Some Epistemic and Methodological Challenges within an Intercultural Experience

PAULA RESTREPO*

Abstract My experience with the Intercultural Indigenous System of Learning and Studies (SIIDAE) in Chiapas gave rise to a dialogue on two different levels: intercultural and interdisciplinary. I understand dialogue here as a very complex model of translation that, at the same time, challenges the unilateral conception of translation. This article reports the decolonial challenges raised by SIIDAE during our dialogue and responds to these challenges by proposing an intercultural reflection on anthropological practice and on its geohistorical context, and by showing the need of an intercultural transformation of society and of anthropology itself.

Introduction

I am a Colombian anthropologist with some training in philosophy. As a Colombian, I used to feel that I was part of Western culture and I believed that our origins were with the Greeks. In my case, this illusion was stripped away when I came to Europe and Europeans made me feel as though I was from another culture. It was at that point that I realized there was something that I had never taken into consideration when looking at my life history. I later came to understand that that “something” was the history of colonization which has affected all the countries in Latin America and

* Paula Restrepo is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Communication at the University of Antioquia, Colombia. Contact e-mail: paularestrephoyos@gmail.com. Before I begin I would like to thank the people from the Intercultural Indigenous System of Learning and Studies Abya Yala (SIIDAE by its initials in Spanish) and Raúl Fornet-Betancourt because it is thanks to their help that this paper has been possible. They taught me about interculturality as a way of life. The time they shared with me helped to open my mind and make me realize that the SIIDAE’s experience as an intercultural community can provide important lessons both to anthropology and to social sciences in general. Whilst I alone am responsible for the paper I have written, I would not have even written the first letter without their help. I would also like to apologize in advance to those from the SIIDAE if at any point I misrepresent, misunderstand or distort what they taught me. I am also deeply indebted to Eduardo Zubia and Alex Stanley for their very helpful revisions of my English and to Gurminder K. Bhambra and the members of the network “Connected Histories / Connected Sociologies: Rethinking the Global” for their helpful suggestions to improve this article.
which has constructed its present and its past. Since the 1940s Latin America’s colonial past has been studied systematically, and colonial events have greatly influenced Latin American literature and the literary studies of the Spanish American narrative. Moreover, interest in these themes has increased since the 1990s due to the Quincentenary of the “discovery” of America (Adorno 2007: 1 ff). However, a critical awareness of the colonial past is part of an intellectual patrimony which has been exclusive to some scholars and activists. These ideas have barely permeated other levels of the education system.

In a very condensed way, what I have said so far explains my world-view. I hope it helps me to avoid what Santiago Castro has called the “hubris of the zero point”. He refers to “a form of human knowledge that seeks objectivity and scientism based on the assumption that the observer is not part of the observed. This assumption can be compared with the sin of hubris, of which the Greeks spoke, when men wanted, with arrogance, to reach the status of gods” (Castro 2005: 63). The act of acknowledging the context of my life allows me to make a connection between my theoretical work and the point from which I write. At the same time, it tries to achieve emancipation from modern epistemic conceptions which seek a neutral relationship between the “knower subject” and the “known subject”. As a Colombian anthropologist carrying out research into the “intercultural dialogue of knowledge” within the framework of intercultural philosophy, I did not consider that a philosophical standpoint alone was enough to face this problem. For that reason, with the help of Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, I contacted the director of the Intercultural Indigenous System of Learning and Studies Abya Yala (SIIDAE), Dr. Raymundo Sánchez.

The SIIDAE is one of the greatest seats of Latin American thought and learning at the present time. The SIIDAE’s experience, as well as the experience of other decolonial spaces, is one of the strongest epicentres of intercultural reflection and postcolonial thought in Latin America. Walter Mignolo (2009) highlights the importance of this system, describing it as a different path, a way of going beyond the university system, based on a decolonial “communally-oriented philosophy of education”. The SIIDAE offers the possibility of understanding intercultural dialogue as a vital and philosophical practice. It bases its activities on the philosophical and academic view it has of itself as a nurturer of the “good life” and a transformer of the world.

