Chapter 6: What It Means to Be *Afro*
Afrobolivianity, Indigeneity and the African Diaspora in Bolivia

In the preceding chapters, I have examined the meaning of the emic categorization *"los Afros de Cala Cala"* and have analyzed the relationship of this particular construct with other possible frames of reference for collective identification. As I have shown in chapter 5, local notions of what it means to be *"Afro,"* as well as notions of being *comunario* are undergoing important changes. On the one hand, the transformation of collective identifications in Cala Cala is shaped by local particularities such as the history and demography of Cala Cala and Nogalani, as well as by regional developments such as the changing dynamics of the coca economy. On the other hand, however, there are a number of developments that cannot be explained from the local perspective alone, but require a broadened conceptual focus. The workshop I described towards the end of chapter 5 is a clear example of this. In such contexts, specific discursive approaches to 'identity' in general and to Afrobolivianity and indigeneity in particular are experienced and negotiated.

In the following chapter, I approach Afrobolivianity as an articulation that is constantly "made, unmade, and remade" (Clifford 2013:61–62). Following Eduardo Restrepo's perspective on blackness in Colombia, my discussion of Afrobolivianity "does not start with the assumption of historical constants, anthropological universals or generalizations that would give a 'master coherence'" to Afrobolivianity (Restrepo 2008:16). What I will flesh out are "contingent articulations" of Afrobolivianity marked by "contradictory trends" (Clifford 2013:30) and how these articulations are shaped by their conceptual location in the "fraught borderland between 'indigenous' and 'diasporic' affiliations and identities" (Clifford 2013:52).

Following Shane Greene's approach to Afro-indigenous multiculturalisms, I argue that we need to take into account and interrogate the ramifications of the fact that "contemporary states project a potential, if not in practice an actual, ethnocultural and racial equivalence between Afro-descendent and indigenous populations in the region." (Greene 2007a:329). Such an approach furthermore presses us to "think beyond the apparent dichotomy of the indigenous as an essentially immovable (rooted) identity and the African diasporic as an essentially movable (uproo-

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ted/routed) identity" (Greene 2007a:333). Analyzing the interplay of indigenous and diasporic affiliations and identifications with regard to Afrobolivianity means also discussing the relationship between race and ethnicity in Latin America and how they relate to indigenous people and Afrobolivians respectively (Wade 2010). I aim at complicating the often-cited picture of black race and Indian ethnicity in Latin America, taking cues from various contributions that have shown the fragility of the exclusive association of *indígenas* with ethnicity and Afro-Latin Americans with race in Latin America (Anderson 2009; Canessa 2012c; Greene 2009; O'Toole 2012; Wade 1999; Wade 2013; Weismantel 2001). As will become clear through the ethnographic examples in this chapter, racialized images of Afrobolivianity coexist with notions of a culturally defined Afrobolivian ethnicity.

"Yo soy doble Afro-indígena, pero me siento afro"

The close entanglements of Afrobolivianity with indigeneity, as well as with matters of culture, race and ethnicity were neatly expressed in a comment during the biannual *Consejo Nacional Afroboliviano (CONAFRO)* congress held in La Paz in September 2014 where I participated in the proceedings of a working group on Afrobolivian language *(la lengua Afro[boliviana])*. The working group's task was to elaborate an overview of the status quo concerning the use and distribution of *la lengua afro,* a creole variant of Spanish that developed in the Bolivian Yungas (for details see Lipski 2008; Perez 2015; and Sessarego 2014). One participant of the roundtable was a woman of about fifty years of age from the Sud Yungas province. When she was asked by the CONAFRO member who coordinated the working group to share her knowledge of the *lengua afro* and comment on her experiences related to its use – and Afrobolivian 'culture' more generally – she said that she did not have any knowledge of the language, nor recall any 'cultural element' *(elemento cultural)* that she considered valuable for the discussion. She went on to say: *"Yo soy doble Afro-indígena, pero me siento Afro. He vivido con los indígenas toda mi vida y casi no he podido captarme con mi raza"* ("I am double Afro-indigenous, but I feel *Afro*. I have lived among indigenous people for all my life and have almost not been able to get in touch with my race").

The particular individual quoted above, of course, could have meant any number of things with her statement and I was at that moment unable to ask her for further details, and therefore it is impossible to know which of the following interpretations would have fitted her intentions best. But let us consider the options: By speaking of herself as *"doble Afro-indígena"* she introduces two basic and well known categories of social differentiation in Latin America – blackness and indigeneity – in joint fashion. From her statement alone, it is hard to discern how she conceptualizes the relationship between the two categories and also what exactly she

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means by blackness *(Afro)* and what by indigeneity *(indígena)*. We can assume from the context – her statement was part of her response to being asked to contribute knowledge on language and 'culture' – that both blackness and indigeneity have something to do with those topics for her.[1] We can furthermore assume that language and 'culture' are not all there is to blackness (and presumably also indigeneity), otherwise it would not be possible to be *Afro-indígena* without any knowledge of *Afro* language and/or 'culture.' The only hint that she gives in her statement is her reference to race towards the end of the quote *("[…] no he podido captarme con mi raza")*, which, in turn, leaves it open what she means by *"raza"* (see below).

As far as the relationship between *Afro* and *indígena* goes, her assertion that she is *"doble Afro-indígena"* could be interpreted as referring to a creolized/hybrid/mixed category that blends blackness and indigeneity racially (similar to the colonial term *zambo* [black/indigenous mixture]) and/or culturally; or she considers the possibility of being both *Afro* and *indígena* at the same time or interchangeably. Blackness and indigeneity would thus remain separate modes of identification at a conceptual level; they could, however, become relevant for one and the same individual at different times or in different contexts. Related to the question of context, one final aspect I want to briefly highlight is the juxtaposition of being *("soy Afro-indígena")* and feeling *("me siento Afro")*. Her reference to being Afro-indigenous could be interpreted as implying that this is stable and unchangeable, whereas feeling *Afro* is more a matter of context, disposition and maybe even choice.[2] From the above statement alone, this interpretation would be fairly courageous, yet it fits neatly with countless more explicit statements that exhibit the same structure (being vs. feeling or something more indeterminate). One young Afrobolivian man I know very well and have spent a lot of time with in the last few years, for example, once introduced himself to an audience of university students with the words: *"Soy zambo, mezcla, pero me identifico como Afrodescendiente"* ("I am *zambo*, mixture, but I identify as Afrodescendant"). Here, a mixed racial identity *(zambo)* is juxtaposed with a conscious self-positioning "as Afrodescendant." This is all the more telling since *Afrodescendiente* (even more than *Afro[boliviano]*) is the denomination most clearly associated with political discourse and diasporic identity politics. With this in mind, and considering that the statement we're concerned with was directed at a CONAFRO representative at an official political event clearly framed as *"Afro,"* I argue that *"feeling Afro"* here refers to a rather conscious act of self-positioning.

1 That would still leave us with the questions of what concepts of 'culture' might be relevant here. Her usage of the term *"elementos culturales"* points in a rather specific direction, though (see my remarks in chapter 7).

2 This interpretation put aside the rather philosophical question of whether "being" can be considered a more stable state than "feeling."

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This short statement thus leads the way to a series of questions that this chapter is concerned with. By closely examining possible interpretations of the hyphenated denomination *Afro-indígena* and by contextualizing the references to race *("raza")* and culture *("cultura")* in the above-quoted statement, I aim to shed light on the articulation of Afrobolivianity. As Mark Anderson (Anderson 2007:407) reminds us:

> "When attempting to assess emerging paradigms of Afro-Indigenous multiculturalism, we need to pay particular attention to multiple, shifting meanings of the relational categories separated by the hyphen. Ultimately, we should critically analyze the way that hyphen marks similarities and differences, disjunctions and articulations, and leave open the possibility that the terms modify each other so that we might speak of 'indigenous blackness' or 'Afroindigeneity'."

Following this lead, I first will discuss Afrobolivianity in relation to indigeneity, as well as in relation to the African Diaspora. I will then address the relationship between race and ethnicity in Latin America (Wade 2010), as well as the location of Afrobolivianity in the wider context of Bolivia's "political economies of identity" (Healy and Paulson 2000). In my discussion of a series of ethnographic vignettes, I will show that Afrobolivianity cannot be understood without taking into consideration discourses on phenotype, racial purity and admixture. *Mestizaje* – racial and cultural mixture – as both an ideology and a "lived experience" (Wade 2005) is an important contextual reference for the articulation of Afrobolivianity and the contradictions engendered by the "Longue Durée of Racial Fixity and the Transformative Conjunctures of Racial Blending" (Whitten 2007) have to be taken into account. This is true even in light of repeated declarations by varying Afrobolivian organizations and individuals that they strive for an exclusively cultural understanding of Afrobolivianity. Contrary to the widely repeated narrative that *"El negro no es un color, es una saya"* ("Black is not a color, it is a *saya* [culture]") (Mendoza Salazar 1992), I will show the ongoing importance of phenotypical appearance and racial ancestry that lie at the core of Afrobolivian discourses on identity.

