

**DECOLONIZING THE TECHNOLOGIES OF KNOWLEDGE:  
VIDEO AND INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGY**

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The colonialist burden of the geopolitics of knowledge invokes a hegemonic structure of thinking that constructs the North as the source of theoretical knowledge, while the so-called Third and Fourth Worlds appear to produce culture, or, in the best of cases, 'local knowledge'. Parallel to this epistemological division, technology – industrial, representational, genetic, informational, etc. – seems to originate from the developed states of the North. Aníbal Quijano (1992, 1997) and Walter D. Mignolo (1994, 1995) have argued that the processes of colonization caused if not their disappearance, then the subalternization of indigenous techniques of representation and epistemic articulation. Corresponding to this colonialist geopolitical division of intellectual labor, when indigenous organizations employ the audiovisual medium they are commonly considered oral cultures using a western technology (see Columbus, 1995).

Nevertheless, in Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia, Canada, the USA, in fact, in almost all of the Americas, as well as Australia, communication and representation processes on the basis of video and the Internet testify to optimism about new technologies; an optimism shared by indigenous activists and visual anthropologists such as Faye Ginsburg (1994, 1995) and Terence Turner (1991a, 1991b). This optimism is generally based on two fundamental observations: First, that video permits decentralized communication and representation; second, that the medium enables liberation from the requirements of literacy and state education. However, others such as James Weiner (1997), Stanley Aronowitz (1979), Teresa de Lauretis (1981), and Catherine Russell (1999), insist that technology is not neutral and that it produces involuntary effects. They agree that video inscribes a particular logic of production. Having emerged in capitalist, colonial and patriarchal contexts, audiovisual media carry the burden of a colonial geopolitics of knowledge. This obviously impacts the way we think about the indigenous appropriation of video. The colonial burden of technology also concerns the efforts of indigenous individuals and organizations to make use of

literary *testimonio*, academic discourse and its institutions. This, ultimately, also has to do with the notion of cultural studies. Does cultural studies want to deepen the division between theory and its object or point to the relations of power and colonialism inherent in our own modes of thinking? Doesn't the latter require a more profound questioning of the technology and contexts of academic production? Indigenous video offers, I think, a provocative perspective in this respect.

The interventions of film theorists allude to the logic of subalternity. That is, to enter into discourse, or, by extension, into the technological or representational medium, is to confront structures of comprehension. That which does not enter into this logic of contestation, that which does not make itself available for any means of interpellation, cannot be comprehended, made intelligible or effective.<sup>1</sup> This logic of subalternity has a double consequence. It prescribes the critical act as a subversion of the existing codes, and simultaneously affirms these codes as a focal point. For film the solution becomes revealing fetishistic meanings in the composition of shots and the duration of takes, a strategy that encounters its aesthetic solution in opposition to Hollywood and conventional ethnographic documentary. The majority of indigenous media productions, however, are not experimental in this sense. They avoid confrontation with hegemonic cinematic codes, and unlike literary *testimonio*, resist incorporation into the university's academic curriculum. Yet indigenous video activists demand the decolonization of the medium and of the geopolitics of knowledge (*La otra Mirada*, 1999). How should we understand this? Perhaps it is necessary to take a step back and ask: What do we want to say when we speak about technology and its relation to knowledge? Are technologies the result of particular desires of knowing or is the production of knowledge dependent on its technological tools? Is it necessary or useful to distinguish between *techné* and *techné*, that is, between instruments of knowledge and their creative uses?

In the video-story “*Qati Qati*” (1999), directed by the Aymara indian Reynaldo Yujra, scenes of a central and tragic plot about the crisis of traditional beliefs are interwoven with the representation of shared labor between men and women and relations of reciprocal relations of exchange in the *ayllu* [Quechua and Aymara kinship community] and the market place. The production and circulation of videotapes and DVDs echo the on-screen enactment of shared labor and reciprocity. As if responding to cultural theorist Stanley Aronowitz, who asserted in 1979 that cinema is the art form of late capitalism, indigenous media production and circulation recall the efforts of the New Latin American Cinema of the 1960s and ‘70s. Imbued with the revolutionary enthusiasm of the time, Getino and Solanas, as well as the Ukumau Group in Bolivia, understood cinema as a revolutionary weapon that lends itself to a socialist mode of production (Solanas y Getino, 1973: 60; Sanjinés, 1979). The Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui had characterized indigenous culture as a form of Andean socialism. Based on their filmmaking experiences in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador, as well as on Mariátegui’s arguments, Jorge Sanjinés and the Ukamau Group adapted cinema as an indigenous-socialist practice. As expressed by Sanjinés: “the Indians, because of their social traditions, tend to conceive of themselves first as groups rather than as isolated individuals. Their way of being is not individualist” (Sanjinés, 1979: 65, Our translation).<sup>2</sup> This perception of their filmic and revolutionary objectives led the Ukamau Group to integrate the Quechua communities they were filming into the production process, and it deeply influenced the script writing process and their preference for long shots that mark a collective protagonist (62-65). It thus also informed their strategy for aesthetically subverting the globally dominant Hollywood mode of production and representation.