This article has a particular feature: the author is the “knower subject” and she is also part of the “known subject” to be reflected upon. Underlying every anthropological study there is always a sometimes forgotten relationship between an anthropologist and a
group of people. In this case I deal with just such a relationship. This article is going to relate an encounter between an anthropologist, myself, and the SIIDAE, including what the anthropologist was taught by them and the difficulties she experienced in the process of learning and translating their experiences into her knowledge. Such an experience must be viewed as one of dialogue, both at a cultural and at a disciplinary level. Dialogue should be understood here to mean a very complex model of translation that, at the same time, challenges the conception of translation as unilateral. In this sense, following Ortega and Conway, this article adheres to the idea of translation as the possibility of constructing a scene of mediation that frames interpretation as a dialogic exercise. Thus, it is the first cultural act that places languages and subjects in crisis, unleashing a redefinition of speakers, a debate over protocols, and a struggle over interpretation. Clearly, translation is a new space of accord and discord (2003: 26).

In my experience, such dialogue took place on two levels: as an intercultural dialogue in the encounter between a Colombian woman and anthropologist and a community of Mexican indigenous communities, the SIIDAE; and as an interdisciplinary dialogue between two disciplines, philosophy and anthropology and of these disciplines with the intercultural experience.

This dialogue allows us to understand that a real intercultural dialogue of knowledge can only take place when “the other” ceases to be an informant and becomes an interlocutor. If Western knowledge wants to be decolonized, it must move from “learning about” to “learning with” and “from” its “others”. Such a position requires an epistemic, methodological, political, economic and social engagement with the other. This article focuses on one of the ways such an engagement can be achieved. Although localized, this experience with the SIIDAE highlights a universal problem: the colonial context of modern knowledge production. It addresses general problems relating to knowledge, especially knowledge as it is understood and produced by the social sciences.

The article is divided into six parts; in the first part it describes some aspects of the Intercultural Indigenous System of Learning and Studies (SIIDAE) and its history. In the second part it explores the historical background of both the SIIDAE and the Latin American present. At the same time it reflects on the relationship between that historical context and the way in which contact with the SIIDAE took place. The third and fourth parts expose two challenges that were raised by the SIIDAE during my contact with them: the first is a decolonial challenge and the second is a critique, also decolonial, of anthropology. In the fifth part it
responds to these challenges by proposing that anthropology should be regarded as an intercultural practice, and explains the measures that were used to implement this. Finally, I try to answer the questions I have posed throughout the text regarding the kind of transformations that anthropology must undergo in order to meet these challenges.

The Intercultural Indigenous System of Learning and Studies

The SIIDAE Abya Yala\(^2\) is located in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, in south-eastern Mexico. It is made up of seven centres that work to construct interculturality, not just from an academic point of view, but in particular to solve the daily dilemmas which arise when living together in a “community of communities” (Sánchez 2009). The SIIDAE was not born as a system, but rather it has been gradually constructed day by day as it has travelled along its pilgrim’s path. Because of this, the whole system has developed in a spiral shape. The origins of the SIIDAE are in 1989 as the Indigenous Centre of Comprehensive Training Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (CIDECI Las Casas by its initials in Spanish). The main principle behind this centre is expressed in Tzotzil as “Ya j-yantestik te balmilal, ja’nax mayuc meta tsakel stael ya’telajualiletik”, which in English is: “change the world without taking the government’s power”. People from the SIIDAE work in this practical and academic construction to develop a vital and anti-capitalist project. “It’s an indigenous centre in its work, in its definition, in its method of operating, in its components, in those who make it up” (Sánchez 2005b). It is primarily aimed at young indigenous people, especially those who are in resistance to the oppression of the current system, but foreigners and Mexican “mestizos” are also welcome. Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol, Tojolabal are spoken, but Spanish is the language which facilitates a common exchange. There are no previous educational or literacy prerequisites to be part of the centre, and arts, crafts and useful trades are taught there.