Articulating Afrobolivianity: *"lo Afro"* and *"lo indígena"* in Bolivia

In processes of self-identification and categorization, certain images of Afrobolivianity and indigeneity are negotiated and employed as references. These images of blackness stem from a variety of sources and differ greatly in terms of content and the evaluation of Afrobolivians' 'culture.' They are furthermore deployed by a variety of actors in different circumstances and with more or less conscious and/or strategic calculations. As Sara Busdiecker (2007:230f) rightfully observes, the talk of invisibility and the constant claim by Afrobolivians that they have been neglected altogether by the state, the media and the academy has served to obscure a variety

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of images and representations of black people and blackness circulating in Bolivia, albeit, admittedly, somewhat beneath the surface (Busdiecker 2003). These representations and images of blackness circulate in the realms of folklore (and studies thereof), music, literature (scholarly and fictional), media (newspapers, magazines and television, in recent times also the internet) and in state discourse. By now, international political fora, declarations and campaigns – most recently for example the United Nations International Year (2011) and International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024) also play a significant role.[3] Moreover, images of blackness as a part of globalized consumer culture have entered Bolivian public imagination and have become an important reference point, particularly, but not only, for Afrobolivians.

Apart from scholarly circles and political activists, Bolivian people's knowledge about Afrobolivians and what they associate with them is fairly limited and can be grouped roughly around the topics of slavery, Africa, *saya*, and the Yungas.[4] Most people know that there were black slaves originating from Africa in Bolivia and some are able to reproduce the well-known narrative of how those slaves were brought to work in the mines of Potosí, how they could not stand the climate and were therefore taken to the Yungas, which is where they live today. In the eyes of most Bolivians, Afrobolivian culture is essentially *saya*, a dance that most Bolivians know from the important folkloric parades *(entradas)* throughout the country (*Carnaval* in Oruro, *Urkupiña* in Cochabamba and *Gran Poder* in La Paz) and from the media. Through its close association with *saya*, Afrobolivian culture is often reduced to folkloric expressions and happy and colorful dance performances attaining a festive character, conveying a joyful, happy and non-conflictual image. Finally, through its association with Africa, Afrobolivianity is represented as something foreign, culturally "out of place" in Bolivia (Busdiecker 2009a), even though the Afrobolivian presence in the country dates back to the earliest days of the colony. Beyond these basics, there is astonishingly little information regarding Afrobolivians that circulates in non-academic, non-specialist circles in Bolivia. Only occasionally do people offer a gendered perspective on blackness related to sexuality, remarking that having sex with a black woman is believed to have curative effects on rheumatism.[5] Finally, black people are often considered to be somehow 'good luck,' a belief that is most vividly expressed in a custom called "*suerte negrito*": when

3 See http://www.un.org/en/events/africandescentdecade/ [11/07/2017]

4 This is true even of people with university degrees and high levels of education. In the years since I started working with Afrobolivians, I have had countless conversations with Bolivians from all sectors of society, age groups, educational backgrounds, regions and political positions. There are vast differences with regard to many things, but their views on blackness are strikingly similar.

5 Spedding (1995:326) explains this with the fact that the color black is thought to have certain characteristics in Andean curative rituals that point in this direction.

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seeing a black person on the street, people pinch each other and exclaim *"suerte negrito"* (lit.: lucky little black) for good luck.

Against the backdrop of those notions of Afrobolivianity, Afrobolivians themselves develop a very specific notion of Afrobolivianity that draws inspiration from "the language of global indigeneity" (Canessa 2012c:3; cf. Niezen 2003), as well as from discourses on diasporic blackness. In the next sections, I will outline those seemingly contradictory inspirations and show how they are employed in the articulation of Afrobolivianity.

Afrobolivians as the people of the Yungas

When expressing what it means to be *"Afro,"* many Afrobolivians at first basically resort to the same set of references and associations as non-black Bolivians. When asked specifically about what it is important to know about blackness in Bolivia culturally or historically, Afrobolivians most readily mention slavery, *saya* and the Yungas. Yet they add some specific elements and group them together in a particular fashion. They build on established and widely known associations of Afrobolivians with *saya* in order to highlight the cultural dimension of Afrobolivianity. However, Afrobolivians usually cite additional '*elementos culturales*' pertaining to Afroblivians beyond *saya*, most commonly other dance genres *(semba, baile de tierra)*, the funeral rite *mauchi*, and the Afrobolivian monarchy (*el Rey Afroboliviano*, see chapter 7). They cite those elements to highlight the importance of Afrobolivian culture beyond *saya* in order to counteract the equation of Afrobolivian culture with folklore. More recently – and especially among urban residents engaged with CONAFRO and other organizations – the list has been enhanced to include *la lengua afro* (Afrobolivian Spanish), even though its status as a language remains contested, its history unclear and it has fallen out of use in all Afrobolivian communities (for different views in the debate on Afrobolivian Spanish see Lipski 2008; Pérez Inofuentes 2015; Sessarego 2011a). Afrobolivians also discursively elaborate the widespread association of Afrobolivianity with the Yungas. They point out the deep historical roots of Afrobolivian settlement in the Yungas, position the region as the sole origin of migratory trajectories and highlight how networks of kinship fundamentally tie all Afrobolivians to specific places in the Yungas up to the present (see chapter 3). Through such discursive maneuvers, the Yungas are increasingly framed as Afrobolivian "ancestral territory" *("territorio ancestral")* a terminology reminiscent of indigenous politics in Bolivia and elsewhere. Moreover, this invocation of the Yungas also builds on the discourses of Afrobolivian autochthony that I have described in chapter 3 as an important element of the notion of *"los Afros de Cala Cala"* as the original inhabitants of the *comunidad* (as opposed to "the people from the *altiplano*" – *"los del altiplano"*). By referring to factual or putative individual and collective origins in specific geographical locations, Afrobolivians, as Sara Busdiecker (2009a)

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has also comprehensively argued, construct and represent the Yungas as the place "where blackness resides." The Yungas thus are not only considered the "natural place" of blackness in Bolivia, but are also represented as the origin of Afrobolivian culture and collective identity: Afrobolivians are the "people of the Yungas" (Templeman 1998) and the Yungas is "the cradle of Afrobolivian culture." Those references to a specific place (the Yungas) and the rootedness of Afrobolivians in this particular place are very important in political discourse in order to substantiate claims that they are a *pueblo* similar to indigenous people, as I will detail in chapter 9. Yet references to distinctive cultural features *(saya, mauchi)* that are furthermore related to the collective spatial origins of Afrobolivians in a specific territory are an important aspect of the everyday articulations of Afrobolivianity as well. Additionally, the emerging references to linguistic particularity *(la lengua Afro)*, and specific Afrobolivian institutions *(el Rey Afroboliviano)* make the parallels to "the language of global indigeneity" (Canessa 2012c:3) even more striking.

This specific articulation of Afrobolivianity is not uncontested, nor should it be understood as constituting an exclusive frame of reference. As I have shown in my discussion of Cala Cala, the salience of 'cultural elements' for defining what it means to be *Afro* is not as straightforward as those discourses suggest. The generic references to the Yungas as the origin of a shared sense of identity and culture also overshadow the decidedly local focus of the collective identification *"los Afros de Cala Cala"* and the emphasis on Afrobolivian distinctiveness obscures the importance of shared cultural practices within the *comunidad cocalera*. What is more, the language of indigeneity is not the only inspiration shaping the contemporary articulation of Afrobolivianity. As will become clear in the next section, references to the African Diaspora are equally important when trying to make sense of what it means to be *"Afro"* in Bolivia.

Afrobolivians as part of the regional and global diaspora

In the introduction to the Afrobolivian *"currículo regionalizado"* (regionalized curriculum for public schools) authored by representatives of CEPA, ILC-AFRO and CONAFRO and published by the Ministry of Education *(Ministerio de Educación)*, this document is presented as an important step on the path towards an education that respects Afrobolivian students' "identity with cultural values and principles of their own."[6] The following paragraph of the document deals with the sources of these values and principles, referring to *"Afros"* and *"Afrodescendientes"* interchangeably and citing examples from different contexts and times, among others: Nelson Mandela, Frantz Fanon, Martin Luther King, Touissant Lubertu, Mohamad Ali, Mike Tyson, Pelé, Usain Bolt, Bob Marley, and Celia Cruz. Only after that does the document

6 *"Identidad con valores y principios culturales propios."*

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mention "local values and contributions" *("valores y aportes locales")* and cite examples of Afrobolivian participation in the rebellion of Tupac Katari in 1781, in specific uprisings in the context of the Bolivian independence movement and in the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay in the 1930s. It goes on to detail Afrobolivian contributions to agriculture, national cuisine, music, dance and soccer.

