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# Colonial Differences in Intercultural Education: On Interculturality in the Andes and the Decolonization of Intercultural Dialogue

## Abstract

This essay seeks to wean interculturality from its comfort zone of flat substitutability across cultural differences by pushing for the possibility of other ways of thinking about the concept depending on where (the geopolitics of knowledge) and by whom (the bodypolitics of knowledge) it is being articulated. In order to make a case for the importance of always considering the geopolitical and bodypolitical dimension of knowledge production within interculturality, this essay shifts focus away from policies of the European Union and UNESCO to the Andean region of Latin America. In that part of the world the notion of *interculturalidad* – translation: interculturality – is not only a subject on the educational agenda, it has also become a core component among indigenous social movements in their push for decolonization. With reference points drawn from a decolonial perspective and the concept of “colonial difference”, this essay makes the case that *interculturalidad*, with its roots in the historical experience of colonialism and in the particular, rather than in assertions of universality, offers another perspective on interculturality bringing into the picture other epistemologies. It concludes by arguing for the requirement to start seeing interculturality as inter-epistemic rather than simply inter-cultural.

## Introduction

What first strikes any reader engaging with the ever-increasing body of literature on interculturality is a strong emphasis on engagement with the Other. Largely defined in terms of contact between people from different cultural backgrounds, *Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (2009, xiii), for example, summarizes the aim of interculturality as a means “to better understand others’ behaviors to interact effectively and appropriately with others and, ultimately, to become more interculturally competent”. In contrast to multiculturalism that according to its critics functions as a descriptive term for the factual co-existence of people of diverse cultures in a given space with the aim to encourage hospitable attitudes towards new generations of immigrants, interculturality is said to characterize actual interaction between people once impediments to relations have been removed (Camilleri 1992; Gundara 2000; Meer & Modood 2012) – that is, to approach *them*, to speak with *them*, and even learn from *them* (Aman 2015a).

Nevertheless, the purpose of this essay is not to uncover what necessarily constitutes such intercultural knowledge that allows us to, in Yvonne Leeman’s words (2003, 31), “learn to live in an ethnically and culturally diverse society”. Instead the aim here is to explore the risks of failure within Intercultural Education to recognize the different ways of knowing by which people across the globe run their lives and provide meaning to their existence. After all, even if interculturality acts as a code for a fluctuating and unbordered world brought about through a commitment to inclusiveness, it seems unlikely that it would have the same signification and equal appeal to all of us. Additionally, as a practice that lends itself to pedagogy, interculturality poses questions not only about who the radical Other is, and what to

teach and what to learn about – essentially, what is defined as intercultural knowledge – in such encounters, but about the language in which the Other is approached and called upon. With this question in mind, it may be fruitful to remember that Michel Wieviorka (2012, 225) has criticized research on interculturality for being Anglocentric as he questions the possibility to write sincerely about interculturality “relying exclusively on authors who write in English or by referring to historical experiences that are only accessible through this language.” Without disputing the need to move towards an understanding of interculturality that does not restrict itself to the English palette, it seems equally fair to also enlarge the scope to epistemology and other ways of reasoning on what defines intercultural knowledge that would allow us to contribute to, as phrased by UNESCO in their policy on Intercultural Education, “respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations.”

Where the aforementioned Wieviorka draws attention to the inherent risk of privileging one language over others when promoting interculturality within education, several decolonial and postcolonial alike have pointed out that there is a tendency to neglect relations of power in relation to languages and knowledge systems (Spivak 1988; Mignolo 2005; Quijano 1992). As Gayatri Spivak (1988) has uncovered with customary sharpness, the subaltern woman of the Global South remains mute unless she addresses her oppressors in their language, enforcing the desertion of her culturally customary ways of knowing and thinking as an integral part of many postcolonial situations. This forced abandonment, Spivak contends, is due to the fact that the epistemologies of the subaltern are not recognized within a Western hegemonic vocabulary.

