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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Dwelling in equivocation

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Translation, a paradoxical enterprise, lies at the heart of *Earth being: Ecologies of practice across Andean worlds* (de la Cadena 2015). Simultaneously a work of translation and a work about translation, *Earth beings* articulates a political vision that is illuminated *by* translation. As an ethnographer of the same region of the Andes, I found myself both inside and outside my comfort zone. I recognized the setting, situations, and persons (human and non-). Also familiar were the problems of comprehension, the kinds of partial connections that Marisol de la Cadena encountered. But de la Cadena's implacable resolve to articulate another kind of politics was less familiar territory; it took me out of my comfort zone mostly in good ways, some of which I will try to articulate in this commentary.

Because I began my research a generation earlier than de la Cadena, my work was available to her as a resource and, happily, she seems to have found it useful. Although we share similar understandings and attitudes concerning Andean cultural worlds, we initially came to our research from different directions. De la Cadena began her career as a committed Peruvian leftist; I came to Cuzco in the 1970s as a North American "knee-jerk liberal." My research in a rural *ayllu* somewhat similar to Pacchanta was not politically motivated, yet living in such a community raised my political consciousness. Experiencing the harshness of poverty from the inside, and recognizing how limited are the options for people one cares about, is a transformative experience. I hoped that by translating coca's profound significance to a "Western" audience I might contribute to the political legitimization of *Runa* lifeways. I did not, however, engage with political theory and remained an outsider to Peruvian politics—so much so that I felt deeply shaken when a leftist community organizer vehemently condemned my work as *culturalista*. It was a rude awakening

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but a useful one in that I learned to tread more carefully. To respond agonistically did not really occur to me and I doubt I could have done so effectively.

De la Cadena has encountered similar push-back from left-leaning colleagues: "When I tell my friends about Mariano's activism they are in awe—until I tell them about his practices: for example, that he consulted with coca leaves. . . . Those practices, my friends say, are superstition—why care about them?" (2015: 98). *Earth beings* definitively answers their question by showing how attention to cultural difference—far from perpetuating false consciousness—might open the way to a radically new politics. The key to this awakening, she argues, is an appreciation of, and respect for, translation broadly understood. From this position, she probes, carefully and nonjudgmentally, cultural encounters ranging from twentieth-century indigenous leadership to New Age tourism in Cuzco. The result is impressive: a luminous book, creatively composed, deeply personal, ethnographically grounded yet highly theoretical.

De la Cadena approached Mariano Turpo intending to write the history of a significant indigenous leader. She did not expect to expand her project beyond the paper trail documenting his ayllu's legal struggle against Hacienda Lauramarca. "The written documents," she writes, "were my final horizon" (2015: 13). Mariano, however, did not share that horizon. As far as he was concerned, the complaint was over and the papers useful mainly as kindling (not such a trivial function; Pacchanta is cold, wood is scarce, and a fireplace the only source of heat). Nevertheless, because he very much wanted his efforts and sacrifices to be remembered, he agreed to "colabor" with Marisol.[1] It soon became apparent that, given their different relationships to the documents, the two were bound to talk past each other. A lesser scholar might have brushed off Mariano's inscrutable commentary and gone off to write up a conventional case history. But de la Cadena persisted; the project became a mutual exploration of differences—partial connections and disconnections—as two people from the same nation yet from different worlds, worked at understanding where the other was "coming from."

This kind of work takes time, patience, and stout-hearted commitment to relationships with people very different from oneself. De la Cadena had to confront the limitations of her own consciousness in order to engage Mariano Turpo's world. *Earth beings* provides a remarkably honest interrogation of this process. We follow Marisol, Mariano, and his son Nazario as they explore partial connections and recognize the extent to which their worlds exceed and exclude each other. These conversations recalled my experiences in Sonqo with interlocutors who shared my investment (emotional as much as intellectual) in finding connections and—if not understanding—at least recognizing where we failed to connect. Writing in the 1980s I commented,

> No one can enter another person's consciousness to share that other subjective experience of life. What one can enter is a shared intersubjectivity that is created when communication takes place. My memory-work is carried along by this intersubjectivity, mine and theirs. . . . I can enter not so much into their world as, in Dennis Tedlock's

1. I find "colabor" a bit precious; "collaborate" would serve perfectly well.

> phrase, into an "understanding of the *differences between* [our] two worlds."[2] (Allen [1988] 2002: 9, emphasis in the original)

