



The Territory of Our Body: A Conversation on Urban Environments in the Andes and Their Bodies

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INTRODUCTION

The reflections in this chapter are inspired by our concern that “knowledge” needs to be rethought in order to face the current socio-environmental risks to which Western society is exposed. In our dialogue, we reflect on what can be learned from the Andean worldview, a Latin American critical theoretical perspective and decolonial thinking.

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This conversation outlines a journey that starts from the consideration of the “urban” as a modern principle of the organisation of social space capable of expressing profound ethical-aesthetic guidelines that collide with South American rooted ways of inhabiting.

As we suggest throughout the chapter, other-than-modern ways of settling community or settling community “otherwise” (Escobar, 2007), in this case within the framework of the Andean cosmovision, are based, fundamentally, on an understanding and sense of the relationship between the domains of the social and the natural that is different from the categories of Western thought. The hierarchical relationship characteristic of the Western matrix of knowledge, that reduces nature to a resource, is irreconcilable with the Andean conception of nature and social relations, as in this worldview no form of life can be instrumentally valued.

These marks of the Andean worldview—explored in our text through a series of stories—constitute a cultural heritage that “teaches”, “shows” a particular way of living that we believe provides key elements for possible answers to our current social and environmental crisis.

Reaching this cosmovision implies that the reader is disposed to “let oneself be taught”; that is, they possess the willingness to move away from the relational position of domination over everything that one wants to know that is characteristic of the modern/colonial epistemological matrix.

Thus, listening to the Andean worldview requires us to be open to new meanings of such fundamental concepts such as “body”, “territory”, or even “sidereal space”—since looking at a different perspective in relation to “ways of living” implies in the first place a deep ontological reconsideration.

In the framework of Western culture, the notion of the body, for example, is restricted to a physical and individual dimension. This conception is irreconcilable with the Andean one that understands the body as a manifestation that exceeds the physical and material dimension and is not restricted to the domain of the individual but is in a complex connection with others. This consideration defines notions of “body”, “territory” and hence any other spatial dimension as clearly different and distant from the same terms understood within the framework of the modern/colonial matrix.

By encountering these matters, we do not intend to expose and settle differences between a dominant Western knowledge and an Andean-silenced one, but to rehearse contributions coming from traditions and

memories otherwise that could enrich possible answers to the needs of our particular civilisational moment.

With our reflections, we long to contribute to a critical process of cultural transformation and at the same time to show that the traits that are mentioned here, either at the habitational level or a semiotic-expressive level, come from a deep dimension that must be understood from a perceptual plane that exceeds the possibilities of rational evocation.

The search to reformulate the idea of “knowledge” by decolonial thinking, that is, to endow new meanings based on the plurality of perspectives in the world, has emerged in recent decades from different disciplinary trends and areas of knowledge (like Anthropology, Psychology, Sociology, Discourse Studies, Gender Studies, Feminist Theory, and so on), as an epistemic response to the Enlightenment-based Western epistemology characterised by a rational, abstract, universal, decontextualised and disembodied knowledge. This “(re)territorialization of knowledge” has opened a fertile space for contributions to knowledge from other-than-Western gnoseological traditions based on a long-lasting experience—like Andean gnoseology, the subject of our chapter.

Many of the elements promoted and developed by decolonial thinking (DT) encounter and connect to the ones promoted and developed by feminist political ecology (FPE). At the same time, both perspectives can be seen to converge with elements evoked from the Andean worldview. Our reflection embraces and tries to build connections across these two critical and politically engaged positions.

Both DT and FPE are deeply concerned with relational matrices and problematise the relationships of domination and exploitation based on the hierarchical classification across species, genders, ethnicities, class, ages, abilities and others. DT, and to some extent FPE, seek to make audible silenced voices and recognise marginalised people and beings in the production, administration and distribution of what the Western matrix of knowledge considers “resources”. In this process, both approaches assert the notion of care and its relational dimension, seeking to transcend the dichotomous conception that separates the care of humans from the care of non-human others.

We have chosen to share our ideas under the format of a conversation, not only to engage the reader easily, but also because of our epistemic position. We position ourselves through our belief that knowledge is produced through dialogue—among authors, perspectives, currents of

thought and cultural traditions over time, rather than through assertions which are refuted in a series of rebuttals.

The format of conversation allows us to present our perspectives and ideas in motion. We wrote the chapter on-line, over time and across different places, writing today from Argentina and The Netherlands. In this *reencuentro*, we revisit the dialogues and exchanges we have been having since 2014, when we worked together at the National Research Council in Argentina, enquiring into the idea of knowledge dialogues and prompting critical reflections on the dominant ways of producing knowledge. In this conversation we intertwine old with new stories and experiences, to advance our critical and reflective journey.

