



Places To Think With, Books To Think About **Words, Experience and the Decolonization of Knowledge in the Bolivian Andes**

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Abstract: Drawing on his anthropological field work in Bolivia in the midst of profound social and political change, the author examines the attitudes of various interlocutors toward knowledge, and in particular the important differences between “hegemonic theories of knowledge and indigenous epistemologies, between propositional and non-propositional knowledge, between knowledge of the world and knowledge from within the world, or between representationalist and relational ways of knowing.” He stresses that there is “no absolute dividing line,” no “clear-cut dichotomies after almost 500 years of asymmetric and colonial intermingling of epistemologies and knowledge systems from different traditions.” Relational ways of knowing and indigenous traditions of thought continue to be systematically treated as inferior but they are still present and are currently making themselves felt at the university.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Bolivia today, indigenous peoples’ political struggles are interlaced with issues of knowledge and truth. Indigenous cosmologies and “traditional” systems of knowledge are not only being politicized in an unprecedented manner; they also make possible a reading of reality and the national political process that differs from and undermines dominant views.

In order to introduce the topic of this

article—Aymara epistemology—I would like to mention a name which is not usually brought up in discussions on indigenous peoples and the decolonization of knowledge: the 18th-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus. I do so not in order to impress the reader with rare references, but in order to contrast the modern, colonial epistemology of Linnaeus’ scientific reason (see, e.g., Jensen 2009) with a subalternized indigenous epistemology. In his *Systema Naturae* (1735), Linnaeus recognized the

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status of humankind as a particular species within the animal kingdom. He had problems, however, in coming up with a solid argument for distinguishing human anatomy from that of apes. The ultimate criterion he used to distinguish humans from apes was the intellectual faculty of reason. Only humans, Linnaeus claimed, have rational and systematic means of producing and conveying actual knowledge of the world and of themselves. Or, as Tim Ingold sententiously frames the argument: “There are no scientists among the animals” (2000:238).

In 2010, a friend of mine, a young male Bolivian Aymara intellectual and indigenous activist whom I will call Antonio, likewise traced the distinction between humans and other-than-humans to the sphere of knowledge, but his grounds for doing so differ radically from those of Linnaeus. Human knowledge as transmitted through language, is pure ‘*siwsawi*,’ Antonio claims—i.e., it is talk, opinions, views and judgments of particular individuals. As such it is knowledge of a particular kind: it is knowledge concerning the *opinions* of other humans and nothing else. It is thereby significantly different from the non-linguistic, experiential knowledge that is lived-through and gained *in, from, with* and *within* the world; with and from plants, mountains, lakes, animals, and not least, certain knowledgeable places in the landscape, so called *wak’as*. This kind of knowledge, my friend claims, is ‘*ukamaw*,’ the way things are. While humans may tell lies, other knowledgeable constituent subjects of the world do not (with the exception of a few animal “tricksters”). While Antonio probably would agree with Linnaeus that there are no scientists among the animals, he also resolutely assures that there are no charlatans among the plants, no liars among the mountains.

Martha Hardman (1986) has shown that Aymara speakers constantly use linguistic ‘data-source marking’ (usually

by adding suffixes) in order to indicate whether they are speaking from personal experiential knowledge, from knowledge acquired through language, or from non-personal knowledge. In this article, the two first categories will be discussed in some detail. When Antonio distinguishes between the ‘*siwsawi*’ nature of the knowledge acquired through human language and the ‘*ukamaw*’ nature of the personal knowledge acquired through non-linguistic interaction with other knowledgeable subjects in the world, he is, according to Hardman, using an Aymara linguistic logic that is “so pervasive that speakers consider the matter to be part of the nature of the universe” (1986:114). Consequently, the failure to indicate from what kind of knowledge one speaks is indeed looked upon with suspicion: “Those who come into the community from outside and state as personal knowledge facts which they know only through language (e.g., things they have read in books) are immediately categorized as *cads*” (Hardman 1986:133).

This way of distinguishing between different kinds of knowledge according to their source and supposed reliability has interesting implications for the current process of ‘decolonization’ of the Bolivian university and the recent establishment of ‘indigenous universities’ as integral parts of the ‘decolonizing’ state politics launched by the Evo Morales administration since 2006. The meaning of ‘decolonization,’ though, is far from unambiguous in contemporary Bolivian society. In official discourse the government has proved a notable capacity of semantic and political stretching of the concept ‘decolonization.’ For instance, it may refer to ‘development,’ ‘industrialization,’ ‘modernization,’ ‘patriotism,’ ‘nationalization,’ and ‘economic growth,’ but it may also denote a forthright critique against, and political measures to respond to, imperialism, capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, sexism, developmentalism, ecological depredation, and (in the

area of knowledge production and education) eurocentrism and the overestimation of any tradition of thought coming from the North and the concomitant inferiorization of any indigenous tradition of thought (see Burman 2011:69).

Antonio was born and raised in a rural Aymara community. Currently, though, he lives more or less permanently in the city of El Alto and he studies political science at the university in La Paz. While he is far from being the only student with Aymara as mother tongue, the teachers lecture exclusively in Spanish. Although the Spanish that is spoken in the Bolivian Andes has been influenced in many ways by the Andean languages and that reference-making is an established academic practice, there is usually no explicit 'data source marking' going on from behind the lecture desk. So while the teacher, usually a non-indigenous male (although this is changing), probably thinks he is lecturing on the way things are, Antonio and his fellow Aymara students are more dubious. When the teacher speaks of how Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital* in London, without stating that he knows this from non-personal knowledge gained through human language (e.g., from a book), it appears as though the teacher speaks from personal experiential knowledge, and consequently, as though he had been there in London by the side of Marx's writing-desk and experienced for himself how the work was written. Since Antonio and his fellow Aymara students are well aware of the established claim that Marx published the first volume of his magnum opus sometime back in the 1860s, the teacher—due to his failure to perform a correct 'data source marking'—appears to be a talker with overly far-reaching claims of knowledge. It is not as though Antonio and his friends really think that the teacher is *actually* claiming to have been there in London in the 1860s; however, to them, the teacher has a confused way of dealing with different kinds of knowledge since he

disregards the implications of the fact that what he claims to know stems from different kinds of sources and that different claims of knowledge therefore have different degrees of trustworthiness. Hence, when teacher after teacher makes this kind of seemingly unsubstantiated and confused claims, Antonio comes to the conclusion that lectures and books are good enough if you are interested in people's opinions, ideas and judgments, but they are no more than *siwsawi*—words said, heard and read, not experience lived.