In taking the hierarchies within epistemologies as a point of entry, I seek to wean interculturality from its comfort zone of flat substitutability across cultural differences by pushing for the possibility of other ways of thinking about the concept depending on where (the geopolitics of knowledge) and by whom (the bodypolitics of knowledge) it is being articulated. In order to make a case for the importance of always considering the geopolitical and bodypolitical dimension of knowledge production within interculturality, I will shift geographical focus to the Andean region of Latin America. In that part of the world the notion of *interculturalidad* – translation: interculturality – is not only a subject on the educational agenda, it has also become a core component among indigenous social movements in their strive for decolonization. Empirically, this essay relies on data gathered through interviews with teachers and students from a pan-Andean educational initiative on interculturality – or to be more precise: *interculturalidad* – run by indigenous movements with a particular focus on *what* concept of *interculturalidad* means to the interviewees, *why* they use it, and how *they* see it being accomplished. Although each is the other’s intended equivalent in their respective language schemas, the argument advanced here is that *interculturalidad* as used in the Andes is not necessarily interculturality; hence, the nouns will be distinguished throughout this essay. While inseparable from each other, what I will argue is that *interculturalidad* actualizes a question of epistemological rights rather than cultural ones as the difference that straddles the geopolitical contexts from where the concepts are articulated goes beyond cultural differences as they are above all colonial; that is, they historically encounter one another on asymmetrical, unequal terms, terms of domination or subordination.

### **Same concept, different stories**

Succinctly put, where interculturality in a European context emerged as a response to a shifting demographic make-up (Meer & Modood 2012) and, in the case of the EU, also as part of forging common ground between member states (Aman 2012; Hansen 2000), the historical backdrop to the emergence of *interculturalidad* is distinctively different. The term evolved in tandem with indigenous people's emergence as an increasingly powerful force on the political arena in the Andean nations during the 1980s and early 1990s; an event in history that Xavier Albó (1991, 299) has dubbed “*el retorno del indio*” (“the return of the Indian”). This due to these movements' focus on reclaiming their identity as indigenous and revaluing their culture in which *interculturalidad* was adopted as a new watchword. According to academic commentators, the indigenous populations of the region found themselves pulled between class struggles, structural racism and corporatist rule, where the use of *interculturalidad* signaled attempts to break out of the prison-house of colonial vocabulary – modernization, progress and salvation – that lingers on in official memory (Gustafson 2009; Walsh 2009). For a more precise definition organizations such as The Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador (*Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador*) and Federación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras (*National Federation of Peasants, Indigenous Peoples and Blacks*) interpret the principle of *interculturalidad* as respect for the diversity of indigenous peoples, but also as a demand for unity in order to transform the present structures of society which, they argue, have been preserved from the time when an alien power established itself as the ruler, imposed its own laws and educational system (Walsh 2009).

In the case of Bolivia, few will have missed that this so-called “return of the Indian” led as far as to *Palacio Quemado*, the presidential palace; when Evo Morales took office *interculturalidad* became as significant in state discourse as it historically had been for indigenous movements in their efforts to move toward decolonization (Walsh 2009). Symbolic to this reasoning, Morales, in his 2006 inaugural address as the first indigenous president of Bolivia, declared that “[t]he best way to decolonize Bolivia is to recover our culture and ways of living”, which draws attention to the ways in which certain ways of life, realities and knowledges have historically been suppressed within the framework of the nation-state. And educational policies have been key in devaluing indigenous knowledges and ways of life (Aman 2015b). As “fruits of the conquest”, Peruvian author José Carlos Mariátegui (1975, 87) writes, the educational systems in the Andean nations have “a colonial rather than a national character. When the state refers to the Indians in its educational programs, it treats them as an inferior race.” In defying the idea of “the two Bolivias” – one modern, civilized and knowledgeable of European descent; one of backwards, ignorant and uncivilized indigenous people – epistemology is at the center of indigenous activism and state politics of decolonization alike by drawing attention to, as in Morales' aforementioned speech, the geopolitical and bodypolitical dimensions of knowledge production. Consequently, it seems far to suggest that *interculturalidad*, in this context, is charged with reverberations of the historical experience of colonialism.

Every bit as contingent as any other concept, then, it is apparent that several conceptualizations of interculturality are simultaneously in play: *interculturalidad* seems intertwined with an act of restorative justice for the way in which the nation-state for centuries has turned the indigenous populations into its blind spot with a particular focus on epistemic change (Aman 2014), whereas UNESCO, for example, advocates interculturality as a method of facing the cultural challenges of every