Although our ideas converge, there are also differences due to our personal way of expressing ideas and thinking about the dynamics we are discussing. We celebrate the polyphony of voices as part of our epistemic approach and of our collective practices (such as the writing of this chapter), trusting that our differences and singularities in dialogue complement each other and enrich what we want to share with the reader.

LET'S BEGIN THE CONVERSATION...

Mariana: I would like to start this dialogue by revising the notion of urban space, the meanings and senses associated with it, and the way in which these are pragmatically constituted in the colonial strategy. In other words, we know that the idea of metropolis is central to the modern perspective, colliding with the ways of establishing community in other-than-western cultures such as Indigenous societies.

Ideas such as order, cleanliness, efficiency, ostentation, and property are manifested in a particular aesthetic in “urban environments”. These ideas can conflict with practices and meanings of Indigenous settlements. This confrontation generates a border zone (an area of cultural translation), a liminal area that is difficult to understand in all its complexity.

From your personal and research experiences, how would you propose to consider these situations of liminality?

Agustina: When we speak of the urbanisation of the territory, we need to reflect on the modern strategies for territorial control that the nascent modern state of Argentina carried out in the military campaigns which attempted to exterminate Andean Indigenous peoples and cultures. These strategies were formed around the establishment of urban centres in the

euphemistically called desert which the oppressors understood as needing to be civilised by modern citizens rather than “hostile savages”.

“Shame is the repeated feeling in each of the stories”

The creation of urban centres in the South Andean territories can be described as the modern/colonial settling of land and peoples to control the territory. It was the project to civilise the “wild”. Not only were urban settlements established but also National Parks were established across the southern Andes to control territories and their resources. Using the rhetoric of modernity and environmental preservation, the foundation of urban spaces was a way to control Indigenous communities. The establishment of National Parks forced Indigenous communities to move to the city to survive on a subsistence level. Yet, at the same time the urban space, and its innermost entity, the house, was also a place of resistance and re-existence for Indigenous communities. Since the urban public space became the surveillance space and the place where interactions were allowed only under a particular form, the intimacy of the home was the fundamental place to keep Indigenous memory, language and beliefs alive.

Urbanity was the means to impose a way of life and a way of being. Such “codes of urbanity” were tools of control and constant surveillance of Indigenous people by the Argentinian state. In these imposed modern urban spaces, a racist, disqualifying, omnipotent, moralising gaze permeated Indigenous peoples’ lives through a permanent distinction between ‘good’ citizens who could read the codes of urbanity and those ‘uncivilised’ people who were seen as lacking the knowledge to read the codes.

These hundred-year-old stories continue in the present. The city of San Martín de los Andes is one of the urban centres established in the Southern Andes; it is an officially self-proclaimed intercultural city. Over the last years, public debates and negotiations around the management of the land located on the urban margins that was given back to the Indigenous communities gained visibility. The central question of debate was around the level of autonomy that Indigenous territories should have. The question was whether and how territories legally given back to the Indigenous communities be surveyed and measured. For example, should public streets be opened, and night lighting installed?

The question of interculturality brought with it notions of the “lack and excess” in how people read the codes of urbanity. If a marginal area of a town lacked public lighting, street layout and urban planning, it lacked urbanity. And at the same time, a large part of the Indigenous community was against those urban interventions.

Consider this: many marginal urban territories were flooded by mud, and it was difficult to get there by car. Yet, people resisted the development of streets. Why? I asked myself that many times when I was doing my PhD research. One day I saw a tourist with a 4 × 4 truck speeding across the area. I realised that the design of the settlement was not for the Indigenous peoples, the Mapuches, but for the tourists. In communal Indigenous territories there were no streets, people walked; there was no street lighting, people walked with torches. Streets and lights were not for Mapuches, but for tourists that could then use roads to visit villages. The rhetoric of urbanity hid the control of that Indigenous peripheral space. Urban development, based on the needs of people outside the Mapuche community, provided the justification to intervene on those territories and to satisfy other-than-Mapuche demands and expectations.

I spent the winter of 2015 and 2016 visiting the Mapuche Community located in the borders of the city of San Martín de los Andes during my PhD research. In June 2015, I was invited to the *We Tripantu* (a Mapuche celebration for the beginning of a new cycle) in the *Paraje Trompul*—a place located on the northern edge of the city that is part of the territories that had been removed and recently returned to the Mapuche community. I didn’t know how to get there. It was a very steep one-way mountain road. I asked if people there shared their cars, but they didn’t, they all walked. I arrived first so I waited at the school gate in the night darkness. Suddenly, in the distance, I saw little lights appear—like fireflies in the darkness of that cold winter dawn. They were the flashlights of the people walking together to the school.