Here I pose a question: if books and lectures are basically about the opinions of specific individuals and proper knowledge is to be gained only in the experiential, non-linguistic, inter-relational dealings with and in the world, is there not a risk that a project aimed at decolonizing knowledge and decolonizing the university precisely by way of books and lectures—i.e., in a logocentric, or as I would suggest, a 'librocentric' project of decolonization—ends up reproducing the colonial epistemological asymmetries of knowledge production? On the one hand, then, this article scrutinizes the problems linked to the '*siwsawi*' nature of conventional academic knowledge in relation to a critical and creative process of decolonization; on the other hand, it explores the '*ukamaw*' nature of experiential knowledge and the prospects for this kind of knowledge to lay the fundamentals for a decolonial epistemological transformation of the Bolivian university and the recently established indigenous universities. Fundamentally, the paper addresses the question of what it means to know, what knowledge is, and what it means to be a knowing and knowledgeable subject in the Bolivian Andes today, in a context in which subalternized traditions of thought gain new urgency in new educational and political dynamics and different visions and claims of truth coexist, coalesce and collide.

II. EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE COLONIALITY OF KNOWLEDGE

In his comments to Nurit Bird-David's article "Animism revisited," Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1999:79) argues that epistemology is a quintessentially modern business and nothing that indigenous peoples have dedicated any significant intellectual efforts to come to terms with. There has been an issue of ontology, Viveiros de Castro argues, not epistemology. In as much as epistemology is understood to be a detached, decontextualized and disembodied scholarly discussion on the nature of knowledge for its own sake, he is certainly right; in this form it has hardly been an issue of great import for indigenous peoples in general. However, as Bird-David (1999:87) argues, "modernity has no monopoly over such questions," i.e., questions such as 'how do we know what we know?' and 'what is knowledge?'

A man who has articulated questions such as these from a perspective that hardly could be characterized as conventionally 'modern' is don Carlos Yujra Mamani, an Aymara shaman in his late 50s with whom I have maintained a dialogue on these issues for several years.¹ Being not only a shaman but also an influential and radical *indianista-katarista* activist, don Carlos embodies the current process in Bolivian society of indigenous activism and state politics intertwining with indigenous cosmology and ritual therapeutic knowledge (Burman 2010).² Don Carlos is not familiar with the term 'epistemology,' and although he is keen on constantly spicing his heavily Aymara-accented Spanish with new 'alien' terms, I doubt he would have used it if he was familiar with the term. To

¹ I use the term 'shaman' as the generic term for a great variety of Aymara ritual and ceremonial specialists, e.g., the *yatiri* (he/she who knows), the *qulliri* (curer), the *ch'amakani* (owner of darkness), the *amawt'a* (wise one).

don Carlos, issues that could be characterized as 'epistemological' are significant not for being topics of a specific, separate sort over which one could pore in a detached manner, but for being inseparable with questions of health, politics, ethics, and life itself. Hence, they are important. In the Andes, moreover, due to almost 500 years of imposition of 'strange' systems of knowledge—and I refer here to a colonial process of what Bolivian Quechua philosopher Victor Hugo Quintanilla characterizes as "the negation (...) of the indigenous cultures and the establishment of one culture, of one world, of one centre" (2009:128, my translation)—epistemological issues have turned into issues of urgency, especially so during the last decades of massive indigenous mobilizations. When one's ontology, one's cosmology and one's very existence are denied, epistemological issues gain in importance. For, if one's knowledge of reality is claimed by powerful and dominant Others to be false, then one's way of knowing reality would be erroneous—one's way of revealing the nature of the world would be mistaken. Thus, to defend an ontology is to defend an epistemology; one's way of knowing is revindicated, reclaimed and defended and 'how do we know what we know?' becomes a question of political, existential and even cosmological import. Colonialism produces anti-colonial reactions: political, cosmological, ontological and, by extension, epistemological resistance and insurgence. Thus, to actually understand why epistemology has turned

² *Indianismo* and *katarismo* are ethnopolitical ideologies which imbue the last decades of indigenous mobilizations and struggles in the Bolivian Andes. In order to understand the rise of the *indianista-katarista* movement in Bolivia, one ought to scrutinize (1) the post-revolutionary Aymara experience of continuing sociopolitical marginalization, second-class citizenship and discrimination and (2) the collective memory of colonial serfdom and indigenous rebellion (cf. Rivera 2003).

into an issue of import for indigenous peoples in the Andes we should explore what has been labeled 'the coloniality of knowledge' (see, e.g., Lander 2000; Walsh et. al. 2002; Mignolo 2005).

To speak of the coloniality of knowledge is to recognize that colonial domination has an epistemic dimension and that epistemic violence is an integral part of the colonial relations of power that characterize the world since 1492 (see, e.g., Dussel 2008). One outcome of this epistemological disequilibrium is that the knowledge of don Carlos, the Aymara shaman and activist introduced above is relentlessly inferiorized in relation to that of a scientist working within the discursive practices and cosmological assumptions of the dominant North. Academia and the university are, needless to say, vital components in the machinery that once established this epistemological asymmetry and that currently ensures that it is reproduced, in the global North as well as in the global South. Thus, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2008) argues that the North—in a process of epistemic colonial imposition and by actively producing epistemic absence where epistemic alterity is detected—diminished and continuously diminishes the world's diversity of experiences and knowledge systems, and hence its potentiality for reinventing alternatives to the hegemonic mainstream epistemology of the North. It has not only been a question of imposing a dominant epistemology upon colonial subalterns in order to replace 'local' systems of knowledge. An equally integral part of the colonial machinery of control and power has also been to know the Other (the South) in the hegemonic concepts and within the dominant logic of the Self (the North) (Santos 2008:30). The practice of anthropology as a whole was once launched with this mission in mind. In other words, and as noted by Edward Said (1978) and many others, knowledge is never innocent; knowledge production is never disconnected from the

mechanisms of power.

Just as it may be problematic to speak of *one* Aymara tradition of thought, it may also be problematic to speak of anything resembling *one* homogenous culture of knowledge in the sphere we call the North, not only because the North is by no means geographically restricted to Europe and North America, but also because all human societies manifest heterogeneity and internal contradictions. In other words, there is no one homogenous and consistent 'epistemology of the North' or one monolithic 'indigenous epistemology,' but a multitude of epistemological currents that overlap, merge and contradict each other. Nevertheless, an emphasis on the fragmentary and patchy nature of the world may lead us to overlook the asymmetric structure of power that underpins it. There is, definitely, an epistemological disequilibrium in the world. Knowledge produced within a certain tradition of thought, i.e., the scientific, modern tradition of the North, is held to be superior. And however heterogeneous that tradition may arguably be, identifying some of its characteristics is far from unfeasible.

