



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Bearing witness

Testimonies, translations, and ontologies in the Andes

Andrew CANESSA, *University of Essex*

Comment on de la Cadena, Marisol. 2015. *Earth beings: Ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

For those who have been following the “ontological turn” in anthropology, Marisol de la Cadena’s work is well known; in *Earth beings* (2015) she makes a book-length contribution seeking to demonstrate that nonhuman earth-beings are not only legitimate subjects of enquiry but also have an ontological status that cannot be denied.

On a more prosaic level, however, de la Cadena’s latest book follows in a well-established tradition in Andean ethnography of *testimonios*, that is, of exploring the life stories of individuals in order to gain particular insight into people’s lives, especially those that have been politically active. Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing’s (2011) *From the mines to the streets* is a particular recent example but the life of Gregorio Condori Mamani (Valderrama Fernández and Escalante Gutiérrez 1996) also comes to mind in this context. In rendering intelligible the world of Gregorio, Ricardo Valderrama Fernández and Carmen Escalante Gutiérrez are deeply concerned with (mis)translation and make great efforts to allow Gregorio to speak for himself—as well as Asunta Quispe (who has less to say)—and offer a bilingual text in the original publication. De la Cadena follows in this long and important tradition of Andean ethnography of witness, accompanied by an acute awareness of the perils of translation, although she does not explicitly situate her work within it.

In terms of its human subjects, *Earth beings* draws principally on extensive interviews with Mariano and Nazario Turpo, father and son who are both *yachaq*, a



word that quite simply means “one who knows,” although in contemporary Peru such people are often referred to as shamans. Marisol de la Cadena interviewed both extensively and is deeply concerned not only to tell their tale—in Mariano’s case a particularly compelling one—but also to do so in a way that honors their ways of knowing. The book is exemplary in its concerns for collaboration between the anthropologist and her interlocutors, and she is very open about moments—sometimes amusing ones—of confusion and misrecognition. As such, there are really three protagonists in the book: the two Turpos and the anthropologist, and although sometimes such a focus on the anthropologist can distract the reader, on this occasion the honesty and humility with which she approaches her subject simply adds to our understanding of the process of collecting anthropological data and the role of the anthropologist within that.

In this case her principal subjects were “known” to the outside world before she met them and in this case the anthropological gaze on the individuals followed, and then contributed to, a broader interest. Both Turpos were, in their time, feted internationally, Nazario traveling to the United States to participate in an Andean Community exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC. Transformed from *yachaq*s into shamans, men such as Mariano and Nazario straddled worlds that, although there are mistranslations at every level, are not—a point stressed in the book—ultimately incompatible since they travel so effectively between them. If their knowledge was rooted in the life-ways of Quechua-speaking peasants, it also included within its range globalized knowledges of shamanic power, global warming, and antibiotics; what appeared to be a dying practice is now flourishing as tourist demands for “Andean shamanism” offers men such as Mariano and Nazario an opportunity to earn a living. The globalized tourist industry has provided opportunities for people such as Mariano and Nazario, but there is no question that they are not subject to the deep historical injustices of lives as Indians in highland Peru, where people have struggled for many years against land owners and, more recently, the neoliberal state.

Earth beings offers an important corrective to the history of peasant struggles in the highlands, which has often erased the contributions of indigenous leaders who were often regarded, even by leftists, as passive participants in the process, ahistorical subjects, as it were. The account of how Mariano was hounded and imprisoned as he fought for justice and the return of his community’s lands is at striking odds with even leftist accounts of indigenous participation in these struggles. De la Cadena quotes prominent sociologist Aníbal Quijano, who asserted in 1965 that there were no indigenous leaders in the peasant movement. What is of particular significance is that today he is well known for his many writings on the colonality of power and offers a powerful critique of the very practice in which he himself participated in his youth. As de la Cadena asserts, in the very year Quijano was making such a pronouncement, Mariano, too, was in the capital city of Lima engaging in a struggle on behalf of his community, yet invisible to the Western narrative of history: the moving tale of Mariano’s struggle serves to insert people like him into the historical narrative. De la Cadena does not, however, stop here; in fact, she isn’t that much interested in conventional historical narratives of the linear sort with a quest to find empirical data in order to establish what happened—and in this she offers a clear departure from the *testimonio* genre: she seeks, rather, to



interrogate the whole notion of history and its utility in understanding Andean worlds and experience.

