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Scientific avatars or doing anthropology of (and against) our modern discontent

CLAUDIA BRIONES[1]

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Summer 2010 in the Southern hemisphere, that is, January. I use the summer break to start thinking on a paper to be delivered in May. The invitation: to reflect upon ongoing changes in the epistemic status of modern knowledge and politics of knowledge production, as well as upon the role of universities in these changes. A necessary yet ambitious enterprise. From which standpoint can we anthropologists tackle the impacts that localized praxis may have on widespread, pervasive North/South, West/Rest arrangements? How can we track them in the globalizing yet localizing, in the fluid yet abrasive, chronotopes we all inhabit and have to make sense of? Suddenly, a colleague who has not taken a holiday either says to me: 'I went to the movies last week. They were showing *Avatar*. Have you seen it?' Of course I have not. 'It's kind of interesting', he added, 'there is something in it.'

When I see a pirate version at home, the movie upsets me. Another forgettable movie about critical and annoying issues ... Days later, while checking my e-mail, the unsettling feeling comes back. I come across the headline of a *Survival International* press release stating that '"Avatar is real", say tribal people' (www.survivalinternational.org/news/5466). Even more surprising, Evo Morales himself gets involved in the debate, and *Avatar* starts jumping from trivia pages to activist cyber-forums and back. There was something in it indeed...

At first it seemed foolish to spend time reading a blockbuster and its social echoes as an index of displacements in the politics of knowledge and of othering, among other things because most of my everyday indigenous interlocutors would not have seen it. However, as a relational concept, this foolishness had to be seen as a key marker of my social trajectory, a person of the global South, who grew up watching black-and-white Disney programmes on television, who read *Para leer al Pato Donald*[2] as soon as she got into college, a long time ago, and was trained as an ethnographer of indigenous communities mostly, all through her undergraduate and graduate studies. Hence, this article is the result of coping with the impression that, foolish as it seemed initially, blockbusters and the echoes they may produce are, like myths for Lévi-Strauss, good for thinking on broader issues.

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Building a case

Avatar, the movie, is not unique because of its plot. The Hollywood film industry has taken indigenous peoples as theme before, even in sympathetic terms. However, *Avatar*'s take on alterity presents some telling differences. Moreover, *Avatar* also takes a stance *vis-à-vis* science and scientists, that is to say, the politics of scientific knowledge, calling us all to change sides and avoid being accomplices of current economic and military frontiers.[3] *Avatar*'s success thus makes visible some seemingly contradictory things. First, popular culture is ready to challenge modern thought and praise the move from a disenchanted to an enchanted vision of nature. Second, popular culture finds no problem in using the most advanced technological means available within the film industry to oppose the technologization of life. But perhaps even more remarkable is the process indexed by the indigenous acceptance of *Avatar*'s capacity to depict their contemporary strife.

Taken all together, these facts invite us to dive into the paradoxical and contradictory as a clue, as a symptom of current questionings, to the prevalent politics of knowledge and representation of alterity. To do so, I use Raymond Williams's concept of 'structures of feeling'[4] as an entry point, as a heuristic tool to focus on the emergent and circumvent the rigidities of the scientific epistemology. By rigidities, I mean for instance approaching the relationship between structure and agency as a closed, either/or, theoretical option, instead of as a tension to explore the endless play between constraints and praxis. I also mean engaging in premature, abstract discussions about the existence of an exteriority to postcolonial, postmodern, postimperialist arrangements, instead of tracking the interplay and effects of concrete expressions of consensus and dissent, to find out whether and which situated actions bring about transformations or rather re-inscribe a well-known dynamics.

Approaching the repercussions of *Avatar* as index of an emergent structure of feeling thus serves a double purpose. One the one hand, it attempts to identify 'effects of simultaneity'—in George Marcus's words, the methodological device to explore the implications and direct effects that actions in connected contexts occurring at the same time have for and on each other.[5] On the other hand, it aims at examining in more ethnographic terms if and how these effects of simultaneity interact with what I call 'effects of presence'. Seeking to identify historic sedimentations embedded into contemporary actions, the concept of 'effects of presence' opens up analytical room to explore the refractions that might exist even among articulated actions—academic praxis included.

In sum, I build this case to tackle related and ongoing scientific avatars. I do so by specifying first in which senses *Avatar*, the movie, is more of the same and yet presents some interesting changes in terms of questioning the scientific knowledge and prevalent constructions of aboriginality, that is to say, of what it means and takes to be considered Indian, aboriginal, native, autochthonous, indigenous to a place.[6] Afterwards I explore the political import of the movie's repercussions, so as to understand the different

cosmopolitics that *Avatar* has helped to keep or put in motion. In the third section, I move from science fiction to fictions in and for science. Focusing on parallel anthropological debates around the side-effects of the current politics of recognition and politicization of cultural differences, I turn from the anthropological discontent with modernity to the anthropology of our academic discontents, to show how relentlessly modern many of these discontents still are. In the last section, I make explicit where I stand *vis-à-vis* the politics of translation and the politics of critical thinking from my current location in the south of the Global South.

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Why scientific avatars? or What is eating modernity?

'I'm a scientist. I don't believe in fairy tales, remember?' (Dr Grace in *Avatar*)

If Anthropology has inherited the savage slot, as Trouillot argues,[7] modernity has inherited both the will of mastering knowledge production and a certain fascination with change and self-critique. As Berman has stated, to be modern 'is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air'.[8] Hence, the lovely human characters of *Avatar*, the movie, are modern indeed. They form part of a developmental frontier, and yet they become critics of development, understood as political oppression and economic subordination, and of modernity, as false source of universals based upon culturally marked meanings.

