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"Give voice" or "give ear" to the subalternized people? The "Global South" in perspective of the work by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

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“Give voice” or “give ear” to the subalternized people? The “Global South” in perspective of the work by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

Abstract
In recent years, in Brazil, the term “decolonial” has gained strength and support among intellectuals in the Social Sciences and Humanities, especially due to the work of the Modernity/Coloniality (M/C) group, which emerged in the 1990s and was formed by Latin Americans and Americanists. Before the emergence of M/C, however, a Bolivian sociologist and historian of Aymará origin, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, had already presented reflections and actions that, instead of decolonial, she prefers to call decolonizing. Despite more than 40 years of intellectual and political activity, especially in Andean libertarian movements, Rivera Cusicanqui is still little known in Brazilian academia. By reading and analyzing her works, as well as those of her interpreters, it is possible to uncover the originality of the proposals she put forward, always in a collective and collaborative manner. The aim of this article is to present, albeit partially, her thought-feeling-movement, showing the importance of theoretical-practical formulations for actions-reflections regarding the history of the present time in Latin America, particularly in Bolivia, her country of origin. Based on the work initially developed at the Taller de Historia Oral Andina (THOA), of which the intellectual-activist was one of the co-founders, it is possible to glimpse other ways of making-thinking the records of oral traditions, as well as their uses and possible abuses. Furthermore, the ch’ixi world she advocated, notably in her latest works, allows us to combat “decolonial ventriloquism” (which seeks to speak for the subalternized), moving from discourses to practices that, in fact, impact the decolonization of knowledge and actions.
Keywords: Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui; *Ch’ixi World*; decolonial.

“Dar voz” ou “dar ouvidos” aos subalternizados? O “Sul global” em perspectiva na obra de Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

Resumo
Nos últimos anos, no Brasil, o termo “decolonial” ganhou força e respaldo entre intelectuais das Ciências Sociais e Humanas, sobretudo por conta dos trabalhos do grupo Modernidade/Colonialidade (M/C), surgido nos anos 1990, formado por latino-americanos e americanistas. Antes, porém, do aparecimento do M/C, uma socióloga e historiadora boliviana de origem Aymará, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, já apresentava reflexões e ações que, ao invés de decoloniais prefere chamar de descolonizantes/descolonizadoras. Apesar de mais de 40 anos de atuação intelectual e política, sobretudo em movimentos libertários andinos, Rivera Cusicanqui ainda é pouco conhecida no ambiente acadêmico brasileiro. Por meio da leitura e da análise de suas obras, bem como de seus intérpretes, é possível desvendar a originalidade das propostas realizadas por ela, sempre de maneira coletiva e colaborativa. O objetivo do artigo é apresentar, ainda que parcialmente, seu pensamento-sentimento-movimento, mostrando a importância de formulações teórico-práticas para as ações-reflexões a respeito da história do tempo presente na América Latina, em particular na Bolívia, seu país de origem. A partir dos trabalhos desenvolvidos inicialmente no *Taller de Historia Oral Andina* (*THOA*), do qual a intelectual-ativista foi uma das cofundadoras, é possível vislumbrar formas outras de se fazer-pensar os registros das oralidades, bem como seus usos e possíveis abusos. Além disso, o mundo *ch’ixi* preconizado por ela, notadamente em suas últimas obras, permite combater a “ventriloquia decolonial” (que pretende falar pelos subalternizados), avançando de discursos para práticas que, de fato, incidam sobre a descolonização de saberes e fazeres.
Palavras-chave: Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui; *Mundo Ch’ixi*; decolonial.

Initial considerations

In recent years, in Brazil, the term "decolonial" has gained momentum and support among intellectuals, especially in the Social Sciences and Humanities. It was (and still is) as if there had been a new "discovery": that, once colonized by Europeans (notably Portuguese), there should be a theory that (re)positioned those so-called "excluded" from Brazilian (and Latin American) history, "giving" them a voice and a place. It is no wonder that authors such as Walter Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Aníbal Quijano (1928-2018) and Enrique Dussel (1934-2023) had their works translated into Portuguese or even began to be read in Spanish/English, gaining recognition from the academic-university public. These and others – mostly men, white and holding positions in universities in the "Global North"[1] – are/were part of the group called Modernity/Coloniality, also recognized by the acronym M/C.

Regarding the origins of M/C, Luciana Ballestrin (2013, p. 94) reports that:

> [...] can be traced back to the 1990s in the United States. In 1992 – the year in which Aníbal Quijano's now classic text "Colonialidad y modernidad-racionalidad" was reprinted – a group of Latin American intellectuals and Americanists living there founded the Latin American Group of Subaltern Studies. Inspired primarily by the South Asian Group of Subaltern Studies, the group's founding statement was originally published in 1993 in the journal *Boundary 2*, published by Duke University Press. In 1998, Santiago Castro-Gómez translated the document into Spanish as "Manifiesto inaugural del Grupo Latinoamericano de Estudios Subalternos". Latin America was thus included in the post-colonial debate.

This group of intellectuals – which includes, in addition to Castro-Gómez, Arturo Escobar, Catherine Walsh, Javier Sanjinés and Ramón Grosfoguel, among others – would distance themselves from the proposals of the South Asian collective over time. Strangely (but not so much, as will be seen in this article), a name that was initially close to M/C, even deserving praise from Walter Mignolo

[1] "Global North" is taken in opposition to "Global South", a term used in postcolonial and transnational studies that relates both to the so-called "Third World" and to the group of "developing countries". It can also include the poorest regions of rich countries (generally located in the Northern Hemisphere of the planet). The "Global South" extends the concept of "developing countries" and usually refers to those that have an interconnected history of colonialism, neocolonialism, and a socioeconomic structure with great inequalities (Peres-Neto, 2024).

