

Ethnography of the Double Bind

A Conversation with Aymara Sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

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Ritualizing the Memory

It is a lively Tuesday in the second week of August 2016 in the city of La Paz, Bolivia, as I listen to the song *Aylluman Kutiripuna* (Let us return to the community) by Luzmila Carpio, a Quechua singer who upon facing the *double bind* of singing in Quechua, her mother tongue, or in Spanish, the ‘prevalent’ language under the trend of Bolivia’s modernization, decided to use the language of her ancestors. In such a tension, the prioritization of the indigenous side of this *double bind* is not unidirectional. Indeed, the *indigenization* turn that I am attempting to remark also results in the need to colour the Western tradition with the indigenous syntax, which is precisely what Carpio’s artistic trajectory embodies. By strengthening the melodic ways of the Andes, she has projected her music as a political expression of rebellion against the overuniform model of cultural progress over first nations’ own thinking in two complementary ways. Initially, Carpio composed children’s music in Quechua as a way to keep alive the ancient Andean world training the mind of new generations for the future. Subsequently, she started to croon bilingual songs in order to remark on the potentialities of a heterogeneous society in which the indigenous legacy can bring about a ‘creative adjustment’ to the world inherited from colonialism.

While listening to music, I make the final preparations to interview Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. After spending one month and a half in La Paz interacting with Rivera and *El Colectivo*, a self-organized group of cultural action and critique, she has agreed to converse with me about her work, intellectual trajectory, and political activism during the last four decades. As a prelude, the interview uses Rivera’s course on sociology of the image, an epistemological proposal based on *double-bound* readings of Andean history. In this appraisal, the *double bind* between the memory of indigenous peoples and the records of official history is resolved in favour of what Rivera calls indigenous *visualization*. The ‘heuristic tool’ of *visualization* is a sort of memory able to condense other senses beyond sight. Thus, while official history has been over determined by the visual, being anchored in both language mediation and data interpretation, *visualization*, by recovering senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing and movement, is able to decolonize memory, allowing not only for the expression of indigenous sources of knowledge themselves, but also the expansion of mainstream narratives. According to Rivera, it is an attempt to project her own Aymara mode of thinking, termed *ch’ixi* epistemology, understood as an articulating agency of contradictions in which those histories that have been hidden, diminished, or forgotten come to the surface as a way to potentiate a dynamic dialogue between the contradictory forces.

Recalling Rivera’s teachings, I had decided to ritualize our conversation with the help of Argentinian photographer Sandra Nicosia, who has kindly accepted to share her photographic memories for this interaction. Rivera usually performs a ritual before starting a new project—to ascertain her social and political responsibility with what will emerge from her writings or artistic interventions. I choose Luzmila Carpio’s melodies to create a previous harmonizing effect because her work, as well as Rivera’s, has been inspired by the inherent contradictions of the *double bind* between colonial impositions and indigenous resistance. In fact, as Spivak has sustained, Western tradition has prescribed the ‘proper terms’ for conducting social interventions: ‘[i]t seemed that there was always an issue of controlling the other through knowledge production on our own terms, and ignoring, therefore, of the double bind between Europe as objective and subjective ground, judge and defendant.’ However, as Rivera and Carpio have shown in their work, the appropriations and reappropriations of the indigenous world to turn such impositions

into something else are also unquestionable. Or, as Spivak has said, all philosophical traditions should resonate with each other as equals, just as all languages are equally able to prepare a child for life.

This harmonizing effect is accompanied by the reading of the poem ‘Tu Calavera’ (Your Skull) by renowned Bolivian experimental poet Jaime Sáenz (1921-1986), who dedicated the piece to Rivera. In this poem, Sáenz refers to an old dream in which Rivera’s skull appears. It is a reference to a pre-Inca cranium that Rivera considers her adoptive ancestor since a period of illness in which an indigenous healer (*yatiri*) announced an antidote to the disease: Rivera would have to return the skull to its place of origin or welcome it as a member of her family. Rivera took the second option and named it Jáquima after the finding of a set of documents of her maternal family in the United States during the seventies. Rivera managed to recover these papers from her uncle’s house, being made aware not only of her family genealogy but also the traces of a deep colonial history. Indeed, those documents tell the story of the Indian who first declared that he witnessed the arrival of the Spaniards to Cuzco, the Inca capital. He returned to Pacajes, a province in the central Bolivian highlands, and was executed by his indigenous fellows, who considered him a traitor. The descendant of this legendary character, genealogically related to the Cusicanqui family, was an indigenous woman named Jáquima and that is why Rivera baptized her skull with this name.

