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## Imagining an epistemic decolonizing

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*Published in:*

Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society

*DOI:*

[10.1080/25729861.2018.1543042](https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2018.1543042)

Published: 01/01/2018

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Verran, H. (2018). Imagining an epistemic decolonizing. *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*, 1(1), 127-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2018.1543042>

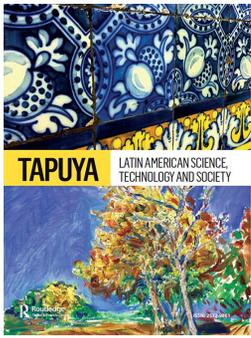
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## Two analyses of Marisol de la Cadena's *Earth beings: ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*

Giovanna Micarelli & Helen Verran

To cite this article: Giovanna Micarelli & Helen Verran (2018): Two analyses of Marisol de la Cadena's *Earth beings: ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*, Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society, DOI: [10.1080/25729861.2018.1543042](https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2018.1543042)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2018.1543042>



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Published online: 20 Dec 2018.



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BOOK REVIEW

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## Two analyses of Marisol de la Cadena's *Earth beings: ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*

**Earth beings: ecologies of practice across Andean worlds**, by Marisol de la Cadena, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015, xxvii, 340 pp., \$99.95 (cloth), 978-0-8223-5944-9; \$26.95 (paperback), 978-0-8223-5963-0

*Following are two reviews of this book, the first by Colombian anthropologist Giovanna Micarelli, and the second by Australian philosopher Helen Verran. – The Editors*

### A divergent recognition of the real

It is not in vain that we say Ausangate,  
They are those names ...  
(Nazario Turpo, April 2005)

A box full of papers about to be used to light up the fire and warm up the water for tea is the event that unleashes the conversations between Marisol de la Cadena and Mariano and Nazario Turpo, father and son, Runakuna indigenous people, through radically different yet partially connected worlds. One world is ordered by biopolitical practices that conceive human life as discontinuous from that which those same practices define as “nature,” and the other world of *ayllu* is where human beings and “other-than-humans” are inherently connected. *Earth Beings* is the translation of the word *tirakuna*, composed of the word land and the plural Quechua suffix *-kuna*. Earth beings are sentient entities that do not inhabit, but that *are* mountains, rivers, lagoons, and other visible marks of the landscape, and that are in mutual relationships of care with the Runakuna. Both Mariano and Nazario were (although not only) *yachaq* – someone who knows how to communicate with the *tirakuna*, read coca leaves, diagnose the causes of an illness, and heal. That was their *suerte* (luck): *suerte* or *istrilla* is the ability that a *tirakuna* awakens in a person to enter into an effective relationship with it – for example, making him or her find *misas*, small stones with awkward shapes, without which “it is not possible to know.”

The book includes seven stories. In the first one, de la Cadena presents the conceptual, empirical, and analytical conditions regarding her co-laboring with the Turpos. The rest of the book is divided into two sections, each one preceded by an interlude. The first interlude introduces Mariano Turpo and his political negotiations with state authorities, left-wing leaders, and the *tirakuna* in the fight for freedom against the *hacendado* (landowners). The second interlude presents Nazario, “Andean shaman” and Runakuna thinker. The other six stories concern indigenous leadership and their fight for land; Mariano Turpo’s cosmo-politics; the indigenous archive and the “eventfulness of the ahistorical”; Andean shamanism and multiculturalism; Nazario Turpo’s collaboration with the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC; the negotiations with the *munayniyuq*, “owner of the will” and the *rondas*

*campesinas* (“the institutions through which Runakuna engage with the state,” 251). These narratives do not have a conclusive character. They return and are intersected by other reflections, analyses, and narratives that unwrap at the complex frontiers between the local and the global. Ausangate, the earth being that is also a mountain, occupies a prominent place in these conversations, suggesting with its presence the existence of “more than one, less than many” ways of being, a concept that derives, in turn, from the conversations between de la Cadena, Donna Haraway, and Marilyn Strathern.

In an important article published in 2010, de la Cadena suggests that “culture” is an insufficient, and even inadequate, notion to understand current indigenous politics. Rather than making cultural rights prevail, what is proposed by indigenous movements is a different political practice. A practice that is plural not because it is marked by gender, race, ethnicity, or sex (as multiculturalism would have it), but because it conjures nonhumans as actors in the political arena (de la Cadena 2010, 334); therefore, it *exceeds* the current notion of the political.