(2002), that of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, remained aloof over the years, sometimes harshly criticizing it.[2]. For the Bolivian sociologist and historian, activist of Aymará origin[3], the group does not follow the rhythm of debates formulated by "Indian" [4] intellectuals nor does it interact with Andean Social Sciences in a significant way (except for granting scholarships and invitations to academic-scientific events, notably for indigenous and Afro-descendant professors and students from Andean countries). For this reason, for her, "Mignolo and company" would neutralize, with a kind of "depoliticized and comfortable salon multiculturalism", "[...] decolonizing practices by enthroning in academia the limited and illusory realm of discussion on modernity and decolonization" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2021, p. 109).

With refined and sterile discourses, the M/C would distort the possibilities of a real decolonization, by promoting essentialist and depoliticized readings of colonial issues in Latin America. In other words, there would be a certain appropriation of terms/concepts/notions by the aforementioned *intelligentsia*, which would distance itself from the practices and political urgencies of various communities and collectives. There is a complaint, therefore, that studies from the "Global North" would strategically resume discussions of intellectual-activists and Latin American social and political movements (although it deliberately obliterates them), reproducing them through its own conceptual and self-referential devices (disguised as academic "novelties"), without, however, establishing any dialogues and/or commitments with them.

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[2] In this regard, Rivera Cusicanqui (2021, p. 103) ironically states: "Dr. Mignolo, at a certain time, began to praise me, perhaps putting into practice a saying from southern Bolivia that says: 'Praise the fool and you will see him work'. He took up my ideas about internal colonialism and the epistemology of oral history embedded in a profoundly depoliticized discourse of otherness".

[3] Aymará (the group's self-designation in their own language) are a people who have been established since before the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, at the end of the 15th century, in the present-day territories of southern Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile. They are also known among the Bolivian population as *Quollas* or *Kollas* (For further information, see Klein, 1991).

[4] Rivera Cusicanqui (2021, p. 98-99) prefers to use the terminology "Indian"/"Indian woman" – instead of "original peoples" – to highlight that "Indian" is a colonial invention, imposed by European colonizers, which reverberates to the present day: "The term 'original people' affirms and recognizes, but at the same time makes invisible and excludes the large part of the Aymará or Qwichua population of the subtropics, mining centers, cities and commercial networks of the internal market and contraband. It is, therefore, an appropriate term for the strategy of not recognizing indigenous populations in their condition as the majority and of denying their potential hegemonic vocation and capacity for state effect".

Thus, assuming an adverse and critical stance towards the emerging canon of postcolonial and multicultural studies and decolonial thought formulated by the M/C, Rivera Cusicanqui (2020) states that these academic discourses would often seek to invest themselves with an "official" or even "ornamental and symbolic" multiculturalism. Not to mention that these speeches would also have been assumed in relation to the Plurinational State of Bolivia, embarked on a kind of "pluriethnic/multiethnic spectacle", dedicated to guaranteeing the continuity of the elites' exercise of power through a certain "piecemeal", conditioned and reluctant recognition of indigenous rights, referred to as "cut-out and second-class citizenship".

Thus, the discourses of multiculturalism that even impose new nomenclatures (such as "indigenous peoples") would be nothing more than:

> [...] the neoliberal rhetoric of politically correct intentions of inclusion and constitutionalization of the rights of indigenous communities. However, it constitutes a rhetoric of "equal citizenship" as an ornamental and symbolic formula, through an agenda that conceals the privileges of the elites. The multicultural designation of indigenous communities as "original peoples" alludes to a static past, to a "noble savage" that has no relevance, lacking needs and interests in the present and future. With this radical denial, the colonial purpose of such "legal recognition" becomes evident: the strategy of invisibilizing the historical struggles of indigenous people, of continuing the invasion and plundering of territory, and above all, of denying their proposal for self-affirmation and vocation for political power (Villalón; Sanabria-González, 2019, p. 241).

Proposing a stance of reflection-action that goes against this liberal rhetoric, the Bolivian sociologist and historian has been involved since the early 1980s with oral history work, especially among women, from a perspective quite different from that advocated by Paul Thompson (1992), Philippe Joutard (1986) and other historians from the "Global North". It would not be a matter of "giving a voice" to the excluded/oppressed, which is considered authoritarian and colonialist, since the subalternized have a voice but not the opportunity to express themselves and act. The idea is to "lend an ear", listening to and recording other stories with them, from different points of view to "feed" emancipation/liberation actions and movements. With this attitude, Rivera Cusicanqui invites reformulations of decolonizing practices and discourses, radically different from the M/C group.

The aim of this article is to present, albeit partially, the thought-feeling-movement of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, showing the importance of her theoretical-practical formulations for the actions-reflections regarding the history of the present time in Latin America, particularly in Bolivia, her country of origin. Based on the work initially developed at the *Taller de Historia Oral Andina* (*THOA*)[5], of which the activist was one of the co-founders, it is possible to glimpse other ways of making-thinking the records of oralities, as well as their uses and possible abuses. Furthermore, the *ch'ixi world* advocated by her, notably in her latest works, allows us to combat "decolonial ventriloquism"[6] (which seeks to speak for the subalternized), advancing from discourses to practices that are, in fact, decolonizing.

Rivera Cusicanqui and the *ch'ixi world*: on real practices and decolonizing discourses

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui was born in La Paz, one of the capitals of Bolivia, on December 9, 1949. She is an intellectual-activist of indigenous origin, a reference in the field of decolonial (or decolonizing/decolonizer, as she prefers) Andean thought-feeling-movement. Her trajectory of research-action in History and Sociology refers to indigenous anti-colonial rebellions, from the one led by Túpac Katari[7] in the 18th century to more contemporary manifestations, such as the Katarista movement[8] of the 1970s and 1980s and the *cocalero* movement, in which she was an activist. She studied indigenous and "mestizo" appropriations of Andean anarchists, as well as the intersection of "Western"[9] and "native" epistemes, languages, and know-how that occurred in these organizations over time.