However, in other regards, *Avatar* inverts one of the founding myths of modernity. The 'state of nature' does not appear either as the departing point of the civilizatory Eurocentric process, or as the subaltern pole of the radical dualism that splits nature from society and body from reason.[9] It rather appears as an arriving point for redemption, and as a totality of heterogeneous yet communalizable elements. In so far as one of the meanings of the word 'avatar' makes reference to a visible manifestation or embodiment of an abstract concept, a question arises. Is it the goal of the movie to incarnate what Enrique Dussel calls transmodernity,[10] that is, the assertion of essential components of excluded and resilient cultures and cultural moments which are located outside modernity and seek to challenge, from their exteriority, the coloniality of power and knowledge, so as to vie for the development of a civilization with innovative values for the twenty-first century? Or does the movie's plot reflect instead a chronic modern critique that re-writes, in quite simple terms, hegemonic well-known structures of alterity and a not so daring politics of knowledge?

As for the structures of alterity, the Na'vi are a blue-skinned species of sapient humanoids with feline characteristics who inhabit Pandora—a lush, Earth-like moon of the planet Polyphemus. Physically stronger and taller than humans, they live in harmony with nature and worship a mother goddess called Eywa.[11] Dexterous hunters and horse riders, they are

organized into several clans, and have a mystic attachment with HomeTree, where some of them dwell.[12] In many regards then, the Na'Vi become the prototype of the Rousseauian 'noble savage', showing many of the most romanticized characteristics that Enlightenment and Evolutionary anthropology attributed to egalitarian primitive societies.

However, the Na'vi's suffering comes less from the scarcity than from the abundance of their 'resources'. Like many sacred sites on Pandora, Hometree, the spiritual and physical home of the Omaticaya clan, sits above a large deposit of unobtanium and is in danger. The Resources Development Administration (RDA)—the largest single non-governmental organization in the human universe whose interests range from mining, transportation and medicines, to weapons and communications—has monopoly rights to all products developed from Pandora and any other off-Earth location. Even if 'these rights were granted to RDA in perpetuity by the Interplanetary Commerce Administration (ICA), with the stipulation that they abide by a treaty that prohibits weapons of mass destruction and limits military power in space',[13] the viewer soon realizes that the RDA does not plan to obey the ICA's regulations.

It is not the first time that US popular culture has criticized the ways in which the West has dealt with otherness, epitomized by indigenous peoples of the prairies. From *A Man Called Horse* (1970, by Elliot Silverstein) and *Little Big Man* (1970, by Arthur Penn) to *Dances with Wolves* (1990, by Kevin Costner), Hollywood has cast doubts on the ways in which 'the conquest of the West' proceeded. In the 1970s, the emphasis relied upon the cruel production of a free spirit in the warriors' bodies. In the 1990s, some of the others were idealized at the expense of other others. Nowadays, the critique takes a different direction. In *Avatar*, the movie, otherness is depicted through a 'hybrid object' in Bruno Latour's sense, that is to say, through a production that weaves 'skeins of science, politics, economics, law, religion, art, fiction' and where 'culture and nature are intertwined'.[14] In this regard, *Avatar* represents the *import-export* of the two main modern divisions which Latour proposes (the 'We, the West, vs. They, the Rest' divide performing as an export of the Human-Non Human divide), to make critical comments on both. Even more interesting, the Na'vi Others are not in the past and in the hinterland of the nation-state, but in the future and in outer-space. They even win the battle, yet less with the help of other humanoid neighbours than with the assistance of Pandoran wildlife, naturaloids whose intervention also opens up the channel for the Na'vi Neytiri and Jake, the remorseful marine, to fall in love.

As for the politics of scientific knowledge, *Avatar*, the movie, seems to make an unusual move as well. Attempting to improve relations with the natives and learn about Pandora's biology, scientists grow Na'vi bodies modified with human DNA, called avatars, controlled by genetically matched, mentally linked human operators.[15] Regarding the role of Science, Doctor Grace Augustine becomes a key character in many aspects. First, she performs as the head of the Avatar Program and manages the Marines who take part in the project with what appears as a congruent attitude: military discipline and

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scientific rigor. After transforming herself into an avatar body for Science's sake and developing a quite anthropological empathy with the natives' point of view, Dr Grace realizes that the destruction of Hometree could affect the bio-botanical neural network that all Pandoran organisms are connected to. As a scientist, Dr Grace takes the right side and opposes both the destruction of Hometree and the RDA's order of 'combating terror with terror'. Not even Mo'at, the Omaticaya shaman, can save Dr Grace's life, but she can at least pave her way to redemption by stating that 'she is with Eywa now'. In any event, Dr Grace's death reveals another of the meanings of the word avatar, which is that of transformation. The experiment allows the scientist to see Hometree less as a fairy tale than as an index of a different (better?) ontology or truth. Dr Grace's transformation is truly deep, in body and soul. As a result, she cannot but take a definite stand against colonial domination.

The RDA's greediness and brutality echo the Western lust for power which previous movies have already depicted. But *Avatar*'s provocative twist comes less from the fact that the natives manage to prevail, than from the effects attributed to updated forms of colonial supremacy. For the corporation, transforming humans into avatars—making them 'go native'—becomes the means to better know and dominate the Alters. As modern project, the experiment of human avatarization aims at communicating with other worlds in and through a mediation which could guarantee the translation as an act of purification.[16] The failing of this quite new variety of power-knowledge therefore performs a twofold displacement. It transforms into intercultural utopia[17] the initial reluctance of the central characters to engage in intercultural (in fact, interspecies) intercourse. It invites the viewers to move from Latour's idea that 'we have never been modern', to the notion that we should not want to be modern at all. Both twists lead us to the realm of cosmopolitics.

