MARISOL DE LA CADENA
with the inspiration of
Mariano and Nazario Turpo
(and some feminist witches)

Not Knowing: In the Presence of . . .

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. Don't you think so? [. . .] The same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections. The same . . . Always the same.
—Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*

We know, knowledge there is, but the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know.
—Isabelle Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal"

I was obliged to "not knowing" as practice with Mariano and Nazario Turpo—*with* indicates the togetherness that made "not knowing" a requirement in order to think ethnographically in their presence, physical or not. Presence is the relation within which "not knowing" happens, and in my particular case it includes the three of us: when it is "them," it also includes me. No separable "other" exists in this presence of which I am (and was) the writer. This paragraph condenses almost all that this short piece is going to be about, which includes what preceded it. I will start by briefly describing the latter.

 I wrote *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (2015) motivated by (what I considered to be) "a peasant's archive"; Mariano was "the peasant" and "his archive" was a box of assorted documents: letters, receipts, telegram texts, minutes, fliers, newspaper clippings, and more recorded what I (using my main conceptual grammar at the time) thought about as "long years of peasant struggle against the landowner." (I had accessed the box through my sister and her husband; they worked at a nongovernmental organization in the area where the Turpos lived.) My idea

was to write an ethnography of this archive—the practices that made it—and in so doing analyze the history the documents told and also discuss "archive" as a concept. When I first got to Mariano's village and talked to him about my idea, he went along with it. A few weeks into our practice he insisted on talking about what was not in the documents, which frequently would also escape history (for example, *tirakuna* [see Box 19.1] safekeeping the papers). At times he would even get annoyed when I insisted on learning from the documents. This "tug of wills"—Mariano's and mine—put at risk my initial ethnographic object of inquiry (the peasant archive and its historical promise) and offered an important ethnographic disconcertment (Verran 2001). Mariano's stories were beyond the limits of the possible; as such, they presented the classical situation that I could have translated through "culture" to explore "his beliefs." This translation would not have been ethnographically wrong; after all, interpreting belief is how we ethnographers know (more about this below). It would, however, have been inadequate to co-laboring. This ethnographic mode required a different *we*: not me with ethnographers, but me and the Turpos. Co-laboring required my categories and Mariano's stories even if they clashed—or as I learned, better if they clashed—for this would not stop the conversation. It would continue and yield unexpected possibilities and the unexpected as possibility!

BOX 19.1 TIRAKUNA

Tirakuna is the Quechua word for earth-beings; they can also be translated as mountains. *Runakuna* is the Quechua word for the people who, emerging together with tirakuna, form *ayllu*, another Quechua word. The Andean ethnographic record has translated it as the institution formed by a group of people who collectively own land. This translation separates subject (people) from object (land) and then connects them through the relation of "possession." Ignoring this definition, which is not wrong, was fruitful: it allowed me to think ayllu as the condition whereby runakuna *with* tirakuna take-place (as in, occur in time and space). To get here I had to start by ignoring mountains and people as nature and humans, and practice "not knowing" tirakuna: using culture, I could not access what they were that was not "belief"—and as Mariano insisted, what was to me (in this case) belief, was *not only* such. (More on *not knowing* and *not only* later.)

BOX 19.2 EXCESS

Excess, as I use it, builds on Guha's concept of limit as "the first thing outside which there is nothing to be found, and the first thing inside which everything is to be found" (2002:7). Excess would thus be that which *is* (as in exists, avoiding the term exist!) outside the limit of what considers itself everything, and therefore *is not* (as in does not exist!) within it. It is thus unlike Bataille's notion of excess which is recognized via a relation of distance or transgression with established norms (Bataille, 1985). The use of "culture" as analytics may open a sensibility for excess as "belief" thus also suggesting that *it* (what the belief is about) is not.

Co-laboring was my name for the practices among us (conversations, sensations, feelings, observations, intuitions) that composed a complex togetherness: a contact zone (Pratt 2007; Haraway 2016) in which we understood each other and did not understand each other. This second ethnographic mode, which I call "excess," was as important as understanding and could be simultaneous with it (see Box 19.2).