*Earth Beings* takes up and deepens these arguments through a heterogeneous recollection of ethnographic, historic and theoretical materials. One leitmotif of the book is to understand “excess” as an important ethnographic condition and analytic challenge that is realized beyond the limits. It is “the first thing outside of which there is nothing to be found and the first thing inside which everything is to be found” (Guha 2002, 7). “This ‘nothing’ is in relation to what sees itself as ‘everything’ and thus exceeds it – it is something” (14). The challenge consists in going beyond these limits and proposing a practice of recognition of the real that diverges from what we are accustomed.

Another leitmotif of the book emerges from a reflection of the frontier between indigenous and non-indigenous worlds. These ways of constructing the world (“wordlings”) have been connected for centuries, but they are also different and incommensurable; they are partially connected. They are included one in each other, but cannot be reduced one to the other (Law 2004, 64). The partial connections concept emerges from the encounter between the notion of the cyborg by Donna Haraway (1991) and the Melanesian perspectives of the person analyzed by Marilyn Strathern (2004). These are partial connections because, even though there is a connection, the conditions of the entities that compose them are incommensurable: “one is too few, but two are too many” (Haraway 1991, 180), or “the alternative to one is many” (Strathern 2004, 52). This notion “offers ... the possibility of conceptualizing entities (or collectivities) *with* relations integrally implied ... ; emerging from the relation, the entities are *intra-related* (cf. Barad 2007) instead of being *inter-related* ... ” (de la Cadena 2004, 32, my emphasis).

The author’s initial intention was to work on the documents of Mariano Turpo’s archive, in order to expand the history of a group of peasants and their allies in the fight against the abuses of the *hacienda*, and to recover Mariano as an important, although invisible agent, of the agrarian reform.<sup>1</sup> The archive contains more than 600 documents of various kinds, recollected by Mariano Turpo between 1920 and 1970: typed formal communications, personal messages, papers where Mariano practiced his signature, newspaper pieces, and pamphlets. Nevertheless, the conversations with Mariano indicated that de la Cadena’s co-laboring could not be kept within the limits of the documents. Mariano’s terms exceeded the limits of what could be historically recognizable as “real.” There were events that had to be taken

<sup>1</sup>De la Cadena tells how in 1965 (circa), in a round table about *Todas las Sangres* (Every Blood) between its author, Jose María Arguedas, and intellectuals of the Left, Anibal Quijano affirmed that “indigenous leadership does not exist today” (59). In this “factual ignorance authorized as knowledge by the hegemony of the epistemic formation that had gathered the intellectuals” (62), Mariano was an “unthinkable” leader (Trouillot 1995). According to de la Cadena, realizing this mistake led Quijano to subsequently define the concept of coloniality of power.

seriously, though according to history they were impossible, like the Ausangate's influence in the *hacienda's* legal defeat.

Mariano Turpo inherited the obligation to work as *colono* in the *Hacienda Lauramarca* – a form of servitude in a racially articulated nation-state with undisputed power over the Runakuna. Their fight for freedom extends from 1940 until the dissolution of the *hacienda* system in 1970, when the *Hacienda Lauramarca* is transformed into an agrarian cooperative, property of the state, and the Runakuna into members of the cooperative. An “unthinkable” leader, from the perspective of leaders and intellectuals of the left, Turpo organized the Lauramarca's Peasant Union and was Secretary General of Andamayo's Syndicate, one of the most important in the region. Turpo worked his way through the everyday practices of local politics, negotiating with lawyers and policemen, sometimes through the gift of a sheep. Mariano's appointment as Municipal *personero* (indigenous leader in the rural village) in the late 1940s reveals how the notion of political representation for the Runakuna is embedded in ontological perspectives that radically differ from what Latour (1993) calls the “modern constitution,” founded as it is in the separation between humans and nature. The *ayllu* looked into the coca leaves, lit up candles to *Taytacha* (Jesus Christ) and the candles burned well: this was Mariano's *suerte*: to fight against the *hacienda*. Justo Oxa, elementary school bilingual teacher, explains:

*Ayllu* is like a weaving, and all the beings in the world – people, animals, mountains, plants, etc. – are like the threads, we are part of the design. The beings in this world are not alone, just as a thread by itself is not a weaving, and weavings are with threads, a *runa* is always in-*ayllu* with other beings – that is *ayllu*. (44)

Human beings and the other-than-humans are inherently connected in the *ayllu* of which they are a part and that is part of them. This practice of intra-relation is called, in Quechua, *uyway* – to nurture, to raise (103), which is not altruism, but an obligation. Obligated by the collectivity to work against the *hacienda*, Mariano does not speak for the *ayllu*, but from the *ayllu*. As a matter of fact, Mariano says “I am *Pacchanta*,” not “I am from *Pacchanta*.”