multicultural society by uniting around “universally shared values emerging from the interplay of these cultural specificities” (2009, 43). In short, particularly versus universality: where *interculturalidad* has its roots in the singular and with strong reverberations of the historical experience of colonialism, interculturality is argued to encapsulate universal principles. The differences between the concepts become even more apparent when focusing on the role of language as part of an intercultural dialogue: the EU identifies conditions for interculturality in the cultural and linguistic heritage of the member states, claiming that this serves as a foundation from which “to develop active intercultural dialogue with all countries and all regions, taking advantage of for example Europe’s language links with many countries” (European Commission 2007, 10). Those local languages to which the EU ascribes importance became global through colonialism and, in another part of the world, those very languages echo the imperial order that *interculturalidad* is an attempt to overcome; languages in which the very act of speaking immediately connects the postcolonial subject to a history of violence and subjugation. Regardless of the language in use, reading the rhetoric surrounding interculturality and *interculturalidad*, respectively, in the light of each other seemingly uncovers the privileged locus from where interculturality makes meaning through its assumed universality. This, in turn, gives flesh to Alison Jones’ (1999) observation that all too often discussions on interculturality start from the assumption that all participants sit at an even table, one at which all parties have an equal say.

### **Colonial differences rather than cultural ones**

What I will argue in this essay is that interculturality and *interculturalidad*, respectively, constitute two sides of an epistemological divide marked by a difference that is besides cultural above all colonial. This by asserting that *interculturalidad*, in contrast to the universalizing assumption underpinning interculturality, reflects ideas from people in the indigenous movements in Latin America that, for all their possible inner disparities, share the conviction that coloniality is not only experienced along economic and political dimensions but also along knowledge lines. According to Ánibal Quijano (1988), European arrival to the Americas meant the abolishment of existing rationalities on the American continent, which he contends are an alternative epistemology attuned to the experiences of the indigenous peoples of the region. What Quijano pinpoints is the geopolitical and bodypolitical dimension of all knowledges; a dimension that often tends to be overlooked as it goes against the grain of what Walter D. Mignolo (1999, 41) has called “the ‘normal’ procedure in modern epistemology to delocalize concepts and detach them from their local histories”. Apart from pointing to the importance of conducting a geopolitical analysis in relation to knowledge – not least, as in the case of interculturality, where the inherent purpose is the respecting of diversity and commitment to equality – Mignolo targets how modern western epistemology, he holds, carries within itself a privilege to universalize meanwhile other knowledge systems are considered as particular and context bound. For Mignolo (2005), the analysis of epistemology must be done in relation to its function in conforming to and sustaining a hierarchy of knowledge and knowers particularly adapted for colonialism, in which the most relevant distinction concerns one’s cultural identity. This hierarchy between the various groups depending on their geopolitical and bodypolitical location is the reason that makes decolonial theorists hesitant about the conceptualization of “cultural differences” which is predominant in, for example, intercultural and multicultural discourses; they are

suspicious of the ways in which these discourses frame difference merely in cultural terms. In their view, this occludes the colonial dimension.

The ‘differences’ between Latin America and Europe and the US are not just ‘cultural’; they are, well and truly, ‘colonial differences.’ That is, the *links* between industrial, developed, and imperial countries, on the one hand, and could-be-industrial, under-developed, and emerging countries, on the other, *are* the colonial difference in the sphere where knowledge and subjectivity, gender and sexuality, labor exploitation of natural resources, and finance, and authority are established. The notion of cultural differences overlooks the relation of power while the concept of colonial difference is based, precisely, on imperial/colonial power differentials (Mignolo 2005, 36).

Fundamentally, the conceptualization of “colonial differences” recognizes the power dynamics at work in how Europeans have represented their Others; that is, a form of hostility to difference embedded in the normative and teleological project of modernity, which is the basis of dominant Western epistemologies. The simultaneous operation of modernity alongside coloniality – they are, according to Mignolo (2005) two sides of the same coin, as you cannot have one without the other – implied the establishment of specific parameters of validity and recognition not only in regard to conceptualization of humanity, human nature, progress, and development but also on what can be known and how this is to be communicated. Translated into an educational debate, indigenous educational forms based on indigenous knowledges, languages, and cultural practices, has been dismissed as non-empirical, non-scientific, non-rigorous and superstitious (Mignolo 2005); views that tend to undermine the relevance of indigenous knowledges to formal education (Deloria 1995). As postcolonial scholar never ceases to remind their readers, whether the site of production is in the West or elsewhere, the knowledge accredited with status as “scientific”, “truthful” and “universal” are the ones created with the modern human and natural sciences; sciences deriving from the European Enlightenment and modernity (Mignolo 2002; Spivak 2003). As direct consequence of the hierarchies instilled in knowledge production, colonized populations in different corners of the world have been disqualified from intellectual labor.