To get to excess, to sense it, I started with what I had—culture and belief—and sought to displace them. In the anthropological analytical habitus *belief* stands for what can be interpreted (it has meaning), but it cannot be known through empirical evidence because it lacks such. Thus, interpreting the meanings of belief is how what escapes modern epistemic knowledge emerges as known. A mirroring move is possible: "not knowing" can occupy the place that "meanings of belief" stands for, thus displacing it analytically and keeping it in view, relationally and as an analytic step, in order to reveal the process. I explain further: an analysis of the meanings of the Turpos' "beliefs," though adequate to anthropology, would have also left the Turpos' practices behind. Such analysis is insufficient to those practices when taken as not only belief, for they exceed "culture": those practices do and thus are in a way that is not only as the meaning(s) of beliefs. For example: What do you do with a narrative that makes what it tells, a form of storytelling that makes the event (and place) it narrates? What do you do when you ask what "something" is, and the response is that an answer cannot be provided because the answer would not be that "something"? What I did was to let what I was being told affect my analytic grammar, to make it vulnerable to the Turpos' presence, to their stories. I let them breathe relentlessly into my breathing space, making it also theirs, one and distinct at the same time. In that complex breathing

space my categories were useful and also insufficient, hence exceeded. My practice was displacement, not replacement (Box 19.3).

BOX 19.3 DISPLACEMENT

I borrow *displacement* from Marilyn Strathern (1988). I also tweak it a bit to use it for what I call the "ontological openings" that may result from a disposition to co-labor with the situation at hand (what I mean by this will be clear momentarily). Displacement results from controlling, without canceling, (the practice of) categories, concepts, or analytics that may overpower, perhaps even kidnap the situation that is up for description. Strathern calls what results from this ethnographic practice "a better description"—one that also indicates the limits and therefore excesses of the displaced categories/practices that, while present yet controlled, cannot further explain away the situation in question, which remains opened to a "better description"—without closure.

Concepts do their work with other concepts: "culture" and "belief" had analytic companions. Their displacement also required displacing other categories: archive, peasant struggle, history, even indigenous. I used them without the power of modern epistemology—and with it, history—to impose requirements in order to decide what is (possible or impossible). Complicating my disconcertment was my early realization that nothing (words, deeds, movements, entities) observed the simplicity of "worlds apart." For one, we shared the history that had generated "Mariano's archive"; it was the history that "Mariano had struggled against," the struggle that I admired and had lured me to him. But history's terms (e.g., its requirement of representational evidence) did not exhaust Mariano and Nazario's terms; doing so—exhausting what they were insufficient for—was what those terms claimed. As required by co-laboring, I aimed at suspending those claims by practicing "not knowing."

"Not knowing" also proposed my conceptualization of excess as that which is beyond the limit of modern epistemological knowledge and its requirement of representation. It all started with Mariano's archive as a complex matter. At first sight it was a box with more than six hundred assorted documents put together by people from many paths of life. The texts, also the texture of the papers, told events that history could subscribe—they were the matter of history. But this object had also become through relations

among runakuna with tirakuna, humans with earth beings. The box thus also was—and thus mattered—through conditions that did not leave a historical track. How to make sense of this was not obvious. Habituated to grant history the power to discern what is from what is not, and with culture within reach to explain the latter, my initial scholarly reflex was to separate Mariano from his archive. Mariano's stories would be cultural; the archives, historical. The separation would have even matched the grammatical form whereby a subject (Mariano) owns an object (his archive). Mariano insisted: we could read the papers in the box, but not only! (I still feel his impatience, see his hands moving in the air, as he told me, "You have not traveled all the way here to read what is inside that box, not if what you want is my story.") His insistence made present a matter that was not historical but may not have been without history. Hence neither one—history nor its excess—were to be discarded: they had both made "Mariano's archive" a complex entity for which I experienced my scholarly knowledge—taken seriously—as insufficient. Co-laboring the archive meant accepting it was not only such: an archive in the historical sense. What it was I did not know, perhaps could not know. Responding to this complex object (a historical archive that was not only such) and the circumstances that had made it proposed "not knowing" as a different form of knowing: one that accepts the challenges posed by that which it interrogates. Co-laboring created a fractal space where the Turpos' practices and mine overlapped and diverged: our conversations—also our being together—were, very tangibly, unevenly occupied by our respective understandings. It implied the composition of a "we" that maintained radically present the divergences that made our encounter: "we" would not have been able to converse without those divergences, or our conversation would have been another.