Walking to school was a moment for conversation and encounter. Teachers, as they walked, shared what they planned to teach. This shared walking did not mean a lack of car as I had assumed. By crossing the city, climbing mountains, chatting, listening, sensing the territories together with others, humans and other-than-humans, they were welcoming and enjoying being in relation otherwise.

During the winter of 2016, different women from the Community shared with me stories about their lives, their childhoods, and the lives of their elders inside the Mapuche Community. One of them told me

that when she was young, she used to walk from the urban margins where she lived to the centre of the city where she went to school. Every morning she walked down the mountain with her sister and her father. They often arrived class late with mud on their white school pinafores or *guardapolvos*.¹ Her sister used to run away from school feeling ashamed to enter the classroom with her white pinafore covered in mud. But my interlocutor, in contrast to her sister, proudly displayed the visible stains to her classmates, saying how exciting it was to live in the community. Another woman, a Mapuche teacher, told me that one rainy day, after washing her white school pinafore, she dried it in the wood-burning kitchen. The day after, inside the classroom a student, covering up his nose and making obvious gestures of disgust said: ‘It smells like Mapuche in here!’ referring to the smell of smoke.

In Argentina the white school pinafore holds a series of specific meanings: the homogenization of citizenship, the erasure of social and cultural differences and the identification with a civilised (white) westernised citizen. It is a symbol of national union and equality, modesty, hygiene and neatness. Due to its homogenising, standardising and disciplining character it has been the emblem of codes of urbanity in school settings. What is the meaning of my interlocutor pointing to her white school pinafore stained with mud? What is the meaning of leaving a white pinafore stained not clean but smoky, instead of ironed, perfumed and starched?

These daily life stories point to liminality or “thin cracks” through which the cultural heritage of an other-than-Western way of being in relation sneaks in. They are as fine as the cracks through which light filters, preventing blackness, preventing complete erasure. Even when codes of urbanity prevail, in the most intimate space, in everyday life practices, those powerful remnants of other ways of being in relation, persist. There may be minimal, subtle, silent fragments that most of the time go unnoticed. Yet, for that very reason, they survive.

¹ The white school pinafore, *guardapolvo blanco* in Spanish, is the uniform used in the public primary schools in Argentina. Inspired by hygienist precepts, the white school pinafore looks like the knee-length overcoat worn by professionals in the medical field. It is mandatory, worn by teachers (mostly women) and students. It has been more than 100 years since the state recommended its use, considering it both a democratising and disciplining element, for social inclusion and for educational organisation and control. It is, to this day, a symbol par excellence of free public education in Argentina.

The stories I heard in the Mapuche Community speak of lack or excess in relation to the norm. Loud music, grotesque laughter, those who speak loudly, don't work hard, those who walk rather than drive cars, those who are always muddy and dirty. These situations of liminality are transgressive. They are gestures that break away and defy what the rules of urbanity dictate. They reveal the persistence of another way of being in relation. If the mud is life, where the strength of the ancestors dwells, then to connect with the mud is to interact with forces beyond modern-Western understanding of life, death, space and time. Walking can mean the misfortune of lacking a car, but it can also mean the desire and the opportunity to relate with people and nature, with being in territory otherwise.

Mariana: It is beautiful what you say, subtle and powerful. It seems that there has been a set of representations—strongly supported by visual images—which coalesce in what is seen as an “Argentine identity”. The wearing of a white school pinafore is linked to what is the right colour skin; the enforcement of short hair (in the case of men) and long combed hair (for women); a certain “moderation” in the forms, gestures and the way of speaking. Such aesthetic attributes are part of modern ethical values of control, discipline, work and effort... indispensable requirements to be and appear “Argentine”; to be people worthy of settling into national territory, of considering themselves owners of these lands and deploying their power.

Now, it is curious that national territory, particularly that of Southern Argentina, belongs—to a great extent—to foreign owners.² Argentine citizens have found it difficult to problematize the colonial erasure of the presence, legitimacy and territorial rights of communities pre-existing the conquest. Indeed, it is only in recent decades that Argentinians have become aware of such denials. But the situation is even more complex in the present since the information regarding who is owning Argentina's resources is now openly debated in the media. Along with the concern about economic dependency on international organisations is the growing awareness that the Argentinian territories themselves are owned—by law—by billionaires from the global North, who are icons of wealth and exploitation of people and resources.

