

A stroll through the Colonial Library

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In addressing a learned audience, I cannot help but confess that the ideas I will pose here are a motley *mélange* of thought and feeling. They stem from the bizarre and contradictory experience of entering libraries in US Universities, for the first time in 2001, as a visiting professor at UT Austin, then in New York at Columbia University, and finally in 2007 at the Hillman Library in front of that ugly neogothic building that the captains of industry in Pennsylvania baptized “the Cathedral of Learning” at the University of Pittsburgh. The Hillman – whose director Eduardo Lozano had enriched for decades with an immense Latin American collection and especially with a good selection of rare books and pamphlets from Bolivia – was no doubt my favorite. But by then, the sense of being a library mouse, or a subaltern alien in the US had somewhat receded and gave way to a feeling of empowerment due to my inadvertently turning myself into an *au-rebours* anthropologist.

Paper leaves

Coming from a degraded and disorganized library system such as the one in my country and in my own University, to experience the University library system in the US provoked intense and contradictory feelings: both discovery and despair, a sense of expansion of my intellectual horizons and at the same time a deep feeling of frustration. In fact, the paradox of being a flying bird, a sort of intellectual tourist at the US

Universities was adequately represented by my Visiting Professor I.D., which gave me unlimited library privileges. I could take as many books as I wanted to my office, for the full semester. I could even recall books that somebody else had borrowed, albeit I had to give them back if someone else recalled the ones I had. I could even photocopy or scan them for “teaching purposes”, although the amount of text I scanned or photocopied was so huge that no course material would have justified it. But I used to do it at nights, under the argument that I did not have a laptop to work at home. The paradox of my ID card, which I used also to open doors in the main buildings, lied in the date of expiration, which meant the sudden and complete end of my privileges. The day after, I returned to the condition of an alien, if not an illegal alien (my visa was valid for a few days after my teaching contract had expired), at least a person that could not knock at heaven's doors in the University Libraries – unless accompanied by one of my students or granted a “visitor” card that expired daily, after a long queue in one of the administrative buildings.

It was there, at these libraries, where I first learned the word “browsing”, to mean something very pleasant: strolling and getting lost in the innumerable alleys and passageways surrounded by the Stacks. At first, I found it difficult to find the books I had identified by call number, but shortly after, I discovered that not having the number was even better: it allowed me – once I barely knew what some of the codes meant – to discover the classificatory system behind the catalog. Thus, I ended up “taking the bull by the horns”, as we say in Bolivia: the Thesaurus of the Library of Congress Catalog. It came to me as if by magic. The simplest method of online catalog search lead me to unexpected meanders. At first, I only chose one key word to start my search: COCA. From an enormous selection of books, I found a lot of items with Coca-Cola in the title – some of them very useful – a small rare group on the “Coca Indians” living in an island near Guadalajara, and a huge amount of material on cocaine and crack, along with a small selection of items on the plant itself and/or its leaves. Even after adding the word

LEAVES, I got some interesting stuff. By then, I had lost my library privileges at Columbia and I went to the NY public library, where searching the keywords COCA LEAVES, after a brief selection on this subject, a “see also” set of titles came up on the screen: see also crack, crack abuse, cocaine, cocaine abuse, crack babies and the like.

Two contradictory sensations emerged from the experience, which were to be confirmed again and again in the streets and subways of the big apple. On the one hand, I was doing something that I completely avoid when in Bolivia: I was anthropologizing my fellow human beings, and even the impersonal entities called libraries, universities and cataloging systems. But at the same time, I found myself living in an awkward position as a potential “illegal alien” of the worst kind. My book on *Coca Borderlands* started to take unexpected turns. On the basis of the quasi ethnographic library experience, which was only beginning, I started thinking of borderland and frontier as not only physical barriers to the circulation of things and people, but also as epistemological and ideological boundaries, that shape common sense and establish what Bourdieu calls a *doxa*. In fact, when I met a learned PhD candidate in Communication Sciences at a friend's house in Austin, he asked me “what's the kick like?” and “is it good for sex?”, when I was talking about chewing coca leaves and fighting for their decriminalization. My reaction was a mixture of impotence and laughter. I found that no heterodoxy was possible regarding the legalization of coca leaves, unless it was posed in the extreme form of the main platform of the decriminalization movement that wants everything – from heroin to peyote to amphetamine – to be freely available, only subject to regulations by State and market forces. On the other hand, when I tried to approach members of the Native American movement in search of debates and connections, I was faced with the fact that one of their main leaders was killed by guerrillas linked with drug cartels in Colombia. The Native American Church of ayawaska was far from my reach, but I intuit that they consider their plant – or rather the plant ingredients in the ayawaska beverage – should be legal, whereas

the rest of the world's plants classified as drugs should not. To my utter despair, some years later, the president of my country, a former coca leave grower, once he came into power, launched a fierce campaign to eradicate marijuana cultivation, trade and consumption, to the point that nowadays it is easier to buy pasta base (a degraded and highly toxic form of crack cocaine) in the streets of Bolivian cities, than a small amount of Ganja, which in Bolivia is called Bayer (turn around yerba and it gives you the transnational corporation's name). Laughing at ourselves and at others is perhaps the most useful item of subaltern agency that Bolivians carry in our backpacks.