The epistemology that has been positioned in the world as the hegemonic theory of knowledge is one that claims detachment of the known from the knower and the act of knowing. This epistemology largely stems from Cartesian metaphysics. In the words of Tim Ingold, it is an epistemology that supposes the "total disengagement of the subject from the world" (2000:169) and one that "introjects a division between mind and world, or between reason and nature, as an ontological a priori" (2000:391). Thus, the knowing subject is enclosed in itself and peeks out at a world of objects and produces supposedly objective knowledge of those objects. The knowing subject is thus able to know the world without being part of that world and he or she is by all accounts able to take a dispassionate view of it and, thus, to

produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context. This hegemonic notion of knowledge production generates discursive scientific practices and sets up interpretative frames that make it difficult to think outside of these frames; simultaneously, it actively represses anything that actually *is* articulated, thought and envisioned from outside of these frames.

III. PLACES TO THINK WITH

A year after the rise to power of Evo Morales, the shaman and activist don Carlos was employed on a special intercultural health project of the Bolivian Health Ministry with the task of integrating ‘indigenous therapeutic knowledge’ into the national health system. Only a few of his workmates understand him, he says. Most do not. “They only think with *piqi* (the head), that’s why they are fools,” he says. “How can they possibly know anything if they haven’t felt it?” he asks rhetorically, pointing to the intimate connection in Aymara concepts of knowledge between ‘reason’ and ‘feeling.’ In most ethnographic accounts of Aymara body-and-mind conceptualizations, ‘reason’ and ‘thought’ have been related to *piqi*, i.e., the head, while ‘feeling’ and ‘emotion’ have been related to *chuyma*. *Chuyma* is often translated as ‘heart’ since many of the qualities and emotions related to it resemble those that Spanish-speaking Bolivians say dwell in the heart. However, ‘heart’ in a less metaphorical sense is called *lluqu* in Aymara, and a more accurate translation of *chuyma* would be ‘lungs.’ On some occasions *chuyma* is spoken of as a specific organ with particular qualities. On other occasions, the meaning of *chuyma* is expanded to denote not only the lungs but the entire thorax, which, as Andrew Orta (1999: 865) has noted, is the “somatic seat of personhood.” Nevertheless, as will be discussed more

thoroughly below, there are also occasions when *chuyma* denotes something much greater than the thorax and when human subjectivity is not bounded by the human skin. As I argue elsewhere (Burman 2010), any clear-cut distinction between the faculty of reason supposedly located in *piqi* and the faculty of emotions supposedly located in *chuyma* would distort any understanding of Aymara epistemology and conceptions of body and mind. One thinks as much with *chuyma* as with *piqi*, or even more so. When don Carlos speaks of ‘feeling’ as the ground for ‘knowing,’ he does not speak of anything opposed to thought. According to don Carlos, emotions, just like thoughts, enter the human body through smells and winds and become consolidated in *chuyma*. These emotions are experienced and, accordingly, they give rise to personal experiential knowledge, i.e., ‘*ukamaw*’ knowledge; knowledge of the way things are. Thus, when I asked don Carlos and Antonio—the young Aymara intellectual and activist introduced above—if they think with *chuyma* or with *piqi*, both of them hesitated somewhat, then they gave quite forced answers without much substance. At the end of his answer, don Carlos seemingly got tired of me and asked: “Why do you ask such stupid questions? You should know better after all these years!” I think most anthropologists have experienced similar situations; one’s questions rest on premises that are not those of one’s interlocutor. In this case it was obviously so that my question rested on a false premise, namely that *piqi* and *chuyma* are categorically distinct and that they operate in different spheres. Most fundamentally, though, my question was based on the likewise false premise that thinking and knowing is something going on inside an autonomous subject. The entire question was thus predicated upon an initial ontological dualism between two separate worlds: the intentional world of human subjects (the knower) and the object

world of material things (the known). Don Carlos and Antonio claim, though, to live in but one world; an ever changing world characterized by political contradictions and social and cultural dynamics which they have to know how to deal with and how to adapt to in their movements between rural and urban contexts, but still, *one world*. And they claim to be intimately *connected* to other knowledgeable subjects in that world.

When don Carlos and Antonio speak in Spanish they often speak of 'being connected' (*estar conectado*) to the *ajayus uywiris*, *achachilas* and *awichas*, i.e., the ancestral, life-generating and knowledgeable beings of the cosmos and of the Andean landscape. At first I simply assumed that 'connection' meant some sort of relation binding together two or more discrete entities. However, when I realized that they use the terms '*mayisthapita*' or '*mayachata*' to speak of the same thing in Aymara, my understanding of 'connection' began to change. '*Mayisthapita*' and '*mayachata*' both suggest 'being one.' Being connected to the *ajayus uywiris*, then, implies being one with them. By participating in the same ritual interchange and flow of life, winds, smells, breathing, then, *ajayus uywiris* and humans become one. This oneness is experienced particularly powerfully at certain sacred and knowledgeable places (*wak'as*) and at particular moments (rituals). This oneness, moreover, tells us something essential about Aymara epistemology: not only do we think with other parts of our bodies than the head, but as knowing subjects, we are not bounded by our skin. Not only do we think with our *chuyma*, but when don Carlos answers that "we're in *chuyma* right now" to my question what *chuyma* actually is, he points towards the fact that we, as living sentient and cognizant beings, are part of the *chuyma* of *pacha*, i.e., 'to be in *chuyma*' is to be embraced by the cosmos and become one with it together with other living

sentient and cognizant beings, human and other-than-human, and to think and know *with* them. Consequently, to ask as I did whether one thinks with the head or with the lungs is not only a proof of ignorance, but a quite irrelevant question.