Disputed cosmopolitics?

Gustavo Lins Ribeiro defines cosmopolitics as discourses and related modes of doing politics which have global scope and impact. He introduces the ideas of 'metropolitan provincialism' and 'provincial cosmopolitanism' to explain asymmetries and the asymmetric ignorance which structures the anthropological academy also organized along a North/South divide.[18] In this section, I propose to examine the political edge of *Avatar*'s global repercussions in terms of the tension between a 'metropolitan alternativism' and an 'alter-native cosmopolitanism', so as to understand less asymmetric ignorance than asymmetric utopias. Here the main asymmetry to be explored relates to the ways and means by which each worldview can dispute meanings in global public spaces.

Unlike the asymmetric ignorance promoted by metropolitan provincialism, the views brought to the fore by what I call metropolitan alternativism aim at the self-critique of its own condition. In this regard, several paradoxes become apparent as soon as one pays attention to the ways in which *Avatar*

criticizes the West. I take these paradoxes as a clue to the ways in which metropolitan alternativism works.

According to the filmmaker, one of the movie's goals is to make you 'think a little bit about the way you interact with nature and your fellow man'. More concretely, 'the Na'vi represent something that is our higher selves, or our aspirational selves, what we would like to think we are', and, despite the fact that there are good humans within the film, the humans 'represent what we know to be the parts of ourselves that are trashing our world and maybe condemning ourselves to a grim future'.[19]

The self-critique thus introduced by *Avatar* does not escape the dynamics by which indigenous systems of knowledge are reified by the very modern structures that marginalize them.[20] In the long run, the Na'vi are nothing more than a looking glass of 'our aspirational selves'. In this regard, *Avatar* sets in motion what Bruno Latour would define as a combination of 'modest relativism'—the West appears just as a culture among others—with an implicit turn toward a guilty anti-modern universalism, according to which the West still is insanely but utterly unique, because of its having detached itself from its pre-modern past, for once and for all.[21]

Another interesting element emerges from statements that form part of the movie's profuse advertising campaign—statements where James Cameron speaks of the movie's stance against 'the impersonal nature of mechanized warfare in general'. While in one interview Cameron acknowledges that *Avatar* implicitly criticizes America's war in Iraq, in another one he makes clear that 'the film is definitely not anti-American' and that he was surprised (?) by the extent to which the scene in the film which portrays the violent destruction of the towering Na'vi Hometree 'did look like September 11'.[22] Analysing the dynamics of world anthropologies, the articles put together by Lins Ribeiro and Escobar have shown that every form of 'imperial-building anthropology' is always a form of 'nation-building anthropology'.[23] Cameron's declarations pose the question about the extent to which *nation-building alternativism* entails *imperial-building alternativism*.

Moreover, *Avatar* criticizes our modern detachment from nature, by introducing an enchanted vision of wildlife and the native simple life and beliefs. Yet, its cry against the utter technologization of life resorts to the most advanced technological means available within the film industry to express and aestheticize itself.[24] Last but not least, *Avatar* seems to be a critique of the capitalist lust for accumulation, but its marketing did not spare any of the means available to make profit.[25] Undoubtedly *Avatar* has behaved as a voraciously capitalist enterprise itself. Taken all together, these paradoxes show that the metropolitan alternativism of the *Avatar* industry does not seem to stage or point to anything transmodern at all.

Against such a backdrop, it is not surprising that *Avatar* earned nine Oscar nominations, and won three of them. The surprising point rather is that some well-known indigenous leaders and at least some of the most proactive of my colleagues in my country praised the movie's stance as an exercise of legitimate advocacy *vis-à-vis* indigenous claims.

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Several well-known indigenous leaders are quoted as stating that 'tribal people have claimed that the film tells the real story of their lives today', and the editor of *Survival International* himself, Stephen Corry, adds:

> Just as the Na'vi describe the forest of Pandora as 'their everything', for most tribal peoples, life and land have always been deeply connected. . . . Like the Na'vi of 'Avatar', the world's last-remaining tribal peoples—from the Amazon to Siberia—are also at risk of extinction, as their lands are appropriated by powerful forces for profit-making reasons such as colonization, logging and mining.[26]

A Spanish trivia page quotes Evo Morales who said that 'Avatar is a profound illustration of resistance to capitalism' and who found a parallelism between Avatar's plot and 'his struggle to protect Mother Earth'.[27]

In Argentina, a well-known senior sociologist and advocate of peasant and indigenous claims published a review in one of the liberal national newspapers. Under the title 'Avatar, cinema and science', she stresses the link between a different kind of scientific practice and Latin American peoples, 'with a strong attachment to their territory and the will of fighting against the expansion of economic powers protected by the political power and by the military bases of the global power, with the complicity of local techno-sciences'. She stresses that:

> We could criticize Cameron, because he surrenders to the temptation of transforming the male avatar into the hero [. . .] but we could also read this in terms of identity formation: identities are not fixed, they are built in collective actions, when it is decided if the proper side to take is that of devastation, looting and violence, or that committed to the likelihood of a different world, respectful of biodiversity and peoples.[28]

I see all of these outcomes as an exercise in alter-native cosmopolitanism, which is indeed harder to nail down than metropolitan alternativism. One thing is clear though. If provincial cosmopolitanism stresses the knowledge that non-hegemonic centres need to have of the intellectual production of hegemonic centres, the alter-native cosmopolitanism expressed by the cultural activists who backed up *Avatar* aims at putting other forms of knowledge, claims and utopias at the forefront of the political debate.