Based on "Indian" cosmogonies, notably Aymará and Quechua, she articulated a variety of decolonizing proposals for ideas, practices, and

[5] Andean Oral History Workshop, in Portuguese.
[6] The expression here is borrowed from the article by Daniel Inclán Solís (2016).
[7] Túpac Katari, born Julián Apasa Nina (1750-1781), was the leader of a rebellion of the Aymará people against the Spanish colonial authorities in Alto Peru, present-day Bolivia, in the early 1780s (For further information, see Grondin, 1984).
[8] On Katarism, see Fabiola Escarzaga (2012). Regarding the *cocalero* movement in Bolivia, see the important work, in Portuguese, by Vivian Urquidi (2007).
[9] Terms such as "Western" and "mixed race", among others, appear in quotation marks in the article because they are part of jargon traditionally used in the Human and Social Sciences and which in Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's work deserve attention and are relativized/problematized.

political/intellectual gestures. She also developed radical critiques of postcolonial and multiculturalist currents and of the canon being formed around the decolonial approach proposed by the M/C. Her theoretical references include Latin American intellectuals who are not sufficiently (or not at all) recognized by "Western" academia, such as Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala (1535-1615), Fausto Reinaga (1906-1994), Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), René Zavaleta Mercado (1935-1984), and Pablo González Casanova, among others. She is the author of dozens of publications, including books and articles written in Spanish, Quechua, and Aymará. In 2018, she was awarded an *honorary doctorate by the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés*, where she taught for more than three decades, and was also a visiting professor at universities in the United States and Ecuador.

Along with intellectuals of Aymará origin, Rivera Cusicanqui co-founded and coordinated *THOA*, a cultural and political community, in late 1983. Initially, the workshop brought together a group of students from the San Andrés sociology course, most of whom were indigenous, and its main objective was to investigate "Indian" participation in revolts during the colonial era. Favoring oral tradition and interviews as sources of information (and "weapons" for the struggles waged by contemporary indigenous movements), the intention was to apply decolonizing methodologies, marked by the concern with "listening" to the subalternized, equipping them to record history from other points of view, instead of "giving voice" to anyone.

The importance of South Asian subaltern studies in the development of these methodologies must be recognized, especially those of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak[10]. Proof of this was the compilation, in Spanish, by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Rossana Barragán (1997) of *Debates Post Coloniales: una introducción a los Estudios de la Subalternidad*, a collection of texts by Indian researchers, some of whom lived outside their country of origin (known as "diaspora intellectuals"). This set of articles allows us to connect and revisit themes outlined by various Latin American circles since the 1970s, in addition to addressing new questions and

[10] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Indian critic and theorist, is known in Brazil especially for the translation of the work Can the Subaltern Speak? (SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty. Can the Subaltern Speak? Trans. Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida; Marcos Pereira Feitosa; André Pereira Feitosa. Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 2010).

realities, such as those raised by the ethnic/indigenous mobilizations of the 1980s and 1990s. This allowed the development of thought-provoking works that sought to break with the thoughtless adoption of "academic trends" originating from the "Global North."

Among the books published are *Oprimidos pero não vandos: luchas del campesinado aymará y qhechwa de Bolivia*, *1900-1980 (1986); The politics and ideology of the Colombian peasant movement: The case of ANUC (National Association of Peasant Smallholders) (1987); Bircholas: work of women: capitalist exploitation or colonial oppression among Aymará migrants from La Paz and El Alto (2002); The frontiers of coca: colonial epistemologies and alternative circuits of the coca farm: the case of the Bolivian-Argentine border (2003); Original Pueblos and State (2008); Ch'ixinakax utxiwa. A reflection on decolonizing practices and discourses (2010); Sociology of the image ch'ixi views from Andean history (2015); Violence (re)covered in Bolivia (2012); Myth and development in Bolivia: the colonial turn of the MAS government (2015); A world of ch'ixi is possible. Essays from a present in crisis (2018); Rethinking anarchism in Latin America: Histories, epistemes, struggles and other forms of organization (2019)*[11].

In addition to a vast bibliographical production, Rivera Cusicanqui has a past closely linked to the Katarista, *cocalero* and other libertarian movements in Bolivia. In the 2010s, she worked at the political and cultural space *El Tambo*, in La Paz, where she organized courses, parties and presentations, combining theoretical knowledge and manual skills. There, she ran the *Sociología de la Imagen* workshop for several years, a training space to decolonize perspectives, understanding the image as "narrative, as syntax between image and text, and as a way of telling and communicating the lived experience" (Barber, 2019). She also contributed to the emergence of *Colectivx Ch'ixi*, in La Paz, a cultural space where she is active and holds workshops and other activities, always combining practical and popular knowledge with intellectual work.

[11] Among organizations and co-authors are the following works: *Los artesanos libertarios y laética del trabajo* (1988), with Zulema Lehm Ardaya and Víctor Hugo Ricaldi; *La mujer andina en la historia*, with Zulema Lehm Ardaya (1990) and *Ayllus y proyectos de desarrollo en el Norte de Potosí* (1992), with Ramón Conde and Felipe Santos.

In the decolonization of perspectives, understood as a vision based on Andean colonial history:

> The author proposes to analyze them [concepts such as miscegenation, commercial relations, and political struggles] through the sociology of images, a critical and decolonizing methodology for interpreting the past-present-future of the social world applied here to the Andean colonial world, which can also be useful for thinking about contemporary colonialism. Without necessarily attending to "historical truth", the images bring into play a moral, conceptual and symbolic framework, which highlights an interpretation and not just a description of the facts (Villalón; Sanabria-González, 2019, p. 240).