The SIIDAE’s story began to take shape in 1989 when the governor of Chiapas expelled Dr. Sánchez and a group of people from his government, where they had been working with indigenous education through the public administration since 1982. Their reaction was one of “wholly indifference”. They wanted nothing more to do with the state, and neither did they want to become a counter-power because, for them, counter-power is also a form of power and works according to the same logic. Instead, they began to live as if the state did not exist. The SIIDAE would not be where it is now had it not been for the fact that this group of people were
expelled by the state, and they are full of gratitude for this (Sánchez 2009). Further, the bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas, Samuel Ruiz (a position that was occupied more than 500 years earlier by the famous Friar Bartolomé de las Casas) helped them to continue in their endeavours, without asking for anything in return. At that critical moment, with the bishop’s support, they began the process of constructing a system of indigenous education “from below and to the left” (Sánchez 2009), and without any kind of engagement with the government.

The SIIDAE realized that they ought to transform the nation-state and “to work from below with the forces of society, taking tiny steps, in order to regain the capacity for self-determination which was expropriated by that hypostasis which is the State” (Sánchez 2005b). With the assistance of Friar Bartolomé de las Casas’s successor, Samuel Ruiz, they also began to view themselves within their historical context. Their struggle is centuries old, and it has to be viewed within the context of the sixteenth century, at the moment when the experience of the Western-European conception of the world was introduced.

The Historical Context

People at the SIIDAE take the position that the historical system that is known today as the capitalist world-system began with the impact which was generated by the European “discovery” of the Americas and the subjugation of its peoples. However, when they wondered what it was that had allowed many groups of people to survive, resist and maintain their identities despite the conflict and subjugation, they found experiences of resistance that have been taking place since the sixteenth century in Latin America. Although there are many contradictions within these experiences, these peoples still exist, more than 500 years later. They still have their languages, a key part of their worldview and their ways of naming and seeing the world (Sánchez 2005b).

In this way, the experience of an exclusive world is bound with the experience of resistance. Therefore it is not possible to look at the colonial project that was born in the sixteenth century without understanding that it has always been accompanied by vital practices that have enabled indigenous peoples to survive and to hold on to their hope. According to Sánchez, the hospitals of Santa Fe of Vasco de Quiroga provided a source of inspiration for the construction of the SIIDAE. These hospitals had in turn been inspired by Thomas More’s “Utopia”, and through their work they helped to partially preserve the identity, customs and territories of Purépechas and the peoples of Michoacán (Sánchez 2005a).
These initiatives, which came from the West itself in that utopian vein, allowed these peoples to resist to a certain extent, to preserve themselves, not to lose the fulcrum of a basic referent of their identity. We said to ourselves, we have something to learn here, and the concept we learned was resisting and surviving (Sánchez 2005b).

The SIIDAE’s historical context connects them to a much wider struggle, the struggle for justice in Latin America. Every historical trajectory has a conventional beginning. The West, for example, chose ancient Greece as a starting point for the narration of its adventures in the world. Such historical thinking has also permeated what is now known as Latin America, from the time the ships of inhabitants from the Iberian Peninsula in Europe first arrived at its shores in 1492. Up until that time, each group of people had its own ideas regarding their origin, why they were like they were, how to explain their social organization, the clothes they wore or their customs. But, as well as marking the birth of America, 1492 was the year which gave rise to a new economic, political, social and epistemic order: capitalism and modernity. The hypothesis regarding the emergence of capitalism is well known from Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis (1974), but that of the birth of modernity is not so well known or accepted. According to most researchers, modernity originated in the eighteenth century. Here I bring in the other less popular theory, postulated by the philosophy of liberation (Dussel 2001) and Latin American modernity/coloniality theorists (Mignolo 2003; Castro 2005), that it was in fact the sixteenth century that saw the birth of a “first modernity”. According to this theory, the conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century was not only military, economic and political, but it was also cultural, epistemic and spiritual.