Mariano's fight was not only for land. The land was an “equivocation,” a concept that de la Cadena borrows from Viveiros de Castro (2004, 11): “a failure to understand that understandings are necessarily not the same, and that they are not related to imaginary ways of ‘seeing the world’ but to the real worlds that are being seen.” As a point of encounter and disencounter between the state and the *ayllu*, the land is not just agricultural soil from which the Runakuna make a living: the land in-*ayllu* is the place where *tirakuna* – mountains, rivers, and lagoons – together with animals, plants, and Runakuna, *are*. The equivocation, according to Viveiros de Castro (2004), a constitutive dimension of anthropology and its project of cultural translation, can be controlled by commenting on the differences and misunderstandings that emerge from the translation. This not only makes ethnographic conversations possible, but the ethnographic commentary can also help recognize the ontological differences enacted in the communication.

Drawing from these ideas, de la Cadena refers to Guha and Chakrabarty's proposal to open the political field beyond the secular limits imposed by European thought. However, for her, even if moving the earth-beings to the religious sphere unsettles the colonial representations that assigned their agency to the devil (e.g., in the description of the *guacas* in the sixteenth century), it still reproduces the distinction between nature and humanity, inaugurated by Christianity and its colonial project of creation of the New World.

This communicative disjunction characterizes, for example, the partially connected worlds of Andean shamanism, where the *tirakuna* “are not objects of human subjects” (207). Even though these practices can also be seen as religious, from the perspective of the Runakuna,

they are “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” (206). To invoke the earth-beings, inevitably summons them to a powerful terrestrial space. “We cannot just talk about the earth-beings; to talk about them, we need coca leaves, wine, alcohol, or *cañazo* [sugar-cane alcohol]. Only then can we ask for permission to talk about them; it is dangerous” (Nazario Turpo, 202–203). Even though they are performed for tourists, the *k’intu*<sup>2</sup> and *despachos*<sup>3</sup> follow a protocol, and if they lack the ethic quality they require, they can generate harmful consequences.

In “Nazario Turpo’s collaboration with the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC,” de la Cadena analyzes the lexicon with which the museum curators (indigenous North Americans) produced a representation of the Andean world, a lexicon that separates the material from the spiritual, and the sacred from the profane. According to the author, while a representation separates word and thing, signifier and signified, and even subject and object, the “objects” of the exhibition didn’t exist separately from the subject that participated in the relationship. Furthermore, to represent traditional knowledge as something from the past didn’t take into account that Nazario as a shaman was the result not only of the continuity of tradition, but also of collaborations and participation in global networks. De la Cadena reminds us that the opposite of equivocation is not truth but a univocal meaning, and the univocal version that prevailed in the museum did not allow the equivocations that inevitably occur in translation to become a theme of reflection in the museum’s practice.

In the book’s last story, the author returns to the discussion of the indigenous leadership and the *munayniyuq*, the “owner of the will,” a term that identifies both Ausangate and the *hacendado* because they are both capable of shaping Runakuna’s lives. The *rondas campesinas* emerged in the 1970s to end local abuse, from infidelity to corruption, and recently have played a crucial role in organizing protests against mining companies. The *rondas* are not meant to replace an absent state, but they are directed towards a present and all too familiar state: the bureaucrats, local “owners of the will,” and their arbitrary demands to exchange favors for sheep. The *rondas*’ intention is “making the law legal,” in a form of leadership that reverses the directionality of authority acquired through elections, and that evokes the motto of the Zapatistas: “leading by obeying.” The author here intertwines another thread woven since the first chapter: an analysis of literacy and its way to mark hierarchies. Not for nothing in Quechua, *ñawiyuq* – “to have eyes” – describes a person who knows how to read and write.

As I have mentioned before, Lima’s leaders and intellectuals did not recognize the role of peasants in ending the *haciendas*; the peasants appeared as “peasant masses.” In the face of such “asymmetrical ignorance” (Chakrabarty 2000), the strong alliance of peasant and indigenous people that in the mid-1970s tore apart the 1969 agrarian reform and redistributed the cooperative land, just like other recent movements and histories, expands the public imagination of who can participate in politics, and what is politics. “Nevertheless, the ontological division between humans and nature that constitutes the modern world (Latour 1993) continues to set limits to this imagination” (89). As a matter of fact, to save the Ausangate from mining exploitation, the Runakuna had to withdraw the *tirakuna* from the negotiations and convert the defense of earth-beings into an environmental defense. “This translation moves earth-being to a realm where they are not (in inherent relations) *with*

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<sup>2</sup>K’intu is a three coca leaf arrangement presented to the earth-beings, blowing them with the breath – *pukuy* (also see Allen 2002).