While we have to keep in mind that this document represents the outcome of a long process of negotiation and also a very particular perspective on Afrobolivianity (see chapter 7 on the elaboration of the curriculum), it is still striking to note the prominent place references to African, African-American and Afro-Latin American personalities occupy in this document, being placed even before references to well-known Afrobolivian personalities and contributions. This is particularly striking when compared to a short episode that Sara Busdiecker reports from her early days of fieldwork at the end of the 1990s. It should alert us to the significant changes in how people think and talk about blackness in Bolivia. Busdiecker reports having met two Afrobolivian women in a village near Coroico in the Yungas. The women asked her about where she came from and inquired into her ethnic, cultural, and national origins, but in particular – as she puts it – into her "*racial* origins" (Busdiecker 2007:6 italics in original). Her traveling companion clarified that she (Busdiecker) was a "black *gringa*" *("gringa negra")* to which she reports the women wondering: "Are there blacks like us in the United States? […] I thought there were only blacks like us in Bolivia!" (Busdiecker 2007:5). I concur with Busdiecker in her interpretation that even though the women must have made some sort of diasporic connection between themselves and the researcher – having detected black phenotypical features in her appearance – they nevertheless "displayed some ignorance about her [Busdiecker's] […] space […] in that Diaspora," as she puts it. This episode is one very vivid example of the fact that at least until quite recently, Afrobolivians conceived of their blackness without any concrete relations to the diaspora and little, if any, reference to Africa.[7] Various accounts that I collected during fieldwork concur in asserting that until fairly recently – similar to what Tanya Golash-Boza (Golash-Boza 2012) has described in the case of Afro-Peruvians – Afrobolivians considered themselves black, without necessarily being 'African' or referencing Africa when defining blackness (see also Restrepo 2004). Only in the context of cultural revitalization and political mobilization did a clearer reference to diaspora and Africa emerge and, since there are organizations and individuals active in diasporic political and cultural networks, references to Africa, the global African Diaspora and regional Afro-Latino connections have become increasingly important. What is more, *Afrodescendiente* and *Afroboliviano* have replaced *negro* as the terminology of choice to refer to blackness in most political and legal contexts.

7 At the same time, it shows the pervasive importance of racial labels and phenotypical features when defining what is 'black' in Bolivia.

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Yet in the first meetings of the emerging *Movimiento Afroboliviano* held in La Paz, it was not even clear what they would call themselves *("cómo nos íbamos a llamar")* and many participants recalled a good deal of debate concerning whether *Afroboliviano* should be the term of choice. Up until then they had referred to themselves simply as *negros* and *negras*. They also told me that at the meeting in question some Africans, presumably from Nigeria, were invited to explain the importance of their African roots to Afrobolivians.

Today, referring to 'Africa' as a source of 'culture' and identity is quite common among Afrobolivians, although it is most widespread among young urban Afrobolivians and less frequent and explicit in the Yungas. Initially, the major sources of references to Africa were the publications of Afrobolivian activists and scholars active in political mobilization. One example is Mónica Rey's (1998: 102) attempt to link the dance *saya* to Africa more firmly by establishing linguistic ties of the word *saya* to purported origins in the Kikongo language. Rey's assertion that the word *saya* stems from the Kikongo word *nsaya* meaning "working together under the leadership of a singer" (*"trabajo en equipo bajo el mando de un cantante"*), although unverified until the present day, has become common knowledge among Afrobolivians. It is not only cited in the context of accounting for the origins of *saya*, but is at times elaborated into a proto-philosophical approach to life purportedly unique to Afrobolivians (by virtue of their African-ness) – paralleling the processes of promoting *vivir bien* as indigenous philosophical wisdom (Ballivián 2014). Approaches linking Afrobolivians with Africa directly can also be found in Juan Angola Maconde's publication *"Raíces de un Pueblo. Cultura Afroboliviana"* (Angola Maconde 2000), a book that is frequently quoted as a primary source on Afrobolivian culture. The book starts with an overview of 'African culture,' presenting information on different types of houses, customs, dances, religion and marriage patterns in different parts of Africa. Its second part is an ethnography of Afrobolivian life in the Yungas. The divide between the content of parts one and two is vast, yet African culture and Afrobolivian lifestyles are symbolically grouped together as a logical succession of sorts.[8] Lately, some Afrobolivians have also declared themselves to be adherents of the spiritual and practical teachings associated with *Ubuntu* and a recently founded organization in Cochabamba has chosen the name *"Ubuntu – Organización de Afrodescendientes."* In La Paz, various Afrobolivians are members of the *Asociación Cultural Ifá Yoruba Boliviana Cubana*, an Afro-Cuban religious organization. According to the

8 The breach is not only apparent in terms of content and argumentation – the author does not even try to establish concrete linkages and identify possible explicit 'Africanisms' – but also in terms of the quality of the material presented. Part one is a clutter of information superficially stitched together with no apparent leitmotif besides the fact that all of the information somehow relates to the African continent. Part two, on the other hand, is a fine-grained ethnography with rich detail, displaying both well-founded knowledge of the region and analytical clarity.

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founder and spiritual leader *("Babalawo")* of this organization, his Afrobolivian adherents seek his help to "connect to their ancestors and their original culture."

Another important dimension of engaging with diasporic narratives of identity and belonging are narratives that situate Afrobolivian history within the broader history of African slavery in Latin America. The explicit reference to slavery and the geographical origins of the Afrobolivian population in Africa are rather recent phenomena as well. In the few records of Afrobolivian oral history collected among senior members of Afrobolivian communities in the Yungas in the 1980s and 1990s, slavery *("esclavitud")* is mostly associated with the times of the *hacienda*, when Afrobolivians worked as *peones* for the landowners (Centro Pedagógico y Cultural "Simón I. Patiño" 1998b). Alison Spedding also cites various testimonies of Afrobolivians that assert that many people expressed the notion that Afrobolivians had "always" lived in Bolivia *("siempre habían vivido aquí")* (Spedding 2009:464). Only in the context of cultural revitalization, political mobilization and through engaging with transnational political networks have Afrobolivians adopted narratives of the transnational dimension of slavery and the African origins of slaves.[9] As Kevin Yelvington (2001:245) has remarked "[t]he past proves to be a dynamic resource for identity, seen in the considerable effort thrown into the commemorating of slavery […]." This is expressed, for example, in Afrobolivian *saya* lyrics. One very popular *saya ("Honor y Gloria")* begins with the line: "Honor and Glory for the first *negros* that arrived in Bolivia. They died working in the *Cerro Rico* of Potosí."[10] Another *saya* links current struggles for equality explicitly with slavery, addressing the audience with the line: "It is not the time of slavery anymore. Why do you treat my people with such resentment?"[11]

Beyond referencing important political and intellectual personalities of the African Diaspora, a shared sense of diasporic history tied to slavery, as well as cultural, spiritual and geographical 'origins' in Africa, Afrobolivians engage *"lo Afro"* through novel practices of consumption. 'African' fashion and clothing (called *"camisas estilo dashiki"* by my interlocutors) has made its way to Bolivia and is now used by Afrobolivians in many contexts to highlight their cultural distinctiveness. For example, I witnessed many Afrobolivians wearing "*dashiki* style shirts" to an official reception at the *Casa de la Libertad*, a museum in Sucre dedicated to Bolivia's struggle for national independence, which hosted a temporary exhibition on Afrobolivian history at that time. Many Afrobolivian political leaders also wear this

9 This type of discourse has recently also become important in local settings, as my discussion of the tourism project in Cala Cala in chapter 10 exemplifies.

10 *"Honor y Gloria a los primeros negros que llegaron a Bolivia. Murieron trabajando al Cerro Rico de Potosí."*

11 *"Ya no es el tiempo de la esclavitud. ¿Porqué tratas a mi gente con tanto rencor?"*

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kind of outfits on official occasions and for press conferences. Especially in political contexts, 'African' garments are beginning to displace *saya* clothes (white pants and shirt and a red neckerchief) as the outfit 'most representative' of Afrobolivians. Similarly, as figure 14 below shows, 'African' garments and iconography have also come to be considered part of Afrobolivian 'culture' in official representations. As we can see, they are displayed alongside *saya* garments in the section on Afrobolivians in the newly inaugurated *"Centro de las culturas indígenas y Afrobolivianas"* ("Center of indigenous and Afrobolivian cultures") in Santa Cruz.

Figure 14: The exhibition on Afrobolivians in the "Centro de las culturas indígenas y Afrobolivianas" in Santa Cruz (photograph by the author).

Yet, as Peter Wade (2009c:175) has observed in Colombia, very often the "'afro' element […] is becoming increasingly distant from Africa itself and from ideas about 'real' Africanisms." Instead, referring to Africa, or Afro 'culture' more generally, allows people to engage with an increasingly "globalised, mass-mediated culture of blackness associated with certain images and styles – of music, bodily comportment, dress – and realised to a great degree through practices of consumption." In Bolivia, this can entail wearing your hair in dreadlocks or cornrows (bolivianized as *"wachus de coca,"* lit. rows of coca), listening to Bob Marley, or wearing Usain Bolt's T-Shirt collection in order to appropriate the aesthetics of globalized blackness through practices of consumption. This kind of globalized Afro consumer culture was limited to the younger generations in mostly urban settings until

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very recently. Through the proliferation of smartphones and internet access, it is now affecting younger people in the Yungas as well, as I have experienced among the few younger residents of Cala Cala.