Although there is an extensive and important research body on *interculturalidad* inside as well as outside the Andean region around Latin America from a variety of focuses, often relying on a sociocultural understanding of knowledge production (cf. Aikman 1999; De la Piedra 2004; Hornberger 2000; Valdiviezo 2009), my contribution here is bringing *interculturalidad* into a conversation with interculturality – two concepts that are rarely mentioned in relation to each other (Bernal 2003; Solano-Campos 2013; Aman 2014) – through a decolonial reading that allows for an enhanced understanding of the geopolitical and bodypolitical locus from where interculturality produces meaning. The importance of such analysis has been pinpointed by Dipesh Chakrabarty (1995, 757) claiming that the problem with hegemonic western epistemology is that it produces opportunities for relationships and dialogue that are “structured, from the very beginning, in favor of certain outcomes”; outcomes that, seen from this perspective, inevitably privileges certain geopolitical spaces, bodies and knowledge systems over others. In comparison to a culturist language of differences, the analytical advantage that the term “colonial difference” brings is the acknowledgement of knowledge as instrumental to domination as on the other side of epistemic privilege is epistemic inferiority (Grosfoguel 2013). In thinking of interculturality in terms of colonial differences rather than cultural ones, I will seek to draw attention to the risk that participants in an intercultural dialogue face one another within a hierarchical schema of domination or

subordination. Without tunneling into the nuances of the diversity within each concept, I argue that in relation to interculturality, *interculturalidad* reveals the necessity to always keep the colonial difference in view as the two concepts mark two sides of an epistemological divide.

If this discussion establishes some of the overarching concerns of the theoretical backdrop, the time has come to more thoroughly present the empirical part of the essay. I draw upon material from a course on *interculturalidad* provided by an indigenous organization spread over the Andean region of Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. Founded in 1999 as a social movement with the aim of establishing indigenous educational models, the organization provides courses on *interculturalidad* to adult students. With each course spanning over a year, the students, who all self-identify as indigenous or having indigenous roots, study part-time and are given academic credits on completion of the course. To ensure the informants' anonymity, the name of the pan-Andean organization will not be disclosed; however, the fact that four universities have agreed to impart academic legitimacy by acting as collaborators of the course in awarding credits to the students reveals not only that the organization is strongly positioned within the indigenous communities but also that the course in itself is deemed to conform to a certain standard. According to the syllabus, the aim of the course is to retrieve and construct knowledge in direct relation to Andean culture and identity in local languages and terminology based upon indigenous methodology. Both the heterogeneity encapsulated by the terms "Andean" and "indigenous" and the common experience of negated identities, ways of thinking and interpretations of the world are acknowledged. Interviews were conducted individually with the three teachers and eight of the students from the course, focusing specifically on definitions of *interculturalidad* and its practical significance. All interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.<sup>1</sup> In the analyses, how and with whom the specific interviews were performed will be clarified.

Before proceeding a caveat is necessary: I have no intention of pushing for generalizations or offering a comprehensive account of approaches to *interculturalidad* among indigenous alliances in the Andes. In drawing on material that also potentially contains internal disparities (of class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality), I want to make it abundantly clear that only a few threads of a much larger tapestry are accounted for here. However, despite the lack of a harmonious definition of *interculturalidad* and the sometimes conflictive space between government and social movements, what unifies the diverse expressions and experiences existing among the indigenous populations in different parts of Latin America is the condition of being out of place in relation to European modernity – the awareness of coloniality (Mignolo, 2005). As before, I am concerned with *what* the notion of *interculturalidad*

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<sup>1</sup> All interviews were conducted in Spanish. Although I am aware of the limitations of such an approach, the reasons for this undertaking are related both to my own linguistic limitations in Quechua and Aymara and to the use of Spanish as the official language of the course. The explanation for this is that, on the one hand, students may carry different languages with them, meaning that Spanish offers a common ground, and on the other hand, that there are those who identify themselves as, for example, Quechua without having training in the language because of the dominance of Spanish throughout the educational system. As Morales lamented in a recent interview, when enrolled in school, he gradually lost his earlier fluency in Aymara (cf. Peñaranda 2011). Although contradictory to the course's aims, support can be found in Mignolo's (2005) writings which stress the importance of thinking in and from a language historically disqualified as a tool for thinking, such as Quechua or Aymara, while still writing in an imperial language, in order to subvert the geo-politics of knowledge.

means to the interviewees, *why* they use it, and how *they* see it being accomplished while placing particular attention on articulations that run counter to a framework deemed to be Western.<sup>2</sup>

### **“Other” Languages**

If this essay has started from the assumption that interculturality is charged with different meanings and contents depending on context and the enunciator’s outlook on the world, the same should apply to *interculturalidad*. Responding to this issue on what *interculturalidad* is, a student interviewed in Cuzco, Peru, pedagogically explains that although the concept of *interculturalidad* “is nowadays seen everywhere” it may nevertheless have few overlapping points with the ways in which the terms is being deployed among certain indigenous groupings.

