meld together. I use the term suffusion to describe the ways these different sources of symbolism become inextricable from one another as they are flattened into an icon placed in the skin. The following examples illustrate how meanings become not only remixed in the tattooing process, but more profoundly reflect a longer cultural process of suffusion in which Indigenous imagery comes to symbolize the local and national.

(1) Tattooing Text—Jallalla

Mateo was one of the youngest tattoo artists among my group of friends, and while apprenticing had received tattoos from almost all the other artists I knew in the city. One of his favorites was the word "Jallalla" [pronounced huh-YIE-yuh] which had been tattooed on his forearm by one of his mentors, Raúl.

Jallalla is an Aymara and Quechua term that unites concepts of hope, festivity, and blessings. But even those Paceños that don't speak any Indigenous language would recognize this word. It is commonly used by Bolivians in celebratory contexts, such as a toast or a shout in a crowd after one's favorite football team wins a match ("Jallalla Tigre!"). It might also be used on national holiday ("Jallalla Bolivia") or on July 16th celebrations of the founding of La Paz ("Jallalla Chuquiago Marka"). The word is so prolific in La Paz that it often appears in municipality funded banners or painted walls such as "Jallalla La Paz, con fuerza y con ñeque" [with strength, first in Spanish, then Aymara].

In many ways, during the presidency of Evo, the word jallalla, likely the most recognizable of any Indigenous word in Bolivia, was used as a way of promoting a particular orientation to decolonization. Evo was well-known for performative gestures aimed at ridding the country of foreign influence—expelling the United Nations, US ambassador, and Peace Corps from the country, threatening to oust Coca Cola, and even replacing the clock mounted atop the façade of the congressional building with one that turns counter-clockwise, urging Bolivians to "question established colonial norms in order to think creatively." The increasing use of widely-known Indigenous words during his term coincided with this same line of thinking. The municipal government of La Paz often incorporated these kinds of terms, thereby establishing them as referents not only of Quecha and Aymara language, but of the city and regional identity. When I asked Mateo about the tattoo, he brushed it off, saying "I just like the sentiment behind it. It's pride, it's happiness." But given the ways the term circulates in the context of 21st-century Bolivia, it has become closely connected with the kinds of discourses of Indigenous nationalism espoused by the MAS party. Thus, this one word simultaneously references mundane Bolivianness as well as a politics of indigeneity.

(2) Tattooing Cultural Symbols—The Ñatita with Chullo and Coca Leaves

In 2015 I helped Gus and his friend Miguel at their table at a local tattoo convention. As attendees passed the table, they perused the binders both artists had set out with photos of their

recent designs. One young woman approached the table saying she was looking for an "Andean design" and Miguel showed her a page with designs of Inti the sun deity most often associated with the pre-Incan Tiwanaku culture, as well as the chakana, or Andean cross which represents the cardinal directions and three levels of existence. Instead of these straightforward designs that come from pre-Colombian culture of the Andes, she chose a design that combines three elements related to "Bolivianness."

The design (see Figure 27.1) centered on a ñatita, a skull (usually *not* of a family member), which acts as a vessel housing the soul of the former living person. Ñatitas are kept in the home and thought to bestow blessings on its caretaker. The practice is Aymara in origin, though widely practiced by Paceños hoping to benefit from the ñatita's association with fertility, luck, and protection. Atop the head of the ñatita sat a chullo, the iconic Andean hat with earflaps, which is based on an Inca style of headwear. While a generation ago these hats would have been associated with a "backward," Indigenous style of dress, their recent popularity among tourists has increased their popularity among urban Paceño youth. Below the skull were two coca leaves, representing the plant that is often used in Indigenous rituals. Because of its association with indigeneity, the coca leaf has lent a particular sense of credibility to those involved in Indigenous social movements (see Grisaffi 2010, 427). At the same time, the practice of chewing coca for its mild stimulant properties (similar to coffee) have made their use in Bolivia quite widespread, and are just as often associated with working-class people who must labour