But let us return to the research on the colonial library. It soon derived in two lines of inquiry. The first one was to go beyond the naturalist and geographical notion of frontier and explore its metaphorical overtones, more or less in the track of Gloria Anzaldúa's proposition, where ideological, national, sexual and epistemological borderlands are constantly crossed over and problematized. The book *Las Fronteras de la Coca* was the result of it. The second line led me again to the library.

During the spring term of 2007, after I met Tina Ross, a librarian at Pittsburgh University, she kindly helped me to do more advanced searches in the online catalogs not always accesible to laypersons like me, so as to obtain every single title on coca and the related semantic field, from 1750 through 2007. Some of these titles showed me totally unforeseen aspects of the issue. I discovered, for example, that coca leaves and cocaine were formally legal until 1914 when the Harrison's Narcotics Act was passed, but that up until the end of the Second Euro-American War, both of them circulated widely as global commodities. Some rare PhD theses written in Germany and Austria between 1910-1920, and translated into English in 2003, showed that at least 60% of the world supply of coca

leaves came not from Peru or Bolivia but from the Indonesian island of Java, and that it was produced under colonial and postcolonial plantation systems, that supplied laboratories in Germany, France and the United States. The global circulation of coca leaves only stopped with the Cold War in the fifties. During a trip to Jogjakarta in 2005 I also had the opportunity to discover that the Chinese migrants in Indonesia had elaborated a type of liquor that circulated all over Asia, which presumably carried the leaves – in the Philippines it was called “vino de chino” - and that the term Ku-Ka had been fully incorporated in the Chinese pharmacopeia, probably since colonial times. No traces of these stories are available to the wider public.

Librarians and their struggles in the United States are part and parcel of this second line of research. In fact, the cataloging system is a coded and highly structured set of procedures and rules, but it always has to pass through the agency and decision making of concrete persons. *Prejudices and Antipathies*, a book edited in 1971 by Sanford Breman, in his book, opens with two epigraphs. One by Bertoldt Brecht addresses the academics – professors and students – that frequent university libraries in the US.

“You with the intentness of your studies
And the elation of your knowledge
Can make the experience of struggle
The property of all
And transform justice
into passion”

The second is authored by Sidney L. Jackson who is part of the radical librarian's movement:

“It is high time to tackle the subject headings”

The subject heading I had discovered in 2001-2002 was HV, and it broadly addresses issues of Criminality and Social Pathology. This is precisely where most of the books on coca leaves are cataloged, including those as innocent as *Coca, Tradición, Rito e Identidad*, published by the Interamerican Indigenous Institute in Mexico, side by side with studies on crack addiction and the like. But strangely enough, William Golden Mortimer's *Coca, the Divine Plant of the Incas*, first published in 1904, which considers the health benefits of both coca and cocaine, is not cataloged in that section, but rather under Herbal Medicines. The reason is that the stigmatization of both coca leaves and cocaine (lumped together after the 1961 Single Convention) reached a peak in the seventies, at the height of the hippie revolution. Accordingly, as Ranajit Guha suggests, the terms of the equation got reversed: what was up to then considered “Good”, joined the other side of the equation and was thereafter to be considered “Bad”. It was from the seventies onwards, that all books dealing with the ethnographic, medicinal or religious uses of coca were misplaced under the subject heading on criminal and pathological behavior.

Sanford Breman and his colleagues did not consider the prejudices and antipathies against plants, due to their anthropocentric view of classificatory systems. The subtitle of the book is: “A tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People”, and its latest edition came out in 2014. There we can find that, as a result of the struggle of liberal and humanist librarians like him, the subject headings Negroes and Race Question were replaced by Afro-Americans and Race Relations, the Jewish Question and Yellow Peril subject heads were eliminated. A “see also” reference to Gypsies, which was “Rogues and Vagabonds”, was dropped, as well as the link “Sexual Perversion” from Homosexuality, and the authoritarian Children Management was changed to Child Rearing.