Currently there’re two levels existing [of *interculturalidad*]: the utopic one and the real one. The utopic one would be something that we are still unable to achieve. This would be a superior level where all cultures are able to coexist horizontally, mutually respected, mutually tolerated, accepting each other. It doesn’t exist yet which is the reason why I would call it ‘*utopic interculturalidad*’. ‘*Real interculturalidad*’ is what we’re practically living nowadays. There’s a certain relationship between cultures, but there are still these situations of placing oneself on top of another culture.

Notwithstanding the production of binaries in relation to cultures, this statement offers a compelling understanding of the ways in which *interculturalidad*, at the moment of writing, offers an alternative vision, a horizon to strive for, rather than necessarily already achieved concrete and radical processes of change. What the student emphasizes as obstacle to fulfilling the ideas of a different vision of society as invested in *interculturalidad* is not limited to clashes of cultural differences. Indeed, the terminology in play in the quotation may allude to such understanding, yet the description of how power structures relationships between different cultures inescapably highlights the colonial difference. While echoing these sentiments, other participants are more concrete in their definitions. *Interculturalidad*, explains a middle-aged female student whom I interviewed in Urubamba, a small town in the Peruvian highlands, allows different indigenous cultures to view and interpret the world through the lens of their own beliefs in their own languages. The importance of this maneuver of reconstruction appears to stem from the interference of colonial residues in the initiatory pedagogy of school and society. According to the same student:

On a general basis we have sometimes rejected our culture, we who come from indigenous cultures. This is because of prejudices, of ignorance; we believe that we’re inferior, we become ashamed of our culture, we become ashamed of our language, ashamed of our mother tongue. They have taught us this (*nos han enseñado eso*), that the European culture is the superior one, that it’s the most developed, supposedly. Education here clearly has an occidental format wherein they teach us to value what is European and not what is ours.

By diagnosing core symptoms of the effect of European influence on life in the Andes, the interviewee describes a colonial difference in which being indigenous is equated with lack, synonymous with inferiority in relation to what is ascribed to Europe. Although she is recounting these issues in a predominantly general manner,

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<sup>2</sup> The “West” does not entail a geographical space, but is instead an expression of modernity, a product of knowledge that was built on categories and concepts rooted in Greek and Latin languages and the modern/imperial unfolding of the West (Mignolo 2005).



the student's articulation of negative emotions in relation to being indigenous – an experience of shame leading to gradual rejection – is significant. The process explained is that of identification and disavowal, in which pretensions to be part of the nation's univocal subject require assimilation through the adoption of a perspective on, among other things, life, knowledge and subjectivity derived from modern European models. In locating the dissemination of European texts in an impersonal "they," that is, the educational system, the student depicts a two-stroke process: the schools bind pupils to a state written in and from the language of the colonizers, which in turn, continues to exacerbate the colonial wound.

This background emerges as essential to understand what differentiates a certain articulation of *interculturalidad* from another. In contrast to state sponsored initiatives around the Andean region under the name of *educación intercultural bilingüe* that allows the teaching of indigenous languages alongside Spanish in public elementary schools (Gustafson 2009), for many indigenous alliances the request for educational rights in indigenous vernaculars in the name of *interculturalidad* extends beyond language learning; this demand is a call for the inscription across subjects and curricula not only of languages but also of knowledge systems, values and beliefs that have been silenced within official discourses ever since the conquest. Since its inception, a stern critique has been directed towards *educación intercultural bilingüe*'s exclusive focus on languages and its disregards for other epistemologies and logics. This is not to dismiss the possibility of important advancements under the name of *educación intercultural bilingüe* that have been reported by academic commentators. Among others, Nancy Hornberger (1987) argues that these educational initiatives helped the endurance of indigenous languages. However, as Angel and Bogado (1999) points out, a general tendency was that Spanish continued to be the *lingua franca* of the nation, as indigenous idioms were merely transformed into yet another school subject, similar to the study of a foreign language. Subsequently all school children, regardless of background, remained subjected to the study of Spanish, and only the indigenous populations were expected to become bilingual – not anyone else.