When Antonio tells me that he thinks with both his head and his lungs, but also with *pacha*, the cosmos, and with certain *wak'a* places in the landscape, he overturns what hegemonic epistemology has established as 'thinking' and 'knowing.' And fundamentally, he goes far beyond any subject-object dichotomy. Being one with, and experiencing *with* and from *within*, what conventional, dominant epistemology would label 'the object of knowledge,' knowledge does not have to take the detour through words, and what is more, it is even more trustworthy if it does not. As Ingold (2000:99) claims: "the conditions of truth (...) lie not in the correspondence between an external reality and its ideal representations, but in the authenticity of the experience itself." To be one with the subject matter of knowledge and to experience the world from within indeed give rise to authentic experiences. Only in a representationalist theory of knowledge and an ontological dichotomy between mind and nature (a Cartesian epistemology) is the correspondence between inside (thought, language) and outside (material world) relevant. What we are dealing with here is different—it is a participatory understanding of thought and knowledge. If representationalist logocentrism considers that human language ideally provides a direct access to 'reality,' then this would be its opposite.

What don Carlos and Antonio manifest is an epistemology of engagement (Ingold 2000:216) or a relational epistemology (Bird-David 1999) with an ontological starting point of oneness. This means that *pacha*, the cosmos, enters directly into the constitution of our subjectivities, "not only as a source of nourishment but also as a source

of knowledge” (Ingold 2000:57). To the shaman and activist don Carlos, the nourishing and the knowledging dimensions of the world are intimately interlaced. Winds and smells make us think and feel because they enter our bodies through our *chuyma* and they become part of us; they think through, with and from within us and make us experience and sense the world, in a sense, they teach us by becoming one with us. The same goes for plants, water, minerals and animals. They teach us as they feed us. They make us live and think, because they enter our bodies and become part of our beings, be it for a moment or more permanently. In the same manner, we think and experience through, with and from within *pacha*, and especially through, with and from within the *wak'as*, the sacred and knowledgeable places in the Aymara landscape. To know the world is to sense it and to be one with it. This is, of course, only comprehensible in a cosmos that is itself sentient, knowing and responsive and in which social relations between knowledgeable beings can “override the boundaries of humanity as a species” (Ingold 2000: 107).

A discussion of notions such as these may easily turn abstract and disembodied from the very context within which they originate. Let me therefore once more anchor this discussion in a specific Aymara lifeworld.

Wara is a woman of Aymara origin who was born in the city of La Paz during the Banzer dictatorship in the 1970s. Her grandparents migrated from the countryside to the peripheral areas of La Paz in the 1950s, where they took up low-status occupations. Her parents, with experience of discrimination and racism due to their origin, thought it would be best not to teach her the Aymara language. Accordingly, like many urban men and women of her age, Wara does not speak more than a few words of her grandparents' mother tongue and her sense of 'Aymara identity' has been far from obvious but instead has given rise

to existential queries. When she was studying at the university, Wara's queries were given a frame of social and political struggle within the *indianista-katarista* students' movement and colonialism was identified as the root cause of her sense of having a denied 'self' and dwelling in a denied world. To Wara, colonialism presents itself not as some imposed 'other' but rather as a feeling of loss, of incompleteness and of physical mutilation. Showing how metaphors of colonialism as collective bodily mutilation can be experienced in the individual body (see, e.g., Burman 2009:121-2), she says: “I have always felt emptiness or as though a part of my body was missing, a foot or an arm somewhere.”

Approaching Aymara shamans and engaging in ritual practice at sacred *wak'a* places has been a way for Wara to deal with this. When she prepares an offering for the ancestral and knowledgeable beings that constitute these places, she directs her thoughts and embodies particular movements and postures. For every offering Wara prepares, her ritual skills improve and she feels that her own *sarawi*, i.e., her way of doing things, comes to resemble her idea of the *sarawi* of the ancestors. She begins to experientially approximate 'proper' Aymara order in the world and in her self. The completeness of the offering becomes coextensive with her own completeness. Wara says: “During rituals and in the sacred places I feel complete, and I feel that the ancestors are there among us in the circle, and I feel that nothing is missing now.”

The most well-written and profound ethnographic account of this would not be enough for accomplishment of this completeness. Bodily ritual practice and experience is required. Ritual practice involves both '*sarawi*' and '*amtawi*,' doing and knowing, acting and remembering. As she engages in ritual practice at *wak'a* places, Wara feels her body move in accordance with the order of the world and that

she imbibes a 'proper' system of knowledge. By remembering and acting in accordance with this knowledge, she becomes re-membered. To Wara, it is a transformative experience of becoming one with *pacha*, the cosmos, and with her own origin. When the offerings are handed over and burned, Wara senses that "the ancestors recognize you." This recognition is mutual. By leaving the city, climbing the mountains, preparing the offerings, and handing them over, Wara recognizes the presence of the *achachilas* and *awichas* in the landscape, be that in stones, rocks, mountains, lakes or animals, and she reaffirms their status as ancestral beings. By accepting her offerings, the *achachilas* and *awichas* recognize Wara as a person, and most importantly, as their granddaughter—an Aymara person. Thus, to have actual knowledge of the world and of the ancestral beings therein, is to have experienced them, to have shared with them and to have become one with them, and thus, to have thought *with* them. And to have actual knowledge of the nature of one's existence is to have experienced this oneness, or as don Carlos and Antonio calls it: *mayisthapita*, *mayachata*. In this case, ritual practice establishes the conditions for knowledge to come about; to reveal knowledge as it is present in the world and to make the participants *attentive* to the world. What we know is inseparable from how we know and there is no distinguishability of the knower and the known. Knowledge is therefore not *of* the world, but happens and grows *among* its different knowledgeable constituents and from *within* it.

There is, then, nothing esoteric about 'thinking with places'; it is rather a way to produce knowledge from beyond Cartesian dichotomies such as nature-culture and object-subject and from beyond the hegemony of logocentric and librocentric epistemologies. Experience is certainly central to the Aymara epistemology. However, as we shall see now, a certain

kind of words also plays a crucial role in Aymara knowledge production.³

IV. MEDICINE WORDS

Qulla means medicine, *aru* means word. *Qulla arus* reside in the *chuyma* of any true shaman. They are words that originate in the lungs, not in the head; they are words that hold the power to cure. In order to understand what it means to cure in the Aymara context we would have to look briefly at Aymara notions of illness (for a more exhaustive account, see Burman 2010). The Aymara world is imbued with *ajayus*, conventionally translated as 'spirits.' The *ajayu* is a prerequisite for the flow of life, a requirement for all varieties of existence. Where there is life, there is *ajayu*. However, the Aymara *ajayu* is not a Cartesian 'ghost in the machine.' Nor is it a 'soul' in the sense of a permanent and stable personal spiritual core. *Ajayus* are all around us. They permeate the landscape and place, being and existence, body and mind; they make us live, feel and think. The beings that are labeled 'Andean deities' in conventional ethnography are no more nor less than different *ajayus* supervising and allowing the flow of life through all forms of existence.