My guess is that this divergence is not infrequent as ethnographic experience; however, it is frequently ignored because acknowledging it would require slowing down habitual knowledge, thereby creating an ethnographic contact zone for "not knowing" that can be perplexing. The reflex is to resort to "knowing": it protects us, often trapping us in what Luce Irigaray calls "the same"—I will resume this last discussion as I close this section.

Co-laboring was certainly perplexing. It required me to acknowledge entities, events, circumstances that *were* but that I could not access with the tools that "culture" and "history" offered. I have already explained why this was the case; now let me add what might be obvious to the reader:

translating my friends' world-making practices into "beliefs" would have canceled co-laboring as an opportunity for a symmetry of practices precisely of the kind that history denied. Moreover, the reason I would have had for a translation into beliefs—lack of evidence—seemed out of place, for evidence there was—the problem was mine if I could not accept it as such! Emphasizing that I was the bearer of "lack," that it was *my* problem if I could not see-feel-sense what was (for example, "evidence," to follow the idea above), was a "classic Nazario move," and he did it humorously. Sometimes he would invent words in Spanish (in his bad Spanish) to mimic what I was saying (with my bad Quechua); this became an internal joke that made obvious our incommensurability and friendship—a unique relation. His humor—laughing at a situation that included all of us, our fractality, our "failures" at mutual understanding, our (im)possibilities—leveled the terrain intimately, if not structurally. Humor also eased my work into knowing in a different way: controlling the reflex to translate into belief what I found no evidence for, being careful with words because they could make what I uttered, and learning to ask questions as a relation proposed within the shared spaces we occupied.

"Not knowing" does not subtract; on the contrary, it has creative returns. The perplexity it produces may be used to control the habit to exercise what Stengers calls "epistemological right" (2000, 80). She uses this phrase to refer to statements that know before the experiment has spoken. If translated to ethnography, "epistemological right" would describe the habit to know better than our interlocutors, depending on who they are, even against what they say-do-know. It is intriguing to think that the exercise of "epistemological right" might be more frequent in ethnographic practice than in the experimental sciences: the experiment speaks epistemological languages; it is on a par with the researcher.

Instead anthropologists speak culture as analytic language and, as the anthropological adage goes, some of our interlocutors have it but do not speak its analytic language; when in such relation, what we know is that they believe.[1] This specific epistemological right includes an us-them distinction that also asserts its right to a position of hierarchical command. (I think of this as epistemism, the hierarchy-making twin of racism that, unlike the latter, remains uncontested and legitimate.) "Not knowing" undercuts this right. It assumes that all statements in such interlocutions may belong to the order of the possible (Savransky 2016) as events "yet to emerge" within modern knowledge (scientific and nonscientific) or as events that exceed the limits of modern knowledge. Hence "not knowing"

can help perform onto-epistemic openings: it can be used to slow down the "givenness" of a notion (or an entity, or a practice) and interrogate it as a historical event (in Foucault's sense) so as to open possibilities for what this event (now historicized and therefore liberated from onto-epistemic "givenness" and excluding presence) might not contain, while perhaps also being part of it. Take "Mariano's archive" as the given. Then ask: What made a box with written documents an archive? The answer, naming just a few onto-epistemic conditions: history, the state and its practices (politics, law), the situations these recognize (property, peasants), our scholarly training (yours and mine). Occupied by these conditions, I thought the box as "Mariano's archive"; he in turn occupied it in a way that both coincided with and exceeded my conditions, and from this excess he insisted: tirakuna guarded the box and its papers, which then were with them, like runakuna were. Because he insisted—and Nazario helped me to attend to his father's insistence/excess—I yielded to the possibility that the box (that I had not hesitated to pronounce an "archive") could be not only a historical object. I then let the presence of excess (that which was unoccupied by "archive" and related material semiotics) affect my practice. It was not easy.