The transformation of the production and distribution process by indigenous videomakers is subtly but significantly different from these anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist projects. First, like

the efforts of New Latin American Cinema, the labor of making video is collective and non-specialized; but the emphasis is on converting indigenous communities into protagonists. They now use the camera, work on scripts, define visual strategies, audio soundtracks, themes, and analysis. As the *Manual para facilitadores audiovisuales indígenas* (the Manual for indigenous audiovisual facilitators), published by CEFREC-CAIB in Bolivia, states: “The objective of community self-diagnosis is that the community itself creates a hierarchy of cultural problems and their solutions, that is, that the main decisions are made in and from community itself, through consensus” (Red de Comunicación Intercultural, 1).

There are variations in how communities are integrated into the production group’s discussion processes. They are sensitive to the cultural differences between distinct indigenous contexts. Likewise the ownership and distribution of the videos is conceived in different ways, following practices of exchange that differ in the mountains and the low lands. The Moxeña videomaker Julia Mosúa refers to a still unresolved debate about the ownership of images that communities believe to be their own, a product of what is effectively their unpaid labor of image production. Alfredo Copa from the Potosí area, on the other hand, explains that his community considers the images obtained from it as property of CEFREC-CAIB, that is, of the producers. The filmmaking affirms a reciprocal relationship between himself as media activist and his community. This relation extends beyond the filmmaking itself. Copa is asked to offer his knowledge, manual and intellectual services based on the needs of the community (Mosúa, Copa, Pinto, 2000). These notions of reciprocity and personal relationships also guide the exchange with the Spanish donors that finance CEFREC-CAIB’s work in Bolivia, as well as with other, if very limited, international distribution contacts.

What I am interested in emphasizing here is that CEFREC-CAIB move away from a socialist logic of production and consumption. Rather, they inscribe audiovisual technology into indigenous notions of property and exchange, which include future responsibilities in relation to their communities. This rearticulation of the technology transforms the idea of film as a free market commodity (the fetish that is liberated from human labor and production context). Video is contextualized within indigenous relations that implicate the market but differ from socio-economic relations informed by neoliberal capitalism. They oppose the global economic structures of inequality that Fernando Coronil (2000) has characterized as “globocentrism.” CEFREC-CAIB demand instead a culture of reciprocity and responsibility derived from long histories of living on the border with capitalism (Larson 1995). This subversion of the neoliberal market goes beyond the logic of subalternity. CEFREC-CAIB change the focus by thinking from what Mignolo (2000) has called ‘the colonial difference’, that is, the process of video production and distribution modifies capitalism and grounds relations of exchange in indigenous economic practices.

When Aronowitz spoke of cinema as the paradigmatic art form of late capitalism in the late 1970s, he wasn’t referring only to the processes of production and distribution. His critique also implied the technology itself; the succession of images in time that replicates and constitutes the rhythm of capitalist production. More recently, James Weiner (1997) pronounced a similar judgment regarding the possibilities of indigenous video. Since the audiovisual medium constitutes the society of the spectacle in the west, its use by indigenous communities can only lead to the destruction of their cultures of origin, as they transform societies based on ‘real’ relations that are not mediatized into cultures of simulacra. It is clear that beneath Weiner’s argument lies a Western utopic desire; the necessity of defining an absolute alterity to the West, the oral culture organized on the basis of ritual as invocation and production of unmediated social relations. Catherine Russel (1999), calls this

desire the ‘ethnographic pastoral’, a result of visual anthropology and its scientific discourse, which replicates the temporal delay between filming and exhibition in the construction of two temporalities: one premodern, the other developed. This negation of coevalness, of living in the same moment albeit with different economic and social consequences, forms, as explained by Mignolo (2000, Ch. 1), one of the bases of the coloniality of power because it negates the intimate dependency of capitalism on those societies that it has exploited. Furthermore, it proposes the European model of development as the only viable path. Russel, however, arrives at the same conclusion as Weiner and Aronowitz: the need to make experimental films. This is precisely what – in general – we do not find in the majority of indigenous productions.<sup>3</sup> The documentaries seem to follow conventional formats, and fictional works such as “*Qati Qati [Whispers of Death]*” (1999), “*El chaleco de plata [Vest Made of Money]*” (1998) or “*El Oro maldito [Cursed Gold]*” (1999) that have won prizes at international indigenous film and video festivals, privilege exemplary characters over collectives, characters who are framed within suspenseful narratives that contain moments of terror and humor and are rendered through the ample use of close ups. All of these are solutions that the anti-imperialist cinema of Ukamau had denounced.