² According to the National Registry of Rural Lands (RNTR) 5.57% of the rural Argentine territory, that is 16.253.279 hectares, is in the hands of foreigners (half of the surface of Italy). Moreover, 40% of the Argentine territory (around 65 million hectares) is in 1200 landowners' hands (INFOJUS, 2015).

How do you understand these growing concerns around ownership and exploitation of territories? Is there a need for collective questioning of the concept of tenure and property?

Agustina: To continue with your representations of what makes the Argentine citizen, I would like to add that all of those representations are supported by public laws and policies. For example, the laws that promoted “education on Argentine heritage”: these laws banned Indigenous languages in schools and imposed Spanish as the only language of instruction. The only history taught was one of national heroes, through celebrations and hymns, idealising one specific citizenship: that of the white, Western(ised), urban man (not even white Westernised woman).

These colonial strategies gave legitimacy to the submission and exclusion of difference, even if their attempts were not entirely successful. The imposition of one language, one flag, one official history, one religion, expressed the control of difference and installed (in law and custom) a model of society based on domination—what the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano has named coloniality (Quijano, 1992).

The legitimacy of the subjugation of difference led to the public denial, the rejection and the shame of being Indigenous, and therefore, of not “being worthy” of establishing an urban community of citizens. Although many privately resisted this subjugation, shame is the feeling that is repeated in each of the stories I heard. The shame is not something of the past, it is also experienced by the people of my generation who, during childhood, learned from their parents to hide, deny and to be ashamed of their Indigenous identity, language, memory and beliefs. The current processes of Indigenous re-identification and “dignification” (as people name it within the community) of being Mapuche, is linked, precisely, with the rejection of shame. I point to this to understand why it has been difficult to problematize the question of the presence, the legitimacy and the territorial rights of the communities that pre-existed conquest of the land. In recent decades, with the recognition by the State of the pre-existence of Indigenous communities to modern state, silenced stories are emerging which reveal that the community life in these peripheral territories existed before the white Western settlers who, with extraordinary effort and sacrifice, settled, populated and civilised those hostile lands as official history stated.

Within historical and geopolitical processes of colonial domination and independence in Latin America, the South Andean region is a periphery

in relation to urban centres of power. The South Andean territories were geographically disconnected from the urban centres founded along the Royal Road (or *Camino Real* in Spanish) of the colonial period, the road that during the colonial period linked the Port of Buenos Aires with the Alto Peru. These territories entered modernity as an empty space on which to expand productive frontiers; a land rich in resources that had been wasted, land favourable for development, a space without a past and with full possibilities for the future. The systematic policy of transferring public land to private hands through donation, sale or reward for services rendered to the Nation (such as the financing of military campaigns) produced large concentrations of land in few hands, not only foreign but also local. The complicity between local elites and international interests consolidated colonial relations after independence. Once again, an illustration of what Quijano called coloniality.

We have now an opportunity to question collectively the ideas of possession and property. It is a far-reaching debate. It is important to question the notion of individual property and recover the idea of community property. It seems to me that the first step would be to rethink the collective, and from there, open the way to debate ownership. Since the appropriation of these territories by the national states, the land has been classified by its use and by who owns it. The notion of ownership is so strong that even the Indigenous communities that have effectively managed to legally return to their ancestral territories are considered owners. But for Indigenous people, land is not a property. However, to receive territorial restitution they had to accept the idea of ownership. Through this process, they managed to add a new figure to the constitution: Communal property. The figure of “Community property” was the way Indigenous communities were able to meet the requirements, within the limits of the modern state and with its legal tools (within modernity, but on its margins).

It is important to review our history and rethink our future. In this Southern Andean space/time, a series of highly conflictive situations converge. On the one hand, we can no longer continue ignoring, postponing, or denying the existence of Indigenous peoples and their pre-existence in these territories—according to the Constitution, they are the legitimate owners. On the other hand, we cannot ignore that the access to

these lands and their resources have been handed over³ to foreign millionaires and multinational corporations who legally own them. Although we cannot undo this completely, we can stop its advance. Local movements that have spent decades of continual struggles have reached national and international visibility.⁴ This moment of profound civilizational crisis is an opportunity to reflect on the process and undo the restraining of other ways of seeing territory.

Mariana: These are situations of translation; that is to say, instances in which to be able to understand or to establish a dialogue, something must be “lost”, in meaning or sense.