Around this time (mid-1980s) a "dialogical turn" was taking place in anthropology and "reflexivity" was becoming a more-or-less accepted mode of ethnographic writing. The current "ontological turn" has much in common with this dialogical anthropology (cf. Golub 2016). Neither approach seeks a transparent, unmediated vision of an "other," but instead endeavors to explore what happens in the communicative space between interlocutors. Both approaches rejoice in the way ethnography forces one to perceive and think about the world in new ways. In *Dialogical anthropology and the emergence of culture*, Bruce Mannheim and Dennis Tedlock describe ethnography as "a peculiar kind of dialogue and a peculiar zone of emergence, at once constitutive of and constituted by radical cultural difference" (1995: 15). Eduardo Viveiros de Castro takes an analogous approach to ethnography as translation: "To translate is to situate oneself in the space of the equivocation and to dwell there . . . ; it is to communicate by differences" (2004: 7). He goes on to characterize "controlled equivocation" as "a properly transcendental category of anthropology, a constitutive dimension of the discipline's project of cultural translation" (2004: 10).

Is the "ontological turn" reinventing the old dialogical wheel? Yes and no. I miss dialogical anthropology's insistence on fine-grained linguistic analysis and ethno-poetic experimentation. On the other hand, I've found the concepts in de la Cadena's intellectual toolkit—*equivocation* (Viveiros de Castro), *partial connection* (Strathern), *intra-action* (Barad)—conducive to a more nuanced understanding of that "peculiar zone of emergence" that is ethnography.

That peculiar zone of emergence confronted de la Cadena with radical difference from the start because Mariano's community, Pacchanta Ayllu, has to be understood in terms of ontological premises foreign to most Western social science and politics. An ayllu includes many other-than human inhabitants; everything possesses some kind of mindful life, including things like rocks that we normally consider to be inanimate. In this context, the land and places that make up the landscape (*tirakuna*, earth-beings) are active participants in everyday life. In acknowledging how this mode of community exceeds her own experience, de la Cadena makes a simple but difficult intellectual move that underpins the rest of her book: "I learned to identify radical difference . . . as that which I 'did not get' because it exceeded the terms of my understanding. . . . For example: I could acknowledge [earth-beings' existence] through Mariano and Nazario, but I could not know them the way I know mountains are rocks" (2015: 63).

In order to (partially) understand this animistic orientation without relegating it to the realm of "mere belief," de la Cadena turns to the idea of *intra-action*, a neologism coined by Karen Barad (2007) to express situations in which entities bring about each other within a relation (as opposed to *inter*-action in which the entities preexist their relation). In terms of this understanding, the ayllu is a process—a sphere of mutual enactment including humans, landforms (earth-beings), objects, domestic animals, cultivated plants, et cetera. De la Cadena explains this ayllu-as-process in terms of the Quechua word *uyway*, broadly translated as "mutual caring"

2. The reference is to Dennis Tedlock (1983: 323).

or more precisely "intra-caring." It is not, she cautions, to be mistaken for altruism or egalitarianism: "intra-caring follows a hierarchical socionatural order; failure to act in accordance with in-ayllu hierarchies of respect and care has consequences" (2015: 103). I wish she had expanded this point to bring out the theme of feeding and eating that is a constitutive aspect of in-ayllu existence (e.g., Salas 2016; Weismantel 1995, [1988] 1998; Van Vleet 2008). The underside of *uyway* is a kind of brutality, a stringent and continual process of mutual consumption. Mariano's life was consumed by his ayllu (and his wife's as well).

Seen as a space of dynamic intra-relationship, ayllu entails a mode of relationality in which whole and parts are interchangeable. "Rather than being instilled in the individual subject, the substance of the runakuna and the other-than-humans that make an ayllu is the co-emergence of each with the others" (de la Cadena 2015: 102). I have described this as *synecdoche* (Allen 1997: 81; 2011: 59); de la Cadena prefers *fractality*, which conveys very well the concreteness of Andean worlds.[3] Drawing on Roy Wagner's (1991) notion of the fractal person, de la Cadena makes an important observation about Mariano's leadership as ayllu representative (*personero*), "As persons with relations integrally implied, in-ayllu personeros are not the individual subjects that the state . . . assumes they are and requires them to be" (2015: 45). The point is well taken and grounded by ethnographic insight: Mariano, "walking the complaint" in the law offices and courts of urban Peru, is better understood as his ayllu's *instantiation* rather than its *representative*.