In a territorial sense, references to 'Africa' and the wider African Diaspora always coexist and interact with references to the Yungas and the national context. Politically, it was crucial to stress roots in national contexts rather than displacement and diasporic affiliations, and rooted-ness has played a much more important role than belonging to the diaspora. This is why the Yungas, rather than 'Africa,' are seen as the 'ancestral territory' par excellence by Afrobolivians, making references to the Yungas much more common, elaborate and important than those linking Afrobolivians directly to Africa. Many people do, however, emphasize that what is sometimes referred to as the "African cultural matrix" ("*la matriz cultural Africana*"), is most authentically present in the Yungas, which does link Afrobolivianity to Africa, but always with the Yungas as a stepping stone. Interestingly, it is less the Afrobolivians still residing in the Yungas that make these claims, and more the first-, second- or even third-generation migrants in urban centers.

Both the discursive thrusts presented heretofore as being important for the articulation of Afrobolivianity presuppose that Afrobolivianity is chiefly a matter of territorial origins and culture and how they relate to each other. The task so far has been to show that Afrobolivianity is best understood as an articulation engaging the languages of indigeneity and diaspora simultaneously. Yet there is another important dimension of Afrobolivianity that needs to be addressed. I have already briefly hinted at the fact that being *"Afro"* is also often perceived as having something to do with race and in what follows I will discuss the importance of racialized notions of Afrobolivianity.

Racialized notions of Afrobolivianity

It has become a firmly established starting point of any social scientific inquiry into questions of identity that all social identities, among them ethnic and racial ones, are shaped and constructed in a dialectical relationship between categorization and self-identification – what Richard Jenkins has called the "internal and external moments of the dialectic of identification" (Jenkins 2000:7; see also Jenkins 2014). Although it has been argued "that ethnicity is generally more concerned with the identification of 'us,' while racism is more oriented to the categorization of 'them'" (Banton [1983: 106] quoted in Jenkins [2008:23]) – and, from this point of view, ethnicity could be considered rather a matter of group identification and self-positioning, whereas race could be considered more a matter of social categorization from outside the group, i.e. interpellation – Jenkins reminds us that this distinction is a rather weak one and only valid when heavily qualified since "group iden-

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tification and social categorization are inextricably linked, logically, inasmuch as similarity entails difference […] and processually, with respect to individual as well as collective identification" (Jenkins 2008:23).

With that in mind – and before addressing the relationship between race, ethnicity and indigeneity – I want to briefly comment on the relationship between self-positioning practices and external categorization with regard to Afrobolivians. It is important to note that black (*negro* and *negra*) individuals always stand out in Bolivia and that the narrative of 'invisibility' does not apply with regard to individual people. Almost every Afrobolivian individual I spoke to recalls some episode or situation in his or her life when he or she was "the only *negro/a*," always standing out and being looked at and treated differently. Black individuals are thus confronted very commonly and very directly with social situations in which they are externally classified and categorized by people on the sole basis of their physical appearance. Who is considered 'black' and on what grounds, obviously, depends on certain normative expectations of what 'blackness' ought to look like – both phenotypically and in terms of 'culture.' In Bolivia, these normative expectations date as far back as colonial imaginations and representations. Additionally, they stem from more contemporary images of blackness, disseminated through mass media and the growing number of self-representations created by Afrobolivians in recent years in different spaces (see Rossbach de Olmos 2007). The external categorization of mixed-looking people is more contingent on other factors and less clear. Here, clothing, social context and what the other person knows about the individual in question is very important for the question of how certain phenotypical traits are interpreted. Very interesting for me were the comments of friends (both Bolivian and otherwise) who occasionally, after having met someone I knew from my fieldwork, incredulously asked: "And this was supposed to be a *black* person, he/she doesn't look like it at all." Apparently, the individuals in question did not meet my interlocutors' normative expectations with regard to blackness.

Afrobolivian self-positioning practices must always be seen with relation to the above-mentioned expectations and normative assumptions, and it is important to keep in mind that even though who should be considered Afrobolivian might seem a straightforward issue, it is by no means a simple question. People constantly resist and relativize clear-cut designations and references to their or others phenotypical appearance – no matter if it is interpreted as denoting mixedness or purity. Thus, whenever phenotype becomes ambiguous, 'culture,' genealogy and geographical origins become important factors in external categorizations and self-positioning. My general aim is to complicate the often assumed natural correspondence of the phenotypical category *negro* with identification as *Afroboliviano*. Even *negro* and *negra* individuals can – depending on their stance towards Afrobolivian identity politics and on the specific social context of the categorization – embrace or

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reject different possible options (for example, *Afroboliviano* or black foreigner).[12] Mixed-looking individuals can make efforts to blend into non-black society or openly emphasize their blackness depending on the context, their decision or even their mood. With certain markers – especially hairstyle and certain styles of clothes, and of course through *saya* dancing – they can manipulate the framework determining their categorization. As much as they can visibly position themselves as Afrobolivian by emphasizing phenotypical aspects that they believe hint at blackness, these aspects might be easily de-emphasized as well, opening up possibilities of being categorized and positioning oneself as non-black. What is more, it is quite common for people to clearly state that they themselves or others are not *negros* or *negras*, but of course *Afroboliviano/a*. In this sense, they exhibit a strongly anti-essentialist view on Afrobolivian identity in racial terms, making *Afroboliviano* an inclusive category of identification with great mobilizing potential, although this is something that people do not always agree on.

Race and ethnicity in Latin America

There exists a long-standing and controversial theoretical debate concerned with the role of race and racism in Latin America, and its relationship to ethnicity (Wade 2008; Wade 2015). From an anthropological perspective, what becomes clear is that ideas of race and ethnicity are highly contingent on historical and social contexts and cannot be dealt with in a generalizing fashion on a global scale. For the purpose of this chapter, it is therefore important to point out certain basic notions concerning the situation in Latin America and Bolivia. For Peter Wade (Wade 2010:14) – and I follow his view as a very practical working definition for the Bolivian case – "races, racial categories and racial ideologies are […] social constructions on the basis of phenotypical variation" combined with "ideas about innate difference" related to this phenotypical variation. As Wade correctly reminds us, it is not phenotypical features *per se* that are considered to connote racial difference, but rather "particular aspects of phenotypical variation that were worked into vital signifiers of difference during European colonial encounters with others" (Wade 2010:14). For black people in Bolivia and elsewhere, these features mostly refer to (a combination of) skin color, hair texture and facial features that have been worked into "racial signifiers" (Wade 2010:14) (see fig. 15). There are a number of terms and categorizations that connote blackness racially in Bolivia. It is common to hear people speak of *los negros* or *las negras*, sometimes also in the diminutive *los negritos*

12 Especially in Santa Cruz, it is not uncommon – as many interlocutors have confirmed – for black Bolivians to pretend to be Colombian, Brazilian, Cuban or Venezuelan, whereas others feel insulted if they are considered to be from 'elsewhere' and strongly emphasize their Bolivian nationality.

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or *las negritas*. Mostly among themselves, Afrobolivians employ a number of complementary qualifications, speaking of *negros chiris* (referencing curly *[chiri]* hair), *negros netos* ('true' blacks), *negros retintos* (lit.: dark brown blacks), *negros carbón* (lit.: carbon [colored] blacks) and *negros negros* (basically the same as *negros carbón* or *negros netos*). All of these qualifications denote a 'blacker than average' appearance. To refer to people of mixed ancestry and generally 'lighter' complexion, there are also a number of terms like *"moreno/a"* (lit.: brown) – often also used euphemistically by non-Afrobolivians – and the denominations *mulato/a* (black and white mixture) and *zambo/a* (black and indigenous mixture). *Mulato* and *zambo* are categories hardly used by non-Afrobolivians: in general, talking about grades of blackness or mixedness is inappropriate for non-Afrobolivians and tends to be seen as racist by Afrobolivians. Among themselves and – after some time – also in conversations with me, however, Afrobolivians do not hesitate to use this kind of vocabulary.[13] Non-Afrobolivians are expected to use the denominations *Afro, Afroboliviano/a,* or *Afrodescendiente*. The colloquial *"Afro"* is very common among Afrobolivians, who also use the terms *Afroboliviano* and *Afrodescendiente*, although the latter is a more specifically political term that is used mostly by activists and in certain formalized interactions and documents.