It is from the sociology of the image – described as "[...] the way in which visual cultures, although they can contribute to the understanding of the social, have developed on their own trajectory, which at the same time reveals and re-actualizes many unconscious aspects of the social world" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2021, p. 29) – that the author works with the idea that in Latin American countries a situation of "internal colonialism"[12] continues to prevail. To counter this situation, the idea of the *ch'ixi world*[13] is formulated. In recent years, the sociologist and historian has undertaken a defense around this metaphor-concept (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2015, 2020, 2021), which includes a renunciation of sterile ideas of hybridism, for example[14].

Therefore,

> In opposition to the Cartesian binary of the modern-Western paradigm that sometimes fetishizes and reifies cultures, sometimes dilutes them into a non-existent or hybrid synthesis,

[12] Regarding "internal colonialism", this is a concept originally formulated by Pablo González Casanova (1963; 1969; 2007) and, according to Rivera Cusicanqui, ignored by decolonial intellectuals of the M/C group. "The definition of internal colonialism is originally linked to phenomena of conquest, in which the native populations are not exterminated and form part, first of the colonizing State and then of the State that acquires formal independence, or that begins a process of liberation, of transition to socialism, or of recolonization and return to neoliberal capitalism" (González Casanova, 2007, p. 432).

[13] The term *ch'ixi* is of Aymará origin and can be translated as "gris", "grey" or "gray": "The word *ch'ixi* has several connotations: it is a color product of the juxtaposition, in small spots or stains, of two contrasting or contrasting colors: white and black, red, and green, etc. This is that jaspered gray resulting from the imperceptible mixture of white and black, which becomes confused for perception without ever mixing from the whole (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2021, p. 110).

[14] "The notion of 'hybridism', proposed by García Canclini, is a genetic metaphor that connotes sterility. The mule is a hybrid species that cannot reproduce. Hybridism assumes the possibility that, from the mixture of two different species, a third completely new one can emerge, a third race or social group capable of fusing the traits of its ancestors in a harmonious and, above all, unprecedented blend" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2021, p. 112).

> Rivera Cusicanqui bets on the path of in-between that recognizes the coexistence of distinct cultural universes under the same context marked by the incidence of "internal colonialism" [...]. The path of in-between proposed here is a possibility of observing indigenous re-existences in urban contexts, without ignoring that beneath the colonial violence perpetuated by independent Nation States, there is an underlying process of reinvention of life that operates according to a logic of constant negotiation between the distinct worlds that are constituents of the same social reality. At the same time, by offering a possibility of analyzing in a more complex way how these indigenous subjects act under coloniality, it also makes it possible to glimpse an emancipatory path that is based on the purification of what is best in the European legacy with what is best in the Indian legacy. The ch'ixi World is, therefore, a path of reflection that transforms this contradiction into a mechanism of self-emancipation (Bruce, 2023, p. 205).

The *ch'ixi world* is therefore coined based on the indigenous realities of the Andean highlands, especially the Aymará way of socially reproducing life, expressing reinventions, and transforming minorities – previously essentialized, or dispersed majorities, diluted in a supposed depoliticized "mixture" – into powerful sources for thinking about "Indian" presences in contemporary urban-Western contexts, especially with regard to the public sphere of local/regional struggles (Bruce, 2023). *Ch'ixi* responds to the "Indian" understanding of something that is and, at the same time, is not. It therefore fits into the "logic of the included third", that which, without ceasing to be, combines opposites without being "hybrid" or "mixed" (Monsalvo, 2011). To advance in relation to the notions of "hybridism" and "miscegenation", we start from a reading that is both critical and complimentary of the work of sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado (1983), recovering the notion of *abigarramiento*, formulated in the 1980s, to try to understand the complex heterogeneities that constitute Bolivian society.

> The notion of *ch'ixi*, on the contrary [as opposed to "hybridism"], is equivalent to that of Zavaleta's [Mercado] "big-group society" and claims the parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not merge, but rather antagonize or complement each other. Each one reproduces itself from the depths of the past and relates to the others in a contentious way (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2021, p. 112).

The use of the metaphorical concept *abigarrado*, derived from the vocabulary of the mining region of Oruro, perceives the historical context of Bolivia as a formation "layered" by diverse and juxtaposed temporalities. When observing the economic and political projects that mark the violent history of the country,

Zavaleta Mercado (1983) sees spaces and times being shaped in dissimilar ways, incapable of producing a combined synthesis. In this sense, in the same scenario, "capitalist" and "feudal" practices can be observed in an overlapping manner, without establishing linearities, with layers of time and history that also have the particularities of each region, with languages and cultural practices that are distinct from each other, intersecting without being dissolved in a universality. Such a condition would prevent a uniform distribution of power, a condition considered by the Bolivian Marxist philosopher as essential for the proper functioning of democracy in a modern society, still associated with narrow concepts of nation and progress.

Rivera Cusicanqui (2020) therefore agrees with the acute perception with which Zavaleta Mercado managed to capture Bolivian reality, not only through the emphasis on constitutive temporal mixtures and overlaps, but also through the recognition of irregularities and disjunctions present in the scenario of these (dis)encounters. However, the intellectual-activist distanced herself from the progressive vision that, in a certain way, condemns these irregularities/disjunctions and that seeks to overcome the phenomenon of *abigarramiento*. In this sense, it is the concept-metaphor *ch'ixi world*, also originating from the Bolivian mining reality and worldview – as opposed to *Chhixi*, which means conformism to domination – that she brings to her work, in order to understand the different historical realities that are entangled in the temporal-spatial diversity of everyday life in Bolivia (Jácome; Kabalin Campos; Souza Leal, 2021).

