

Alejandro Haber
**Severo's
Severity and
Antolín's
Paradox**

01/06

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.¹

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 archeological 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

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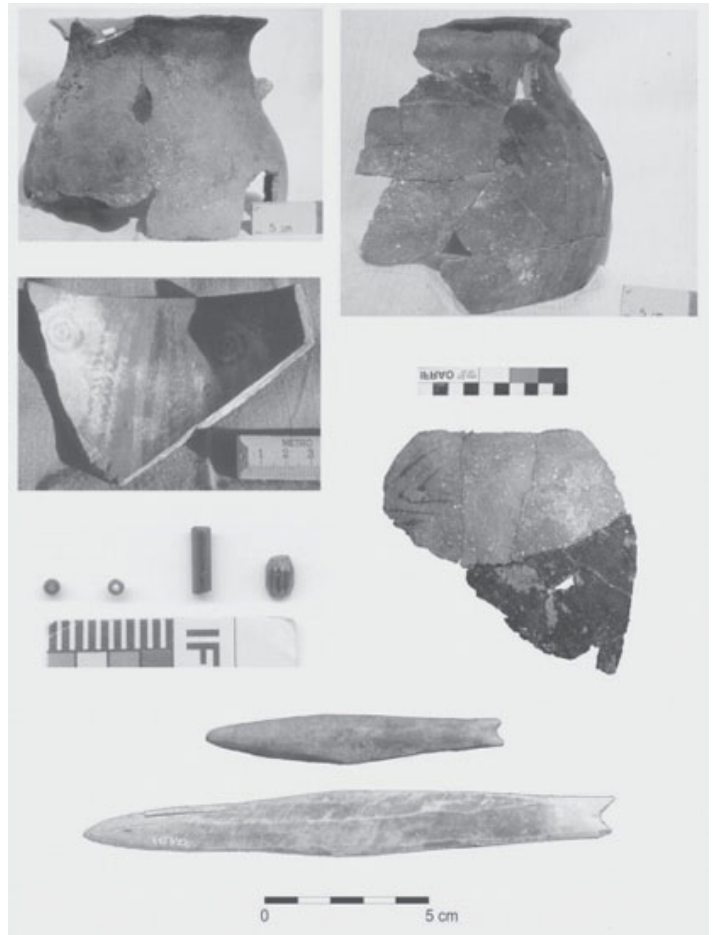
relationship; and the illicitness (and displacement along the vector) of relations-other-than-disciplined.² It is not that there are simply other possible interpretations of history, but that history – the past and its objects – are interrelated and related with other things (people, the earth, the sun, 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.³ 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 (*phagocitosis*⁴), or actively ignore hegemonic agents (*ignoration*⁵). *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.

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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

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Volcancito mining structures, Salar de Antofalla.

the area.⁶ (The presence of two large slab stones in the bottom of the valley suggested they were carried from the upper slopes where there are quarries with the same size and kind of stones.) Never fond of excavating tombs myself, and assuming that excavating human remains would arouse similar feelings, I talked to Antolín and his family about the possibility of the hole being a tomb before excavating. To my surprise, Antolín asked me whether the tomb would be Christian or Gentile (i.e., non-Christian), and showed no particular interest when I said that in my opinion it would be Gentile. He was almost upset when I suggested discussing the issue of excavating a tomb with the rest of the people in the community. He perceived my suggestion as challenging the exclusivity of his right to that plot of land; neighbors had nothing to say about what happened within his plot, and asking them would be admitting their intromission. Rights to a plot are a consequence of taking care of that particular place, a relation again enmeshed with the idea of reciprocal breeding, a meta-pattern that I called *uywaña*.⁷ In time, the goodness of that relationship would be evident to everyone in terms of land well-tended: many and fat sheep, and a well-bred family.

With our conversation in mind, I spent 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 Antolín, 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 Antolín, 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, Antolín 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

epistemes. These epistemes are meshes of relationships, ways of thinking and acting relationships among things, gods, and beings, not mere amounts of things. To be Christian or Gentile is a matter of identity, but Christianity as practiced within local indigenous epistemes is a kind of relationship that can illuminate the way we think about things and gods. In this second vignette, the *sacred* is not the tomb (nor the would-be tomb) but the earth that is asked to relinquish the big stone slabs. I suggest that we think the *sacred* (*waka*) not as things, but as relational agents who are themselves made in meshes of relationships, or meshes of relationships made through conversation among many agents. While the *waka* as a tomb can be the object of scientific knowledge and legislation (as the objects within the tomb are), the *waka* as a relational agent is a subject to be related with, not merely as knower, but as related being. The earth, that particular piece of soil in the familial plot, was a relational agent that took care of the family, providing them with food, and they gave her attention in the form of work and food in the form of ritual. Antolín’s plot itself is a god that breeds his family through relations of *uywaña*, but it is not a god before those relationships but because of and through those relationships. Relationality in motion is itself sacred and pedestrian at once. The apparent paradox appears when relationships of *uywaña* take precedence over fixed objectual identities, and while Antolín is Christian in a local indigenous way, maybe he is not Indigenous in a Western way.

The gods Severo asked to breed beautiful things for me were already related to the gods of the water and the earth, and with Antofalla people. *Wakas* are everywhere. They are not objects but animated things (gods) that act upon their relationship with other things (humans).⁸ As in any conversation, any utterance is a reply to the other’s real, imaginary of expected utterance.

Archaeological objects have power only in instrumental terms: as media for obtaining knowledge. The same can be said for the collectors’ version of *wakas*: they have power only as media for obtaining money or prestige. But for Antolín and Severo, *antiguos* and *wakas* in general are not media for obtaining another aim, and neither are *antiguos* there to represent some absent reality (like vestiges of the inaccessible past). Archaeological objects/sites don’t mean the past; they are purposeful and powerful actors whose social relations are embedded within the rest of things in the (local) world.⁹

Time and space are not dimensions in the Western modern sense, but conversations among animated beings, relationality codifying alterity.

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 *ignored* to being *fagocitated*, the move undertaken within the local conversation implies a post-Western conversion.

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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.

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1
See Rodolfo Kusch, *América profunda* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1962), as well as Mario Vilca, "Más allá del 'paisaje.' El espacio de la Puna y Quebrada de Jujuy: ¿Comensal, anfitrión, interlocutor?" in *Cuadernos FHyCS-UNJu* 36 (2009): 245–259.

2
Alejandro Haber, "Animism, Relatedness, Life: Post-Western Perspectives," in *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*(2009): 19.

3
Ibid.

4
Rodolfo Kusch, 1962.

5
Londoño, W. *Fausto ignorado. Una etnografía sobre construcción e ignoración de la modernidad en la Puna de Atacama*". PhD dissertation, Universidad Nacional de Catamarca, 2012.

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.

8
Mario Vilca, "Más allá del 'paisaje.' El espacio de la Puna y Quebrada de Jujuy: ¿Comensal, anfitrión, interlocutor?" in *Cuadernos FHyCS-UNJu* 36 (2009): 245–259.

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.

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