Using intra-action to describe in-ayllu relations is a brilliant move, in part because it relates the ethnographically particular context of Pacchanta to a more general body of theory. Ironically, this is also the aspect that gives me pause—particularly when de la Cadena rushes to express her insights in terms of a postcolonial critique of representation. This critique attributes the ills of Western colonialism to our practices of representation, which are based on the ontological premise that humanity is separate from nature. Contexts that do not recognize a nature/humanity divide (like Mariano Turpo's relations with earth-beings) are represented as "belief," which, as de la Cadena convincingly argues, renders them invisible and deprives them of real-world agency (2015: 99). This much I agree with; what troubles me is the extension of this critique to representation per se as a Western (and Westernizing) practice.

A case in point is de la Cadena's important discussion of ayllu and property. She observes that, although hacienda and ayllu are normally contrasted as individual and collective property, "this distinction ignores that ayllu and property are conceived through different relational regimes" (2015: 134). Indeed, ayllu and property are conceptually incommensurable; earth beings cannot be owned. But she goes on to tell us that the problem is representation itself: "ayllu relations cannot be represented; the separation that this requires (between subject and object, signifier and signified) severs the inherently relational character of beings in-ayllu" (134).[4] Yet, as Frank Salomon and others have shown us (e.g., Salomon 2004; Urton

3. See Dirk Vandenbeke (2004) on synecdoche and fractality as equivalent modes of relationship.

4. Understanding the ayllu as composed of mutually defining human and other-than-human subjects doesn't rule out the existence of subject-object relations *within* ayllu-as-process. In fact, Quechua grammar requires verbal suffixes specifying interaction

2017), in-ayllu relations *can* be represented, particularly via fiber-based processes like weaving and knotting. We only partially understand how devices like the *khipu* work,[5] and probably will never comprehend them completely because they operate in an ontological context that exceeds our experience. Thus, the problem is not representation per se; it is that ayllu intra-relationship requires a semiotics of representation that dominant legal discourses of property cannot accommodate or even recognize. This does not invalidate de la Cadena's basic insight, nor the discussion that follows from it. I simply point to the possibility of an ethnographically and theoretically more nuanced treatment.[6]

Earth beings includes a fascinating discussion of the power of words. Words must be used carefully because they are not simply immaterial signs but rather intrinsic elements of socio-material intra-actions (de la Cadena 2015: 23–26, 54–56). Although the book was not written for specialists in Andean ethnography, its arguments would have been well served by more extended probing of Quechua examples. De la Cadena explains, for example, that Mariano is described in Quechua as *ayllumanta parlaqta*, that is, "speaking from (not for) the ayllu" (44–45)—a good observation as far as it goes, but there is more to it. *From* is only an approximate and partial translation of *manta*, a grammatical suffix sometimes categorized as a Quechua ablative (Cusihuamán 1976: 131–32). *Out of*, *about*, and *concerning* would be possible (also inadequate) alternatives. No translation can get it exactly right, and I wish de la Cadena had dwelled longer in this equivocation. -Manta indicates an Andean kind of emergence: what emerges stays bound to its origin (place/time/substance) and vice versa, in a synecdochal relation. *Ayllumanta* exceeds its possible English or Spanish translations because *the materiality of the relations it references differs radically from relationality and materiality as we usually understand them*.

But perhaps I ask too much. De la Cadena's project is not to write an ethnography but to articulate an ethnographically-informed political vision. At the 2013 meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Petersen and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro called for "nonskeptical elicitations of the manifold potentials of *how things could be*" (2014: 1). As an answer to this call, *Earth beings* is a real *tour de force*. The book concludes with a proposal for an alter-politics that would accommodate "relations among divergent worlds as a decolonial practice . . . with no other guarantee than the absence of ontological sameness" (de la Cadena 2015: 281). Political acceptance of radical difference would "open up life to a cosmos of worlds that would be intra-connected through respect" (285). De la Cadena notes hopefully that earth-beings are increasingly invoked

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of persons (I-to-you, you-to-me, etc.). Objects in some contexts are subjects in others; contexts are multiple and simultaneous as entities continuously (sometimes coercively) bring each other into being.

5. The *khipu* is a complex communication device composed of knots and strings (Urton 2003).

6. I agree that, as an analytical concept, representation can be problematic in an Andean context, leading us to see symbolism when we should more accurately see consubstantiality and mutual enactment (see Allen 2016).

in political contexts (e.g., conflicts over mining rights), thus compelling Andean states to accommodate ontological disagreement (277–84).

Writing in the shadows of the US presidential election, Brexit, and the Colombian referendum, I cannot but feel skeptical about the reach of de la Cadena's alter-politics beyond an appreciative intelligentsia. But this should not detract from the work's importance: by showing us "peculiar ethnographic spaces" and confronting us with radical difference, anthropology like *Earth beings* encourages us to embrace what exceeds our experience—fostering an attitude that could, in the best of all possible worlds, transform politics for the better.

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