"Thus, *ch'ixi* becomes a decolonizing political bet to understand the identities and proposals of another modernity, an Indian modernity, or a *ch'ixi* modernity" (Villalón; Sanabria-González, 2019, p. 242). Decolonization needs to transcend rhetoric, betting on decolonizing, bilingual practices and thoughts, nourished by the *ch'ixi world*. This composition of a decolonial praxis presupposes the willingness to work on other relations of imagination, capable of including differences, instead of appeasing them or, even, hierarchizing them. It is in this direction that Rivera Cusicanqui's proposal of a *ch'ixi view* of the world is headed, in order to build a decolonized Bolivia, affirmed in its particularities.

This stance was present in the intellectual-activist's action-reflection even before her formulations about the *ch'ixi world*. When gathering a group of indigenous students and professors from the *Universidad Mayor de San Andrés* around the *THOA* in the early 1980s, Rivera Cusicanqui already outlined one of her main concerns: how to unite/merge popular knowledge and practices with decolonizing theories? Or rather, how to undertake reflection-action on current decolonizing practices and discourses, both in the university environment and in political rhetoric? At the same time, she emphasized that there is no support for decolonizing discourses/theories without the existence of decolonizing practices that give them life and meaning. After all, if there is a present intersected by the past and the future (Nadal, 2019), which contemporarily maintains situations of "internal colonialism", words would "blur" realities instead of naming them, making it necessary to decipher them from "Indian" points of view, a task to which *THOA* has dedicated itself for more than 40 years.

Taller de Historia Oral Andina (THOA): four decades listening to forgotten voices

THOA is a research institution and workshop for methodological proposals linked to the construction of knowledge through oral traditions and other elements characteristic of Andean cultures in general. Founded in the first half of the 1980s, its main themes of work are the history, gender relations, rights, and cultures of the indigenous Andean peoples of Bolivia and their interrelations with non-indigenous societies. In the little over four decades of activity, the work of strategically formulating decolonizer/decolonizing methodologies – based on a revisionist Andean historiography, contemporary territorial demands, and collective and cooperative political actions (Stephenson, 2002) – has been quite significant[15].

The initial requirements for admission for members included knowledge of the Aymará and/or Quechua languages, although this condition was relaxed over time. The workshop was influenced by Marxist perspectives, Katarism, and the indigenism proposed in the work of Fausto Reinaga (1967). The group's objective

[15] Information about *THOA* was taken from scientific articles (Inclán Solís, 2016; Ottavianelli, 2013; Stephenson, 2002) and websites, such as the institution's Facebook page. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/p/Taller-de-Historia-Oral-Andina-THOA-100068636509081/. Accessed on July 29, 2024.

was to use oral history to explore and redefine the history of Bolivian indigenous populations and the work of the workshop members; throughout its first decade of activity, this involved both conducting interviews with members of Andean indigenous communities and researching archives and libraries/newspaper libraries. During this period, the focus of research was the indigenous land struggle movement in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the networks of chiefdoms involving the *ayllus*[16]. The results of the research on the *ayllu* Santos Marka T'ula, for example, were published in a book (1984) and later transformed into a 90-episode radio soap opera, broadcast in Spanish and Aymará on radio stations in the rural interior of Bolivia, starting in 1986.

Between 1983 and 2016, the group was responsible for the production of eight radio soap operas, in addition to creating its own radio station, called *Illapa*. In addition to research and the production of audio content, from 1989 onwards *THOA* also began producing audiovisual material. Recording with a VHS camera, the members of the workshop produced a documentary about anarchist women in Bolivia called *Voces de Libertad* and a biopic of Adrián Patiño (1895-1951), a Bolivian soldier, band director and composer. Particularly in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the group was involved in the broader efforts of the Aymará communities to reconstruct the *ayllus*, a historical form of indigenous social organization dating back to the Inca Empire. In addition to documenting the social movement that took place during that period, the workshop's effort was important in recovering and disseminating historical indigenous movements in Andean territories.

From her connection to *THOA*, much of Rivera Cusicanqui's thought-feeling-movement around oral history is expressed in "*El potencial epistemológico y teoria de la historia oral: de la lógica de la instrumentalización a la decolonización de la historia*" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1987), the aforementioned article praised by Walter Mignolo (2002). In it, the author analyzes a double dilemma: on the one hand, the epistemological dilemma faced by ethnography, which assumes an asymmetrical relationship between individuals and/or cultures whose cognitive horizon is

[16] An *ayllu* (Quechua or Aymará), also called *aillo* or *ayllus*, is a form of extended family community originating in the Andean region with a common ancestry – real or imagined – that works collectively in a communally owned territory (Klein, 1991).

diametrically opposed and, on the other, the ethical dilemma of the Social and Human Sciences, in which knowledge can become an instrument of power and be placed against the interests of the community under investigation (Ottavianelli, 2013).

For this reason,

> If the hidden structure, underlying society is the colonial order, westernized researchers are being unconscious reproducers of this order because they only have to focus their conceptual concerns on the dominant theories of social homogeneity. To think in homogeneous and synchronic, homogenizing terms; thinking about Indians as "peasants" is actively denying their "otherness" and contributing to reinforcing colonial oppression – based, precisely, on denial and exclusion (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2008, p. 171).

In this way, by externally attributing identities and imposing changes to the "Indian" self-perception, "Westernized"/ "North-centric" researchers become accomplices in ethnocide and dispossession, perpetuating the condition of alienation from society as a whole and from themselves. They therefore suffer from what Charles Melman (2000, p. 31) called the "Columbus Complex", given that the 15th century explorer "[...] did not want to be interested in what was going to happen on land. And he was capable of exploring, discovering, but he did not want to be interested in what he had left behind [...]". This is how many of those who dedicate themselves to investigating/theorizing subalternity and the subalternized behave: they are zealous about their research projects, about the deadlines to be met, but they are incapable of taking a real interest in the decolonization of knowledge-practices, including their own.