On the one hand, these processes—which go far beyond the mere issues of language—sink into cultural distances that integrate different ways of feeling and thinking. If Indigenous communities constantly renounce their own meaning making and senses (their deepest ways of inhabiting the world) it is worth asking ourselves what we are losing or are willing to lose, from the Western senses, in pursuit of an effective intercultural encounter. I am referring to how we transcend the meanings behind the control of people, land and body at the institutional level, which appear in the different areas of state administration. I understand

³ The plundering, handover and “foreign takeover” (*extranjerización*) of lands has been going on for more than a century in Argentina, as have the claims and struggles of indigenous peoples to recover them. From 1880, the Argentinian State applied a “systematic policy of transferring public lands to private hands through the donation, sale or reward for services to the Nation [the killing of indigenous populations]” (Bandieri, 2005). Donations were established by law to encourage colonisation (Minieri, 2006). After the indigenous erasure at the end of the nineteenth century, the lands taken were ceded to investors, giving rise to the large livestock companies of foreign capital. This process took place within the framework of legal disorder that protected speculation and hoarding in the hands of foreign actors (Vazquez & Sili, 2017). The English company “The Argentine Southern Land Co.” (renamed *Compañía de Tierras del Sud Argentino* at the time of the Malvinas war), for example, received almost a million hectares in Patagonia as a gift from the nation. By the end of the twentieth century, a new cycle of acquisitions by external investors was consolidated. The most emblematic example is the Benetton group that acquired the *Compañía de Tierras Sud Argentino*, accumulating 900,000 hectares (Forty times to the City of Buenos Aires.) (Minieri, 2006, pp. 7–9).

⁴ In recent decades, denunciation of land foreignization has achieved national and international visibility and circulates in social discursivity. An example of this is the public support in 2004 of Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980, to the Mapuche people in their struggle to recover their ancestral lands, who stated that “If we don’t stop this intrusion we will live in exile in our own land” (Macarenhas, 21 August 2006).

that this is a key question for those within social studies and humanities who are committed to diversity.

On the other hand, the distance between cultures does not come just from different meanings and senses but fundamentally from the way they are produced; something that goes far beyond language; but what we know as forms of “representation” of culture and meaning are the last thing the West would be willing to leave behind.

In academic fields, but also in the general social arena, the dominant representational modality is the verbal one, with all the semantic restrictions that this implies. It is enough to remember that scientific texts—rationally used, unlike in the field of arts, such as poetry or literature—are defined through a limited and limiting series of logical articulations. The format of academic texts requires a way of structuring that constrains the emergence of other (what are perceived as non-rational) senses. Indeed, those who decide to break these semiotic patterns of construction place themselves outside scientific knowledge, appearing as art or in a diverse cultural framework, with all the institutional exclusion that this implies.

The Andean cultural horizon is simply not comprehensible by Western rationality. It cannot be covered from the logical and linear linguistic sign because the deep matrices of its senses are different, strongly marked by the notion of circularity. It is a founding pattern that appears both in its landscapes and in the way verbal discourse is displayed. It is manifested in its iconography (which entirely seals the mountain range by petroglyphs), ceramics and the idea of inhabiting itself, which, from a Western perspective, would be linked to architecture, urban planning and conservation. Only through ethical and aesthetical assessments of multiple materialities would it be possible to take a glance at Andean epistemology from these otherwise forms of representation (pictorial, sculptural and architectural).

Given this, how do you understand the different ways of inhabiting, between the Indigenous cultures of South Andes and the Western cultural matrix?

Agustina: You ask what we are willing to lose from the Western knowledge to allow a true intercultural encounter. Your question inspires me to ask a further question—how much more will we lose if we do not consider other perspectives? The Mapuche poet Liliana Ancalao (2018), wrote:

I’m talking about an ancient language and the ignorance of men who mapped a country over a territory full of names, elements, and meanings, silencing it. I’m talking about what we lost. All of us.

All of us who were born without knowing the names of every plant, every stone, and every bird of this land.

I woke up in the middle of a lake. In gasps I tried to give thanks but didn't know the words.

I resonate with what Ancalao raises about the plurality that has been deprived to “all of us”—the knowledge that all of us lost. What would we all gain with an effective intercultural encounter?

Looking at the different ways of inhabiting helps us to reflect on what you expressed about the distance between cultures as a consequence of the way of producing meanings and senses; and not as a result of the different meanings and senses themselves. Under a broad conception, inhabiting the world, as a practice, is a continuous process anchored to a body, a territory and a specific social and historical context. Inhabiting the world is a collective process embedded in a network of relationships woven through time and marked by a particular way of relating. In this sense, based on my own journey, I understand that the deep network of relationships between the territorial, the ancestral, the spiritual and the communal, is central to understanding the inhabiting of the South Andean Indigenous cultures.