<sup>3</sup>Packages that contain different goods, like food, llama fetuses and flowers, according to the circumstances and the objective that wants to be achieved, and that are burned by the *Tirakuna*.

Runakuna, ultimately cancels the reality-making capacity of the practices that such connection enables" (99). The mountain won, but to win, earth-beings had to become invisible, nothing else but "beliefs."

Instead of recognition – an "offer for inclusion that [...] can transpire only in the terms of state cognition: it can be as long as it does not impinge on those terms" (277), the author proposes to cultivate epistemic bewilderment to defy what and how we know. Drawing inspiration from Isabelle Stengers (2005), de la Cadena conceives the Runakuna's practices as cosmo-political: decolonial practices of the political that emerge from the relationship between divergent worlds, "with no other guarantee than the absence of ontological sameness" (281).

*Earth Beings* is an interesting and provocative book, rich in information that, nonetheless, is presented in a slightly anecdotal way. The theoretical conversations, sometimes redundant, prevail over the conversations with the Turpos, and the feeling is that the former ends up subduing the latter. These conversations could have been more sustained and deepened, also showing the resonance with the onto-epistemological visions of other Amerindian people, to amplify the horizon of what is possible in the face of academic knowledge and the state. For example, to pay more attention to the role of narratives in the Runakuna onto-epistemological perspectives would lead us to better understand historical experience and temporality from indigenous points of view. "History" in Quechua can be translated in two ways. *Willakuy* is the act of narrating something that has happened, sometimes leaving topographical traces – a lagoon or a rocky formation – which make the event present, but that are not the type of evidence that the modern sense of history demands. *Kwintu*, from the Spanish *cuento* "tale," narrates events that could or couldn't have occurred. Both are translated as "myths." But while *willakuy* is not historical in the modern sense of the term, the events that it narrates did happen (28–29). To recover this quality, the author introduces the concept of "eventfulness of the ahistorical": ahistorical because it does not provide the type of evidence that the modern sense of history requires, that is, ahistorical from the point of view of modern history. Drawing inspiration from Guha (2002) and Chakrabarty (2000), de la Cadena criticizes in historicism the separation of time and space, the creation of universal history as a discipline, and a notion of nature universal and abstract. However, to define the *willakuy* as ahistorical does not allow us to exceed that which disqualifies the sense of history of the Runakuna, their own historicity (Rival and Whitehead 2001; Whitehead 2003; Uzendoski 2006). The author explains that in *willakuy* word and thing are not mediated by meaning: *willakuy* are acts of speech that perform an event and that produce the world they narrate. When they are written down, the unity between the name and the named is altered and lost, it becomes a representation, where words "are no longer the marks of things; they lie sleeping between the pages of books and covered in dust" (Foucault 1994, 48). That is why, according to Mariano, Marisol's writing was insufficient to "make things happen." For the same reason, the documents that had been necessary during the complaint against the *hacienda* could now be used to light up the fire.

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## Imagining an epistemic decolonizing

Marisol de la Cadena, Mariano Turpo and Nazario Turpo are the main characters we meet and follow through the nonlinear and multilayered text of *Earth Beings*. There are other more shadowy characters too – both human and non-human, who play strategic roles in the compelling real-life drama that unfolds in the book's pages – arranged as preface, seven stories, two interludes, and an epilogue. Marisol, Mariano, and Nazario, all contemporary Peruvians, were very good friends despite the gulf that separated them. Marisol is an anthropologist in a prestigious US university, and Mariano and Nazario, father and son, are Runakuna, "Andean Indians." Both Mariano and Nazario are now dead, but nevertheless, through de la Cadena's text we come to know and respect them and the places they loved. Deep friendships nurturing multiple ties, enabled Marisol's stories, drawn from her experience of a three-way conversation that involved them all, and two rather distinct two-way conversations between Marisol and Mariano the father, on the one hand, and Marisol and Nazario the son, on the other. Through stories and images attesting Marisol's experience of and with these two impressive Indigenous Peruvians, readers are entertained, informed, enriched, and extended.