As ethnographic practice, "not knowing" meets the feminist assumption that knowledges come with the world they make. Donna Haraway (1988) is my obvious source of inspiration here. Elaborating on Marilyn Strathern's proposition that "anthropology uses relations to explore relations," Haraway also offered that "it matters what . . . thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (2016, 12). It matters because scholarly knowledges make the worlds they know; they trap what they perform (Corsín Jiménez 2018).[2] They make their similar. This echoes Luce Irigaray's urge in the first epigraph above: if we repeat the categories that have made our history, even change becomes the same, within the same history. Also, within the same worlding practices: those that confirm reality through evidence of the empirical kind and impose the same requirement on others. "Not knowing" has the capacity to practice the requirement and *not only*, thus suspending the exclusion that the imposition enacts, or at least revealing its process. Not knowing as ethnographic practice *knows in divergence with the same* and escapes it as imposition while being through it.

Not only was a phrase Mariano repeated to make me aware of my inability to sense what escaped what and how I knew. It suggested "not knowing" as ethnographic (and friendship) relation: a fractally shared space where we did not know and also knew together.

"Not knowing" and "not only" are fellow travelers of what Marilyn Strathern called "negativities." That is, the mode of analysis she used to take into consideration the absence (in Hagen, her Melanesian fieldwork site) of certain categories and use such categorical absence to "create contrasts within our own language" (Strathern [1988] 1990, 16) and affect her analyses. Absences, she said, "create spaces that our analysis lacks" and can be used to "stop ourselves thinking about the world in certain ways" (16). I also use absences to affect our conceptual language, but I wish to do something else perhaps more prosaic. My use of negativities, particularly *not only*, wants to indicate that epistemic assertions make presences (for example, nature) that may (the conditional here is important) include the ontological denial, sometimes benevolent yet always imperative, of what exceeds them. The practice of these assertions, which I call "onto-epistemic," can make absent and impossible what does not fit them while also creating tolerable analytic room for those excesses (for example, through culture). Negative qualifiers at the site of denials—a negation of the negation— may work as tool to displace the assertion of what appears unquestionably as "given" and open possibility for the presence of what the assertion (of the given) makes either absent or impossible.

As a tool to perform onto-epistemic openings, "not only" is a device to halt knowing as usual and allow what we know as an archive or a mountain to emerge not only as such, and therefore through requirements that diverge from what makes them archive or mountain. "Not only" suggests that entities, or even the order of things, may also be other than what and how we know they are. It is not a formula to add known possibilities (not only happy, also unhappy) in order to make a list of things, or to denote conditions that combine into being something else (not only black, also white and thus mulatto). Rather, "not only" opens room for presences that could challenge what we know, the ways we know it, and even suggest our impossibility of knowing without such impossibility canceling those presences, for "not only" allows entities to both fold into and exceed each other: like Ausangate, the mountain and earth-being whose overlaps and mutual excesses made me think. Allowing for complex incommensurability,

"not only" shares in the vocation of Strathern's (1991) "partial connections." Yet, in addition to stating that anything can be connected with anything else, it also wants to push against the historical onto-epistemic impossibility of some connections. In that sense "not only" proposes what John Law (2004) calls both/and situations, yet not necessarily to replace either/or—rather, to displace them. For example, "not only" works with Mariano's archive as a historical object as it (also) pushes against the impossibility of earth-beings guarding it. Together and in mutual excess, both made what I called Mariano's archive: a historical object and not only. In this specific case "not only" recognizes the empirical (that history needs) and works to open it up toward a divergent mode, which is not "abstract theory" either, yet can become with it. Thus "not only" arrests the analytic urge embedded in the practice of history that wants to cancel the eventfulness of relations, practices, or entities that do not meet the empirical conditions that modern epistemology currently requires in order to "abstract knowledge" from the objects it tests.