A consciousness of the way in which its historical background is linked with the entire history of Latin America means that the SIIDAE is aware of being itself a protagonist in a history of military, economic, political, epistemic and spiritual domination, as well as a history of resistance, struggle and opposition to such subjection. In other words, it is not possible to consider coloniality without also considering decolonial activity that, although most of the time has been silenced, has taken place at the same time. The first and subsequent encounters I had with the SIIDAE must be understood within this framework.

The Decolonial Challenge

As I mentioned above, I contacted the director of the SIIDAE. At that moment I told him that I wanted to spend some months in the SIDAE to learn more about the practical implications of intercultur-
turality and intercultural dialogue there. I sent him my project and in his reply he told me that he had seen some deep problems in my work. I couldn’t understand why he would think this, because I was not aware of any mistakes within the project. It was like any other anthropological project, with a chapter dedicated to an explanation of the kinds of ethnographic strategies that were going to be used and how and why were they going to be implemented. These anthropological techniques gave the study a real anthropological and scientific quality. Without these strategies the research would be abstract, philosophical and lacking in empirical evidence. But the SIIDAE’s director got straight to the point during our first telephone conversation. The problem with the project lay in the ethnographic strategies I was proposing to use in order to study the SIIDAE. Dr. Sánchez said that they (the SIIDAE) were tired of being an object of study for academics. They wanted to question the status of the academia in the pursuit of knowledge: their starting point was that “we are all seekers of knowledge”. Paradoxically, my project was about the need for a transformation of the object into a “subject of knowledge” that must be undergone within cultures. In this way the proposed techniques contradicted the soul of my own work. So I realized that it would be wrong to insist on the application of ethnographic methodology. This conversation and the subsequent consequences constituted the beginnings of my new approach to intercultural dialogue of knowledge.

I had to go to Chiapas without having prepared interviews and observations and without a tape recorder or any other device for recording data. I arrived and introduced myself to the director. My only plan was to wait until he asked me to visit the SIIDAE to attend a seminar or some other event. I didn’t know what to do or how I was expected to behave there. Initially I felt really uncomfortable, but this sensation started to abate when I came to understand why he had said what he had said about anthropological techniques.

The SIIDAE director’s initial criticism and my whole experience in the SIIDAE raised at least two challenges:

1. The first one concerns decoloniality, the struggle against subalternization and against subject/object dualism – an expert from a dominant culture (the subject), who is complicit in the subalternation of others’ knowledge and turns them into the objects of research – in the research process of social sciences in general and in anthropological practice in particular.

Edward Said also articulated this challenge in *Orientalism*: one of the main tasks left “embarrassingly” uncompleted in his book was “to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a non-repressive and non-manipulative, perspective”
This is a complex problem which philosophy and social sciences have long highlighted. For example, Enrique Dussel made a critique along these lines coming from the perspective of the philosophy of liberation from the 1970s. He argues that modern reasoning perceives in terms of a rational subject who knows and a known object. This relationship explains the fact that Europe does not allow for a real construction of knowledge by different cultures or for a real exchange of knowledge between cultures, while relations are asymmetric (Dussel 1995: 92, 107).

In this vein, the Western world has always viewed what is not itself as “lacking in being” and “barbarian”, i.e. as raw nature that needs to be civilized. Thus the elimination of alterity —including epistemic alterity – was “the totalizing logic” that began to be imposed on indigenous American peoples and Africans from the sixteenth century, both by the Spanish conquerors and their Creole descendants’ (Dussel 1995: 200-204). These ideas, as put into practice by the SIIDAE, and reflections such as those by Dussel are present in anthropological theories and practices. Anthropology was, and continues to be, part of an enterprise focused on the elimination of alterity, and this was one of the very things that the SIIDAE’s director criticized at the time of our first contact.

This feature of anthropology must be traced back to anthropology’s origins and to the origins of the social sciences in general. With the French Revolution and the whole political change that occurred in the world at the end of eighteenth century came the widespread acceptance of the normality of change. Once this had happened, social sciences emerged, as Wallerstein argues, as “expressions of and responses to this ‘normality of change’” (1991: 15). He states, further, that the social sciences came to represent “the empirical study of the social world with the intention of understanding ‘normal change’ and thereby being able to affect it” (Wallerstein 1991: 18).