Ethnicity, on the other hand, is mostly thought of as referring to cultural difference rather than phenotypical difference (Wade 2010:15). To this we might add the fact that ethnicity often invokes a language of place, as people use "location, or rather people's putative origin in certain places, to talk about difference and sameness" (Wade 2010:17). The distinction between ethnicity as defined through culture (and therefore seen often as less natural and more socially constructed) and race through phenotypical variation (and therefore biology) is of course less clear-cut than the above juxtaposition suggests. Ethnic difference (and with that cultural difference and indigeneity) is very often naturalized and biologized in much the same way as is racial difference. Additionally, we also have to keep in mind that – at least in the Bolivian case – indigenous phenotypical features are obviously an important element in the complicated realm of social differentiation. With regard to race, we are dealing with a similar situation. Race, albeit often regarded as relying on biology and objective differences in human nature, is by no means less socially constructed than other categories of social differentiation (Wade 2004). What is considered black or *Afro* in Bolivia today depends – at least in part – on social markers beyond phenotype. In short, ethnicity in Latin America is not clearly and comprehensively a simple matter of cultural difference; neither is race more

13 Except in conversations with a select few individuals I got to know very well over the course of the last few years, it would have been inappropriate for me to make distinctions between people on the basis of their phenotype and use this kind of terminology.

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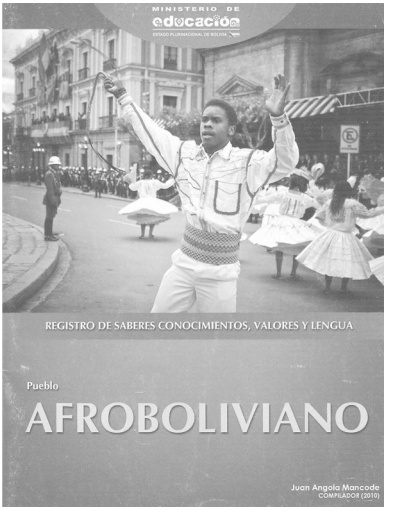
Figure 15: A 'typical' black person from Coripata (left) and a 'typical' image of an 'ethnic' Afrobolivian (right) (images courtesy of Municipio de Coripata/Martín Ballivián/ Ministerio de Educación).



natural/biological than ethnicity, nor does it function as a category of social differentiation unrelated to further social and cultural markers.

The distinction between race and ethnicity in the Latin American context is therefore not necessarily a radical one (Wade 2010:19). They overlap as analytical concepts and in practice, as they both involve a discourse about origins and certain essences related to these origins: in the case of race, aspects of phenotype that are transmitted through generations become cues for categorizing people; in the case of ethnicity, origins in a cultural geography become the basis for perceived cultural differences (Wade 2010:20). What is more, in the Colombian case, according to Wade, "if ethnicity invokes location in a cultural geography, it may be the case that the phenotypical traits used in racial discourse are distributed across that geography" (Wade 2010:20), and this has also been suggested for Bolivia (cf. Busdiecker 2009a).

Being such closely related concepts, distinguishing race and ethnicity in the Latin American context becomes a matter of accounting for differences in their historical genesis and social consequences rather than a radical conceptual distinction (Wade 2010:19). The necessity of accounting for the specificities of the social, political, and legal consequences of distinguishing between race and ethnicity emerges from the ways racial and ethnic categories have been applied to different popu-

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lations in Latin America. Whereas Indians (now *indígenas*) have been viewed and classified mostly as an ethnic group on the basis of a distinct culture, Afro-Latin Americans have been considered a racialized group in most circumstances, based on variation in phenotypical appearance (see Wade 2010). This split has led to significant differences in a variety of ways. Starting in colonial times, being classified as black or indigenous had consequences in legal and political terms that influenced access to opportunities for black and indigenous people (O'Toole 2012). Blackness and indigeneity, conceived of as racialized and cultural difference respectively, have also occupied different discursive roles in debates on nation and 'national culture' in many Latin American countries (Rahier 2008; Wade 2009b). Moreover, until the present, multicultural schemes of recognition have perpetuated the legal and political boundaries between Afro-Latin Americans and indigenous peoples. For example, Juliet Hooker has argued that indigenous groups have had significantly higher success rates in terms of political and legal inclusion since Latin American multicultural regimes of recognition tend to privilege indigenous (cultural) difference over the claims of racialized Afro-Latin Americans (Hooker 2005; Hooker 2008).

In Bolivia, indigeneity has been the primary category of otherness and the 'Indian question' has been a prominent item on the political, legal and intellectual agenda for most of the country's history (Stefanoni 2010). This situation has not changed; if anything, the scope of debate on indigeneity has broadened and the intensity increased since the election of Evo Morales, the continent's 'first indigenous president' in 2005 (see, for example, Albro 2005; Canessa 2005; Canessa 2012c; Postero 2013; Postero 2017). For Afrobolivians, this has meant that engaging with indigeneity, as well as with indigenous forms of politics and the conceptual universe of indigenous rights (cf. Niezen 2003) has become a political necessity. They have had to deal with the central question of the sense in which and the circumstances under which a "relocation of blackness in structures of alterity" (Wade 2010:37) could be articulated in order to make Afrobolivian claims "legible" (Scott 1998) to the multicultural and plurinational state in Bolivia (see also Albro 2010a). As will become clear in my discussion of Afrobolivian activism, there are a lot of different variables that have to be taken into account when analyzing the way that this political articulation and Afrobolivian engagement with the logics of specific regimes of recognition take place.[14] In chapters 8 and 9 I will analyze Afrobolivian political activism as relying on a culturalization of blackness and an ensuing indigenization of black political identity (cf. Wade 2006a:13). This is most clearly expressed in the articulation of black collectivity as *el pueblo Afroboliviano*, since it

14 Various studies have shown how specific notions of blackness and indigeneity, as well as their respective positions in imaginaries of national history, identity and society vary from case to case (for an overview see for example Andrews 2004; Rahier 2012a; Whitten and Torres 1998).

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(*"pueblo"*) can only be analyzed in close dialog with the concept of indigeneity, as it is directly derived from the concept of *"pueblos indígenas originarios campesinos"* guiding the plurinational logics of the present political conjuncture.

Although successful on a political level and increasingly propagated in legal documents, the question remains in what sense this political articulation of Afrobolivianity can transcend organizational rhetoric and spaces of political negotiation, and influence the way in which people conceive and represent their blackness in day-to-day contexts. As will become clear in the anecdotes in the next section, the articulation of Afrobolivian collectivity as a *pueblo* does create novel "*political* subjects and subjectivities" (Restrepo 2004:711 emphasis added), and "a novel assemblage of memories and identities" (Restrepo 2004:711). Racialized difference, however, also remains an important reference when Afrobolivianity is debated and negotiated.

Negotiating Afrobolivianity

After introducing the key elements of the articulation of Afrobolivianity, as well as addressing the question of how race and ethnicity relate to each other in Bolivia with regard to Afrobolivianity and indigeneity, I will now turn to discussing concrete examples of how, when and under what circumstances such questions are debated by Afrobolivian individuals. The three episodes I will discuss have some recurring themes, yet point us in different directions or introduce different perspectives on certain matters. The first example is concerned with a rural perspective on urban Afrobolivianity, dealing with the question of how processes of racial mixture might relate to a sense of groupness among Afrobolivians. The second and third examples stem from urban contexts. These, in turn, address questions of race and cultural authenticity, while at the same time alerting us to the flexibility and malleability of racial and cultural identities in Bolivia. Although situated in rural and urban contexts, they nevertheless share the same conceptual horizon and are situated within a common frame of meaning, highlighting once again the close interconnections between urban and rural Afrobolivians in the articulation of Afrobolivianity.

Mamanis negros y Angolas indígenas: migration, kinship and the perceived perils of racial mixture

The following narrative was recounted in Cala Cala and aptly illustrates a common view many people hold on questions of migration, racial mixture and the ensuing consequences for Afrobolivian culture and identification with an Afrobolivian collective. One day, several months into my fieldwork, I asked Roberto, one of

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my main research participants from Cala Cala, to draw a family tree of his relatives in order to make sense of the various kinship ties that many members of the wider Afrobolivian community share (see chapter 3). He named his mother's siblings, members of his wife's family (parents and siblings), and was also able to produce a list of numerous descendants of his and his wife's parents' siblings. He emphasized, however, that many of these individuals had never lived in the community and had hardly ever visited the Yungas. What is more, Roberto has also not frequently travelled to more distant cities such as Santa Cruz or Cochabamba in order to establish personal contacts and closer ties with many of his relatives.[15] While he lamented the fact that "his family" is dispersed throughout the whole country on a general level, there was one aspect of the dispersion that especially troubled him. He told me that his oldest daughter had a child with an "indigenous man from Potosí" and that his grandchild was certainly not the only *"Angola indígena"* to be found in Bolivia.