Following up on your comment around circularity as a relational matrix, I can add that the gap between the different ways of being in the world—in this case between South Andean Indigenous culture and Western culture—reflects the conflicting distance between the founding elements of their relational matrices.

Without intending to essentialize, and without ignoring the complexities and heterogeneities within them, it is understood that the Andean relational matrix is based on a life-affirming relationship that is sustained in the care of all beings and the care for the reproduction of life. Contrary, and given its colonial origin, the relationship of domination and control of nature and people for exploitation and consumption are constitutive of the modern Western relational matrix. This last clearly does not represent all of Western culture. There are deep life-affirming Western struggles that question and manifest against this relational mode.

The Andean relational matrix sustained in care is based on the conception of equality between the various forms of life and therefore on the intrinsic right of the different forms of life to regenerate themselves. In contrast, the most predominant relational matrix of the West, sustained in domination, is based on the conception of hierarchies between humans

(since the invention of the idea of race), and between humans and nature. The Andean world view is based on a circular perspective in which human beings are part of the weave, while the Western is grounded in a linear hierarchical perspective in which “The Man” (male, Western, urban, white, heterosexual, able bodied) takes the highest place.

Care for life and its reproduction contrasts with violence produced by domination and exploitation—founding characteristics of a relational matrix that since the emergence of the Enlightenment and coloniality dominated the world. This implies moving from the centre the care for the human and for the individual, to bring instead the care for the capacity reproduction of the complete weave of life. Care for the plurality of life seeks to protect the complete weave of life. Ontologically, each being in this weave occupies a vital place for continuity. Therefore, to protect life is to make room, to keep a safe space for each being to develop its life course and to regenerate. Circularity, from the Andean perspective, is going back to the origin. This stands in contrast to the Western Enlightenment conception of unlimited growth in pursuit of progress and (economic and political) development, in which the direction is linear, away from the origins. Posing the idea of returning to the origin helps us to understand how growth can come from the cultivation of life. Learning from the experience of the South Andean cultural horizon invites us to make room for the plurality of worlds and to rethink modern/colonial Western practices. This implies positioning the West as a place of reception, letting be rather than doing, becoming affected and therefore becoming vulnerable, letting vital processes take their course as decolonial and feminist political ecology approaches invite us to do.

Mariana: Isn't it remarkable the way in which these considerations have reappeared, although we are not sure precisely how or where from, and have now begun to circulate in general social discourse? Discussions on (the promotion of) interculturality seem to have generated the possibilities of emergence of this kind of engaged understanding with the otherwise to the West. I would caution us here, there is a trap. The notion of “worldview” has served to position non-Western cultural heritages such as the Andean worldview in a space of distant gnoseological recognition, which means it cannot question the legitimacy of dominant Western institutions, governed by their epistemological rules, even those which are critical.

For instance, each of the axiological, ontological and semiotic concerns you raise necessarily become an epistemic model—a dynamic of knowledge that starts from a way of perceiving which appears completely unknown.

Take the question of naming the “natural world”: from the Western epistemological matrix of knowledge and its way of representing, plants are only considered in their ornamental dimension or in their instrumental possibilities. Biology, for example, has made—and continues to make—enormous efforts to classify minutely the South American flora to find its medicinal properties. Thus, each of the “discovered” varieties are observed and categorised according to these specific kinds of qualities: emmenagogues, healing, anti-fever, etc.

It is difficult to find a clearer example of the instrumental perception of the world, so lucidly denounced by critical philosophy since the late twentieth century. However, this pattern of knowledge remains completely intact in a field that is as important as medicine and related disciplines, such as biology or physics.

From the Andean worldview, this cognitive operation and way of approaching the natural world, implies nothing more and nothing less than losing the opportunity to encounter the different processes and experiences that each plant displays, of which those related to the physical, biochemical dimension, are just a small part.

It is important to be clear that cultural difference in the way of perceiving and understanding the world of “nature” is perfectly valid from the different perspectives through which the body is understood. But what is important to underline is that in an Andean perspective, the body (one’s own and others) is nothing more than a point in that knowing weave.

So, the difference can seem immeasurable, impossible to overcome; but this key epistemological feature of Andean culture—the circular knowing weave—is not given its epistemic status by the West but is referred to as part of an almost picturesque and distant “worldview”.

It is also intriguing how the body—that great unknown—has been returning in different ways to the scene of social theory, demanding its denied place. Anthropology of the body and emotions has risen as a subject of study in Performance Studies in dialogue with feminist theories.