Social sciences were born as institutionalized subjects at the end of nineteenth century when they became part of the university. The study of the past of “historical nations” was the task of history, while economics, political sciences and sociology took care of the present of the same nations. All of them were considered societies that were continually changing. But there were other societies considered as unchanging or in which change was introduced by the historical nations, by means of colonialism, war or commerce. These societies were studied by Oriental Studies and anthropology. Orientalism was born as the study of “petrified” literate peoples’ (Wallerstein 1991: 20), while the people studied by anthropologists were regarded as illiterate “pristine survivals from a timeless past” (Wolf 1982: 385).
In this way social sciences made a division of the intellectual labour of studying others: some of them studied the past and the present of historical societies and some of them studied the societies without history. Social sciences and their division of labour obtained their full dimension from the alleged historical sovereignty of European thought and the relationship that European culture built with other cultures and with itself.

The objects of study of anthropologists were the native inhabitants from the colonies of hegemonic countries and were commonly called “primitives”. As these groups of people were culturally different to those who studied them, the main mode of research was “participant observation”. The researcher stayed at the place for a long time in order to learn the inhabitants’ language and observe the whole of their habits and costumes with the aim of describing them through writing. This work was called ethnography. But why were those peoples seen as peoples without history? The answer can be found in the type of thinking that arose in the sixteenth century: coloniality. It refers to “the subalternization of the knowledge and the cultures of oppressed and excluded groups, which necessarily accompanies colonialism and which continues today with globalization” (Escobar 2005: 236).

Coloniality leads to “colonial difference”, which is understood by Mignolo as the deficiencies and excesses in behaviour, religion, customs, knowledge and so on, marked by the hegemonic thinking of each era from the sixteenth century onwards (2003: 30). In this way, anthropologists as well as Orientalists “emphasized the particularity of the groups they studied as opposed to universal human characteristics” (Wallerstein 2006: 22). These alleged “universal characteristics” were actually local features of the “civilized historical world” that uncivilized peoples supposedly needed to pursue with the help of civilized peoples. In other words, non-modern peoples had to strive to become part of history. Although anthropological practice was consolidated in the eighteenth century, the context of its birth – i.e. the context that generated its political, epistemic and economic guaranties – is the sixteenth century. This historical background behind anthropology was the problem which the SIIDAE’s director identified with my initial project.

A Critique of Anthropology

2. The second challenge involves the fact that it was not the anthropologist who raised the problem, but rather “the others”. The SIIDAE is not a place to be studied, they say, but a place where a special kind of knowledge is generated, the knowledge which is necessary in order to live in a community of
communities. In my experience with the SIIDAE the anthropological practice was not reformulated from the discipline itself, but instead from those who have been its “objects of study”. What is generated here is a redistribution of power that leads to a democratization of anthropological practice. Anthropology is confronted with its otherness, and that otherness should be an active and fundamental part of the established relationship. In anthropological activity, decoloniality must be overcome on both sides of the relationship: anthropology and its otherness. “The prejudice of superiority of certain knowledge over others is an obstacle that must be overcome by both sides of the spectrum: those working in the offices of hegemonic knowledge and those working in the offices of subaltern knowledge” (Mignolo 2003: 24).

Should this challenge lead to the disappearance of anthropology? This paper does not sustain that position because, although anthropology was developed as a science to study people with whom a horizontal dialogue was not possible since their knowledge and way of life were subalternized by hegemonic thinking, this science has a particular feature that makes it very interesting and progressive: it has shown the West its own limits; and therefore it makes the West face up to its alterity (Escobar 2005: 244). This feature means that anthropology is a science which is in constant debate with itself regarding its methods, its theories, its context and its origins. This conflictive story is analyzed by the anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2005) in his work *Otras antropologías y antropologías de otro modo: elementos para una red de antropologías del mundo.* Here, Escobar describes and examines the self-criticism carried out by the hegemonic anthropologies in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century: the criticism these anthropologies received from the discipline of political economy in the 1960s and 70s, the textual self-criticism made in the 80s and the institutional self-criticism and the criticism made by the academic establishment in the 90s. He believes that these self-criticisms do not create a sufficient foundation to form a base for his “world anthropologies” proposal. The framework of the “world anthropologies” project includes a criticism of the power relations that lead to the naturalization of the way in which anthropology is carried out from the perspective of the power centres of anthropology, i.e. the U.S., Britain and France.