However, there are also other *ajayus*. There are harmful *ajayus* that make people step out of the flow of life and enter other flows where there is no reciprocity. There are 'strange' *ajayus* that cause disorder, illness and even death. Most illnesses in the Aymara world are explained through a system of therapeutic knowledge in which these 'strange' *ajayus* play a crucial role.

³ Moreover, Tristan Platt (1992: 138) and others have shown that written words in the form of historical documents are perceived to have power and that they therefore are stored cautiously by indigenous authorities as fundamentals of historical legitimacy and communal land rights. However, these dynamics are beyond the scope of this article.

Healthy, friendly and socially integrated persons are so because of their oneness with the *ajayus uywiris*, i.e., the protective, benevolent ancestral beings. By the same token, sick, aggressive and antisocial persons are so because of their oneness with the strange *ajayus*. However, the strange *ajayus* are not considered to be thoroughly evil spirits. They are unreliable, though, and since they have the power to cause misfortune in the world, they are often likened to the white, colonial oppressors, the *q'aras*⁴; they are exploitative, abusive and 'strange.' Moreover, they enter people's bodies, minds and lungs and cause illness and distorted views and understandings of the world. Don Carlos explains it thus: "Strange spirits enter. That's why they speak badly. Like Sánchez de Lozada⁵ and [George W.] Bush; this person is sick, that's why he kills people." This quote reveals an interesting fact that I explore elsewhere (Burman 2009 and 2010): Aymara shamans often speak of colonialism in terms of an illness (an imposed 'strange' power causing disorder and a distorted view of the world). Likewise, they speak of decolonization in terms of a cure.

There are many different therapeutic practices to deal with the illnesses caused by 'strange' spirits, but the use of *qulla arus*, medicine words, is central to many of them. *Qulla arus* are used for guiding people back

⁴ *Q'ara* is the Aymara term for Bolivians of European descent. It literally means 'peeled' and its usage is often explained by Aymara people with an anecdote about how the Spaniards came to what is now Bolivia 'without anything, no women, no belongings, no land,' i.e., peeled. The dominant are socially and culturally 'peeled.'

⁵ Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, "Goni," was President of Bolivia twice. His first mandate was from 1993 to 1997, and the second was from January 2003 to October 2003, when a massive indigenous uprising forced him to resign and flee to the US. Sánchez de Lozada is currently being investigated for human rights violations and genocide on account of the atrocities committed during his last weeks in power.

into the relational, life-generating fields of the cosmos, and for disengaging them from the relational fields of 'strange' spirits. They are also a way to disclose knowledge. However, the *qulla arus* are not words for *transmitting* knowledge to people, but for *guiding* people's attention in a world of human and other-than-human knowledgeable social subjects and to induce people to experience for themselves the way things actually are, i.e., to create 'ukamaw knowledge,' as Antonio calls it, or to 'sense the world' as don Carlos says. When don Carlos speaks *qulla arus* to people, nothing is actually passed on. It is more as though he is telling a story in which the attention of the listener is guided into the story, a way of conducting people's attention along certain paths (cf. Ingold 2000:190). This way, *qulla arus* are "instruments of perception" (Ingold 2000:146); they educate one's attention and make one see into the world rather than merely look at it. As such, they are quite different from conventional written text. Nevertheless, as the following account shows, don Carlos has had a fascination with written words since early childhood.

In the early 1960s in the rural Aymara province of Omasuyos, don Carlos was on his long way home after a whole day at school. Although he still had problems understanding his monolingual Spanish-speaking teacher, the few terms he had spent in school had given him some basic writing and reading skills. And he was keen on using these skills. All the way to his home, he wrote the names of animals on stones by the roadside with a piece of chalk. He wrote "*cóndor*," "*zorro*," "*llama*" just because he liked to see words in written form. Once at home, and to his mother's chagrin, he wrote the names of animals, plants and persons on the adobe walls of the house. He was severely reprimanded by his mother.

Some 40 years later don Carlos' itch to write resulted in a wonderful book (Yujra

2005) entitled *Laq'a achachilanakan jach'a tayka amuyt'äwinakapa* (the *Great mother-thoughts of our ancestors*). It is a bilingual book, first written by don Carlos in the Aymara language and then translated into Spanish by some of his friends. In his book, the entire *pacha*, the Aymara cosmos, is drawn to our attention. However, to don Carlos, there is no knowledge in books. And this is not in the sense that Plato, for instance, considered the written word a visible façade for the inner sonic reality of spoken words (Ingold 2000:247). To don Carlos, the essential distinction is not between knowledge conveyed in spoken words and knowledge conveyed in written words, but between knowledge conveyed in *words* and knowledge conveyed in the *world*. The words written by don Carlos do not primarily represent things, a world or ideas. His written words are *qulla arus* and they draw our attention to certain features in the landscape, such as sacred knowledgeable *wak'a* places, and to certain practices, movements and events and how these are related to one another and to us. It is a relational, often non-propositional, knowledge; a knowledge not *of* but from *within* the world; an experiential kind of knowledge that stems from sensing the world from within.

I once asked don Carlos what will happen to all his knowledge the day he dies. He looked puzzled, so I reframed my question: "Are you worried about not having a particular disciple to whom you can pass on your knowledge?" This time he smiled and shook his head, then he said:

You still don't get it, do you? I can't pass anything on to anyone. They have to sense it for themselves. I can only point to the places they should go...then they will go there and feel and think. If it's a good place, they will think good thoughts.

Consequently, don Carlos does not write or speak *qulla arus* in order to transmit knowledge. His words are spoken and written in order for people to experience for themselves the source of his knowledge and to become one with this source. The *qulla arus*, then, do not represent the world; they orient us to sense it for ourselves, and they do so as written text and spoken words alike.

In contemporary Bolivian society, though, there is of course no absolute dividing line between hegemonic theories of knowledge and indigenous epistemologies, between propositional and non-propositional knowledge, between knowledge *of* the world and knowledge from *within* the world, or between representationalist and relational ways of knowing. You do not find any such clear-cut dichotomies after almost 500 years of asymmetric and colonial intermingling of epistemologies and knowledge systems from different traditions. Moreover, Aymara people have developed a striking capacity to manage seemingly contradictory logics and practices simultaneously. This does not mean, though, that contemporary Aymara culture is essentially 'inclusive' and 'open' to any external influences, as Swiss theologian and philosopher Josef Estermann (2006) argues when he speaks of Aymara spirituality in terms of a smooth reception of Christian elements into a receptive Aymara cosmology. To argue thus would be to underestimate the significance of past and present colonial power relations. To acknowledge that hegemonic and indigenous ways of knowing have intermingled in the Andes in different ways for almost 500 years should not lead us to overlook the fact that within the context of the colonial world-system and the modern state and, not least, its educational institutions relational ways of knowing and indigenous traditions of thought are systematically inferiorized. Nevertheless, these subalternized ways of knowing are still there.