"Angola" is a very typical Afrobolivian last name, and with the term *"Angola indígena"* he referred to a person of mixed Afrobolivian/indigenous ancestry. He also used the expression "*Mamani negro*" on that occasion: *Mamani*, in much the same way as *Angola* for Afrobolivians, is a last name very much associated with indigeneity in Bolivia, making the *Mamani negro* a person of mixed indigenous/Afrobolivian ancestry. From his perspective, the 'problem' with the countless *Angolas indígenas* and *Mamanis negros* is that they have few personal ties to the communities in the Yungas and also little "love for their color"; they rather privilege their indigenous heritage over the Afrobolivian side. Roberto interpreted this as a serious threat to the Afrobolivian community as a whole, since he argued that mixed ancestry most often meant that Afrobolivian cultural heritage would be downplayed or even openly neglected. It is interesting to note the conflation of race and culture in Roberto's statements. "Having little love for their color" to him means the same as neglecting or downplaying Afrobolivian cultural heritage. It also seemed to be 'natural' to him that strong identification as Afrobolivian would be hindered by racial admixture, as he thought of the Afrobolivian cultural essence being diluted much in the same way that "Afrobolivian blood" was diluted through racial mixture. Thus, for him, having lost touch with the offspring of his uncles was not only a matter of personal dissatisfaction, but was interpreted as saying something about the Afrobolivian community more generally. In his view, migration, as well as cultural and racial mixture, is clearly a threat to Afrobolivian groupness and culture.

Judging from this account, it could be argued that racial mixture as such poses a threat to Afrobolivian culture and should therefore be avoided. And, in fact, similar

15 As we have seen in chapter 3, the lack of close personal relationships with many urban residents did not prevent Roberto and others from including some of them within the notion of "*los Afros de Cala Cala*" in other contexts.

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points have been made at least implicitly by a number of Afrobolivian interlocutors of mine who stressed that it is in some sense a political and even ethical necessity to marry another Afrobolivian in order to preserve their culture. Yet the relation between racial mixture, culture and Afrobolivian identity is not as straightforward as the above statement suggests. This became obvious to me when Roberto spoke about his own mixed racial ancestry. I found him on his porch one day early in the morning burning a pile of papers in a small bonfire. He told me that he had been taking advantage of the bad weather that prevented him from working in the coca fields to clean up his room. He had found some old papers that he didn't think he would need anymore. He went on to show me different pictures (that he did not intend to burn), but my attention was caught by a yellowed piece of paper on the pile of disposable documents ready for burning. I was intrigued by the official heading displaying the credentials of the municipality of Coripata and asked if I was allowed to see it. He showed the document to me and it turned out to be an original copy of his birth certificate from 1972. As I was skimming through the data, one line immediately made me curious. Besides the expected information on date and place of birth and further administrative data, one line specified Roberto's *race ("raza")*. I was surprised as I had not known that Bolivian authorities recorded racial identification in birth certificates at that time. The handwritten information states that Roberto's race is *"nigra"* (the 'i' instead of 'e' possibly indicating that an Aymara native speaker authored the certificate). I asked him if he would mind giving the document to me and not burning it. At first he seemed surprised at the fact that I would be interested in such a document, but gladly agreed to give it to me as a present. When he expressed his surprise at why I would want the document I told him that I found it interesting that the civil registry authorities would specify someone's *raza* on such an occasion. This was the cue for him to explain his interpretation of the certificate. He told me that he thought the registry official must have written *"negra"* because he must have seen his mother, whom Roberto spoke of as being *"negra,"* and therefore designated the child as black. In fact, Roberto stated, he is *"mezcla"* (lit.: mixture) because his father (whose data is not specified in the certificate due to the fact that he never formally acknowledged paternity) was an indigenous man *("indígena")*. He went on to point out that his mixedness was something that could be easily deduced from his physical appearance, especially from his skin color and his hair texture. Yet, as he made clear, he strongly identifies as *"Afroboliviano": "Ya soy mezcla, pero Afroboliviano."* For him, identifying as Afrobolivian is rooted in his feelings *(sentimientos)*, and his heart *(corazón)* as he told me, tapping his chest with his hand. He made it very clear that he did not consider his physical appearance or any type or degree of race mixture to be a significant factor in how he himself feels about his belonging to the collective subject of Afrobolivians. This, of course, runs counter to the opinions and doubts he had expressed when referring to the numerous *Mamanis negros* and *Angolas indígenas*.

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Interestingly, Roberto told me on another occasion that he had been confronted by a fellow community member from Cala Cala with the allegation that he was not "truly *negro*" and thus not entitled to speak on behalf of the *"Afros de Cala Cala"* or on matters of Afrobolivian culture.

What is clear from this example is that Afrobolivianity is thought of and talked about in racial terms, the efforts to emphasize cultural aspects of blackness notwithstanding. Being Afrobolivian in the above-mentioned example is clearly about phenotype – i.e. about being *negro* – and genealogical ancestry – i.e. about being *mezcla* or not. Moreover, we get a glimpse of the widespread belief that mixed or mixed-looking individuals are more inclined to disregard their Afrobolivian heritage than *negros/as* and are considered less authentic in cultural terms. Beyond racial markers, self-identification and adherence to certain cultural practices also play a role: Roberto does foreground individual *sentimiento* and *corazón* as the basis for his self-positioning as Afrobolivian, yet it is also his active engagement with Afrobolivian collective organizing that, despite occasional questioning, determines his status as legitimately Afrobolivian in the eyes of others, as well as his individual positioning. In fact, what most clearly distinguishes Roberto's situation from that of the people he referred to as *Mamanis negros* and *Angolas indígenas* – beyond individual *sentimiento* and *corazón* – is the fact that he actively engages in the affairs of the Afrobolivian community of Cala Cala. As one of the most active community members in terms of political activism and cultural entrepreneurship, for Roberto, being Afrobolivian is rooted in practice, rather than in a merely discursive positioning. Therefore, although his authenticity and authority are occasionally questioned on the grounds that he is *mezcla*, his legitimate belonging and leadership role in the community are generally accepted.

Beyond this particular example, there is of course no reason to suggest that we can establish a clear, unitary way in terms of how racial mixture relates to the question of how any individual positions him- or herself towards Afrobolivianity. On the one hand, parallel to Roberto describing himself as *"mezcla"* and yet clearly identifying with Afrobolivian culture, political organization and communal values, there are numerous cases in which individuals with mixed racial ancestry express and practice strong ties to Afrobolivian identities and ethnoracial networks in urban as well as rural contexts. On the other hand, there are people unanimously classified as *negros carbones* who do not engage with Afrobolivian organizations, sometimes even preferring to claim foreign origins in urban settings, show no interest in *saya* and consider Afrobolivian culture something only remotely – if at all – important in their lives. As the following cases illustrate, however, there are certain tendencies regarding how the relationship between physical appearance, ancestry and legitimate belonging are interpreted, especially in urban settings where people do not know all potential members of the 'Afrobolivian community' personally, as is the case in the fairly small *comunidades* in the Yungas.

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"Can just any white person dance here?" – An urban perspective on phenotype, ancestry and legitimate belonging

The following account is a transcription of a discussion within the La Paz-based organization *Movimiento Cultural Saya Afroboliviana (MOCUSABOL)* and a subsequent conversation I had with one of the members that participated in the discussion. It is an interesting example of the ways phenotypical appearance, cultural authenticity and identity are commented on and negotiated within urban Afrobolivian organizations.

At a MOCUSABOL meeting I attended in La Paz, great controversy was sparked by the comments of Marco, a long-time member of the organization. Marco 'originally' comes from Coripata, which means that his family is from that municipality/region in the Yungas, even though he migrated to La Paz at a very young age. The present group members were just discussing an upcoming performance and compiled a list of the members that were to participate when Marco addressed the *mesa directiva* (board of directors) with a question. He wondered, he said, since when it had been allowed for "any white person" *("cada blanco")* to dance *saya* with the group. At a past performance, he recalled, he had seen two "white girls" *("chicas blancas")* dancing with the group; "white girls" he had never seen before and did not know personally. He expressed serious worries with regard to the image the participation of "whites" would create for the audience and the general public. He went on to complain that the two girls in question had not even formally introduced themselves before starting the performance, something he interpreted as a lack of respect for himself, the group and Afrobolivian culture in general. His interpretation of the situation was that people from outside of the community were trying to appropriate Afrobolivian culture for themselves, contributing to an image of MOCUSABOL that he did not consider adequate. For him, *saya* was and should continue to be an Afrobolivian affair without the participation of outsiders. Many of the present members commented approvingly on his intervention.[16] The unfolding discussion among the members of MOCUSABOL centered on the relationship between phenotypical appearance and legitimate group membership. The main quarrel was about the fact that the two girls where considered "white" by some members of the organization. After some heated debate, another member pointed to the fact that the girls in question are the nieces of a man who was a well-known member of MOCUSABOL and whose Afrobolivianity was clearly beyond question. That piece of information calmed the mood significantly, yet questions of how to deal with 'white-looking' people continued to loom in the background. At some

16 It is important to know that participation in public performances is a much debated and highly contested topic within Afrobolivian organizations, mainly because of the economic gain participants can obtain through participation.