This concept is used by Escobar within the framework of a problematization of a Western tradition that defines anthropology as institutional practices and expert knowledge and confines it to a modern field of knowledge and practices (2005: 232). Although
Escobar acknowledges that there have been other similar attempts, e.g. “indigenous anthropologies” or “native anthropologies”, he argues that he does not want to replace them, but rather to show something that these attempts have not shown: “the power relations articulated to the naturalization of disciplining practices and practices of normalization that become hegemonic in a given time” (2005: 233). The purpose of the “world anthropologies” project is “the implosion of disciplinary limitations that subalternize modalities of anthropological practices and anthropological imaginaries on behalf of a model of anthropology not-marked and not-normalized” (Escobar 2005: 233).

The power relations described by Escobar form part of a regime that is not only modern but also colonial. He is therefore supporting the hypotheses of modernity-coloniality theoreticians when he states that hegemonic anthropologies, as expert knowledge, are tools used to build and interpret the world (Escobar 2005: 236). The approach put forward here falls within this framework as a “world anthropology” that has been challenged and transformed by experiences with the SIIDAE. The reason they challenged anthropology in the way they did was that they have had meaningful experiences of the decoloniality of knowledge. The SIIDAE’s aim was that I would learn from what was being said and done there in order to gain a deep understanding of their decolonial activity. What I learnt transformed the way in which I understood my own surroundings, their surroundings and the world that we, they and I, inhabit. I was not an anthropologist, but rather a learner.

This idea can be understood as the challenge of establishing an intercultural dialogue of knowledge, as postulated by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, who suggested creating a different type of relationship between Western thought and other ways of knowing, simultaneously transforming both knowledge itself and ways of knowing “others” (2001: 55). From Fornet-Betancourt’s perspective, an intercultural dialogue of knowledge must transform the representations that construct self-perception and perception of the stranger. It should promote criticism, self-criticism, openness and understanding. Knowledge is not then created about others or even despite them, but with them. That is, the other goes from being interpreted to being an interpreter who can offer her own interpretation of the world (Fornet-Betancourt 2001: 59). In this sense, dialogue is also a two-way translation between different perspectives on the world: I translate the other, the other translates me and together we create a scene of mediation (Ortega and Conway 2003: 26). Anthropological practice seen as a two-way translation strives to break the idea of anthropology as a translation of the other, a unilateral translation.
Anthropology as an Intercultural Practice

To carry out the anthropological transformations needed in order to respond to the SIIDAE’s challenges we must undertake concrete actions within anthropological practice. These actions seek to accomplish the political and epistemic task of the decolonization of my experience as anthropologist and as political subject. It is necessary to understand the relationship between anthropologists and their interlocutors (known as study objects) as an intercultural contact, both in anthropological discourse and in anthropological practice. According to Fornet-Betancourt, globalization – the historical context for interculturality – should be regarded as the process that emerges from an expanding economic policy which portrays itself as humanity’s only option. It imposes itself as the only worldwide project and does not make cultural differences possible (2001: 175). Interculturality must therefore take on the form of an ethical project that offers an alternative to globalization by seeking a shared sovereignty based on solidarity. Interculturality opposes globalization via a worldwide universality which comes from below, by and for cultures, by and for diversity (Fornet-Betancourt 2001: 205–208).