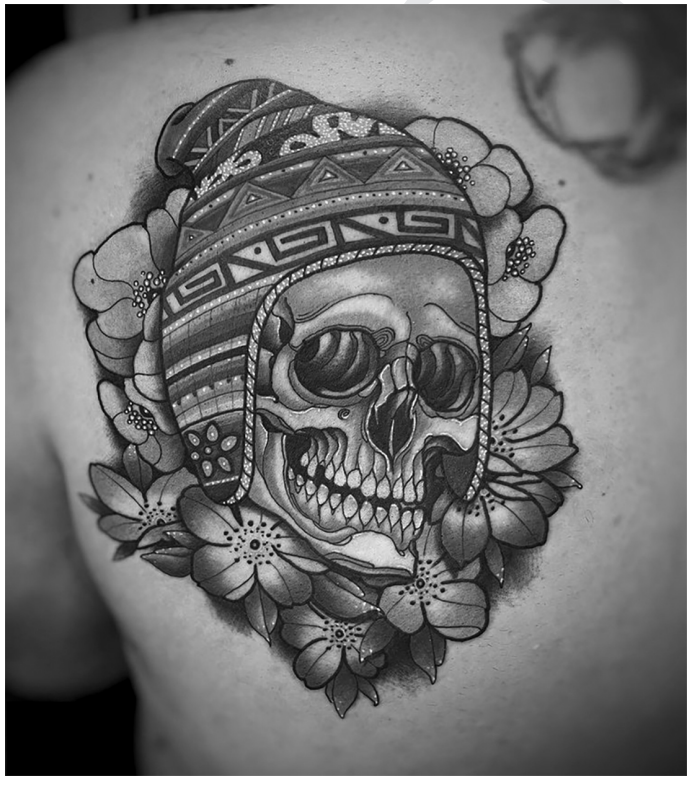

Figure 27.1 Tattoo of ñatita with chullo and coca leaves
Source: Tattoo and photo by Rodrigo Jimenez Ross

for long hours, as associated with Indigenous identity. The coca leaf has also become a political symbol in recent decades, associated with MAS, and more specifically Evo Morales, who began his political career as president of the coca-growers union.

Unlike an Inti or chakana design, this young woman's choice reflects the ways material goods with Indigenous origins have become embedded in local practices that are now more superficially connected to indigeneity. While ñatitas, chullos, and coca leaves all have origins in Indigenous practice, they have now become so widely possessed and used among Paceños that they, much like Mateo's jallalla tattoo, more closely reflect local context than reference Indigenous cosmovision, ritual, or practice. This underscores the way indigeneity itself has become available for identity claims to the wider Paceño public.

(3) Tattoo as Hybridity—Textile Swallows

While the ñatita tattoo appears as Indigenous symbolism but actually reflects local material goods, the swallow tattoos designed by Gus (see Figure 27.2) reflect Indigenous symbolism converging with global tattoo symbolism. The swallow tattoo dates to sailors in the 1800s, and has a number of different meanings attributed to it—sailing 5000 nautical miles, going around Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope, or possibly getting one swallow before a first voyage and a second swallow upon return. In any event, the swallow is one of the most longstanding and well-recognized tattoos today, across the world. At the same time, the textiles Gus studied at the museum, as well as in books and online resources, seem to reflect the hybridity García Canclini discusses, but bring the local into the global. The textiles reflect designs from the Yampara and Jalq'a cultures, and Gus paid specific attention to which were created by women and which by men, which were used in quotidian life, and which reflected ritual imagery.

Figure 27.2 Tattoo of swallow with aguayo textile design
Source: Tattoo and photo by Gustavo Palacios Gutierrez

But to an undiscerning Bolivian eye these designs might appear quite mundane, reminiscent of the aguayo textiles ubiquitous in La Paz. Aguayos serve as tablecloths in corner restaurants and most homes have a few lying around for various purposes. The textiles are also visible on city streets as they're used by market women to carry their wares on their backs. These women are known as "cholas," a formerly derogatory term for rural to urban migrant women who make a living selling wares in outdoor markets. Mary Weismantel (2001) explains that historically these women, as urban dwellers, were "not quite" considered Indigenous, yet, were not wholly mestiza either. Today however, the chola is considered to be more of an icon of indigeneity, represented in festival dances, advertisements for dessert brands, and lending an air of "being from this place" to local political candidates (see Albro, 2000). The chola is indeed a national icon. Thus, this symbol uses a very specific form of representing local place but can easily be interpreted in nationalist terms through indexing the chola, and is literally enveloped by the global symbol of the swallow.

From Abstraction to Appropriation?

These examples of tattoo imagery present a range of symbolic associations, from Indigenous-related politics, Indigenous ancestry, Incan iconography, fauna indigenous to the region, quintessential gendered social types, festival characters, and favorite sights of the city. These categories of symbolism though, often overlap, particularly as exemplified by coca, which simultaneously indexes Indigenous ritual, and working-class practice. In each of these, then, we see a string of linkages which eventually brings us back to indexing indigeneity.

Each of these symbols has already accumulated various meanings related to pre-colonization cultures, colonial traditions, and current politics. In the process, they have become culturally recognized and associated with certain social categories, reified over time and transferred into symbols and signs of identity or belonging (Butler, 1999). As Clare Sammells points out, abstraction of indigeneity into symbols is part of what has made Indigenous culture "real and powerful" for Bolivians (2012). While each of these symbols retains indexicality oriented toward indigeneity, they also have come to stand in for "Bolivianness" more generally. The idea of Bolivia as an Indigenous nation has taken hold among many social sectors, particularly with younger urban Bolivians who do not retain the biases and stigmas their parents and grandparents may have had toward Indigenous peoples. Yet, the distillation of these complex histories into a flattened symbol means that these links are not easily pried open. In essence, notions of Andean indigeneity have become completely suffused in notions of Bolivianness in the altiplano.