In contrast, for *THOA* members, oral history is "[...] more than a 'participatory' or 'action' methodology (where the researcher is the one who decides the direction of the action and the modalities of participation): it is a collective exercise of disalienation, both for the researcher and for their interlocutor" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2008, p. 171). This means that it is not just about conducting research and publishing it, feeding curricula and academic-scientific circuits, and theorizing in an innocuous way about subalternity: oral history – beyond the "popularization of History", which often only reinforces instrumental logic and ideological manipulation – brings everyone closer to the disalienation and decolonization of histories. It therefore creates, in the words of Marcia

Stephenson (2002, p. 103), an indigenous "public counter-sphere", a discursive-practical and territorial arena constituted by/in the collective and collaborative spirit:

> The work of the pioneering Aymará nongovernmental organization known as the *Taller de Historia Oral Andina (THOA)* has contributed in keyways to the formation of the indigenous counter-public sphere in Bolivia. [...], *THOA* has conducted an ongoing critique of Western epistemologies through writings and activism for close to two decades. *THOA* is not the only organization in Bolivia to undertake the difficult task of re-examining prevailing historiographic and intellectual paradigms from the point of view of indigenous peoples.

As Stephenson (2002) points out, it was not only *THOA* that carried out important work in oral history in Bolivia. Also noteworthy is the set of works that emerged from a non-profit organization based in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, *APCOB – Apoyo Para el Campesino indígenas del Oriente Boliviano*. Led by Jürgen Riester[17], scholars studied the reality of the people who live in the Bolivian plains, known as *llanuras*, and produced a vast body of work, dedicated especially to the Chiquitano. Among these works, the following can be cited: *Historia de los Chiquitanos* (Krekeler, 1995) and *Historia Oral Indigena*. The latter, written by anthropologist Ulrike Hagen (1994), states:

> The transformation of historiography due to the method of Oral History was more profound: in addition to dealing with other social groups, it also resulted in a displacement of contents. What these groups lived as their own history, I brought new impulses, new ideas and motivations for the same historical discipline. In part, this leads to a reorientation of the interests of knowledge: To move away from the great central events of a nation and to orient oneself towards regional, everyday and subjectively experienced events (Hagen, 1994, p. 36).

Hagen (1994, p. 12), like other members of *APCOB* and *THOA*, questions oral history research conducted with indigenous communities "[...] for an academic world outside of and not for or in favor of those being investigated". He also emphasizes that the subalternized can no longer be treated as potential "data providers" in order to support scientific theories/conceptual apparatuses with which academic careers are promoted and which are irrelevant to the

[17] A German anthropologist naturalized as Bolivian, Jürgen Riester (1941-2019) dedicated a good part of his life to action research among the Chiquitanos of eastern Bolivia.

people/communities being investigated. A similar undertaking was carried out by the New Zealand sociologist of Maori origin, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2018), when she proposed a decolonization of methodologies in research with/about indigenous peoples.

Over the years, *THOA* has published numerous studies related to the use of oral history, without taking indigenous communities simply as "research objects". Among these publications are: *El indio Santos Marca T´ula. Cacique principal de los ayllus de Callapa y apoderado general de las comunidades originarias de la república* (1986); *Los constructores de la ciudad. Tradiciones de lucha y trabajo del sindicato central de constructores y albañiles 1908-1980* (1986), *Mujeres y resistencia comunitaria*: *Historia y memoria* (1986) and *Taraqu*: *Masacre, guerra y renovación en la biografía de Eduardo Nina Qhispi* (1991). In 2006, the Workshop received the "Institutional Contribution to the development of scientific research in Social and Human Sciences" Award, from the *Fundación para la Investigación Estratégica em Bolivia* (*PIEB*), demonstrating its strong social commitment to the communities investigated.

Studying the work of the *Taller de Historia Oral Andina* over the years, Chilean historian Cristina Oyarzo Varela (2022, p. 167) asked herself "What made *THOA* so interesting?" and answers that:

> A series of characteristics that allowed the project to assume the responsibility of facing long-gestating social and political processes, which at that time were being consolidated. Among them, and very briefly outlined, are the innovation in methodologies; the intensity of fieldwork developed and published; and the interlocutors with whom they established dialogues: not only the academy, but, above all, the indigenous peoples of Bolivia. This emphasis was manifested in an interesting peculiarity: it was necessary to know Aymara or another native language to be able to be part of the team. This had to do not only with a political issue, very relevant in itself, but also had methodological implications, since the possibility of doing field research in the highlands required understanding and expressing oneself in the language spoken in the communities. This was one of the bases for establishing the necessary trust that allowed exploring the depths of the oral stories through which part of the history of the indigenous peoples and, especially, Aymara, would be extracted. Through the first questions about the students' own place, the exploration of their personal and family past began to gain relevance, moving towards a distancing from the more conventional ways from which Social Sciences were thought.

THOA thus promoted methodologies for listening deeply to protagonists/agents of indigenous struggle and organization processes. Combating "decolonial ventriloquism," which seeks to speak for the subalternized, "sterilizing" their voices in concepts devoid of meaning, actions-reflections were constructed from another dimension of translating knowledge-doings, using them to interconnect apparently fragmented times, but synchronized in the present in which the meanings of collective life are disputed. The work of the group, which currently proceeds without the constant presence of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, demonstrates that "[...] translation is a political task, which does not aim to bring indigenous knowledge out of the shadows, to overcome a nostalgia for oblivion and mistreatment; its purpose is to update the knowledge of the struggle to show that in the past there are the potentialities of other possible worlds" (Inclán Solís, 2016, p. 77). Translating subalternized know-how would, then, be a way of understanding them not as "things" that happened, but as contemporary and future projects of emancipation.