The Intercultural Indigenous System of Learning and Studies (SIIDAE)’s concept of interculturality takes the same viewpoint. For the SIIDAE, in order to reach towards a real interculturality, it is necessary to take two elements into account: anti-capitalism and an intercultural transformation of knowledge. They use a metaphor to explain this transformation: “it is necessary to let the ship sink in front of an archipelago”\(^5\), meaning that every passenger would inhabit a separate island and interculturality would exist between those islands. Social and exact sciences would not disappear. However, they would only be the inhabitants of an island and not the captain of the ship. For them, interculturality must start with an economic, political and epistemic transformation of the world. The SIIDAE provides us with an example of how relationships between the islands would work, after the ship sinks. They sank the ship on their shores and therefore they are in dialogue with scholars under entirely novel conditions. Such conditions are not only fair for all but they are also a source of real learning, both for themselves and for the few scholars who dare to imagine what the experience of a better world for everyone would be like: a world which many worlds can fit into.

The ship metaphor is an appeal for epistemic and social justice, for the right to participate in the construction of the present and the future, to walk a path constructed by and for everybody. Thus every culture’s knowledge must be assessed, including Western
knowledge. As the SIIDAE put it metaphorically, it should be placed on its own island. Looking at matters in this way, it is necessary to be aware that, as Fornet-Betancourt (2004: 43) contended, Western knowledge is also traditional because it belongs to a tradition, the Western one. The SIIDAE’s approach is not just a proposal for the construction of an intercultural world, but it is also an interpretation of the way the world works and the way in which interculturality should work within it. According to the SIIDAE, there is a strong relationship between economics, politics, knowledge and culture. Their actions, and the way in which they live as a community of communities, are based on this interpretation. For that reason, they do not accept an interculturality that does not take this relationship into account.

People from the SIIDAE and Fornet-Betancourt share the idea that interculturality may not be limited to the folkloric or ethnic content of societies. For them, interculturality is an epistemic tool which is used in the struggle to achieve “a world which many worlds fit into”. I carried out some processes in order to make an intercultural anthropological practice possible. All of my interactions with the SIIDAE were arranged with or promoted by its members. They led me to search alongside them in their quest to understand their preoccupations within their own context, which is the world-system from the point of view of the colonized. I tried to grow closer to them by understanding and truly appropriating their concerns, without considering myself to be a possessor of truth. In short, we tried to construct a concerted decolonial relationship, and not a relationship determined by anthropological method. The challenge I had was that of being able to accept a true dialogue, and being ready to learn from an honest and horizontal relationship.

For these reasons, the approach I have taken to this experience has bordered on that of a relationship between people: careful, horizontal, sensitive, full of uncertainty and solidarity. No fieldwork was carried out, but rather meetings, discussions and conversations. I used some extracts from two interviews with Dr. Sánchez which had been conducted by other researchers and published on the Internet, and these served to further my understanding of interculturality. I took part in discussions, lectures and recreational, religious and political activities as a person and whilst trying to construct a relationship of reciprocity. This does not absolve me from recognizing the duality which was in me by virtue of the fact that I was also a researcher and an anthropologist.

When I started writing this paper it became evident that it would be necessary to find a way to understand the experience in the SIIDAE and to incorporate it into the research. The best way to do this would be to use the text I had written about my intercultural
experience to focus on important aspects of the intercultural dialogue and to understand it better, rather than writing a case study. There is a part of what I learnt at the SIIDAE that is not included in the text because it cannot be concretely determined. At the same time, this non-textual part was the most important outcome of this experience and it spans across the entire piece of research. My experience in the SIIDAE has radically changed the way in which I understand and address the subject of interculturality. So, everything I have written here cannot be understood without taking into account the dialogue I had with the SIIDAE.

**Final Considerations**

In this paper, two levels of dialogue have been developed: an intercultural dialogue between the SIIDAE and myself, and an interdisciplinary dialogue between anthropology and philosophy and of these disciplines with the intercultural experience. As has been previously said, dialogue is a very complex model of translation that seeks towards the transformation of each translator whilst constructing a single scene of mediation (Ortega and Conway 2003: 26). At the same time, the idea of dialogue is in opposition to a unilateral conception of translation, which it regards as an unfair and unjust practice which anthropology has many times used.