De la Cadena, as is the case with other ethnographers of the Andes, discusses in detail how the past and present fold into each other and are immediate before the subject. The Quechua word for eye, *ñawi*, is the root of the word for past, *ñawpaq*, that which stands before us or, literally, “that which is to the eyes” (2015: 129). De la Cadena stresses a well-established point from Andean ethnography, that there is no clear distinction between past and present; the key issue is not temporality but the “difference between the known and the unknown.” “The known and the unknown are made available, usually as stories, through tangible entities, human and other-than-human that take-place in-ayllu” (2015: 130), the *ayllu* being the Andean community. These stories emerge embodied “in the here and now of ayllu relatedness.”

De la Cadena’s work rejects historicity, especially one based on provable reality, in favor of epistemologies where earth-beings and others have a manifest role and the empirical basis of their existence or role becomes, ultimately, uninteresting: “rather than extending historicity to include nonhumans in events . . . I extend eventfulness to earth-beings—entities whose regimes of reality, and the practices that bring them about, unlike history or science, do not require proof to affirm their actuality” (2015: 150). Earth-beings are thus “eventful” but “ahistorical,” they have agency but are not subject to empirically based enquiry. This is because, for de la Cadena, earth-beings are in a “regime of reality” and she goes further than scholars such as Bruno Latour who accord historicity to nonhuman beings, since, for her, earth-beings in Peru are *ahistorical* and bring together “different onto-epistemic worlds.”

The Andean ethnographic record is clear that many Andean people inhabit an animated landscape where the mountains and the earth are beings intimately connected to the lives of people. In a related move she explains that people are not *from* a place but *are* that place. De la Cadena quotes a bilingual local schoolteacher, Justo Oxa, and his explanation of *ayllu*, the Andean community of people rooted in place, in terms of a weaving where “all the beings in the world” are threads that form the weaving (2015: 44), and relates this to Roy Wagner’s idea of the “fractal person” (1991: 163) as well as Donna Haraway’s (1991) notion of the cyborg where “one is not enough but two is too many” to understand how humans relate to space. That is, to put it simply, it is not possible to understand a human as a bounded individual but, rather, she or he is unintelligible as a subject without her or his connection to the community of humans and earth-beings that are the *ayllu*.

Mariano, according to Oxa, is a “being-in-ayllu” and this becomes a central phrase that is repeated throughout the book. It would have been helpful to learn what the original phrase was—we are not even told if it was in Quechua or Spanish—and this sits oddly with the frequency with which the original words are otherwise given in the book. The reader is left with a cryptic phrase without much sense of its origin, but I suspect that this is intentional, to disturb the reader’s complacency, to push readers to think differently; much of the writing in the book appears to have this aim.

This idea of *ayllu* is presented as a “more capacious ethnographic concept” than has hitherto been presented, but this would seem to sit very well with most ethnographic descriptions of the Andean community (some of these cited in a footnote)

that make clear the intimate interconnectedness between humans and other beings, especially the earth-beings. A reader unfamiliar with Andean ethnography would be no doubt surprised to learn that the relationship between people and space and the intimate connection between the two is, in fact, a staple of Andean ethnography but de la Cadena describes it thus: “As beings emerge through in-ayllu relations they take-place; their relational being in time is also their emplacement. Through in-ayllu practices, runakuna and tirakuna *take-place*: I have already used this phrase to stress the collapse of time and space enacted in-ayllu” (2015: 133). It begs the question why such a central element of Andean ethnography needs to be described in such an overly complex way that can’t but fail to tax the reader.

