



DEBATE

Methods really do matter

A response to Marisol de la Cadena

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

We live in an age where the very foundation of evidence-based research as well as journalism is under serious threat. It matters. I am not suggesting that there is some unalloyed truth “out there” and that a confident rational approach espoused by Enlightenment scholars such as Francis Bacon, deaf to the ways in which knowledge is produced, is within easy reach. The postmodern critique of Western science is an important one and, within anthropology, the powerful critique of the discipline produced by James Clifford and George Marcus’ volume *Writing culture* (1986) that undermined the methodological confidence of the discipline continues to reverberate. One interpretation of the ontological turn in anthropology is that it is a reaction to these anxieties, as one of its main proponents has suggested (Holbraad 2017). At any rate, the discipline has been pushed to make itself more engaged, relevant, and radical in its understanding of human culture. There is a danger, however, and the danger is that in an admirable attempt to develop new critical methodologies, to provide new perspectives on the myriad ways of living in the world, we actually undermine the foundations of anthropological inquiry and that of social science more broadly. I can see the iconoclastic attraction of this, especially if born of a frustration at seeing subaltern people’s views and interests increasingly trampled by the neoliberal capitalist juggernaut. If this is to be the project then we must be especially careful that our methodologies be robust or we run the risk of undermining the very worldviews we seek to empower and protect. Marisol de la Cadena’s rebuttal of the critical points made by her readers and her sheer avoidance of others, all presented in a language that seeks not to clarify but obscure, with the



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repetition of phrases that are never properly explained, suggest to me that there she is undermining her very own political project.

One of the points I made that was not addressed was what *in-ayllu* was in Quechua or Spanish. The phrase occurs on almost every page of the book but its provenance is a mestizo school teacher (speaking in Spanish?) and it is no more clear who else uses it. Is this a phrase used at all by Mariano and Nazario? This is a methodological problem because it is not clear if the whole idea of *in-ayllu* is something borrowed from Oxa that de la Cadena adopts or a concept actually current among the people of the ayllu. Or, indeed, is *in-ayllu* one of those phrases that de la Cadena likes that does not occur naturally in English but seeks to capture something different and complex? There is no particular problem with analytical tools being borrowed but it is surely methodologically important to indicate that. The methodology of positing an ontological difference on the basis of one person who does not inhabit that ontology is at least worthy of some discussion.

Another methodological issue that I raised but that was never addressed is that of gender. De la Cadena does not wish to “walk shopworn analytical paths” such as patriarchy and quite clearly gender too. I am not sure what she means by “shopworn.” Are gendered systems of domination no longer of interest to us? We now know that Nazario’s wife has a name and that she is “charming, strong, [and] bright” but it is not sufficient, in my mind, to say that her friendship did not extend to Liberata, for the book pretends to go beyond presenting the worldviews of Nazario and Mariano but instead that of their community. To do that you have to, surely, talk to more than two related men. For all the concern about accurately understanding the ayllu, there is an astonishing lack of curiosity in what anyone other than those men have to say about it and de la Cadena is silent on the methodological implications of this. This book aims to challenge and disturb the complacent Western mind and offer radical new analytical categories but it curiously does so by silencing *all* the women of the community, and *all* the people who are not ritual specialists. Much is made of there being “more than one, less than two” ontologies but the number of people the author is drawing on for these ontologies is only fractionally greater than the number of ontologies she posits. I really *do* wonder what Liberata thinks about *tirakuna* and I am surprised by the lack of curiosity on the part of de la Cadena in hers or any other woman’s views.

One key aspect of the method of academic writing is acknowledging others who came before. This is in the very least disrespectful of the many ethnographers who have grappled with the concept of ayllu as social and physical space, as an intra-relation as well as an interrelation, and allows for an easy condescension when disagreement can be reduced to misreading. I don’t think I “miss” de la Cadena’s reading of “ayllu as relational form” because I dedicated a substantial portion of a book to the very issue (2012) where I am at great pains to point out that one cannot conceive of mountains without people and vice versa. The point of disagreement is not that I do not understand how some Andean people conceive of their world and how they relate as beings with others such as mountains but, rather, I do not hold that those mountains actually have agency. The key issue here is that one can be capable of deep understanding of others’ perspectives *without sharing them*. The point of difference is that de la Cadena asserts one must share them, holding them to be true: it is not that I fail to understand but that I decline the offer to believe.



Finally, I want to reflect on a very important political dimension to what is proposed in the pages of *Earth beings*. We are urged to suspend our Western perspective of reality and embrace the ontologically different worlds of others. This seems like an admirable project, a radical critique of Western thought, and a liberational move for subaltern peoples historically denied voice and agency. The problem is that it is an entry pass into a Trumpian world of “alternative facts.” In a moral university of multiple ontologies there is no place to stand where one can be evaluated against the other: all worlds become ethically equal. You cannot argue from empirical reality about environmental destruction and global warming because in my ontological world such things do not exist and your “science” has no ontological status in my world. And so, in a move toward the possibility of a de-colonial anthropology, *Earth beings* paradoxically nods toward a position that exacerbates colonial hierarchies.

Methodology matters.

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