Finally, leaving my hotel in downtown La Paz, I decide to take a walk echoing one of the main sources of indigenous knowledge, which is intertwined with ancestral territories as a way of remembering indigenous cosmologies and laws: I go to the Basilica of San Francisco set in the historic heart of La Paz and built over an ancient sacred place where indigenous peoples render cult to their divinities (*wak’a*), and where, even now, indigenous social movements routinely meet after their mobilizations (see Figure 1.1). Then, I walk through the Mariscal Santa Cruz Avenue, a central street that leads to a corner from which it is possible to see the Illimani, the highest mountain in the Cordillera Real and one of the main geographical and cosmological referents of the Aymaras—the people to which Rivera belongs (see Figure 1.2). Thus, I feel that I can be closer to Rivera’s work, always enriched by the *double bind* between her own indigenous sources and Western epistemological frameworks.

A Double-Bound Indigeneity

Evoking the life and work of Gamaliel Churata (1897-1969), a Peruvian novelist and philosopher who skilfully mastered the *double bind* between European avant-garde (taking the foundations of critical Western philosophy seriously) and Latin American indigenism (assessing the contribution of Andean cosmologies with particular emphasis in the conceptual richness of the Quechua and Aymara languages), my conversation with Rivera began by exploring the *double bind* between indigenous and non-indigenous identity.

Talking about *indigeneity* with Rivera is to speak of the impossibility of resolving the paradox of being simultaneously indigenous and non-indigenous. Rivera recounted growing up in an environment where the understanding of Aymara language is a spontaneous experience: ‘I grew up in La Paz and there were two women who took care of the home. They spoke Aymara all the time and one of them took care of me and while holding me in her *aguayo* (multicoloured woollen cloth) would tell me stories. Somehow, I was bilingual by means of my sense of hearing – I could

not speak but I was very familiar with the sounds of Aymara (there was a lot of onomatopoeia). I was eight-years-old when she passed away and I felt an orphan since then; indeed, my mother was never able to “replace” this woman.’

According to Rivera, her instinctive appreciation of the Aymara world was the legacy she received during that moment of her childhood. She related that period with a lot of affection since it shaped her temperament and determined her vocation for Andean cosmologies as well as her spiritual connection with Aymara mythical beings such as the fox and the condor. However, Rivera noted that this ‘learning curve’ has always been an unfinished process, indeed, a practice of life that is always to come: she was around sixteen when she began taking Aymara lessons, but feels that she does not speak the language well and is in an unending process of learning. Interestingly, Rivera’s conclusions regarding this route are inextricably connected with the possibility of developing the social sciences using a *double bind* logic.

In Rivera’s view, behind the physical elimination of Aymara *amawt’as* (philosophers) and *yatiris* (healers) during the fifteenth century Spanish conquest of the Americas, lies the ‘spiritual’ annihilation of the philosophical uses of the Aymara language. The *amawt’as* were murdered, while the *yatiris* hid their knowledge cryptically and syncretized it with Catholic religious elements in order to survive. Thus she considers it necessary almost to reinvent the words’ philosophical meaning by taking into consideration their metaphorical senses in daily life. And this is precisely what Rivera has done in her unparalleled work: departing from the pragmatic use of Aymara words, she has been ‘scratching’ their allegorical connotation in order to project a philosophical reflection based on indigenous sources of knowledge. In so doing, Rivera is working with an Aymara idiosyncratic translation of what Spivak has termed concept-metaphors, that is to say, the possibility of unveiling the deep philosophical roots of expressions that tend to remain unnoticed for most anthropologists and ethnographers although they are fundamental in day-to-day indigenous activities.

The metaphorization of daily-life concepts is inherent to the polysemous character of Aymara language and, it is by using this polyphony that Rivera has been working with the contradiction (located at the very heart of *double bind* logics) as an epistemological tool to explain indigenous social realities. One of Rivera’s key concept-metaphors is encapsulated in the Aymara concept of the *ch’ixi*. Rivera told me: I have reinvented the practicality of this concept by exploring its allegorical and epistemological power. ‘Pragmatically, *ch’ixi* is the stained sheep, the spotted toad, the smudged snake. It is a descriptor, a keyword; however, its most abstract and philosophical dimension has not been developed and this is because after the assassination of the *amawt’as* and *yatiris* in colonial times, the language has been impoverished by the translations conducted by priests such as Ludovico Bertonio (1557-1625) and Domingo de Santo Tomás (1499-1570), who have expurgated Aymara concepts and ideas that were incomprehensible to them, subsequently removing the philosophical potential of indigenous languages’.