What is striking about the de la Cadena’s treatment of *ayllu*, the Andean community, is that, despite its centrality as an analytical tool we get very little sense of the contemporary community. There is some discussion of the community in the past as Mariano struggles to establish land rights, but Mariano and Lazario appear largely, and ironically, as individuals in these pages. Lazario, in particular, works for tourist agencies but we get very little sense of his role in the ayllu itself. Perhaps most importantly in a book that is so focused on ontological difference, we simply do not know to what extent the worldviews of ritual specialists such as Mariano and Nazario are shared by their neighbors. The voices in the book are those of two male ritual specialists and the anthropologist; those of, say, women and younger people in the community are largely silent. We hear more from the Jesuit priest and the *mestizo* schoolteacher than any woman from the community in this book. This would matter less if *Earth beings* were not so ambitious in its claims of presenting a world with profound ontological differences; it is not entirely clear whose worldview is presented here.

De la Cadena follows from an established body of work that sees the Andean world, not so much as people engaging with earth spirits, but one where people are ontologically inseparable from mountains and other earth-beings. Her signal contribution in this book is to insert earth-beings into the political struggle. Mariano’s struggles against the landlords are unintelligible without an understanding of the agency of the earth-beings who assisted in the battle. Thus, Ausangate, a prominent earth-being, “won the war” and here, de la Cadena insists, the epithet Won the War is simultaneously a description of Ausangate’s role as well as well as an ontological statement: “Ausangate *is* Win the War” (2015: 189). At this point, as elsewhere, de la Cadena interrogates Western assumptions about how things are related to each other, as well as notions of causality.

De la Cadena insists on rejecting the idea of belief with respect to earth-beings because, in so doing, she pushes them into the realm of epistemic reality and away from the realm of the supernatural. For Lazario, “believing” in the mountain Ausangate is not the same as believing in Jesus because the mountain is there to be seen every day of the week. What is there not to believe? For tourists (and President Toledo), they are engaging with indigenous religion, and for the local Jesuit, too, local practice is defined in terms that parallel his Christian faith. But de la Cadena’s interlocutors do not require “faith” to “believe” in tirakuna because, as she insists, they coexist; the earth-beings are manifest.

It is not clear, though, that the relationship with earth-beings is radically different to relationship that other people have with what we might call supernatural



beings. As even the most cursory reading of the history of the Conquest shows, the Spaniards arriving in the New World saw their God very much as an active participant in defeating the Indians and their patron saint, James, as a warrior, Santiago Mataindios, Saint James the Slayer of Indians. That is, surely, rather like Ausangate participating in the war between Peruvians and Chileans, the Christian God did much the same against Indians (and in many other conflicts). People may say they “believe” in Jesus but many Christians hold that they have a very immediate and intimate relationship with Jesus that involves, among other things, an intense love.

Nevertheless, de la Cadena insists that the relationship between people such as Mariano and the earth-beings cannot be reduced to “religion” or “belief.” It is one thing to say that to talk of “Andean religion” is to deny the holistic nature of relationships with earth-beings where there is no realm that can be reduced to “religion,” but surely that is true of many other parts of the world where the Enlightenment idea of religion as separate from life in general has not penetrated. As de la Cadena writes, “Thus what in the world of travellers, anthropologists, politicians, and priests may be ‘religion’ is also *not* religion, but interactions with other-than-human entities that are neither natural nor supernatural, but beings that *are with* runakuna in socio-natural collectives that do not abide by the divisions between God, nature, and humanity” (2015: 206). The problem is that a division between God, nature, and humanity is a feature of Western cultures and interactions with other-than-human entities that *are with* people is a key aspect of life for many people in the ethnographic record.

Herein is a radical departure from Andean ethnographies that, although they have noted the importance of the nonhuman in understanding people’s lives, generally pull short of asserting their actuality much less their agency. She thus argues for the recognition of nonhuman agents, the *tirakuna*, or earth-beings, in (a)historical processes. It is the eponymous earth-beings who are the true subjects of the book. The ambiguity registered here is because the discovery of Mariano’s archive offers evidence of his participation in history and de la Cadena cannot help but be drawn to them even as she rejects “history” for its coloniality.