In reaction to state policy initiatives, indigenous alliances across the Andean nations began to develop their own intercultural education referred to as *casa adentro* (in-house). A concrete example of such course is the one under scrutiny here. According to one of the initiators, Juan García (Walsh & Garcia 2002), the objective of these courses is to strengthen the ties of belonging, the building of a collective memory, among the indigenous populations. This carries a specific purpose: "to unlearn the learned and relearn *lo propio*, 'our own', as a way to understand life, our vision of history, knowledges, and of being in the world" (Walsh 2011, 51). While the words in use above on learning "our own" can be seen as drawing upon a certain essentialist construction of "our own" defined in opposition to what is not, it can also be seen as targeting the colonial difference in emphasizing ways of knowing the world from epistemological premises other than the ones sanctioned by modernity. Or as explained by a student interviewed in El Alto who outlines how *interculturalidad* offers:

tools to re-recognize in my memory what my grandparents had: the language, the forms, the traditions. [...] Thus, to live my reality and accept myself a little bit more for who I am and not try to copy ways of life that are outside of our reality. I think that this is *interculturalidad*, to accept ourselves as we are.

In this account, the participant seems to view the importance of *interculturalidad* as an action that allows the indigenous population to recover traits of identification

deemed “extinct” as a result of colonial extirpation since Spanish arrival. Resistance occurs in the form of claiming particularity, a way of being that, as the argument goes, differs from those who were originally external: “indigenous communities are losing their identity in learning Spanish”, another student interpolates. Speaking in a single European language becomes not merely a reinforcement of historical power structures that oblige the addressee to communicate in the idiom of the *metropolis*, but colonialist vestiges are equally ingrained within languages. In the case of Spanish, imperialist attitudes have found a home in the realm of the idiomatic negative imperative – *¡No seas indio! (Don’t be Indian!)* – in everyday speech that encourages the recipient to stop acting ignorantly and instead be civilized.

Recognition of other languages, however does not necessarily signal the undoing of the linguistic legacy of Spanish that persists in the Andean nations. Rather, in this context, to make use of a collective “we” can be seen as part of the struggle for acknowledgement of the existence and contribution of languages that have been disqualified as tools for thinking. At least that is the argument that Aymara intellectual, Esteban Ticona (2012), advances as he explains that speaking of “our thought” should not be viewed as necessarily essentialist or vengeful. In Ticona’s view, then, it is rather seen as an indispensable part of decolonization as it makes use of fissures of coloniality by carving out the social, political and epistemological spaces that are necessary to generate other subjectivities. Viewed from this angle, *interculturalidad* activates the discourse on “*lo propio*” as part of a radical claim for epistemic rights rather than cultural ones – or put differently, for *interculturalidad* rather than *educación intercultural bilingüe* or even interculturality, whose recognition of cultural or linguistic diversity does not necessarily translate into epistemological diversity.

### **“Other” Ways of Knowing**

Besides the demands for the recognition of indigenous languages, Morales’ accession to power revealed another longstanding request: right to the land. Confronting the chronicles of the colonial archive, Morales proclaimed already in his inaugural speech as the new president of Bolivia that “we have achieved power to end the injustice, the inequality and oppression that we have lived under. The original indigenous movement, as well as our ancestors, dreamt about recovering the territory”. In the final part of this sentence, “recovery” emerges as fundamental to continuing action. A term laden with loss, this word’s presence is intimately linked to past experiences of colonial subjugation of having been stripped of self-determination of the territory over which the various Andean nation-states extends their arms. Morales’ words on the importance of recovering the territory are echoed in interviews with the students:

What we’ve always been fighting for is the issue of political decisions about the land. The basis of life (*la base de la vida*) is in the territory and it defines everything. Of course, it also has its proper manner of expression; in this case it also signifies a way of life and the conception of life itself and this we express in our own languages (*nuestros propios idiomas*). The major problem has been one culture’s negation of all other cultures.

What the interviewee conveys is how lifeworlds and knowledge systems have been buried under centuries of colonial, Eurocentric and racist dust. In targeting the colonial difference by referring to how this is a consequence of “one culture’s negation of all other cultures”, the interviewee at the same time produces a counter-narrative in describing a holistic view in which the ground is inseparable from

languages, knowledge systems and even life. “It’s my territory that gives me my identity”, she explains before underlining the importance of *interculturalidad* as a return to one’s identity and to respecting Mother Earth (*la Pacha*) because “she is our mother who provides us with our food. We also respect our water without contaminating it because the water is life, it has life (*el agua es vida, tiene vida*).”