Allowing for divergence from modern epistemic knowledge while also being with it, "not only" positively asserts incompleteness. Thus this ethnographic tool for onto-epistemic openings also closes: it closes the prospect of notions, ambitions, and desires for completeness that may drive, for example, ethnographic data collection. Yet it also calls attention to practices (also the practices of notions) that demand completeness, for example, the forces that translate into singularity what Mol (2002) calls "multiple." Considering these forces, one of the tasks of "not only" is to make of singularity an ambiguous condition: "not only" might unsettle the imposition of singularity over multiplicity while maintaining it as possibility. On ending: "not only" and "not knowing" slow down the scholarly habit to use categories without inquiring into their historical worlding capacities. They do not carry dangers of ahistoricity—on the contrary.

PROTOCOL

First a caveat: *not knowing* is not equivalent to *I do not know* if this phrase implies that I will eventually know. In that case *I do not know* would be equivalent to *not knowing yet*. "Not knowing" is an analytic method—a way to practice analysis—not its result. Premised on "not only," it means that what you know (or might eventually know) might be exceeded by that which what you know (or might eventually know) cannot contain (both, as in comprise and control.)

Now the steps, not necessarily sequential. Perhaps it is better to think of them as suggestions to choose from:

- Identify the presences you want to think-feel with. This includes what you are intimate with, your most cherished concepts and ideas. Locate if possible where they are coming from and what other concepts and ideas they come with. This is like opening a black box and encountering a mess inside. Do not organize the mess; just treat it as an entangled piece of yarn impossible to gauge. Touch the knots, get familiar with them, but do not try to untangle them; just touch the connections they make. Same with the presences you are not intimate with: try touching them; feel the borders that keep them out of your reach.
- Make vulnerable your most cherished concepts and ideas. This will risk their becoming with and through those borders that for you seem to make the presences you are not intimate with. This will start the complex contact zone that I talked about above. Once there, begin your "not knowing"; for example, control your impulse to divide what emerges there into binaries (tempting among these might be "empirical" and "abstract," the former perhaps bifurcating into "real" and "unreal.") Let the contact zone be complex and you in it.
- Watch your analytic grammar: as modern scholars our default position (the one we do not think of) tends to be that of subject and object (that is, the specific relational form representation requires). We may want to suspend it (momentarily is fine) in order to think through the presences we co-labor with: Are they expressing another relational form?
- Co-laboring also means you are being co-labored, learning with and perhaps in divergence. This makes fieldwork about us as well: a complex "us" that includes what exceeds it. Co-laboring also places fieldwork always in the here and now of the presences it works with; "the field" is wherever those presences make you work (think and feel). Co-laboring makes co-presence the name of the game fieldwork is.
- Co-presence does not distinguish humans from nonhumans or other-than-humans. With the latter I refer to that which escapes the empirical and the abstract. I invented the hyphenated word.

Be ready to invent words—"not knowing" and "not only" may, at times, require it.

- As co-presence, fieldwork also shapes "ethnographic concepts," which you can think as concrete abstractions. This oxymoronic phrase refers to concepts that do not easily detach from what provoked them, or if they do, they continue to refer back to the here and now of their "conception." Ethnographic concepts evoke what Benjamin says of the story of the storyteller: "it preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it after a long time" (1968, 90). An ethnographic concept preserves the strength of what made it; it is that localized strength that makes ethnographic concepts travel.

- "Not knowing" does not want to make "better knowledge" nor to "prove wrong" the knowledges from which it diverges. It can work with them without becoming them; it insists on "not only" as refrain. Both not knowing and not only are tools to hopefully make alliances in and across divergence. Remember the orchid and the wasp? (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987)

NOTES

1. Similarly, the exercise of epistemological right may allow "us" to know that animals do not think, plants do not feel, and rocks lack life.

2. I borrow this notion of trap from Alberto Corsín Jiménez (2018).