“Mariano’s archive” refers to the ethnographic anecdote where a German photographer, Thomas Müller, sees Nazario about to use documents used in the lands rights case dating from the 1920 to 1980s to light a fire. These documents are “rescued” and come to the hands of the author who mulls over their status. This is an important chapter in the book because de la Cadena uses the incident as a foil to discuss history and how it relates to people such as the *runakuna* of Peru. She argues that it is not sufficient to heed Eric Wolf’s ([1982] 2010) call to develop an ethnohistory and complete the historical record because the historical record *per se* is a colonial practice that excludes, among other things, the eventfulness of beings such as *tirakuna*, earth-beings. De la Cadena’s concern is that extending historicity to subalterns, although part of an anticolonial project, may serve to include them within a coloniality of history and displace other ways of seeing the past and the present. “In other words, the ahistorical may be eventful without translation into a cultural perspective (a belief) on otherwise inanimate beings” (2015: 148).

De la Cadena seeks to displace documented history (and specifically the role of documents in understanding history) with a practice of reading the past that includes earth-beings in an ahistorical way. The problem with the reading presented

here is that there are many examples across the Andes of communities carefully guarding documents going back to the colonial period in order to support land claims. There is no argument that Andean peoples have long understood the power and place of written documents (Platt 1992) and it is not one that de la Cadena explicitly makes. One reading of the incident is that the documents in Mariano's archive have no power because the land dispute is resolved and no current land claim rests upon them. The pieces of paper have no use other than as kindling and so are thus used even though they are of interest to anthropologists such as Marisol de la Cadena who examines, translates, and scans them for this book.

It is not, however, sufficient for the author to note that the documents themselves testify to what we have learned: the earth-beings were understood to be protagonists in the tale even though they will never be historical figures; and they will remain protagonists so long as they continue to inhabit and indeed be the place where ayllu members live. It is worth underlining that here, as elsewhere in the Andes, people and place cannot be divorced from each other and neither can past and present since time is located spatially.

I have no argument against any of this, not least because I have made very similar arguments myself (Canessa 2012), as have many others. What I find difficult with the way these points are made is the compulsion to make them much more complicated and exotic than they really are. It is not just that the writing is difficult—often opaque and hard to scan—but that there appears to be little effort at clarity—rather the opposite: it seems that writing cryptically is valued over writing clearly, rendering difficult what might be more clearly expressed. I am not for a moment suggesting that de la Cadena is a poor writer because she manifestly can write beautifully but, rather, that she chooses to render her thoughts in ways that distance the reader from the subject, stresses ontological difference over common humanity, so the world of the *runakuna* appears exotic and almost unfathomable. It is quite possible that this reader is simply not intelligent enough to understand the prose, and I say this with no sarcasm, but I do wonder why it should be so difficult to present an ethnography to someone who, in this case, has been reading Andean ethnography his entire adult life. I can only conclude that it is the intention of the author to confound the reader through complex and unfamiliar prose and this does rather raise the question of who the intended or imagined readership is. What is interesting is that the one ethnography she cites with any frequency or depth (and there is a puzzling refusal to engage with other ethnographies that deal with very similar issues) is that of Catherine Allen (1988) who movingly and poetically describes the world of the *runakuna* of Sonqo with no apparent loss of ethnographic sophistication—quite the opposite, one might easily argue.

Earth beings is a bold and ambitious attempt to insert the “ontological turn” into Andean ethnography and for those already convinced by these general claims, it is no doubt a magisterial example. For readers less convinced, however, and particularly those familiar with Andean ethnography, the book may offer less of a radical turn in how the Andean world is to be understood but, rather, a compelling account of how two men have negotiated their way through national politics and global trends to make meaning in their own lives.



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Andrew Canessa
Department of Sociology
University of Essex
Wivenhoe Park
Colchester, Essex, CO4 3SQ
UK
canessa@essex.ac.uk