Notable here is the repeated emphasis on points of identification that were equally apparent in the previous section on the struggle over language that stems from the indispensable interrelation of ways of life and the territory. A claim for the existence of life in the waters and protection from los Apus – symbolically, *Apu* is an honorific for a person in Quechua – signals not only interaction with the landscape and dependency on it. But the statement also reveals the colonial difference by introducing an indigenous perspective, which, contrary to western epistemology, does not treat nature as an object but rather as a subject (Quijano 2007). For a concrete case in point, a student interviewed in Cochabamba, Bolivia, describes a logic of resistance to the dominant paradigm of capitalism in relation to the land:

In the big world (*el mundo mayor*) the land is valued as a piece of merchandize. In the Andean world it isn’t, rather we care for it with respect, as something that gives us life, that is part of... like a person, more (*como una persona más*).

In short, what the student accounts for is a counter-narrative against Eurocentric, reductionist notions of development and economic growth. This is done by way of an planetary metaphor that underlines a subjugated position by contrasting “Andean” and “Big” – an inclination that bears traces of the dictum *the West and the Rest* – which draws sharp boundaries between the agents and the silenced in a hierarchy both of ontology (European versus indigenous) and epistemology (science versus beliefs) determined by geopolitical location. In eschewing the binaries alleged to be central to modernity (cf. Escobar 2010), the quotation highlights the way in which the common Western opposition between nature and humanity lacks a signifier. Instead the interviewee opposes such duality that splits nature from culture through ascribing agency to the land as knowledge, from this perspective, is produced in relational fields; it emerges from practice and intersubjective relations with and within the world (Burman 2012). If humans, living systems, nature and – in Western eyes – lifeless objects are not distinguished, as Mignolo and Schiwy (2003) suggests in reference to Andean cosmology, but are rather all conceived as part of a network of living interactions, it draws attention to the epistemological dimension of *interculturalidad*. Or as succinctly captured by another student in Bolivia: “[i]nterculturalidad isn’t a concept that solves humanity, rather it permits debating what the human is.”

### **“Other” State Model**

Over the past decades, a new paradigm for human progress has been emerging in Latin America referred to as *buen vivir* (“living well”), which is the result of many years of political organization and mobilization of indigenous groups. Before going further, it is important not to confuse “living well” with “living better” as they are set apart by epistemological differences: where “living better” is confined to European modernity with its emphasis on development, consumerism and progress, Morales himself summarizes *buen vivir* as “to live in harmony with everyone and everything, between humans and our Mother Earth; and it consequently implies working for the dignity of all” (cited in Canessa 2014, 157).

Moreover, the promotion of *buen vivir* is incorporated in the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador and the 2009 Constitution of Bolivia. However, a similar scenario to that of *educación intercultural bilingüe* seems to repeat itself also here, despite the constitutional changes. Differently put, there is no guarantee that *interculturalidad* for the government now means the same thing as for the grassroots movements that supported Morales' campaign. On the contrary, Escobar (2010) claims that the Morales administration have failed to accomplish profound and satisfactory changes in line with the radical programs proposed by several social movements, which, he continues, highlights how *interculturalidad* as an attempt to transform the existing order is more likely to be struggled for from below than above. In reference to this issue, a student in Bolivia interpolates that “[a]ll the documents of the state nowadays have ‘*interculturalidad*’ all over the place – they breath *interculturalidad*.” Yet she identifies a discrepancy between policy discourse and practical implementations when stating that “in concrete practice with racism and coloniality that is crazy, it’s super present and they are re-actualized in other forms when the key question is the colonial structure.”

Besides the possibility of *interculturalidad* having lost some of its subversive edge in the hands of the state, the student pinpoints an additional obstacle in terms of how the continuously colonial structure of the state prevents the implementation of *interculturalidad*. In viewing the construction of the state with its argued colonial character, the student suggests that the struggles invested in *interculturalidad* move beyond a liberal acceptance of cultural pluralism. While this recognition of cultural differences within the frontiers of the state would possibly allow for cultural rights and educational reforms, it would not necessarily translate in equality of difference within the framework of the nation-state. After all, as Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (1991) remind us, the processes of nation-state building has always been violent as it was accompanied by the exclusion of national minorities. Applied to the Andean context, as well as in many other parts around Latin America, an important reservation needs to be made: in contrast to Europe, national minorities were not necessarily pushed to the corners in the process of nation-state building. Quite the reverse, when the decedents of the conquistadores founded the respective republics of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador between 1820 and 1830, it was a national minority that excluded a majority of the population: the indigenous peoples (Prada 2010).