For instance, in May 2010, *Avatar* actress Sigourney Weaver and the film director James Cameron, along with the NGO 'Land is Life' and members of the permanent indigenous forum at the UN, participated in a demonstration in New York against the construction of a dam in Belo Monte, Brazil, advocating that 'the river is our life'. Some people could see this move as a way of putting the 'weapons of the weak'[29] into use, in order to make an impact on the global hegemonic public space, to promote more symmetrical relations, and to create a multi-centred public space. Other people would see these demonstrations mainly as a betrayal, as a suspicious return to a quite romanticized image of natives and their cultural distinctiveness which in addition gives an improper support to a self-indulgent view of modernity.

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Debates of this sort have occupied and preoccupied anthropologists for some years now. Disagreements abound when it comes to explaining and assessing the effects of the politics of recognition of cultural rights on the politics of identity and the politicization of culture, and the ways in which these forms of political praxis tend to express themselves within international arenas. Acknowledged as authorized discourse about alterity and as a key player in the politics of othering, anthropological cosmopolitics plays its part in global scenarios and thus deserves examination.

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Anthropological discontent with modernity and anthropology of our modern discontent: taking sides

The unequal battle that *Avatar* puts on stage resembles everyday asymmetrical exchanges which take place in global arenas where indigenous peoples vie for their rights to be recognized, like the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the International Labour Organization, or summits about biodiversity or climate change. It is not my purpose here to follow this analytical path, but to explore how the debates that take place in these scenarios are echoed by and impact on anthropological cosmopolitics.

John Gledhill has stated that, in tune with globalization and state reforms, 'the proliferation of professionalized intermediaries in both the State and NGO sectors contributes to the reinforcement of group boundaries and visions of "cultural distinctiveness" with which at least some academic anthropologists feel uncomfortable'.[30] In fact, once 'culture' itself becomes not simply an anthropological concept but mainly a patrimony, a value, a right—that is to say, a politicized resource—uneasiness with inherited anthropological wisdoms and role definitions multiplies.

In this regard, a senior anthropologist, Adam Kuper, has opened up a debate that has had wide repercussions. He has voiced concern with the ways in which the identity politics displayed at international arenas transformed 'culture' into a common euphemism for 'race' and restored to life the ghostly category of 'primitive peoples', even if under a new label. His questioning is based upon the anthropological conviction that 'local ways of life and group identities have been subjected to a variety of pressures and have seldom, if ever, remained stable over the long term'. When the boundaries between science and activism become blurred, Kuper regrets that 'new identities are fabricated and spokespeople identified who are bound to be unrepresentative and may be effectively the creation of political parties and NGOs'; even worse, that these allegedly 'traditional' leaders voice their demands 'in the idiom of Western culture theory', becoming detached from their constituency and creating movements which 'are unlikely to be democratic'.[31]

I suspect that Adam Kuper would be as sceptical as I am *vis-à-vis Avatar*, the movie, even if for different reasons. He is afraid of the 'dangerous political consequences' that essentialist ideologies of culture and identity may have, fostered as they are to back up indigenous land claims, and relying as they do on 'obsolete anthropological notions and on a romantic and false

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ethnographic vision'. I am however less concerned by the means through which the alter-native cosmopolitanism vies to be heard, than by the ways in which the metropolitan alternativism puts the former into iron cages. I am concerned with the hegemonic digestion of native views which nurtures the divide between what could be seen as a 'fair claim' or rather as an 'unbearable politicization'.[32] And as long as metropolitan alternativism uses anthropological images of the Other, I would argue that what should be at stake here is less the indigenous politics of representation, than the politics of anthropological representation itself. More specifically, what does it mean and take to deliver 'accurate accounts of social processes',[33] as Kuper demands? I identify three main positions around this controversial issue.

Some colleagues and Kuper himself are quite optimistic about our anthropological duty and capacity 'to unveil truth'. The idea of truth is discussed in the next section. Here the point to stress is that, according to Kuper, we should avoid relapsing into self-censorship or into ignoring 'history for fear of undermining myths of autochthony'. Otherwise, Kuper warns, 'if we report only what is convenient and refrain from analyzing intellectual confusions, then our ethnographies will be worthless except as propaganda'.[34]

Other colleagues rather advise to be more sensitive to the pragmatic effects of our intellectual work. For instance, commenting on Adam Kuper's article, Steven Robins argues that, as long as 'Gayatri Spivak's concept of ''strategic essentialism'' is useful for understanding such situated activist logics' and proves to be effective to advance political projects, we should not see it as problematic or criticize it. Instead we should put into focus the double standard which is asymmetrically applied to criticize indigenous essentialisms only.[35] Debates around the notion of 'strategic essentialism' are abundant and cannot be summarized here. Yet I have argued elsewhere that what emerges in these discussions informs more often than not on our epistemological rigidities, rather than on heterogeneous and contextually-sensitive indigenous practices of symbolic and political representation.[36] In any event, Michael Dove wonders what part the recent academic inclination towards deconstruction is playing in the wider deconstructionist project of Modernity. He also alleges that pursuing a clear-cut distinction between 'indigenous and non-indigenous knowledge'—instead of accepting and describing the 'mix of hybridity, mistranslation, and incommensurability' which is likely to occur—involves engaging in what Foucault defined as biased, power-laden dividing practices.[37]

However the act of paying attention just to divergences or to convergences does not in itself prevent the relapse into controversial practices which are the core of modernity as hegemonic project that can both segregate and assimilate selectively those who are defined as internal others. Because of that, some colleagues urge us all to identify our epistemic privileges, to struggle against 'Western epistemic racism'[38] or to adopt a decolonial turn so as to achieve an epistemic decolonization.[39] Other colleagues combine this line of thought with Bruno Latour's idea of engaging in a symmetric anthropology,[40] so as to identify different 'political ontologies' and analyse why some of them have the chance and urge to dominate others.[41]

Assuming that anthropologists are not outside disputed political ontologies themselves, the problem goes beyond Anthropology's politics of representation and becomes a problem of our politics of knowledge. To get off the hook, John Gledhill proposes that we ask ourselves 'for whom we think we are producing knowledge', and suggests that we commit to help our interlocutors focus on the bigger picture.[42] But, concretely, what part of the bigger picture should be put into focus and how do we do it?