And in the Bolivian Andes, they are currently making themselves felt at the university.

V. BOOKS TO THINK ABOUT

Soon after Evo Morales and the *Movimiento al Socialismo* came to power in 2006, 'decolonization' was posed as one of the overall political visions of the new government. Higher education was from the outset identified as a key area for the implementation, generation and articulation of decolonizing politics. This should be understood against the background of indigenous educational claims and initiatives in South America being increasingly transferred from the field of basic education (such as the claims from the 1970s and onwards for an intercultural and bilingual education, claims that to a large extent were addressed and neutralized by neo-liberal multiculturalism) to that of higher education (such as the current demands for the decolonization of knowledge and the university) (López et. al. 2009:246). In Bolivia, one of the most massive mobilizations for creating something 'proper' in the field of higher education was generated from the popular and indigenous demands for a university in the city of El Alto in the late 1990s. This resulted in the Universidad Pública de El Alto (UPEA). One urban Aymara activist who was part of these mobilizations remembers the process thus:

We've created this all by ourselves. El Alto rose to its feet. And I remember those first months, how we attended classes seated on adobe blocks and how our older brothers were our lecturers without any payment whatsoever...

Today UPEA is a very conventional university in many aspects, but quite unconventional in others. It is conventional

in the sense that it offers its students the same standard academic assortment and curricular contents as most other universities in Bolivia and elsewhere. No rhetorical statement of aiming at "recovering the identities of the indigenous nations" can conceal that. Nor can the inclusion of a short obligatory series of classes on "the History of the Indigenous Nations"⁶ in all degree courses. However, UPEA is unconventional in the sense that an overwhelming majority of its students are of Aymara origin. It is unconventional in the way *indianista-katarista* ideologies imbue student organizations and activities. It is also unconventional in its internal structural functioning in which any student's voice and vote has the same weight as any teacher's and in which the social organizations of El Alto have had a saying since UPEA was founded in the year 2000. All in all, though, *indianista-katarista* students of UPEA usually emphasize the need for a profound decolonization of their university.

Before UPEA was founded there were other Aymara initiatives for a 'proper' higher education. El Instituto Tecnológico y de Investigación Andino (Inti Andino) in the province of Gualberto Villarroel was one such initiative. As part of a NGO with an explicit *indianista-katarista* agenda, I worked there as a teacher for two years a decade ago and I remember all the work that was put into establishing subjects such as Andean cosmology, Andean philosophy, Andean ecology, indigenous and communitarian rights, and 'traditional' Andean agronomy in the curriculum.

Another university with its roots in the *indianista-katarista* movement is the Universidad Indígena Tawantinsuyu (UTA) which was founded in the small village of Laja in the late 1990s. While UPEA, as described above, is conventional in some aspects and

⁶ [http://www.elalto.galeon.com/up-
ea.htm](http://www.elalto.galeon.com/up-
ea.htm) (accessed May 24th 2010).

unconventional in others, UTA is unconventional in most aspects. UTA was the place that radicalized Antonio, the young Aymara activist and intellectual introduced above. In elementary school, Antonio did not question the teachers' doctrines but accepted their view of the world as correct. He speaks of how he internalized official Bolivian history, how he pledged allegiance to the flag and how, during his military service, he was taught to defend *la patria* with his life. When he returned to his natal rural community after his military service, his mother advised him to get an education. Not too far from his community was UTA, headed by Germán Chukiwanka, renowned for having been crowned as Inca during the peak of the '500-years-of-resistance-campaign' in 1992. Antonio decided to register in the program of indigenous rights. He was not motivated by any ideological conviction but simply by practical considerations and the belief that university studies would open new horizons and opportunities for him. He did not foresee the transformative experience that his university studies would come to be for him. The teachers spoke powerfully and urged the students to ransack themselves and their past to find answers instead of simply accepting the established colonial truths. The study environment was one of constant, passionate debate and radicalized thought. Antonio says:

It was as though someone had poured a bucket of cold water over me. It occurred to me that I had been living my life with my eyes veiled. There, at the UTA, I understood this and came to see the world the way it actually is, that the true knowledge is the knowledge of our ancestors.

At UTA, currently located in the city of El Alto, the students are offered programs such as Andean Theology and Philosophy,

Indigenous Rights, Tourism, Aymara Linguistics and History. Though some of these programs may seem to be quite 'conventional,' they all aim at having 'indigenous traditions of thought' as their fundamental point of departure, and not as some culturalist topping on a conventional academic curriculum. Moreover, not only Aymara scholars of more or less conventional academic backgrounds teach at UTA, activists and shamans are also invited to share their experiences in the lecture hall. UTA is therefore a quite unconventional university.

One fundamental reference for any kind of critical indigenous initiative for education is the small Aymara village of Warisata. On August 2, 1931, a unique school was founded there: *Escuela-Ayllu de Warisata*. The school took as its point of departure the indigenous sociopolitical and economic realities of the era and was soon immersed in a severe questioning of the colonial character of 20th century Bolivian society and aimed at liberating 'el indio.' After only a few years, though, the school was closed by state authorities and its premises were used for conventional state training of teachers. They became a tool used for assimilating the indigenous peoples into Bolivian society (see Luykx 1999).

Nevertheless, times are changing, and on the 77th anniversary of the founding of the *Escuela-Ayllu*, a state-controlled indigenous university was founded in Warisata by Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales Ayma. La Universidad Indígena Boliviana Aymara 'Tupak Katari' in Warisata offers the following academic programs: Agronomy, Veterinary and Zoological Science, Textile Industry, and Food Industry. The indigenous university, it is argued, is one step towards the decolonization of higher education. Thus, the circle is apparently closed and education seems to have become a tool, not for colonial assimilation, but for indigenous eman-

icipation, just like the *Escuela-Ayllu* in the 1930s.