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point, a member of the *mesa directiva* took the initiative and reminded the present members of the MOCUSABOL statutes that clearly established that the only prerequisite for becoming a member of the organization was "African ancestry" (*"descendencia Africana"*) and not black phenotypical features (*"no tiene que ser negro"*). Since this was clearly and without any doubt established in case of the two girls, the matter need not be discussed any further. Subsequently, he reminded the assembled members of the contents of different workshops that MOCUSABOL had been organizing with regard to Afrobolivian identity and the importance of self-identification *("autodeterminación")*. He cautioned the participants against judging too quickly based on a person's skin color and jumping to conclusions regarding their claim to legitimate membership. With that said, the meeting resumed its course and the problem was not discussed further.

Some days later, I had lunch with Paola in a crowded restaurant in La Paz' busy Uyustus market district. She is a stable member of MOCUSABOL who had also witnessed the debate. We discussed the events of the meeting and Paola expressed her support for the official position on the subject of requirements for membership (focusing on ancestry and limiting membership on these grounds), and also showed great understanding of the critical inquiries Marco had made concerning the circumstances of the two "white" girls' participation. When I somewhat provocatively asked her how far back in a person's family tree the "black" person could be located and what other criteria might be considered valid if the genealogy background check did not render clear results, she explained the matter to me by referring to her own situation, her family background and her biography. She started by saying: "I am *mestiza*, but I feel Afro." (*"Soy mestiza, pero me siento Afro,"* note the parallels to the case discussed at the beginning of the chapter). She explained that she considered herself to be *mestiza* because her Afrobolivian grandfather had children with an indigenous woman, one of them being Paola's mother. From that point onwards, her family became mixed. As a child, she recalled continually being confronted with the Afrobolivian ancestry in her family. In her words, this was due to the fact that she was "the blackest among the siblings" (*"la más negra de todos mis hermanos"*), i.e. she was given the impression by others that her physical appearance showed clear markers of Afrobolivian ancestry. Her siblings, on the other hand, did not look as "black" as she does, their physical appearance thus generating less comment referring to Afrobolivianity. To this situation she attributes the fact that she does "feel Afro," self-identifies as Afrobolivian and actively participates in the *saya*, whereas none of her siblings do. They rather feel inclined toward the indigenous/mixed aspect of their ancestry. But since she was always "the black of the family" *("la negra de la familia")* she actively embraced that part of her ancestry. In her case, the visibility of black physical features sparked discussion on her racial ancestry. This in turn led to her self-identification as Afrobolivian.

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From all I know about how Bolivians usually identify a 'black person' *(negro/a)*, Paola would have easily passed as 'non-black' if she hadn't chosen to emphasize her Afrobolivian ancestry. The same is true for Marco – the man who initially started the conversation. In fact, people from Cala Cala that know him personally even commonly referred to him as *"blancón"* (lit.: "white-ish"). Judging only from their phenotypical appearance, Paola and Marco could easily have been subject to the same doubts that Marco expressed with regard to the "white girls" – namely that they were not 'black' (enough) and thus not entitled to participate in the *saya*. Yet Paola expressed little consideration for the "white girls" whose legitimacy as Afrobolivians had been questioned. She considered it indispensable for the organization to inquire into the background of its stable members. For her, the "black blood" *("sangre negra")* that runs in her veins legitimizes her claim to membership and also determines the degree of her authenticity as *"Afro."* In her view, it is a matter of biographical circumstance and individual choice how a person deals with his or her ancestry, yet "black blood" is indispensable for claiming membership of the Afrobolivian community and also a prerequisite for performing *saya* authentically. "*Saya* is in our blood" *("La saya, la llevamos en la sangre")*, she added towards the end of our conversation, hinting at the widespread belief that a non-black person, cannot 'feel' *saya* as a black person can and is also not able to perform it with the degree of authenticity needed to be a member of MOCUSABOL and thus a representative of Afrobolivian culture.

'Social blackening' and the appeal of *"lo Afro"*

The fairly essentialist views on Afrobolivianity shining through Marco's and Paola's statements and MOCUSABOL's statutes notwithstanding, there is a great deal of flexibility with regard to identifying as *Afro* in Bolivia. This is true in many ways. As much as Marco and Paola could have 'whitened' their biography and appearance – something many mixed race people do in Bolivia and elsewhere for a variety of reasons – it is also possible to undergo such processes in the opposite direction. One fairly extraordinary but very telling case is that of Valeria, a young Afrobolivian woman from Santa Cruz. She was born to an urban-based, *"mestiza"* mother (neither self-identified indigenous, nor Afrobolivian) and hardly knows her father. As far as she told me, her father is neither visibly 'black' nor has he self-identified as Afrobolivian at any time. Her mother – she told me – has never mentioned anything that would have led her to believe that she was Afrobolivian or had Afrobolivian ancestry. She did not consider herself to be *"negra"* and even told me that she considered her skin color to be lighter, rather than darker, than what she called the "Bolivian average" *("los Bolivianos en general")*. Yet she told me that because of her curly hair, in high school she was continually approached by a handful of Afrobolivian students who wondered whether she did in fact have Afrobolivian an-

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cestry. They eventually became friends and by being associated with the *"negros,"* she underwent a process that might best be described as 'social blackening.' On the one hand, she started dancing *saya*, which is certainly an important aspect of her becoming Afrobolivian. On the other hand, she emphasized that in day-to-day contexts, she expresses her Afrobolivian identity mostly by wearing her curly hair more openly, not trying to suppress the *"Afro"* look of it. Additionally, she started wearing clothes with 'African' patterns *("estilo dashiki")* that are increasingly associated with the 'Afro' look in Bolivia and that clearly reference a diasporic perspective on Afrobolivianity. She eventually met an Afrobolivian *(negro)* man through her Afrobolivian friends, whom she ultimately married and had a child with. Nowadays she firmly identifies as Afrobolivian and is one of the most visible figures in Santa Cruz' Afrobolivian scene, as she works for the *Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Afro (ILC-AFRO)*, the Afrobolivian branch of the government-sponsored *Instituto Plurinacional de Estudio de Lenguas y Culturas (IPELC)*, an entity whose main objective is to assist the *pueblos* recognized by the Constitution to preserve and/or revitalize their languages and cultures. As far as she told me, her claim to Afrobolivian identity was never questioned; not when she started to dance *saya* and entered the more formalized group in Santa Cruz, nor when she applied for the job at ILC-AFRO. This is quite surprising, given the fact that she managed to secure a position as a government employee through the *Afro* slot, something many activists aspire to. These positions are therefore usually very jealously guarded. Thinking along the lines of Marco – and he is far from an isolated example – the legitimacy of Valeria's claim to Afrobolivian identity could have been questioned on a variety of grounds. She is not *"negra,"* claims no ties to any specific Afrobolivian ancestor and has no connection to a community in the Yungas. Her engagement of Afrobolivianity, albeit sparked by an isolated feature of her phenotypical appearance, is mainly rooted in her firm self-positioning as Afrobolivian and her embracing of an increasingly diasporic perspective on Afrobolivianity.

Conclusion: Race, identity politics and the invisibility of *"Afro-Aymara"*

In this chapter, I have identified the main discursive threads relevant in the articulation of Afrobolivianity. Representing Afrobolivians as 'the people of the Yungas,' characterized by distinctive cultural features, this process of articulation involves engaging a language of indigeneity, mainly through references to culture and place. At the same time, a transnational, diasporic perspective on Afrobolivianity is emerging. Finally, I have shown that despite the growing importance of those discourses, Afrobolivianity is also importantly a matter of racialized difference. As the three ethnographic vignettes have shown, the way these threads interact varies according to context.

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On (the invisibility of) *Afro-Aymaras*

At the beginning of the chapter, I raised the question of how indigeneity and blackness might relate to each other in Bolivia and – following Mark Anderson's remarks – whether there is "the possibility that the terms [Afro and indigenous] modify each other so that we might speak of 'indigenous blackness' or 'Afroindigeneity'" (Anderson 2007:407). Anderson also reminds us, however, that "we should critically analyze the way that hyphen marks similarities and differences, disjunctions and articulations" and in what remains of this chapter, I want to briefly address the question of how and under what circumstances the invocation of similarities allows for articulation, and when and why disjunction and an emphasis on difference prevail. As I have shown, discursive articulations of Afrobolivianity draw on the language of indigeneity, and in political and legal realms Afrobolivians also position themselves and are regarded in many instances "like indigenous people" (cf. Anderson 2007). What is more, as my discussion of Cala Cala, as well as other authors' depictions of different communities in the Yungas show, *Yungueño* culture, oral tradition, political and economic institutions and festive culture could be interpreted as Afro-indigenous, since they were forged over the years by Afrobolivian and indigenous *peones* and *comunarios* living together in a common geographic, economic and social space (Busdiecker 2007; Léons 1966; Léons 1972; Spedding 2009; Sturtevant 2013).