Doing the job on/in the Global South: where to stand *vis-à-vis* the politics of translation and the politics of critical thinking

> Every totalization, even if it is critical, helps totalitarism.[43]

The debate that Adam Kuper has introduced and the reverberations it has provoked have drawn attention usually to the identification of proper or improper postures and arguments, more than to the analysis of the ways in which our frames of reasoning and debate create iron cages in terms of research problems and agendas, for both anthropologists and our interlocutors as well. If cultural hegemony has to do less with an anthology of contents than with the generalization of mechanisms of thought and action, I would suggest that—beyond disagreements—totalizing practices tend to be a meeting point, a common patrimony inherited of Anthropology's modern and Eurocentric cradle. The expansion of our politics of knowledge thus seems to depend on (re)thinking two related issues. One point requires revising and reorienting the politics of translation that has been one of Anthropology's key tools from the very inception of the discipline. The other point consists of debating the extent to which our politics of critical thinking, radical as it seems, is based upon—and may recreate—quite modern privileges.

As for the first issue, debates among anthropologists have shown that translations can be done in different ways and with different purposes and consequences. Classical anthropologists were confident on the likelihood of translating cultural differences into a universal, scientific language, as if this were a non-cultural and context-free idiom. Grosfoguel would see this confidence as an index of the 'ego-politics of knowledge'.[44] I would add that such a politics resonates with what Lawrence Grossberg has identified as the liberal vision of unity in the difference.[45]

The interpretive turn which is associated with 'modern anthropology' introduced the idea of mediation between at least two universes of signification, that of our interlocutors, and that of the anthropologists themselves. A telling example of this change is the article in which Roberto Da Matta proposes that the ethnographic approach requires a double operation—that of transforming what seemed exotic into familiar, and that of transforming what seemed familiar into exotic matter.[46] However, in Da Matta's path-breaking piece, the anthropologist's cultural bias results not from the scientific culture, but from the fact of being a national of a

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particular national culture. Therefore the logic and hierarchical standing of the 'scientific discovery' still remained unquestioned.

Nowadays, there seem to be three open paths whenever we apply our critical thinking to the tasks of translation. The first path proposes to 'speak truth to power', which is a form of 'unveiling the truth', even if apparently from the opposite direction. Doubting the groundings of this translation in reverse, John Gledhill proposes a second path that consists of translating 'the bigger picture' of capital accumulation into the explanatory frames of local communities.[47] A third way seems to be defined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who proposes to do an exercise on intercultural and interpolitical translation within shared social forums, so as 'to expand the mutual intelligibility without destroying the identity of our partners in translation'.[48]

If we come back in this point to Gledhill's question—'for whom we think we are translating knowledge'—it seems to me that one of Anthropology's most indelible colonial marks is that of viewing the subaltern as our sole interlocutor. This vision has led us to define translation as the task of making the subaltern understandable to power, or rather of making 'power' understandable to them, or, in Sousa Santos's proposal, of making subaltern groups understandable to each other. However, many questions arise. Can we say that our partners in translation are organized around discrete identities? Is any knowledge unmistakably localized in one side only of the epistemic divide? Or rather are we social scientists so trapped into totalizing practices and metacultural battles—clashes that involve defining 'culture' from a cultural perspective—that we also end up believing that discrete cultural contents are the primary vehicle for the articulation of external classifications or self-identifications, instead of a sense-building process, 'grounded in a continuity of practice',[49] a process that produces truth effects about meanings and identities?

Lately, the anthropological politics of translation has been put to the test more often and more dramatically, whenever a colleague is brought to court to offer an expert testimony in a trial that involves indigenous rights. These occasions therefore offer remarkable possibilities to think about different acts of, and occasions for, translation. Although expert testimonies by anthropologists are not a common practice in Argentina, I use my limited experience in this area to open up the discussion toward other considerations.

As a rule, expert court testimonies are framed in a well defined communicative situation. More often than not, judges expect the anthropologist serving as expert witness to provide his/her anthropological knowledge of 'facts'. Presumably this expert knowledge results from translating social knowledge and beliefs into a factual truth that the judges can equate to juridical concepts. In more banal terms, in most judges' expectations, the anthropologist just has to paraphrase indigenous (awkward) beliefs in a (common) language that judges manage and can understand. Some colleagues do believe that this can be done. The Mashpee trial analysed by James Clifford however shows that other disciplines are better equipped than Anthropology to meet expectations of this sort.[50]

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I understand our mission in a different direction however. The main task is certainly not giving proof of who is indigenous and who is not—a common expectation in Argentina. It is not simply the collection and presentation of 'hard evidence', although we obviously have to work on this as well. Hence, the most fruitful and thus principal duty consists of making apparent the hidden dispute which plays a key part in courts, a dispute about the criteria that delink and create a pecking-order in terms of the juridical knowledge, the anthropological knowledge and the social knowledge. The critical first step then is to show that courts of law are first and foremost a battleground of conflicting knowledge, embedded into distinct discursive horizons of meaning or of truth production. That is, in trials which involve indigenous rights, at least three (to keep it simple) modes of knowledge and truth production (the Indians', the courts', and the anthropologists') are at play.