Combating "decolonial ventriloquism": Uses (and abuses) of the translation of subalternized knowledge-practices in Latin America

When comparing two ways of translating the knowledge of the subalternized in Latin America – that of the decolonial studies of the M/C group and that of *THOA*, Daniel Inclán Solís (2016, p. 70), echoing the ideas of Rivera Cusicanqui, critically observes that:

> One of the great limitations of decolonial interpretation is the substantiation of processes and geographies. They take for granted the existence of a Europe that has a colonial project and the existence of colonized groups. In none of the cases they study is a process of double invention observed: while America is invented, a version of Europe is invented, and at the same time that the colonized is constructed, the colonizer is constructed. On the other hand, they do not consider the participation of local groups in the production of relations of domination (for example, in the case of the so-called Mesoamerica, it was the Indians who defeated the Mexicans and who participated in their extermination and subjection).
> A perspective focused on contradictions and political disputes is missing. The reading they present is univocal, there is no space to think about the mediations and political conflicts that attempt to define social forms. There is no concern for studying subaltern

> discursiveness; they are obsessed with demonstrating coloniality in colonial discourses, but not with looking at silenced statements.

Furthermore, Rivera Cusicanqui criticizes a certain fetishism regarding concepts/ideas, implicit in the formulations of M/C intellectuals when they elaborated, for example, notions such as "coloniality" (colonialidad), which, in essence, had already been thought of decades earlier under other names, such as "internal colonialism" by González Casanova (2007). These and other authors were obliterated over time, which produced a hierarchy of references, in addition to a sterile attachment to the nominal repetition of the "North-centered" canon. The marginalization of indigenous and "mestizo" intellectual contributions (such as those of Fausto Reinaga) – in favor of contemporary intellectuals centered in universities of the "Global North" and dedicated to the satisfaction of the colonial imagination surviving in university environments – gave shape to multiculturalism.

This would be a neutralizer of true decolonizing practices, simply conceiving the accommodation of fragmented (and therefore inert) "identities" in a world of unquestionable hegemony. For the author, this discourse of multicultural alterity has the defect of being profoundly depoliticized and tends to conceive the subalternized in an essentialist and historicist manner, imposing recognition on them only under the condition of a "theatricalization of identities". This implies the reduction of indigenous peoples to "pure, timeless" modes (hence calling them "original peoples") and fragmented and powerless territories. The contemporaneity of "Indian" peoples is continually denied, or rather, their capacity to constitute an inclusive current presence, based on multiple temporalities, ancestries, and epistemes that traverse the Andean social fabric. Rivera Cusicanqui has continued to elaborate and defend under the name of the *ch'ixi world*:

> Since colonial times, there have been processes of anti-colonial struggle; on the other hand, decolonialism is a very recent mode that, in some way, takes advantage of and reinterprets these processes of struggle, but I believe that it depoliticizes them, since decolonialism is a state or a situation, but it is not an activity, it does not imply agency, nor conscious participation. I put the anti-colonial struggle into practice in facts, in some way, delegitimizing all forms of objectification and the ornamental use of the indigenous that makes the State. All of these are processes of symbolic colonization (Barber, 2019).

This symbolic colonization occurs from the universities of the "Global North" (called "baseless triangles"[18]), which entangle the university environment of the "Global South", including Brazil, and its intellectuals in clientelist networks, in which they use assumptions of legitimacy and power in the asymmetrical structure of academic knowledge to create "[...] a new academic canon, using a world of references and counter-references that establish hierarchies and adopt new gurus [...]" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2021, p. 104-105). Among these "gurus", she identifies Mignolo, Dussel, Sanjinés and Walsh, whom she provocatively calls "North-centric intellectuals". This hierarchization would be responsible for the disguised appropriation of theoretical contributions from indigenous and "mestizo" intellectuals who receive little or no recognition/dialogue.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui accuses, for example, Walter Mignolo (2002) of prematurely and naively appropriating the perspectives that guided the initial work of the *THOA*, without taking responsibility for its critical and self-critical developments on the study of oral history, something that is repeated in the relationship with the political movements of the "Global South".

In this way,

> Ideas run like rivers, from south to north, and become tributaries of great currents of thought. [...] as in the world market of material goods, ideas also leave the country converted into raw material, which then returns, regurgitated and in a great amalgam, in the form of a finished product (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2021, p. 108).

Rivera Cusicanqui therefore proposes to analyze the "political economy" of knowledge, uncovering economic strategies and material mechanisms that operate behind discourses – distinct from the "geopolitics of knowledge" proposed by Mignolo (2020) – a task that has received little concrete attention from the M/C group.

"Political economy" would involve the perception that:

> Postcolonial discourse in North America is not just an economy of ideas, it is also an economy of salaries, amenities, and privileges, as well as a certifier of values, through the granting of titles,

[18] For Rivera Cusicanqui (2021), these "baseless triangles" are far removed from any daily events of the subalternized, engaged only in symbolic extractivism that serves the capture and recolonization strategies of States and capitalism.

> scholarships, master's degrees, invitations to teach and publication opportunities (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2021, p. 105-106).