The following account, though, hints at some of the tensions and ambiguities that characterize the project of decolonizing higher education. In September 2009 I was invited by two friends of mine—non-indigenous, middle-class, radical intellectuals from the Morales administration—to come with them for a seminar on ‘decolonization and education’ at the Institute of Education in Warisata, just next door to the recently established indigenous university. So we went there and were met by a group of enthusiastic Aymara students. The seminar went well; my two state official friends discussed the works of critical thinkers such as Enrique Dussel, Franz Hinkelammert, Paulo Freire and others, and the Aymara students listened attentively. While listening to the seminar, I gazed through the window towards the west and it struck me that there, on the horizon, just a couple of miles away, stood the exceptionally powerful ancestral mountain Pachjiri. How many times had I not climbed that mountain with the shamans? How many times had I not met the sunrise up there after entire nights of ritual activity on the mountain? It is an indeed knowledgeable place where and with which one, in the words of don Carlos, can ‘think good thoughts’ and obtain ‘good knowledge.’ And there it stood, visible from the window of the lecture hall where issues such as decolonization, knowledge and education were discussed. Many important books and many significant writers were mentioned, but nowhere in the discussion was the name of Pachjiri, or any other *wak’a*, uttered.

On our way home from Warisata I pointed to the mountain ridge where Pachjiri stands and I asked my friends if they knew that place. They shook their heads. I then began, right there on the bus, to formulate a series of questions that in the end led me to write this article. If the decol-

onization of knowledge primarily turns out to be a question of ‘critical’ intellectual theorizing; if it is fundamentally about books, lectures and words; if indigenous epistemologies are disregarded or simply ignored in the very practice that expressly aims at doing away with the epistemological disequilibrium of the present colonial world-order—is there not a risk that the ‘decolonization project’ ends up buttressing epistemological asymmetries instead of undermining and challenging them? Is there not a risk that the decolonization of knowledge be converted into a project of urbane scholars and intellectuals, a project of Academia, a logocentric, librocentric project? In other words, where does this leave don Carlos, Antonio and Wara, the three Aymara persons that I have introduced here, and their knowledge and experiences? Where does this leave the mountains, the lakes, the trees, the condor, the fox, the fields, the rocks and stones and their knowledge and experiences?

Indigenous relational epistemologies have a long history in what today is the Bolivian Andes. Nevertheless, logocentric and librocentric notions of knowledge have a history and a central place when it comes to politically and academically recognized production of knowledge, even in the production that in one way or another sets out to question the colonial hegemony in Bolivian society. An example of this is 20th century *indianista* ideologist Fausto Reinaga, the man who as early as the 1960s envisioned a *Universidad India* and articulated the need for a *Revolución India* (see Reinaga 2001 [1970]). Reinaga’s ideological legacy to the contemporary *indianista-katarista* movement is vast. Nevertheless, in his works Reinaga is more immersed in a philosophical critique of European thinkers and texts than in any indigenous tradition of thought. There are some extraordinary passages in his writings where Reinaga manages to critically reassess European thought from indigenous conceptions, but

these are quite rare. Usually, he criticizes European philosophy through a philosophical practice that is not very remote from that which he criticizes. Moreover, Reinaga often flaunted with the fact that 14,000 books were seized from his personal library in 1972 by the military dictatorship of Hugo Banzer. Books were indeed central to his *indianista* project.

Books are equally important to Bolivian Vice-president Alvaro García Linera who is not far behind Reinaga when it comes to quantity. His personal library is said to host approximately 10,000 books and at least before swearing the oath as Vice-president he was said to read at least six hours a day, Karl Marx being, of course, one of his favorites. Another figure in the Bolivian critical intelligentsia is Juan José Bautista who argues for the need to 'think for ourselves' but simultaneously claims that "anyone who wants to make a precise critique of the categorial frame of modern-postmodern thought, just like they cannot do without Marx, they cannot do without Hinkelammert if they do not want to appear naïve" (2007:70, my translation). This, I would argue, is a problematic statement. And it is so since the "categorial frame of modernity" is currently not only being criticized but *transcended* by Aymara shamans, activists and thinkers. The critique that is articulated by, for instance, don Carlos is grounded in experiential knowledge. He has never heard of Hinkelammert, he is not familiar with the writings of Marx. Nevertheless, there is nothing naïve in his critique of modernity. But then, his critique is not a "precise critique of the categorial frame" of modernity, but a critique that disobeys and denies the authority of any such frame.

In much scholarship dealing with knowledge, indigenous peoples and decolonization there is a tendency of looking to Marx or Hinkelammert in order to understand the colonial and decolonial dynamics at work not only in Bolivia but elsewhere

too. But to think that one could understand these dynamics without taking seriously the knowledge production and the specific ways of knowing of specific places would, to me, be naïveté. However, it is as though the books, the European thinkers and the hegemonic, modern epistemological frameworks impede indigenous ways of knowing that need to be seriously considered.

One fresh breath of air in this context (though oft-ridiculed) is the Bolivian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aymara activist David Choquehuanca, who claims to never read books, but instead prefers to read, as he says, 'the wrinkles in the faces of our elders.' He characterizes the elders as 'walking libraries' and speaks of the lithic remains of pre-colonial Andean societies as 'stone books.'⁷

Interestingly, both these tendencies, the ones embodied most explicitly by Bautista and Choquehuanca respectively, are present at the indigenous universities in Bolivia. And both claim to be dealing with the decolonization of knowledge. At the indigenous universities one can even experience how the ontological and epistemological assumptions differ from one class to another and even from one moment to another in one and the same class. What would it mean, then, to decolonize knowledge and the university and what does it mean to be an *indigenous* university?

When I talk about these issues with Antonio he articulates two seemingly contradictory standpoints. On the one hand, he forcefully emphasizes the importance of 'thinking for ourselves,' in the Aymara language, in Aymara categories and in Aymara ways, i.e., not as autonomous individual subjects, detached from the world but as relational subjects thinking and producing knowledge from *within* and *with* the world. On the other hand, he

⁷ See e.g. <http://www.wiphala.org/david.htm> (accessed May 24th 2010).

recognizes the importance of being fluent in conventional librocentric ways of thinking and producing knowledge. The contradiction is, of course, only apparent. There is nothing strange or contradictory about using the words and academic practices of the hegemonic colonial tradition in order to contest the legitimacy of colonial power. As I argue elsewhere (Burman 2010), indigenous peoples have developed skills for resignifying 'strange' colonial concepts and then use them to defy colonial power. The challenge for indigenous universities, teachers and students is to use colonial hegemonic language and thought but without entirely embracing the epistemological and ontological presuppositions of conventional colonial Academia. Because there is a risk "that the world seems to be what European (...) categories of thought allow you to say it is" (Mignolo 2005:36).