Chances are that the enactment of this duty within courts ends up making all the parties feel uncomfortable (judges, public prosecutors, lawyers, plaintiffs, defendants), because they are all trying to monopolize the truth. Yet we have to endure their discontent. Otherwise we cannot undertake what I see as our real service, which has to do with showing the need to engage in a trialogue among different truths to make them understandable, commensurable and of equal importance. The notion of trialogue tries here to call attention to the need for an exchange that transforms the pragmatics of the communicative situation which is defined as expert testimony. What is the ultimate goal of working out such a trialogue? I would say that it is reaching a non-ethnocentric notion of justice, by avoiding straight imposition of one discursive horizon over the others.

Now then, once the idea of trialogue is established, another anthropological duty is to make apparent that there is no such thing as a one-to-one, simple translation, because the same event or fact can be examined through different perspectives or modes of reflective thinking. As Alcida Ramos has clearly shown, interpretation can work through different registers, be they spiritual, historical, or political.[51] In this regard, when our indigenous interlocutors complain that anthropologists explain in court 'their' things, they are not only making a statement in terms of the intellectual property of knowledge. They are also expressing doubts about the capability we may have to understand differences among these modes of reflective thinking, and thus to select the proper interpretive register to give meaningful answers to plain questions about 'facts'.[52]

Still, there are many things that we anthropologists can proactively do in courts, in addition to showing the complexities, opacities and ethics of translation, and the inconvenience of engaging in totalizing practices. First, instead of totalizing concepts, we can offer

> knowledges based upon the possibility of generating historically situated explanations, by means of the finding of axes of comparison that help establish productive yet situated generalizations to explain the emergence, recreation and transformation of fields in which the superimposition and the conflict over meanings—as well as the rearticulation of identities, equivalences and

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> demands—are materializations that are equally possible in the realms of interaction and social control.[53]

Second, we can present facts and knowledge in such a way that judges realize the necessity of changing their questions. Now then, for judges to pose different questions, they have to acknowledge first the cultural foundations of the judicial discourse. They have to understand as well—and we must try to make it apparent to them—that there is no such thing as two completely different cultural worlds enmeshed in an absolute and constant conflict. Historical experiences of interaction have made us all live in what Marisol de la Cadena defines as 'more than one, but less than two worlds'.[54]

Now then, because power-laden social relations have always conditioned how and how much different people are entitled to live in 'more than one, but less than two worlds', history cannot be a missed link in our acts of translation. Making apparent how the conflicting truths involved are embedded into their own contexts of meaning and truth production cannot be a missed link either. These links do not attest to the absolute incommensurability of perspectives, nor do they deny the likelihood of translation. They rather direct our attention to the affinities that exist between a totalizing politics of translation, and quite modern scientific acts of purification,[55] which become hegemonic acts of normalization, and standardization. At the same time, they reveal trialogues as situated practices, both possible and necessary.

*

Let's come back to the beginning now, in order to revise the relationships, if there are any, between the structures of feeling emerging from *Avatar*, the movie, and its repercussions, on the one hand, and less fictional scientific avatars provoked nowadays by the politics of translation and of critical thinking, on the other.

Avatar is comforting because it shows that it is possible 'to speak truth to power' and that power listens. It also conveys another certainty. In addition to assuring that scientists will always take the rightful side, *Avatar* confirms the likelihood of a direct, simple translation of meanings and worldviews. The academic debates and the complexities of translation that this article has examined cannot but make me sceptical in both these regards.

However, my distrust in the foundations of the metropolitan alternativism which is woven around *Avatar* does not apply to the ways in which alternative cosmopolitanisms have made use of the movie. The metropolitan alternativism subordinates its political discourse to business, and therefore tends to confine and make banal the terms of debate. On the contrary, the alter-native cosmopolitan interventions which *Avatar* allowed have sought to take advantage of hegemonic gaps, in order to continue 'speaking truth to power' and widen up public spaces even further. In this regard, the structures of feeling that *Avatar* mobilizes and the effects of simultaneity that the movie has aroused can be read themselves as effects of presence of an enduring

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indigenous struggle, that is, of many different acts based upon the strategy of 'speaking truth to power'. These previous acts have helped to change the global-scapes[56] within which *Avatar* makes sense and becomes so distinct from previous movies showing a sympathetic stance *vis-à-vis* indigenous alterity. Hence, the tactics of 'speaking truth to power' may not be an adequate metaphor for translation, yet it implies a powerful, always situated and contingent, act of political intervention.

In like manner, the last point to touch upon here refers to the identification of what can count as meaningful interventions for our politics of critical thinking. Following Gledhill, I maintain that the ways and grounds on which we take a critical stance indeed matter, because a critical stance 'that is totalizing and non-situational is lacking in responsibility'.[57] I exemplify my point situating myself deep in the heart of academia, within public universities where we train future scientists.

I teach now in a new public university located in northwest Patagonia. Our students are truly heterogeneous, committed professionals, Mapuche activists, youngsters of 'el alto', where the poorest neighbourhoods of my town, Bariloche, are located. In one of my opening classes of the introductory course to Anthropology, I presented anthropological discussions about universalism and relativism. I stressed that the very idea of uni-versities is committed to a monologically modern notion of knowledge, and introduced the idea of pluri-versities, as an attempt to put this monological cradle into question. One of my students replied:

> Professor, you said that 70 per cent of the parents of the students of our university have not finished high school and that 40 per cent have not even finished elementary school. The very idea of universities is quite unknown for them. Don't you think that it could be confusing if we started talking of pluriversities before we get to know what a university is?