Yet, according to Brennan, most of the work, even in the issues regarding people, remains to be done; many of the most loaded terms, such as the “Primitive” descriptor for all sorts of human groups and creations, or “Oriental” descriptors for the same in Asia, still abound and are far from being deleted or changed.

Thanks to the link Tina Ross developed with my research on coca, in 2010 she managed, at a congress of the American librarians, to pass a recommendation to take some of the most blatantly prejudiced titles on Coca Leafs, Chewing, Rituals and Medicinal Practices, out of the HV Social Pathology and Criminality subject heading. Nevertheless, the battle seems to have now taken a different turn. In 2006, another librarian by the suggestive name of Thomas Mann, issued a report to the Association, asking “What's going on at the Library of Congress?” It basically deals with the loss of meaning and of depth in social and human sciences research due to the equation of browsing with Google and Amazon search engines that have replaced the pleasant stroll through the stacks at the libraries. On the other hand, as libraries get bigger and acquire more collections, space begins to be a problem. The books that are not in demand for years are transferred to big storehouses or vaults, and are cataloged according to the order of their arrival. No more finding unexpected treasures in the stacks, while looking for other books of the same subject heading. Periodically, lots of the books stored in the vaults get thrown away, considered no longer useful or valuable for any type of research. That is how I got a book that I had been searching for a long time: *Coca Exotica. An Illustrated History of Cocaine*, by Joseph Kennedy, which I finally bought from a used book store through the Internet, with the help of my son. It had a stamp in the last page that said “Discarded”.

After decades and centuries of collecting, cataloging and storing up written knowledge from all parts of the world and from diverse written traditions, the American libraries

have become graveyards of knowledge, and the vaults are the equivalent of huge fields of common, anonymous graves. Far from the possibility of making the “experience of struggle the property of all”, or “transform justice into passion”, the private enclosure of an immense archive of human knowledge in these libraries is an act of colonial dominance and appropriation. It is also a strategy of depolitization, a prose of counterinsurgency that molds the common sense knowledge of the public and the media. Thus, through the conversion of higher education into a commodity, and of libraries into a costly privilege, the archive cuts off the road that leads from knowledge to action. And as to the knowledge of our own subaltern societies, it is evident that many of the most valuable book and pamphlet collections in my country have been sold to American libraries, as well as photographic and film archives. Several former presidents of Bolivia have donated their memoirs and personal documents to these institutions as well. Our contemporary Archivo de Sevilla is now located in the US Library system, inaccessible to the great majority of people who have lived through and produced the insights and toils behind those paper leaves.

Grandparents' wrinkles

In 2008, amidst the intense political turmoil provoked by the lowland elites of Santa Cruz and the “Media Luna” against the government of the elected president Evo Morales, the State Minister of Foreign Affairs, David Choquehuanca, declared to the press that he does not like libraries, and that he had not read a single book for many years. “I read in the wrinkles of grandparents' faces”, he said, and a series of scornful and aggressive commentaries followed in the daily press. The opinions ranged from a critique of his “ignorance” to the denial of his right to occupy such a high office in the government. The subtext in all of them is only a confirmation of the hegemony of the “lettered city”, which values knowledge acquired in books more than the practical knowledge of a culture that,

in spite of centuries of oppression and exploitation, has managed to preserve a substantial patrimony of interpretive resources, agricultural, ecological, astronomical and architectural achievements. But above all, this is an oral and performative body of knowledge, rooted in daily life and communal practice. Therefore, it is a knowledge that implies ethical commitments, epistemological and aesthetic constructions. Oral knowledge is performative. It is uttered in the form of collective acts of speech such as the *iwxaña* or ceremonial scolding (recommendations) that takes place during certain moments of the life cycle of individuals or communities. The total act of an *iwxaña* is a philosophy of practice that intertwines political, economic, religious and psychological dimensions into a single interpretive body.

Minister Choquehuanca, in another interview with a journalist, attempted to translate the Aymara aphorism *taqikunas pänipuniw akapachanxa*, (everything in the universe comes in pairs), in a schematic and approximate way: he said that for the Aymara people, “even the stones have [a] sex”. The binary conceptualization which polarizes the world into pairs of opposites, even though it usually creates a third space in which double or mixed identities can exist, is a central trait in the Aymara system of classifications. In the case of stones, the distinction has not only conceptual but also practical implications. For instance, when one has to build a traditional oven from mud and stone, or when one has to line the walls of a hole in the earth to cook a *wathiya*, it is crucial to clearly distinguish male from female stones. Either of them is weak, cracks with the fire, but the other is strong and will stand high temperatures without breaking apart. To crack or not to crack are qualities not fixed to one or the other sex invariably: in some regions the male stone is weak and the female is strong and in others it is the reverse. But these were not the issues discussed by the journalists who commented on Choquehuanca's inappropriate declarations. The day after, a comic strip appeared in one of the journals. It showed a highway blockaded by a truckload of stones. There were no people in the blockade, only

stones lying on top of one another, and some were being interviewed by the press. One of the stones declared: “This is not a road blockade; it is an orgy”. The meaning of “las piedras tienen sexo” had been twisted to associate it with the image of copulating stones. The circle of cultural misunderstanding was closed. The absurd and the abject were imposed over any possibility of dialogue with another rationality, with an alternative way of understanding the world of life.