How do you consider the place that the body has reached today in social studies and what elements do you think it is possible to contribute from the Andean cultural horizon?

Agustina: Your thoughts about plants recall for me a question: what is the purpose of building bridges across the plurality of knowledges? What is the purpose of the knowledge that we produce by encountering others? I continually return to these questions, trying to be cautious with the knowledge that others shared with me and with what I do with it from my privileged position in the academy.

As a decolonial researcher, I orient my academic efforts towards encountering perspectives otherwise to learn from them. However, this learning is not aimed at recovering specific knowledge about something in order to possess it or obtain something from it. Instead, I aim to learn about other ways of being in relation.

Mapuche women use plants for healing purposes, but they also relate to them in a very particular way. Before taking a plant from the ground, they ask permission to use it and benefit from its properties. Both the ritual of asking for permission, of expressing in words the reasons why the action is carried out, and the ritual of thanking the plant for providing its properties, have to do with the relational matrix between women and healing plants. The ritual accounts for the consideration of plants as entities, as a living part of the weave of life with rights to be and reproduce themselves. As Quijano says “it is not accidental that knowledge was considered then in the same way as property — as a relation between one individual and something else” (Quijano, 2007, p. 173). In this ritual example, the idea of the subject of knowledge and object of knowledge (and therefore objects of domination and exploitation) are diluted. The plants become subjects and the relationship is one of cooperation between subjects.

But, returning to your question, I understand that the body, like the territory, plays a preponderant role in knowledge production. When understanding the notion of inhabiting the world, as a process sustained in a historical, cultural, social and political weave that shapes and transforms it; the notions of body and territory become central to the deep intertwined meanings inscribed in dwelling. Knowledge is always situated in a territory and in a particular body that produces it. By accounting for the geopolitical and body-political location of the subject who speaks, we recover the partiality of perspective and in so doing can question the universality of knowledge. The situated character of knowledge (Castro-Gómez, 2005; Haraway, 1988) and the focus on the violence of Western domination inflicted on other than heterosexual, white, male bodies are the main points of convergence between feminism and the decolonial perspective.

From the Andean cultural horizon, it is possible to problematize the ownership of the body and reflect that, like the territory, the body is not a property. And, in the logics of coloniality, like the territories, racialized bodies have been property.

The Andean horizon shows us another way of understanding the body and territory, both part of a common weave. Andean cosmology teaches us to see that it is not possible to separate the body/territory from the spirit, and that each living being (body/spirit) has a place and fulfils a vital function in the weave of life. The Andean cultural horizon teaches us about our responsibility for care so that life can continue its regenerative process. From this perspective, care for the bodies/territories has a collective nature—it is caring for the indivisible weave of life.

Mariana: The expression you use regarding the Andean cultural horizon is very interesting: when you say that it “teaches us”, it reflects it’s the idea’s deepest sense on two levels: on one hand, it disobeys that dangerous idea, inherited from early Anthropology, which postulates that it is possible to know other cultural frameworks without questioning our own semiotic and cognitive habits. This early anthropological assumption has been strongly problematized from the decolonial perspective (Segato, 2018). But on the other hand, the idea of “letting ourselves be taught by other cultures” places science in a completely different position. It is no more about a science that “knows” and goes in search of its multiple “objects” or “subjects” of study to consequently “teach” the rest of society; on the contrary, it begins from an intentionally receptive position—less masculine and less imposing—to put Western science on an equal footing, from a dialogical position, with respect to what it is trying to address.

“to hold differences, be taught”

As such, this move constitutes an important feature of the decolonial movement as different from other theories which are critical of modernity; it aims to recover the cultural heritages silenced by the colonial enterprise.

Further, this emancipatory decolonial movement is not restricted to scientific production. The issue of care that you mentioned before is intimately related to the concepts of reciprocity and cooperation, which go completely against the grain of the current social scientific dynamics that are open only to a certain type of production of logical argumentation.

Research “products” (papers, thesis reports, books, etc.) are not materials or media designed to communicate with diverse cultural groups. Quite the contrary, these pieces strengthen intra-institutional communication, fuelled by information that comes from ‘international’ knowledge, perpetuating the extractive-academic-logic.

How do you understand decolonial research as an opportunity to “let oneself be taught” when the deep structures, the hierarchical dynamics—semiotic and socio-cultural—that we intend to transform by the decolonial move have not yet been modified?