My student had brought to the fore key aspects of the politics of critical thinking that I want to summarize here. Having the chance to express our discontent with modernity and modern thinking requires that we have been granted with some basic 'modern privileges' already. And we have to consider them 'privileges', because not everybody has access to them. In other words, we cannot take for granted, as a point of departure, what is still a point of arrival for others. From this perspective, not every exteriority is transmodern or emancipatory. Egalitarian arrangements in a modern sense are still necessary to fight for a better political structuring for our intercultural arrangements. Otherwise we just have exclusion, instead of productive exteriorities.

Against such a backdrop, what is the most productive way of thinking critically the role of our public universities? I try to prepare my students to live with the uncertainties of translation, that is to say, without recipes for which politics of translation to adopt on each different occasion, but with reflexes to decide which to use in different situations. I try to prepare them to posit good questions and analyse truth effects (those of anthropology

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included), for them to be trained to deliver the most accurate and deep accounts of social processes. They still teach me or make me aware of the privileges involved in the politics of critical thinking. And thus they teach me their right to have access to the most modern anthropological means of analysis, to the most rebelling and most revealing modern tactics of critique, before having their own chance to select the exteriority from which they decide to criticize modernity. In the meantime, I do not get mad if some of them tell me that *Avatar*, the movie, conveys a quite anthropological perspective.

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Notes

[1] Universidad Nacional de Río Negro (UNRN) and Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET), Argentina.

[2] Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *Para leer al Pato Donald: Comunicación de masa y colonialismo*, 36th edition, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, [1972] 2008.

[3] As explained on Wikipedia, one of the many websites available on the issue, '*Avatar* is a 2009 science fiction epic film written and directed by James Cameron [...] The film is set in the year 2154 on Pandora, a moon in the Alpha Centauri star system. Humans are engaged in mining Pandora's reserves of a precious mineral, called unobtanium, while the Na'vi, a race of indigenous humanoids, resist the colonists' expansion [...] The film's title refers to the genetically engineered Na'vi bodies used by a few of the film's human characters to interact with the Na'vi.' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(2009_film. It is in relation to the genetically engineered Na'vi bodies devised to interact with the natives that 'scientists' become entangled with the story.

[4] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

[5] George Marcus, 'Imagining the Whole: Ethnography's Contemporary Efforts to Situate Itself', *Critique of Anthropology* 9(3), 1989, pp 7–30.

[6] For aboriginality as social and historic construction, see Jeremy Beckett (ed), *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988; and Claudia Briones, *La alteridad del 'Cuarto Mundo': Una deconstrucción antropológica de la diferencia*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sol, 1998.

[7] Michel Trouillot, 'Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness', in Richard Fox (ed), *Recapturing Anthropology*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991, pp 17–44.

[8] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, London: Verso, 1983, pp 345–346.

[9] Anibal Quijano, 'Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina', in Edgardo Lander (comp), *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas*, Buenos Aires: CLACSO-UNESCO, 2000, pp 201–246.

[10] Enrique Dussel, 'Sistema mundo y transmodernidad', in Saurabh Dube, Ishita Banerjee and Walter Mignolo (eds), *Modernidades coloniales*, México: El Colegio de México, 2004, pp 201–226.

[11] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(2009_film)

[12] 'The circumference of a Hometree is great enough to house dozens of clan members. The tree is honeycombed with natural hollows and alcoves, in which the Na'vi sleep, eat, weave, dance, and celebrate their connection to Eywa. When a young Omaticaya becomes a man he is allowed to make his bow out of the wood of hometree [...].' The Hometree's structure 'is comprised of a grove of intertwined trees of the same species that have grown together, providing for mutual strength and structural reinforcement. The Omaticaya revere this quality of Hometree as a constant reminder that a community is stronger and more resilient than the sum of the individuals who comprise it' (extracted from www.pandorapedia.com/doku.php/hometree).

[13] Extracted from www.pandorapedia.com/doku.php/the_rda

[14] Bruno Latour, *Nunca fuimos modernos: Ensayos de antropología simétrica*, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2007, p 17.