In the aymara language, there are two words for “thinking”: *lup'iña*, the rational and cerebral way of thinking, that is associated with light and sight. The root *lup'i* means sunlight, which relates to the clarity of the mind. The other word is *amuyt'aña*, a mode of thought based in memory, reflection and feeling, which is rooted in another part of the body: the upper entrails or *chuyma*. *Chuyma* is a generic concept that includes the heart, the liver and the lungs. The knowledge that stems from the act of *amuyt'aña* is a sort of metabolism, through the beating of the heart and the rhythmic inhalation and exhalation of air through the lungs, and this metabolism is an exchange of energies between the human body and the totality of the cosmos of which humans are part. The idea that the brain is the site of rational knowledge and that the heart is the site of emotions is part of a hegemonic euro-centric point of view. The supremacy of science, of higher education and of the library as the archive of human knowledge has systematically denied, distorted or fragmented all other forms of knowledge, and thus it has rejected the possibility of any conversation with them. This is a unilateral act, it refuses to connect and understand anything outside its own premises. The hegemonic centers of science, and specially social and human sciences are located in the US and Europe. It is in these societies, which have benefited for centuries from the colonial pilfering of human and natural resources of the rest of the world, where a new process of expropriation takes place: the flow of books and other forms of knowledge from South to North under a capitalist and commercialized world of higher education turns the library system into a new and more perverse mode of

colonial domination. The heaven's doors look as if they were open.

. Unpublished paper presented to the conference *Dis/Locating Culture: Narratives and Epistemologies of Displacement*. Rice University, Houston, December 9-10, 2011. Updated February 2014.

. My present day experience at NYU has yet not been so thrilling. Somehow, my library card cybersignals got mixed up somewhere and I am having trouble checking items out of the Film library, which is what most interests me presently. For the last couple of weeks the status of “guest borrower” assigned to me by mistake is not being corrected, and as a southern aphorism goes, the dog blames the cat, the cat blames the mouse, and the mouse blames... the computer. The very same day I was about to cry in desperation, I went back to the Stacks trying to follow the advise of Argentinian friend and writer Alfredo Grieco, and as I was searching for William Harris novel, *Palace of the Peacock*, I serendipitously found another treasure of Caribbean paradise/hell: Michelle Cliff's *Into the Interior*. Regalo de la Pachamama.

. Though I cannot cross South-North borders with coca leaves, I have been chewing them for almost 3 decades.

. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. *Las Fronteras de la Coca. Epistemologías coloniales y circuitos alternativos de la hoja de coca. El caso de la frontera Argentina*. La Paz, IDIS-Aruwiyiri 2003.

. Paul Gootenberg. *Cocaine: global histories* - 2002 - Routledge

. Sanford Berman. *Prejudices and Antipathies. A tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*. McFarland & Company [1971] 2014.

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. Ranajit Guha. “La prosa de contrainsurgencia”, in Silvia Rivera and Rossana Barragan. *Debates Postcoloniales. Una introducción a los Estudios de la Subalternidad*. La Paz, SEPHIS, Historias, Aruwiyiri, 1997.

. Berman, loc cit, passim.

. Mann, Thomas. 2006. What is Going on at the Library of Congress? June 19 2007 <

HYPERLINK "<http://www.guild2910.org/AFSCMEWhatIsGoingOn.pdf>"<http://www.guild2910.org/AFSCMEWhatIsGoingOn.pdf>>, see also Karen Markey, “The online library Catalog. Paradise lost and paradise regained? in D-Lib Magazine, Volume 13 No. ½, January/February 2007. Accessed February 6 2014, HYPERLINK "<http://www.dlib.org/dlib/january07/markey/01markey.html>"<http://www.dlib.org/dlib/january07/markey/01markey.html>

. *Coca Exotica. An Illustrated History of Cocaine*, by Joseph Kennedy...

. “Las piedras tienen sexo” can be rendered alternatively, as having sexual intercourse or a male/female sexual identity.

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