After twenty years conducting archaeological research on the Atacama plateau of Northwestern Argentina, in the Antofalla territory of the south-central Andes (where I also live and teach), I wanted to undertake a test excavation near the recently modified stone fence of an agricultural plot. I asked Severo Reales, the owner of the plot, for permission, though I had already acquired legal authorization from the state anthropology bureaucratic agency. Severo said he had no problem at all and that he would come with us (a small group of students and myself) the first morning of work. The next morning, he came along with wine, liquor, coca leaves, and cigarettes; he dug a hole near the spot I wanted to dig and gave ritual food to the antiguo. After lighting a cigarette, he invited each person present to make an offering of some food while he addressed the excavation site: “Holy Earth Pachamama, beautiful old things shall be bred for Mr. Alejandro.” Severo was severe enough: in addition to his words of friendship, he also provided me with a theory of relatedness, including relationships with antiguos, that is completely different from the theory of relatedness I assumed was valid.

According to Severo’s theory, antiguos are not vestiges from a perfect past, but are rather still alive, and breed themselves under the soil; the past is not gone and distant; the past has not past in a perfect sense; and the relationship with the past is not mainly about extracting knowledge but about reciprocal feeding, care, respect, fear, and love. For Severo, archaeological objects – considered by the archaeological discipline (as well as heritage legislation and international agreements) to be its exclusive domain, variously named but always referring to vestigial matter originating in the more or less distant past – instead exist and act upon people in the present, demand obligations of them, and, rather than being accessible or inaccessible in absolute terms, modulate their relationships – including access and avoidance – through ritual.

Severo’s significant practice challenged my common understandings of the relationship I have with the antiguos of Antofalla. But he also challenged the central assumptions of the archaeological discipline, its apparently solid foundations, and together with them every piece of legislation (provincial, national, international, and multilateral) that shared with the archaeological discipline the same basic set of assumptions: the materiality of the archaeological object; vestigiality from a past located at a distance along a time vector; the archaeological discipline as the medium for relating with an otherwise inaccessible past; asymmetrical knowledge as the normal
relationship; and the illicitness (and displacement along the vector) of relation-other-than-disciplined. It is not that there are simply other possible interpretations of history, but that history—the past and its objects—are interrelated and related with other things (people, the earth, the sun, the moon, food, and so forth) in completely different ways, according to Other theories of relatedness. Those Other relationalities are made through and by the relationship to the Other.

This Other is not the Other to the West, that is, the cultural Other to be placed at a different point along a vector of time, culture, or development, outside its own borders, out there to be reflected negatively in the configuration of a self-image and finally captured as an object of science, tourism, or social or international aid. Neither is it the negative of Western alterization, an alterization that would assume a local perspectival point for alterizing the West. The Other from the Other-to-the-West’s perspective is both metaphysical and immanent in a particular moment, given that its relation to those animated powerful beings is itself the fabric of those implied in the relationality. These theories of relationality are based on local ontologies (local epistemes) and are grounded locally; but they are not isolated from the Western hegemonic episteme, which includes the archaeological discipline.

Severo knew quite well what I was thinking about the archaeological site, what my ontological assumptions were, what I was looking for, and what kind of praxis I would develop with respect to the antiguos. That is why he came to intervene before I started my excavation; he placed my relationship to the antiguos within the terms of the local theory of relatedness, and through our involvement in a ritual conversation with the antiguo he implicitly explained to my students and me what kind of relations they—antiguos—expected from us.

In doing so, he implied that from the locus of where we stood as archaeologists, we had no choice but to ignore the local episteme, and he intervened to put things in order. We were epistemically eaten by the local relationality. Archaeological objects are enmeshed with local theories of relationality, and are themselves actively related. The inter-epistemic relation is constructed in time as hegemony/subalternity. Subaltern local theory includes its own positionality with respect to the hegemonic episteme, a perspective on its relation to hegemony, but its main feature regarding the hegemonic episteme is that it can either incorporate Western beings (objects, concepts, gods) within its own episteme (phagocitosis5), or actively ignore hegemonic agents (ignoration5). Phagocitosis and ignoration are two different attitudes to hegemony that preserve local theories of relationality. From local theory there is not an outer space of alterity where the self can draw its own contours and expand, as is the case with the modern West. Alterity as a condition of relationality is already thought and practiced among each being with another being. Parents and children, people and Pachamama, Upper winds and Lower winds, alive and defunct, and so forth, are relations of alterity already patterned through the local theory of relationality.