[15] James Cameron, the filmmaker, acknowledges that the movie's title is related to the Hindu concept of avatar, that is to say, 'the incarnation of a deity in human or animal form to counteract some particular evil in the world' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/45474/avatar).
[16] Latour, *Nunca fuimos modernos*, p 28.
[17] Joanne Rapapport, *Intercultural Utopias: Public Intellectuals, Cultural Experimentation, and Ethnic Pluralism in Colombia*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.
[18] Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, 'World Anthropologies: Cosmopolitics for a New Global Scenario in Anthropology', *Critique of Anthropology* 26(4), 2006, pp 363–386; Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Arturo Escobar, 'Las antropologías del mundo: Transformaciones de la disciplina a través de los sistemas de poder', *Universitas humanística* (Bogotá) 61, 2006, pp 15–49.
[19] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(2009_film)
[20] Hornborg 2005, quoted in Michael Dove, 'Indigenous People and Environmental Politics', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35, 2006, pp 191–208, p 195.
[21] Latour, *Nunca fuimos modernos*, pp 154, 181.
[22] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(2009_film)
[23] Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Arturo Escobar (eds), *World Anthropologies: Disciplinary Transformations within Systems of Power*, New York: Berg, 2006.
[24] 'The film is being touted as a breakthrough in terms of filmmaking technology, for its development of 3D viewing and stereoscopic filmmaking with cameras that were specially designed for the film's production.' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(2009_film).
[25] *Avatar* 'premiered in London on December 10, 2009, and was released on December 18, 2009, in North America [. . .] Within three weeks of its release, it had grossed over $1 billion worldwide [. . .] The Coca-Cola Company collaborated with Twentieth Century Fox to launch a worldwide marketing campaign to promote the film [. . .] A series of toys representing six different characters from the film are also being distributed in McDonald's Happy Meals in the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Venezuela and mainland China' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(2009_film).
[26] www.survivalinternational.org/news/5466. On 8 February 2010, another press release from *Survival International* stated that 'Tribal people appeal to James Cameron [. . .] Avatar is fantasy. . . and real. The Dongria Kondh tribe in India are struggling to defend their land against a mining company hell-bent on destroying their sacred mountain. Please help the Dongria. We've watched your film—now watch ours: www.survivalinternational.org/mine [. . .] Like the Na'vi of "Avatar", the Dongria Kondh are also at risk [. . .]' (www.survivalinternational.org/news/5529).
[27] www.publico.es/culturas/284916/evo/morales/identifica/avatar
[28] www.pagina12.com.ar/imprimir/diario/elpais/1-138305-2010-01-11.html
[29] James C Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985.
[30] John Gledhill, 'Beyond Speaking Truth to Power: Anthropological Entanglements with Multicultural and Indigenous Rights Politics', Manchester Anthropology Working Papers, 2004, p 6. www.social sciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/socialanthropology/research/workingpapers/documents/Beyond_Speaking_Truth_to_Power.pdf
[31] Adam Kuper, 'The Return of the Native', *Current Anthropology* 44(3), 2003, pp 389–395, pp 391, 392, 395.
[32] Claudia Briones, *Weaving 'the Mapuche People': The Cultural Politics of Organizations with Indigenous Philosophy and Leadership*, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, UMI # 9959459, 1999.
[33] Kuper, 'The Return of the Native', p 400.
[34] Kuper, 'The Return of the Native', p 400.
[35] Steven Robins, 'Comment on Adam Kuper's "The Return of the Native"', *Current Anthropology* 44(3), 2003, pp 398–399, p 398.
[36] Claudia Briones, 'Questioning State Geographies of Inclusion in Argentina: The Cultural Politics of Organizations with Mapuche Leadership and Philosophy', in Doris Sommer (ed), *Cultural Agency in the Americas*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, pp 248–278.
[37] Michael Dove, 'Indigenous People and Environmental Politics', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35, 2006, pp 191–208, pp 196, 202.
[38] Ramón Grosfoguel and Walter Mignolo, 'Intervenciones Decoloniales: Una breve introducción', *Tábula Rasa* (Bogotá) 9, 2008, pp 29–37.
[39] Walter Mignolo, 'Cambiando las éticas y las políticas del conocimiento: Lógica de la colonialidad y la postcolonialidad imperial', *Tábula Rasa* (Bogotá) 3, 2005, pp 42–72.
[40] Latour, *Nunca fuimos modernos*, p 155.

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[41] See Mario Blaser, 'Political Ontology', *Cultural Studies* 23(5), 2009, pp 873–896.
[42] Gledhill, 'Beyond Speaking Truth to Power', p 15.
[43] Latour, *Nunca fuimos modernos*, p 182.
[44] Ramón Grosfoguel, 'La descolonización de la economía política y los estudios poscoloniales: Transmodernidad, pensamiento fronterizo y colonialidad global', *Tábula Rasa* (Bogotá) 4, 2006, pp 17–48, p 23.
[45] Lawrence Grossberg, 'Entre consenso y hegemonía: Notas sobre la forma hegemónica de la política moderna', *Tábula Rasa* (Bogotá) 2, 2004, pp 49–57, p 52.
[46] Roberto Da Matta, 'El oficio de etnólogo o cómo tener "Anthropological Blues"', in M Boivin, A Rosato and V Arribas (eds), *Constructores de otredad*, Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1999, pp 172–178.
[47] Gledhill argues that 'speaking truth to power' is quite ineffectual in a world in which the forces we wish to denounce have themselves become skilled players of multiculturalist politics. He states that 'maintaining a grounded optimism of the spirit requires a realistic appraisal of situations and possibilities, orientated to supporting the efforts of movements themselves to recognize contradictions and seek ways of transcending them' (Gledhill, 'Beyond Speaking Truth to Power', pp 31–32.
[48] Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'El Foro Social Mundial y la izquierda global', in R Hoetmer (coord), *Repensar la política desde América Latina: Cultura, Estado y movimientos sociales*, Lima: UNMSM, 2009, pp 373–410, p 409.
[49] James Suzman, 'Comment on Adam Kuper's "The Return of the Native"', *Current Anthropology* 44(3), 2003, pp 399–400, p 399.
[50] James Clifford, 'Identidad en Mashpee', in *Dilemas de la Cultura: Antropología, Literatura y Arte en la perspectiva posmoderna*, Barcelona: Gedisa, 2001, pp 327–406.
[51] Alcida Ramos, 'Indian Voices: Contact Experienced and Expressed', in J Hill (ed), *Rethinking History and Myth: Indigenous South American Perspectives on the Past*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp 214–234.
[52] Another related issue emerges, but it cannot be explored here. Do we have the right to disclose knowledge which comes from a spiritual mode of reflective thinking, despite the fact that our interlocutors have shared it with us? Issues of cultural privacy in addition to confidentiality also come into play.
[53] Briones, 'Questioning State Geographies of Inclusion', p 276.
[54] Marisol de la Cadena, 'Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond "Politics"', *Cultural Anthropology* 25(2), 2010, pp 334–370.
[55] Latour, *Nunca fuimos modernos*, p 29.
[56] Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', *Public Studies* 2(2), 1990, pp 1–24.
[57] John Gledhill, 'Moral Ambiguities and Competing Claims to Justice: Exploring the Dilemmas of Activist Scholarship and Intervention in Complex Situations', 1999, p 4. http://jg.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/Moral%20Ambiguities.pdf

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