Agustina: The desire to “let ourselves be taught” is profoundly valuable, although still unattainable. Bridging the distance that exists between those desires and the possibilities of learning from other relational matrices is where we are lacking. Reducing the expectations of what Western epistemology can do would be the first step in this direction.

The profound ancestral wisdom that inhabits the Andean cultural horizon is there. Yet, the very idea of “ancestral wisdom” refers to an almost mystical idea that the West find captivating and attractive, but continues to decontextualize, simplify and abstract from its epistemic status, through the notion of “worldview”, as you explain above. Moving towards an encounter with the deep and unintelligible processes that the southern Andean ancestral wisdom holds means establishing a dialogue, which is not easy.

“Research outputs” are specific products resulting from research processes. Even in the research carried out by those positioned on the margins of modern Western epistemology, investigative “products” continue to be reductions, abstractions, translations into an academic language, of an entire universe that has been opened and shared to us. When translating lived experiences, we reduce all that richness to what (from our own perspective) we can understand. All the abundance that comes from other processes, all that immensity that exceeds the scope of our understanding frameworks, becomes negligible or unintelligible, or “in-significant” as Zulma Palermo (2004) describes it.

The desire to build bridges with other ways of being and relating pursues a profoundly valuable goal: epistemic, social and environmental justice. However, in the movement towards understanding, interpreting, and translating those interpretations to a specific language, all that shared richness is reduced and simplified. This universe of meanings alludes to something much deeper than we (the Western-based scholar) think we encompass. Can we understand from our Western interpretative matrix

the deep relational processes that unfold in the ritual of asking permission and thanking the plants before extracting their medicine from them? Even if we cannot fully understand it, we should not reject the invitation to let ourselves be taught.

These reflections seek to contribute to bridging those gaps between diverse cosmologies. My encounter with others made possible my awareness of coloniality. My encounter with other perspectives, in specific territories and with specific bodies that have suffered (and continue to suffer) in their own flesh the colonial wounds, has opened up the possibility of becoming aware of processes that were foreign to my Western experience; to unveil previously naturalised situations. Encountering others transforms one's perspective. After knowing the experiences marked by coloniality it is not possible to be indifferent to it.

Even when the deep structures have not been modified, the invitation to let oneself "be taught", and to then return to academia to reflect epistemologically on what has been learned together with those bodies that have been traversed by coloniality, has transformative potential. This practice is within the framework of our possibilities and contributes to the emergence of the plurality of the world. The path we move on is that of the fight against oblivion, based on the recovery and reconstitution of the memory that inhabits plural bodies and territories. We could move forward by making a turn, from an active position to a passive one, by listening, by letting oneself be permeated by the experiences of others. The challenge would then be to lean on the memories and stories that others share with us, nourish ourselves with them, and work hard to keep them active, alive; against the destruction of the plural heritage and the extraction of life at all levels, human and other-than-humans.

Among our effective possibilities of generating transformations is that of enriching a critical movement that contributes to the struggle so that others can take part. This does not end simply in criticism. The critical review would be a reflection on ourselves. We would go to meet others, but this time not to understand what those others think and establish intercultural and inter-gnoseological dialogues with them (something that seems ambitious and unrealizable), but to revisit what we think of our own trajectories once we articulate with others. And that would require expanding our reception and listening capacity. The invitation to let oneself "be taught" is the invitation to become available, permeable, sensitive—to make room to host differences.

A FEW CLOSING WORDS UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN...

Throughout this conversation we have exchanged considerations around some of the most challenging questions of our time—starting from the consideration of the “urban” in the Andean-colonial encounter, we moved into the question of knowledge in its different manifestations and ended with the need to rethink and listen otherwise.

Listening to the Andean perspective, which is not homogeneous but singular and characteristic of an entire “space-culture”, we have tried to think with the readers about questions related to the different ways of inhabiting territory, understood from a broad and circular conception, as an extension of our own body.

The Andean perspective understands the individual and collective are part of the general body of nature within a circular matrix. This matrix associates the body with abstract and symbolic, mental or cultural processes through a bond of mutual affection.

We think that the investigation and understanding of these issues is currently emerging as particularly challenging, configuring a space of knowledge that is given voice in different spaces of research and discipline such as Psychoanalysis, Gender Studies or Decolonial Studies at times overlapping with FPE, by bringing centrality to the (collective or individual) body and sensory, by calling attention to care for humans and other-than-humans, and fundamentally, by striving towards being, doing and knowing otherwise. In this sense, this space of knowledge is open to knowing and wisdom coming from non-Western spaces, such as Andean Indigenous cultures, that as we have tried to show through this conversation, have essential contributions to this moment of re-founding a new way of understanding life.

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