Criticism of the production of some “unquestionable” references in the “decolonial” field asks what the “gurus” ignore (or pretend to ignore) by not engaging in dialogue with epistemological productions and political bets in Latin America, which often pre-exist the conceptualizations that they formulate, such as “colonial difference”, “coloniality of power/knowledge”, “geopolitics of knowledge”. By seeking to displace epistemologies constructed from Eurocentrism to make way for “other knowledge/paradigms”, decolonial discourses would present excessively academic tendencies, dangerously coated in culturalist/political rhetoric without practical consequences. On the contrary, they reproduce models of internal colonialism, contributing to “changes that change nothing”, through recognitions that do not go beyond the textual plane, with purely symbolic functions, thus remaining at the service of multiculturalist discourses of States and mass media.

Furthermore, the M/C group would privilege the analysis of Hispanic America to the detriment of Latin America, paying little attention to the processes of internal colonialism(s) on the continent, with the exception of the United States.

Not to mention that, for Luciana Ballestrin (2013, p. 111-112),

> [...] some texts come up against the romanticization of the oppressed and exploited, the defense of the autochthonous/original subject, paralyzing deconstructivism and departure from the very scientific field that is in dispute. Another problematic point is a certain lack of elaboration and concern with democratic theory in the spectrum of modernity/coloniality.

Without romanticizing, Rivera Cusicanqui's feelings, thoughts and movements move in other directions. Reconstructing/retelling the stories of subalternized groups requires ears (and eyes) attentive to the internal dynamics of the collectives, and not paying attention solely to the construction of dominant discourses, as the intellectuals of the M/C do, for example. After all, colonial/colonialist relations, whether in the past and/or present, are also products of colonized subjects. Therefore, attitudes that combine theory and action are necessary, without folklorizing or idealizing aspects of the indigenous and other cultures.

The work of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and many other Latin American researcher-activists – more interested in the emancipation/liberation of those subjected to subalternity than in translation strategies that create new and sophisticated jargons, in addition to intellectual soliloquies – deserves attention and respect. Combating "decolonial ventriloquism" therefore means not giving in to the "temptation" of "giving voice" to subjects, as "North-centric" oral historians intend. It also means "listening", as *THOA* members do, collectively constructing translation exercises in the reconstruction of past and contemporary histories and in the prefiguration of possible worlds.

Final considerations

Writing an article about Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, in a way introducing her to the Brazilian historian community, especially those working on the History of the Present, is not an easy task for two reasons. The first is related to the scarcity of recent works in Portuguese about this thinker-activist (Dalfré, 2023; Kovalczuk, 2021; Miranda, 2018) and the second is the fact that most of her work has not been translated, especially the pioneering and important book "Oprimido pero noprovados" (Oppressed but not defeated), from 1986. Thus, unlike many authors from the M/C group, she does not yet enjoy the academic prestige conferred to other "decolonials" (a label she rejects, preferring the terms "decolonizer"/ "decolonizing") in the country, whether through publications or participation in scientific events.

An important issue in this contemporary post-colonial/decolonial scenario is the noticeable absence of intellectuals from Brazil, although Darcy Ribeiro and Milton Santos are mentioned (Ribeiro, 2011). This is a very problematic point, since Portuguese colonization – the longest-lasting European colonial enterprise in the Americas – brought specificities to the Brazilian context in relation to other countries on the continent, which were also subjected to subordination. Thus, Brazil appears almost as a reality separate from Latin America, and it is significant that there are no researchers from the country associated with decolonizer/decolonizing scientific production (Ballestrin, 2013).

Hence, the importance of knowing the work of Rivera Cusicanqui, which, although focused on understanding the Andean contexts and, specifically, the Bolivian ones, can serve as inspiration for thinking-feeling-acting in relation to other subalternities in Latin America, especially in the non-Hispanic portion, as is the case of Brazil. It is curious that the work developed by the *Taller de Historia Oral Andina (THOA)* over more than 40 years is still practically unknown to those who study oral history in the country, as is the work of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. As we have seen, this is mainly related to the fact that the intellectual-activist keeps her distance from the M/C and strongly opposes what she calls the "North-centric" and "self-referential" research developed by the group, in addition to being a staunch critic of the Evo Morales/Álvaro Garcia Linera government (2005-2019).

Her intellectual production, mixed with direct involvement with/in libertarian movements in Bolivia, is marked by actions-reflections on the history of a present time traversed by the past (ancestry) and revealing other possible worlds in the future (such as the *ch'ixi world*). Thus, the results of oral history work, from the perspective of the subaltern/excluded, cannot be used solely for those who investigate, but, above all, for those being investigated. Breaking away from "participant observation" – and seeking effective participation that not only observes, but interacts/acts/shares –, it is necessary to "listen" and allow oneself to be impacted by the discourses of otherness, of the silenced/stifled voices of the subalternized for so long, transforming realities and transforming oneself at the same time.

Decolonizing thought-feeling-movement is, therefore, about looking with one's own eyes, using one's own mind to develop more than theories: transformative gestures, even if on a small scale. This requires, in the words of Rivera Cusicanqui (2020), a historical review that does justice to decolonizing discourses, proposing to highlight the silences, the unsaid, the prohibitions imposed on the subalternized. And not only oral history – whose epistemological and theoretical potential advances from instrumental logic to the decolonization of History – but also the sociology of the image, based on a present in crisis, enables other readings regarding subalternity and how to overcome it.

In response to the dismantling of community ways of life "*de la gente a pie*", the author has been "weaving"/elaborating the *ch'ixi* epistemology as an active (and not just reactive) effort of historical social struggles. It is in the production of ideas and gestures based on everyday life that it becomes possible to see/feel the *abigarrado*, borderland and "mestizo" that is (and, at the same time, is not), no longer as a stigmatized/despised subject or "object of research" to be investigated, but a result of the (im)permanence of Europeans and Indians, among others, in Latin American societies today. Thus, between "giving voice" and "giving ears" to the oppressed/excluded, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's work makes an evident choice and not only enunciates/announces the subalternized realities, but acts upon them, transforming them in search of emancipation/liberation.

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