The concept of anthropology developed here is the result of a dialogue between intercultural philosophy and its concept of dialogue, and my experience with the people at the SIIDAE and the challenges they raised for my anthropological vision. To develop an anthropology that does not reproduce the subalternization of knowledge, an anthropology that treats others as interlocutors and not as informants, it is necessary to construct the relationship between the anthropologist and “the others” as an intercultural dialogue built out of the intercultural transformation of the whole society, a dialogue that gives people back the ability to speak in their own voices. If this goal was achieved here then it was thanks to the SIIDAE’s political and epistemic work concerning interculturality. But as well as responding to methodological and epistemic challenges, anthropology should learn from what the SIIDAE and intercultural philosophy have taught us and start to take action in order to liberate those who have previously been its objects of study. As anthropologists we should therefore endorse Fornet-Betancourt’s philosophical proposal and we should use it in order to carry out “critical-liberating reflection in the world today” and to contribute to the transformation of reality in the search for justice and peace (2001: 18).
This article and the practice it describes may fall under the “world anthropologies” framework: in line with anthropology developed under non-alienating policies, taking its former objects of study as subjects that produce knowledge in two ways: as creators of a way of doing anthropology and as producers of knowledge about the very topic explored by this research: intercultural dialogue of knowledge. There is a tension within this article, because although it calls for decolonization and the proliferation of knowledge, it has been written in academic language and it also seeks academic recognition. This choice of language comes from the intention of understanding scholarly work as a form of decolonial labour and as a way of pursuing decoloniality. This is not the only option and surely it is not the best.

Notes

1 Although Enrique Dussel seems to suggest that the feeling of being Western in Latin America should be situated in the past, as a Colombian I can say that it is just as valid now as it was in the first half of the twentieth century. “I belong to a Latin American generation whose intellectual genesis dates from the end of what is known as the Second War World, the decade of fifties. For us, there was no doubt in Argentina at that time that we were part of the ‘Western culture’” (Dussel 2005: 1).

2 Abya Yala was the name used by the Kunas, an indigenous people from Colombia and Panama, for “the American continent”, before Columbus’ arrival. Abya Yala means mature land, live land or flowering land. Nowadays some indigenous peoples use this term instead of “America”.

3 One of the reasons that Las Casas accepted the bishopric of Chiapas was to support the Dominicans in their desire to preach the Christian faith without violence. This was the last major enterprise he carried out in the Americas which would give him the opportunity to implement the doctrine he had preached for so many years. While he was there, he imposed strict rules under which the Spanish owners of “encomiendas” (an area of land and its native inhabitants given to a conquistador) would be made to confess and under which very few “encomenderos” would be absolved. Therefore, when it is asserted that Samuel Ruiz is Friar Bartolomé de las Casas’ successor, it is not only because of his position as bishop, but rather an affirmation that, just like Las Casas, Ruiz has dedicated his life to fight alongside the indigenous peoples.

4 One English version of this paper is Escobar, A. and Restrepo, E., 2005, “Other Anthropologies and Anthropologies Otherwise: Steps to a World Anthropologies Network”. Available at: http://www.ram-wan.net/restrepo/documentos/Anthropologies-Otherwise.pdf

5 According to the SIIDAE’s director this metaphor is attributed to Subcommandante Marcos from the EZLN.

6 This is the premise of one of the SIIDAE’s centres, the Raimond Panikar and Raúl Fornet-Betancourt Intercultural Studies Centre, which is helping the SIIDAE to understand interculturality and create a context within which it is possible.

7 When I was facing up to the challenges that I am narrating here, I knew that I had reached a methodological crossroads. Did what I was doing
fall within the field of anthropology? Were anthropologists going to accept the way I had conducted the “field work”? Is the way in which I have analyzed my experience in SIIDAE academically valid? The way in which I carried out this research is validated by the ‘world anthropologies’ concept, yet at the same time my work is a criticism of hegemonic anthropology, as I have described above.

References