Not all tattoo artists see this as a positive development. Like the general population, some question whether the Indigenous nationalism of both political speeches and pop culture might verge on appropriation. When I interviewed Gus in 2020, he reflected, almost five years later, on the type of tattoo he had been pursuing back when we visited Sucre's Museum of Indigenous Art.

> I was trying to use folkloric elements in order to create valorisation of our Andean culture. But I've realized that it's a cultural exploitation that I don't like and I don't feel comfortable with it, because it [feels like] I'm selling a culture that doesn't belong to me, to people that it doesn't belong to.

He then explained that tattooing folkloric designs is simultaneously good and bad. It valorizes an important part of Bolivian culture, but only by transforming it into a product that is bought

and sold. On one hand, tattooing tradition has long been steeped in replication of iconic symbols (such as sailor tattoos or famous artists like Bert Grimm),[6] but in thinking about the specific context of Indigenous nation ideology, we can see a tension between positive and negative cultural effects.

Critiques similar to that of Gus are levied at times in Bolivia but are counter to the prevailing way of understanding indigeneity as part of national identity. However astute Gus's stance may be, my point is not to shame individuals by suggesting that they are appropriating Indigenous culture as outsiders. Michael Brown's claim that "the hybrid nature of Indigenous cultural life today argues against rigorous separation of Indigenous knowledge from the public domain of global society" (2004, p. 248) seems quite relevant to the Bolivian context. Rather, I reflect on the change of perspective Gus details to emphasize that representations of "Bolivia" or "Bolivian identity" have become thoroughly steeped in notions of being an "Indigenous nation."

Conclusion

The tattoos I describe which incorporate Indigenous-related symbolism may simultaneously be read in conflicting ways. Many individuals do see them as reflecting an increasing valuation of indigeneity, of connecting the artist and client to an Indigenous ancestry, and even indexing affinity with Indigenous-associated social movements and politics. But others might equally read these same tattoos as appropriations of Indigenous culture by urban, middle-class, mestizo-appearing bodies who (should) have no claim to Indigenous symbolism. Through such a reading, these tattoos may be considered a microcosm within Bolivian society of the global tendency to appropriate Indigenous "tribal" tattooing. Seeing these tattoos not as simply appropriation, but a reworking of identity within a context of the nationalization of indigeneity then opens up greater possibilities for understanding identity formation in late capitalist Bolivia.

What is perhaps most surprising about these tattoos is the ways in which tattooing itself is still seen as quite "rebellious" in Bolivia, by the general public as well as those who make and have them. But in analyzing the tattoos themselves, we see how they still quite strongly draw from and reinforce the ideological discourses that are hegemonic among politicians in the first two decades of the 2000s. While not as exploitative as the indigenismo of the 1950s, today's discourses may equally marginalize the most vulnerable in the country in favor of majoritarian political projects. Tattooing Indigenous symbolism may be understood as a reflection of these ideological discourses, but they also serve to reinforce them through their quotidian presence. Understanding the ways once vibrant cultural symbols become flattened in tattoo imagery demonstrates how media, even when produced from the margins, may both reflect and strengthen hegemonic discourses related to identity and nationalism.

Notes

1 I draw in part from Albro's (1998) astute evaluation of transactions with yatiris at Quillacollo's festival of the Virgin of Urkupiña as going beyond a syncretic "combination of Andean and Christian cosmological systems in the colonial context" (p 134; see also Himpele, 2008, p xiv). In the case of tattooing in La Paz, indigenous symbolism is flattened into iconic representation without the complexity of ritual (or other forms of cultural) knowledge.
2 Identification here might also include counteridentifying with hegemonic social norms through the use of tattoo or reworking such norms in a form of disidentification (see Pecheux, 1982; Muñoz, 1999).
3 I asked, "Que consideras tu etnia o raza?"
4 See Haynes, 2015, p. 273 for explanation as to what characteristics make a person "visibly Indigenous" in Bolivia.

5 In fact, during the 2019–2020 political crisis in Bolivia, I found through personal conversations, small WhatsApp group discussions, and public social media posts that almost all tattoo artists discussed here, and many clients, openly opposed Evo Morales, and the MAS party.
6 Charlie Connell, Editor in Chief at *Inked Magazine* notes that reproduction and replication have always been central to tattoo art, and in the context of Indigenous symbolism poses new questions as to what constitutes commodification (personal communication, June 28, 2021).

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