This book exemplifies North American anthropology at its best. I write that as an outsider, neither American nor anthropologist. It is as an empirical epistemologist that I appreciate the way the book is permeated by a concern for translations, linguistic and ontological. There's a deep appreciation of the everyday workings of language here, I sense a love of, and sensitivity to, words. From my own experience, I recognize that such respect comes of struggle, with and through words, to partially inhabit the particular worlds that others' languages help to conjure up as "experienced here-and-nows." The author clearly knows that the subtleties of others' experienced worlds remain elusive when one trips over words. The wonder of this book is the way de la Cadena evades so effortlessly the pitfalls of anthropological relativism, so

urgent and focussed is her concern to convey the epistemic authority of her Quechua compatriots, as she struggles to have her readers glimpse difference that is beyond the grasp of modern relativism.

The preface opens with a photograph – a smiling young man on a small Andean horse crossing a stream, sheep grazing in a river valley and a steep grassy slope in the background. The first sentence tells us that the text that follows emerged from a series of conversations between this man, his father, and the author. Such are the exigencies of Andean life, however, that both the men are now dead. So, the anthropologist faced the sad task of completing the book without them. In the preface, the book is explicitly announced as the outcome of mobilizing the differing but connecting epistemic practices of three people – practitioners of epistemics in three quite differing contexts. You must read the book to understand those contexts and how they are put into conversation in the work of these three skilled knowledge authorities – each with unique capacities.

As a Peruvian, the historical anthropologist de la Cadena is re-encountering her own national political history in her experiences of, and with, these two men. As readers we come to understand Peru's national political history as a potent brew of conventional modern politics and ontological politics involving powerful "other" landscape-entities. Both politics profoundly influence history. The stories range across a time span stretching from Peru's mid-century struggle for agrarian reform, to the contemporary making of a multicultural Peru. As she joins modern public stories to others that had remained outside the conceptual reach of the state, readers glimpse the Peruvian state as in a never-ending dance with its ever-present Indigenous elements, "circuited together" in "symbiotic" relations. Through de la Cadena's delicate tellings, we recognize that each swaps elements in modifying their practices and working imaginaries, "without consuming the difference" between them (4). Focussed as it is through the lens of her own carefully articulated, experienced epistemic disconcertment, throughout the book time and again readers are treated to careful scholarly insights into the workings of epistemic practices – her own and those of her epistemic "co-laborers" (12). Peru's dominant culture, we recognize, fails to see the huge epistemic workload involved in maintaining the productive alterity of a modern Peruvian Indigeneity.

De la Cadena's "Story 4 Mariano's Archive" is my favorite. I read that story somewhat against the grain of her argument for "the eventfulness of the ahistorical" (117). The archive of the story's title is a found object – a cardboard box containing a variety of more than four hundred documents that had been collected between the 1920s and 1970s. As we see from a photograph, the box was kept with the seed potatoes in a "a rural home – some would consider ... a hut" (119). The contents of the box are used to kindle fires. Considerable epistemic disconcertment amongst anthropologists ensues from this observation. It is clear that amongst the members of the family who collected the papers together, it is insistently *not* an archive. The challenge here is to take this seriously and respectfully, and to understand its *ontological* significance. To insist on the box of papers being simultaneously *both an archive and not an archive* is valid as interpretation. This is possible only because the liveliness of this box of collected papers is so precisely and delicately evoked in de la Cadena's text. We as readers briefly glimpse particular ontological tensions buried just below the surface of ongoing collective contemporary life in the high Peruvian Andes.

So, what do this story of an odd entity, an archive/*not* archive, and the other stories add up to? Remember that I'm asking that question as an epistemologist – someone interested in knowledge making. In this expression of the anthropological ethnographic method, I find possibilities for imagining a decolonizing, specifically an epistemic decolonizing. If we stay with the example of Mariano's Archive. The story has two distinct moments. First there is a situating – the everyday, ordinary/extraordinary happenings of rural livelihood and home, and second,

within that situating, the latent ontological tensions that the archive/*not* archive points to, emerge. These for me are the two moments of epistemic disconcertment that need attention if we, as analysts, are to avoid inflicting epistemic harm through epistemic ignorance. The question that this lively archive/*not* archive sets as homework for readers, involves puzzling about the particularities of epistemic practices which might reveal some of its historical, cultural, political, social, or even linguistic meanings. Undertaking such work, we, as analysts, can begin to ask about epistemic injustice. It is from there that we might imagine possibilities for epistemic decolonizing.

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