As one of the course teachers explains in his office in Quito, the indigenous populations have been made aware of the colonial difference ever since its construction: “From the conquest onwards the state has wanted to assimilate the indigenous population and insert them into the state, yet without understanding their processes, without knowing their cultures.” The colonial difference reveals itself in the fact that the Creoles were without a demand to adjust, to abolish their cultural identities, in order to acquire full citizenship. Through their fortuitous character as a class, they are already fully considered as citizens. On the direct question of how *interculturalidad* can target the deemed colonial structure of the nation-state, a student in La Paz responds; “we’re fighting for a plurinational state (*un estado plurinacional*).” Although it was indigenous movements in Ecuador that initially began to use the term “nationalities” to refer to themselves as distinct people within the Ecuadorian state, Bolivia has made the furthest advancement in being the first state in Latin America to recognize itself in the National Constitutional Assembly as plurinational (Gustafson 2009).

Naturally, such radical move inevitably produces its own critics. Where some academic commentators have dismissed a plurinational state as a process of

“balkanization” in creating territories on ethno-linguistic grounds (cf. Mayorga 2007), others are more hopeful in suggesting that it may allow for achieving real democratic pluralism as it provides a new model of citizenship that challenges former colonial and postcolonial injustices (cf. Gustafson 2009). While at the present time of writing it may seem premature to evaluate the practical effects that the re-founding of the nation-state as plurinational has had for the invoked populations, Walsh (2009) contends that albeit underdeveloped on an theoretical level, it has undeniably opened up new avenues of possibilities for decolonization as it signifies a clear shift from the uni-national framework of the nation-state to the one with more adequate structures to include its people. This by a new form of nation-building process that sets out to incorporate difference (indigenous languages, knowledges, cosmologies) into sameness (nationhood, modernity, the state apparatus) while also allowing for sameness to be transformed by difference. Succinctly put, the idea of the plurinational – as a central component of *interculturalidad* – finds its primal sustenance in the historically repressed and negated literal plural character of the national. If *interculturalidad* offers, in Escobar’s (2010, 25) words, a move away from “the monocultural, monoepistemic, and uninational state”, part of the altered link to the state can bring about a new sense of citizenship and entitlement. Granted, a citizenship produced within the framework of *interculturalidad* is not merely a new model of citizenship for indigenous people; it seems fair to suggest that it is a new model of citizenship *per se*.

## Coda

In shifting focus from a policy discourse on interculturality produced by supranational bodies orientated towards cultural differences; instead engaging with the sibling discourse of *interculturalidad* has allowed an enhanced understanding of the importance to consider epistemology in a project set to bridge cultural difference through intercultural dialogue. Succinctly put, what I have highlighted in this article is the importance of the geopolitical dimension of knowledge production and the potential pitfalls of not taking the colonial difference in consideration of interculturality. Take for example the goal of intercultural dialogue – a hallmark of intercultural education: *Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, speaks of “to better understand others’ behaviors to interact effectively and appropriately with others”; UNESCO advocates interaction across cultural differences around “universally shared values”; and the EU underlines the importance to “develop active intercultural dialogue with all countries and all regions, taking advantage of for example Europe’s language links with many countries”. Juxtaposing them against the backdrop of *interculturalidad* would allow for a profound questioning of not merely the way in which the pragmatic identification of a dialogue held in imperial languages into which subjects in erstwhile colonies continue to be born illustrates a continuing exaltation of the colonial difference, but also a profound questioning of what constitutes such allegedly “universal values”. What we have seen in this essay is that there is seemingly few exceptions of the conceptual and terminological premises to *interculturalidad*, in contrast to interculturality, privileged enough to pass as universal. Part of the challenge in achieving an intercultural dialogue with the purpose of, in the words of UNESCO, promoting “respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations” involves understanding the social-historical power relations that imbue knowledge production. As Ánibal Quijano (1989, 447) puts it: “[e]pistemic decolonization is necessary to

make possible and move toward a truly intercultural communication; to an exchange of experiences and significations as the foundation of another rationality that legitimately could claim some universality.”

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