Yet not one discussion of the Yungas that I am familiar with applies this terminology ("Afro-indigenous"). Moreover, for most Afrobolivians I have met over the years, Afro-indigeneity or indigenous blackness are not viable concepts for describing their social reality or options for conscious and explicit self-identification. This is true in everyday processes of social differentiation, as well as in more politicized contexts where structural and discursive similarities do exist, yet any conceptual association with *"los indígenas"* is downplayed by Afrobolivians. I have come across countless statements explicitly denying any allegations that Afrobolivians are in any way *'indígenas'* or even 'like *indígenas*' and also heard numerous complaints by Afrobolivian activists that "they always have to move alongside the *indígenas*."[17] For example, at some point during my fieldwork, Afrobolivians discussed a documentary on Afrobolivians in the Yungas aired on Argentinian television and entitled: *"Los negritos de Bolivia: descendientes de africanos con vidas aymaras";* "The little blacks of Bolivia: descendants of Africans with Aymara lives." Although the short film does not depict Afrobolivian lifestyles in any different way to the countless clips many people proudly showed me as representing part of their 'culture,' what caused outrage among most Afrobolivians was the allegation that they were leading "Aymara lives" and thus were culturally indistinguishable from Aymara. Attempts to

17 *"Siempre tenemos que ir con los indígenas."*

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emphasize the many similarities they share with other Bolivians, rather than the things that set them apart, are often met with open rejection. Although Afrobolivianity is articulated very much like indigeneity in Bolivia, and this articulation has been sanctioned by legal recognition, for most of my interlocutors, *Afro* and *indígena* remain two separate spheres of belonging, culture and sociality.

Even the few references I have encountered that employ a certain terminological approximation – "*doble Afro-indígena*," "*Angolas indígenas*," "*Mamanis negros*," "*zambo*," "*mezcla*" – are first of all fairly rare and second of all, I argue, point in a direction that makes me think rather of "disjunctions" than of "articulations," to use Anderson's (2007:409) terms. The woman quoted at the outset of this chapter lamented the fact that she could not contribute any details to the discussion of Afrobolivian language or culture and apologetically explained that by pointing to her lifelong close associations with indigenous people. She has by way of being "*doble Afro-indígena*," become less "*Afro.*" The same is true for Roberto's representations of "*Angolas indígenas*" and "*Mamanis negros*," whose alleged lack of commitment to Afrobolivianity he sees as a threat to Afrobolivian groupness. The occasional questioning of his leadership role in Cala Cala on the grounds that he is *zambo* points in a similar direction. The approximation of "*Afro*" and indigenous, their blending and interaction, no matter whether this process is imagined as a matter of race, culture or both at the same time, is not interpreted as something productive. Only once have I heard an individual identifying as "*Afro-Aymara*." The young man spoke up in the plenary of the same CONAFRO congress in 2014 and demanded that CONAFRO make the question of how to deal with mixed people (*hermanos mezclados*, lit.: mixed brothers) a central concern of the organization, since people like him – "Afro-Aymara" – were often discriminated against by "their own people" ("*nuestra propia gente*") for not being purely Afrobolivian. I met this individual several times during my fieldwork and in subsequent conversations had the impression that he indeed thought of his identity in ways that would make it possible to speak of articulation, rather than disjunction. Although firmly rooted within Afrobolivian identity and cultural discourse, politically very active and in close contact with CONAFRO and other organizations, he spoke a lot about the great influence his mother – an Aymara woman – had on his life, his values, his ways of seeing the world and how he could not consider himself "only Afrobolivian" ("*solamente Afro*"). However, his was an isolated case and the CONAFRO plenary that day did not respond to any of the issues he raised in his intervention.

I interpret this silence on "Afro-Aymaras," as well as the various comments that aim at explicitly separating *Afro* from indigenous as pointing very clearly into one direction: the disjunction of Afrobolivianity from indigeneity and mixture rather than its close association with it. By stating "*soy doble Afro-indígena*," "*Ya soy mezcla, pero me siento Afro*," "*soy mestiza, pero Afroboliviana*," or "*soy zambo, mezcla, pero me identifico como Afrodescendiente*," people acknowledge that racial mixture and cultu-

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ral similarities are a social reality, yet they try to disentangle Afrobolivianity and indigeneity. In my view, this situation is rooted in two interrelated dimensions. On the one hand, the still widespread tendency to conceptualize Afrobolivianity as essentialized racialized difference and on the other, the pervasive influence of equally essentialist identity politics that shape the articulation of Afrobolivianity as a matter of 'cultural difference.'

Afroboliviano as *negro*

Racialized notions of Afrobolivianity are highly essentialist. Markers of Afrobolivianity – even though they are represented as 'cultural' as in the case of *saya* – are very often seen as essential, heritable qualities that 'run in the blood' and are thus naturalized to a great extent and tied to ancestry (cf. for example Wade's [1993:249f] remarks on *"sangre caliente"* as a heritable quality of Afrocolombians). Although an individual's phenotype by no means determines self-identification and does not tell us anything reliable about someone's 'culture,' racialized physical traits are still by far the most commonly given explanation in accounting for what being Afrobolivian is about. This is exemplified by the tendency that *"los más negros"* ("the blackest") are in most cases exempt from further inquiries into their ancestry, kinship ties and/or geographical roots or cultural skills in order to legitimize their Afrobolivianity. This is not to say that those topics do not play a role for those '*negro*' individuals. Even *"los más negros"* comment on their geographical origins and genealogical ancestry; they just do not need to further legitimize their Afrobolivianity with it. It is taken for granted that a *negro* individual is legitimately *Afroboliviano* – no matter how bad a *saya* dancer one might be, how little contact with the Yungas a person might have or how the individual in question relates to his or her Afrobolivian kin in practice. Given that racial mixture is making phenotypical blackness less clearly distinctive in many cases, equally essentialist references to ancestry are emerging as an increasingly important factor in marking the boundary of Afrobolivianity. Although categorizations like *zambo, mezcla* and *mestizo* denote mixture, they still tacitly posit the existence of pure categories as the foundation for mixture (Wade 2005). Consequently, when 'white-,' 'mixed-' or 'indigenous-looking' individuals are questioned with regard to the legitimacy of their claims to belonging, they resort first and foremost to referencing a *negro* or *negra* ancestor.

Afrobolivianity is thus to a large extent a matter of race – either defined through phenotype or through biological ancestry – even though many individuals tirelessly argue that what makes somebody Afrobolivian is first and foremost culture and self-identification. As Roberto's remarks on the *Angolas indígenas* suggest, racial admixture – a very widespread phenomenon in Bolivia both historically and in the present – is considered a possible liability and an obstacle to embracing *(asumir)* Afrobolivian (collective) identity and representing Afrobolivian culture. His own

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story and the awareness of his mixedness notwithstanding, he suspects that mixed individuals and their lack of commitment to the Afrobolivian cause put the continuity of the collective in danger. Both the lack of visibly black features (as exemplified by the *Angola indígena*) and the cultural influence of 'others' (as exemplified by the *Mamani negro*) are seen as contributing to the weakening of Afrobolivian collectivity. It repeatedly struck me as quite remarkable that it is often the less visibly black individuals who deployed this type of argument, when their own life stories would suggest that racial mixing might not have the results they generally fear.

Afroboliviano beyond *negro*

The articulation of Afrobolivianity beyond racialized difference is, in practice, not less essentialist. It builds on the logics of multicultural and plurinational identity politics that presuppose and propagate clear-cut distinctions between groups, either-or-logics of categorization and identification, and difference rather than similarity as a basis for inclusion and empowerment. As I will detail in chapters 8 and 9, the notion of political Afrobolivianity beyond *negro* is so deeply rooted in the political and legal context of multiculturalism and plurinationality – the term *Afroboliviano* only emerging in the late 1980s – that it cannot be grasped without always keeping in mind what conceptual baggage this entails. And the plurinational regime of recognition is equally essentialist as racialized notions of difference. As the population census in 2012 vividly exemplifies, individuals can only be counted as Afrobolivians – in the strict sense of the word – not as *zambos*, *mezclas* or *Afro-Aymaras*. The avenues to representation, political empowerment and economic benefits are also to a large degree dependent on exclusive, clearly circumscribed and legally sanctioned identities. Although individual positioning practices and the way people frame their identities and aspirations are often less essentialist and much more dynamic than the rhetoric of Bolivian ID-ology or racialized essentialism suggest, there are few contexts where these alternative visions can be brought to bear. The essentialist perspectives expressed in the notion of Afrobolivianity as racialized difference, as well as in the notion of a culturally defined multicultural/plurinational Afrobolivianity, thus preclude a thorough and productive engagement with entangled concepts like black indigeneity or indigenous blackness.

In the next chapter, I will elaborate on this topic by examining the making of 'Afrobolivian culture,' a process that is based fundamentally on defining, cataloging and structuring Afrobolivian 'cultural elements,' conceptually separating them from regional and/or indigenous culture in order to make them legible and politically meaningful.

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