There is a pervasive notion among students and teachers at different indigenous Aymara initiatives for higher education that the '*indigenous*' in 'indigenous university' cannot merely be a question of indigenous physical presence, in the sense that teachers and students are of indigenous origin, because then even UMSA in La Paz (not to speak of UPEA in El Alto) would qualify as indigenous universities since a majority of their students could arguably be said to be of indigenous origin. There has to be something more than indigenous presence, they argue. The intellectual production and practice at an indigenous university should be *contestatario* to the system; it should be insubordinate, defiant, disobedient. Moreover, it is argued, an indigenous university should work with, teach and produce 'proper' knowledge; it should create knowledge outside of the hegemonic frames of modern rationality; it should be a place for learning by de-learning and re-learning; and all this should definitely be reflected in its curriculum. Currently though, there is a massive indigenous physical presence and there is a lot of

epistemological disobedience going on among students and also among some teachers, but there is still to a large extent a 'colonial' curriculum. This is obviously so at the conventional universities, but it is also to a certain degree so at the indigenous universities. The only perceivable exception to this would perhaps be UTA, where 'Andean thought' has had a more decisive influence in the very generation of the academic contents. Even at the indigenous university in Warisata, a subject such as *Cosmovisión Andina*, which stems from an indigenous tradition of thought, is still *included* in an overall curriculum that bears the stamp of conventional Academia, though to a lesser extent than, say, UPEA or UMSA. Moreover, although '*prácticas*' are carried out by the students, these are more the *applications* of knowledge received in the lecture hall than the fundamental way of *generating* knowledge and actually coming to know with and within the world. The overall academic practice still centers on books, words and lectures, i.e., the kind of knowledge that Antonio calls *siwsawi*, opinions and speculations heard, said and read.

Above, I argued that there is always a risk in using hegemonic academic language and theories since they may impede us from seeing beyond the epistemological and ontological presuppositions of colonial modernity. I also argued that the academic curriculum is to a certain extent still conventional even at indigenous universities. The solution to this, then, would seem to be to decolonize the curriculum by transforming its content so that indigenous traditions of knowledge and thought could be taught more comprehensively in the lecture halls. Nevertheless, and here I identify a second risk, if indigenous knowledge is integrated into the university it may result that instead of decolonizing the university we end up colonizing indigenous knowledge. Let me explain what I mean.

When Elisabeth Croll and David Parkin (1992) argue that indigenous peoples, their environment and their knowledge exist inseparably 'within each other,' they point to something of fundamental importance for this discussion. To institutionalize Aymara knowledge within the four colonial walls of the university would be to decontextualize it and disembody it from the very context and practices in and from within which it is produced and transformed over time. This in turn would mean separating "culture from place" (Ingold 2000:225) which would be to fundamentally distort the nature of Aymara epistemology. Moreover, any attempt at standardization of Aymara knowledge would be to fix it in a frame that is not its own and to reify and freeze a cosmology and thus alter its dynamic quality. Attempts have been made, for example, to compile dictionary-like charts of 'traditional' Aymara knowledge, such as the meaning of dreams (an important source of knowledge). But such attempts overlook the fact that Aymara knowledge is not a standardized set of data that can be transmitted through written or spoken words. Aymara knowledge is primarily of an experiential kind. To know the meaning of dreams is to have dreamt and then to have experienced certain occurrences in the world. But it is not as though the words of knowledgeable persons are not important. They certainly are. But they are indications, guidance and incitements for experiencing for oneself; they should not be considered knowledge or even tools for transmitting knowledge. Where does this leave librocentric Academia? Is it possible to think with a book in the same way as one can think with a place, say a mountain? According to don Carlos and Antonio, to think with a book is like thinking with the speculations and opinions of others. You can certainly use these speculations in your everyday life. But if those others think colonial thoughts, you risk ending up thinking colonial thoughts. Mountains do not think

colonial thoughts. Books, then, are better to think *about*, than to think *with*.

VI. CONCLUSION

Boaventura de Sousa Santos has argued that "one of the failures of modern theory was to not recognize that the reason that criticizes cannot be the same as the reason that thinks, construes and legitimizes that which is reprehensible" (2008:28, my translation). I think he is absolutely right. A few adjustments in our academic curriculums or in our lists of references are not sufficient to bring about political, theoretical, epistemological and, in the end, existential and cosmological paradigmatic revolts. We would still be reproducing the colonial images and 'truths' that the hegemonic categories of thought reduce the world to. To learn to think *in* and *with* other categories is a good start, but other *categories* will not make our ontological pillars shiver. For that to happen, other *experiences* are necessary. In other words, there is no way we are going to *intellectually* reason our way out of coloniality, in any conventional academic sense. There is no way we are going to publish our way out of modernity. There is no way we are going to read our way out of epistemological hegemony.

Antonio argues that there is another path. A couple of years ago, Antonio says, when he and his mother were on their way to gather their cows for the night, his mother stopped on the hillside and picked up a flower and inhaled its fragrance. "*Chuym qhanartayitu*" she said, "This opens up my heart for the light." When Antonio remembers this episode a few years later he says: "A smell can make you see the world as it is; this is knowledge, this is the knowledge of our ancestors."

I am not taking any romantic anti-intellectual stance here. What I am doing is to question the unidimensional conception of

knowledge as reproduced in Academia. Moreover, I question the idea that an abstract, logocentric and librocentric project of decolonization would be apt to transcend this unidimensionality. It is not my intention to deny the importance of books and words, but to put them in their place, and critically reassess the taken-for-granted epistemological presuppositions of conventional academic practice.

It is not my aim to criticize the indigenous universities in Bolivia, rather the opposite; I support them to the fullest. Against the constant attacks of conservative right-wing academics, I certainly defend the epistemological disobedience and the critical knowledge production going on at these universities and elsewhere. Nevertheless, we do not do the so called 'process of change' or the Evo Morales administration any favor by uncritically applauding their every move. Indigenous universities are not some kind of decolonial havens. There is, of course, a colonial epistemological asymmetry even at these universities. Not to acknowledge that would be a proof of naiveté. However, it would be a proof of cynicism not to acknowledge the potential of the indigenous universities for revealing the colonial roots of modern theories of knowledge, for un-learning and re-learning and for the acquisition of skills in the art of questioning engraved colonial truths.

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