However, from fictional pieces like the Aymara video-story “*El Chaleco de plata [Vest Made of Money]*” emerges a subtle transformation of the medium. “*El Chaleco de plata [Vest Made of Money]*” avoids the epic representation of colonial exploitation as much as the collective indigenous resistance to these conditions. Instead it brings to the screen the exemplary history of two rural characters who lose their mental health and eventually their life to avarice. The story unfolds chronologically, without interruptions or temporal regressions, and it ends with an explicit moral, declared by the authority of the town. What is realized in this fictional piece – I think – is a transculturation of audiovisual technology that restructures colonial relations and escapes the logic

of hegemony-subalternity. In a nutshell: “*El Chaleco de Plata [Vest Made of Money]*” proposes that the separation between orality and writing is insufficient. The video suggests instead the possibility of generating knowledge through video; in other words, of thinking with audiovisual tools. At the same time, the media activists emphasize that this process requires an exchange of various reflections among different indigenous cultures.

The basic tool used to enact this transcultural operation is primarily the visual quality of the film. The film employs an almost touristic videography of the Andean high lands that slowly introduces viewers to the scenery, with the camera zooming in closer and closer and ultimately arriving at the faces of the protagonists. Throughout the film, the individual scenes are tied together with iconographic takes of the landscape, the town church, and of individuals or people talking in small groups at the market. These takes proceed with a fast rhythm and serve to maintain the tension between individual and collective responsibilities. The use of dialogue and the soundtrack contribute to the meaning of the images, but moreover function as diegetic elements that signal the existence of two languages, Quechua and Spanish, in the high lands. The dialogue and soundtrack create sound bites, auditory icons associated with the high land context that also provide particular perspective on a more encompassing problematic: indigenous peoples’ search for meaning and for ethical and epistemic value, in the face of generations subjected to the ongoing coloniality of power now articulated in massive migrations to the city and increasing incorporation into the system of state education. Instead of subscribing to the division between orality and literacy, indigenous media suggests that indigenous cultures have always been audiovisual, that is to say, oral and iconographic.

Mignolo (1994) criticized the Western teleological thinking according to which orality develops toward writing. This developmental understanding of the technologies of knowledge is the

basis of Weiner's ethnographic pastoral (1997) and also underlies Third Cinema's need to create distance in order to safeguard the spectators' ability to reflect critically. Mignolo was right to point out the equivalency between Amerindian systems of signification, which were suppressed during the conquest, and Western alphabetic writing. The process of colonial suppression established alphabetic writing as part of a hegemonic knowledge production system while the practices of painting codices or knotting quipus were subalternized and their functions changed (Mignolo, 1994: 297-8). Quijano sees this subalternization as a total colonization and as one of the pillars of the coloniality of power. The indigenous peoples were

impeded from objectifying their own images, symbols and subjective experiences in an autonomous way. This is to say, with their own plastic and visual forms of expression. Without this liberty of formal objectification, no cultural experience can be developed. [And he adds] They could not exercise their needs and abilities for visual and plastic objectification, but only and exclusively with and through the means of the preferred visual and plastic expressions of the dominators (Quijano, 1997: 115-116).

Mignolo, however, indicates the survival of indigenous technologies of knowledge, although changed and subalternized. Denise Arnold and Juan de Dios Yapita, in their critique of bilingual education programs in Bolivia, emphasize the contemporary use of visual-tactile technologies of knowledge in detailing the iconic tradition of textiles. They suggest that the textiles function as archives that have been successfully used to complement the written documents in fights over territorial rights (Arnold and Yapita, 1996: 375). But the epistemic quality of the textiles actually embraces all dimensions of Andean life, from gender relationships to cosmology, from archaeology up to the ideological and conceptual (376). The subalternization of the textiles, according to Arnold and Yapita, is not based only on

historiographic methods, or on the general pressure of alphabetic writing as Mignolo and Quijano ascertain, but also on its association with the feminine gender within the *ayllus* [Quechua and Aymara kinship communities] themselves.