Sets of objects that characterize the Indian occupation of the sixteenth and eighteenth in the northwest, recovered in Tebenquiche Chico.

Antolín’s Paradox
While in Antofalla, Antolín and his family asked me to excavate their plot. It was the first time I was asked to excavate by local people. They irrigate their plot by flooding it for one to several days with water from a canal. They told me that the water “gets lost through a hole.” When they saw some large stones inside the hole, they presumed that it had something to do with archaeology; being the expert, it was “obviously” my duty. My inspection of the spot gave me the impression of a tomb, similar to the underground stone slab false-vaulted chambers common in
Volcancito mining structures, Salar de Antofalla.
much closer to local than to Western Christian
relationship to land enacted in this scene seems
Nevertheless, I should say that the
people.

Gentile was unimportant to the very same
the very same spot where the possible tomb of a

the earth demanded a ritual payment for them, in

pouring alcohol and coca leaves, sharing them
around the hole prepared for the job, first
morning, Antol'n and two neighbors gathered

I was again taken by surprise. The following
two days "excavating the hole," where I
fortunately found nothing besides a broken
pottery bowl, the two big slabs, and the idea that
if it was indeed once a tomb, the amount of water
running through it over the course of several
years was mainly responsible for the
displacement of the slabs from their original
chamber-like positioning and the washing out of
any organic remains. Having reported my
conclusions and findings to Antol'n, the job was
not yet finished, given that the hole — by then
neatly brushed and pictured — needed to be filled
in to let the water flood the plot instead of
running through it. I managed to leave the filling
part to Antol'n, who also wanted to take out the
big slabs in order to use them in some building
plan.

While I remained a spectator to the lifting of
those two gigantic stones from a hole in the soil,
I was again taken by surprise. The following
morning, Antol'n and two neighbors gathered
around the hole prepared for the job, first
pouring alcohol and coca leaves, sharing them
with the earth, lighting a cigarette for her and for
each person present. Taking out the stones from
the earth demanded a ritual payment for them, in
the very same spot where the possible tomb of a
Gentile was unimportant to the very same
people.

Nevertheless, I should say that the
relationship to land enacted in this scene seems
much closer to local than to Western Christian

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In the Antofalla episteme, space and time are the same as “the place,” that is, my lived-in place. And this idea of soil – not, as in the Western episteme, a dimension – is not even a thing as in Western thought of the others. *Pacha*, a concept of “space/time” and “this place” and the noun root of Pachamama, the so-called Andean Mother Goddess, makes sense only as a web of lived relationships in which one comes to being. But, again, not just as an object but as a sentient and powerful being, a god. Thus, the lived relationships within the cosmic community of beings, in which each being is bred, grows, reproduces, and dies, are themselves agentive and sacred. Life itself, being a god, acts upon each being through reciprocal and asymmetrical relationships of breeding and eating, creation and destruction.

Life cannot be simply known but must be lived; relationality cannot be simply known but must be related with. The inter-epistemic trip that begins undisciplining archaeology ends with its own epistemological/philosophical consequences. Local theories of relationality act upon the knower that comes from afar as much as the knower is related and becomes through those relationalities. In theoretical and political terms this implies a standpoint from which to decolonize oneself of Western modern assumptions codified in the disciplines of knowledge. As much as one moves from being *ignorated* to being *fagocitated*, the move undertaken within the local conversation implies a post-Western conversion.

This essay is a tribute to Severo and Antolín Reales’s teachings, friendship, and care. Both of them, their families, their houses, and their village provided me with a place for thought, which is exploited in this text (and in many others). A place for thought is the most important thing a researcher can have.


3 Ibid.

4 Rodolfo Kusch, 1962.


6 Alejandro Haber, Domesticidad e interacción en los Andes Meridionales (Popayán: Universidad del Cauca, 2009).

7 Haber, A. “La casa, las cosas y los dioses. Arquitectura doméstica, paisaje campesino y teoría local”, Encuentro, Córdoba. 2011.


9 In the modern logocentric sense of meaning as an explanation, a description of a word or significance that is absent and represented by a signifier. In Severo’s theory, antiguos are the past as much as the past is the antiguos: both are co-present, continuous, material and immaterial at the same time.