The lack of explicit references to visual semiotic systems like textiles and the privileging of male producers and protagonist in the indigenous videos limit the decolonization of knowledge that the media activists carry out. But this limit, like Arnold and Yapita's conclusions, reveals that the gendered imaginary is part of the coloniality of power. At the same time, it implies that the effort of distinguishing between *techne* and *techné*, that is to say, between technology and the employment of it, obfuscates a colonial problematic. The effect of the coloniality of power was the Eurocentric allocation of technological-epistemic capacity in an environment defined by a modern/colonial masculine imaginary. As the feminist critique of knowledge has demonstrated, the feminine sphere – including the subjects and mental capacities associated with it – came to be thought of as opposite to this masculine environment. Critics of Orientalism have pointed out that the imaginary feminine sphere came to include everything associated with traditions, emotions and religions. One can see the same principle at work in many *indigenista* literary works of the beginning of the century in the Andes. In other words, the colonized subjects and their epistemic practices themselves were feminized. In a reciprocal process that endured over centuries, femininity was defined in opposition to a particular construction of masculinity based on the generally white, heterosexual, able and “rational” bodies that composed it and that located it geopolitically in the so-called ‘North.’ Rationality, objectivity, and the absence of emotion (understood as masculine characteristics) were defined by the theorists of technology, science and culture as requirements not only for thinking but also for the manipulation of

the technology that simultaneously transformed what they considered nature (understood as feminine). The decolonization of the technologies of knowledge on the part of the indigenous videographers calls attention to these dense interrelations between technology, its definitions, the subjects trained in its use, and the academic requirements to carry out such definitions; it insists on the necessity of transforming not only the use and the product of the technology but also the discursive context that defines what “is” epistemic technology.

The vast majority of the videos reclaim the audiovisual epistemic tradition in an indirect manner by creating a critical and cultural reflection that emphasizes the visuality of the medium. Even though they do not totally detach themselves from the fusion between their own masculine-centric traditions and the modern/colonial gender imaginary, they are able to interrupt part of the separation between technology and its use. First, they explode the idea of mediation since any type of semiotic act implies as much the production of a reality as the discursive definition of it; second, they reclaim traditional semiotic-communicative media in indigenous societies (both from the high lands and the jungle). Video emerges from this process as a logical extension of indigenous intellectual capacities and of indigenous epistemic technologies. They collapse as such the division between *techné* and *techné* by transforming not only the use or the form of the technological product, but the definition of the technology itself.

Of course, by using a medium that liberates them from alphabetic writing and the requirements of national education, indigenous media activists and their audiences also forge international contacts. The video is converted into a new type of epistemic tool that dissociates alphabetic writing from its hegemonic position. At the same time, it undermines

the division between orality and writing and dismantles the internal colonialism that would imagine the illiterate “Indian.”

One of the effects of this process is the distinction it draws between cultural discourse and theoretical reflection. It challenges us as academics to further investigate the colonial legacies that affect academic production, the distinction between writing and orality, and the relation we have with our supposed objects of study. If as academics we want to understand this thinking environment without reproducing the colonial gesture – the objectification of culture as opposed to theoretical reflection – we still need an understanding of the decolonization process and the consequences that it has for our teaching and theoretical production. We cannot be content with transmitting knowledge for the benefit of the subaltern – even if this knowledge now emerges from the field of cultural studies – but rather must break the very reproduction of the hegemony-subalternity dynamic.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is the principal argument of postcolonial thinkers like Spivak (1988) and of the Indian Subaltern Studies Group. See, for example, Guha (1988) and Chakrabarty (1991).

<sup>2</sup> There are indigenous videos that use slow takes and film in real time, as Vincent Carelli points out with respect to “Video in the Villages” in Brazil (Aufderheide, “Making Video”: 150). The Kayapó, also in Brazil, after having seen videos of themselves performing ceremonies in their daily T-shirts, shorts and dresses, decided to take off western clothing for the filming. They have thereby also taken advantage of the shock that is produced when video frames the camera together with their ritually painted bodies. These images have helped the Kayapó gain international attention in their fight for the preservation of their land as well as their culture (Ramos, *Indigenism; Taking Aim*, 1993). However, the majority of the indigenous videos in Latin America employ less conflictive strategies.

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<sup>3</sup> I thank Aníbal Quijano and Santiago Castro-Gómez for insisting on the possibility of making this distinction during the discussions in the Seminar on the Geopolitics of Knowledge at Duke University, November, 2000. Although I do not agree with their proposal, their interventions helped me a lot in forming my own position on the subject; a position that instead insists on conceptualizing the technology in terms of what Fernando Coronil, on the same occasion, called “their totality.”

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