In an interview given to Francisco Pazzareli, Rivera explained that the *ch’ixi* as a concept-metaphor, embodies the quintessence of an Aymara *double bind*, namely, a decolonial gesture to work with the contradiction as a way of moving between opposite worlds. Thus, for instance, the snake is not only *ch’ixi* for being spotted but also for being an Aymara mythical animal who is undetermined in cosmological terms: it belongs to both the world above and the world below, it is both masculine and feminine, it is both rain and a vein of metal, it is symbolized both as lightning striking from a great height and as a subterranean force. And this is precisely the way in which

Rivera traces the epistemological signs of Aymara cosmologies within the contemporaneity of a modern Bolivia that is indigenous and non-indigenous at the same time.

By challenging the official discourse, according to which the colonization of the Americas supposed the harmonious *mestizo* fusion of European and indigenous cultures (in which Western imaginaries overlay indigenous cosmologies), Rivera projects a reverse process of analysis in which indigenous cosmologies are capable of indigenizing Western imaginaries. In so doing, Aymara cosmologies endow Western narratives with a new throbbing immediacy by taking the threads of indigenous laws and weaving them in their own modern way. This does not occur following the *mestizo* logic of fusion but by making reference to paradoxical structures as the inspiration of a *double-bound* reasoning. When I asked Rivera if she is indigenous and non-indigenous at the same time, her response was categorical: ‘of course, being indigenous is a becoming. It is not an identity, it is a search’.

Rivera’s reflections range from the personal to the methodological and from the epistemological to the collective. She once described herself, during our interactions, as an ‘abajista’—a Spanish term that she uses in opposition to the ‘arriviste spirit’ that characterizes the Bolivian upper middle class. Indeed, belonging to an upper middle-class family, Rivera never expected to join the ‘elite’ but rather to become an urban Aymara woman.

According to the Argentinian intellectual Verónica Gago, Rivera refers to herself as a ‘non-identified ethnic object’, and has also reclaimed the label *sochologist* (fusing the word sociologist with *chola*, Bolivian term for an urbanized Aymara woman), a term once used to discredit her. She similarly plays with the term *birchola* (combining *chola* with *birlocha*, a name for women whose dress indicates upper class aspirations, and were among the social categories that Rivera investigated in El Alto, the indigenous-dominated city above La Paz. Gago sees these amusing word plays as simultaneously a merciless critique against the essentialization of the indigenous. She quotes from a conference address by Rivera: ‘We are all Indians as colonized peoples. Decolonizing one’s self is to stop being Indian and to become people. People is an interesting word because it is said in very different ways in different languages.’

The idiosyncratic way of displaying an indigenous becoming is not only an asset for Rivera but also an indigenous performative act that can be seen in different practices of the Aymara mind-set. A central Aymara principle that passed from Rivera’s personal experiences to her methodological endeavours is captured in the possibility of reading Western sources using Aymara rationalities. Thus, for instance, Rivera’s work clearly demonstrates the principle of selectivity with which Andean communities transform Western properties such as Spanish grammar/syntax and classical European ways of dressing, as well as the epistemological parity demanded in indigenous social struggles (see Figure 1.3). She told me, ‘I read in a fragmentary and selective way, from my point of view, you have to put what is lacking in an author [...] and furthermore the different philosophical traditions should be placed on an equal footing [...] that is to say that the words of an indigenous sage are connected with an inherited collective knowledge—they have an intellectual genealogy and you do not have to put them as ethnographical data separated from theory. Rather, I believe we have to engage in a dialogue between philosophical and theoretical conceptions of the world’.

In this way, not only are indigenous epistemological tools capable of nurturing collective experiences, as is indeed the case with Aymara cosmologies, but also Western systems of knowledge can resonate in a comparable way with indigenous cosmological frameworks. This synergy vividly appeared in the course of a face-to-face interaction between Rivera and Spivak, in the

context of Rivera's simultaneous translation of a conference presented by her Indian comrade in La Paz. Gago recounts that in so doing Rivera showcased the undiscipline of the text and of linear translation. Finding no Spanish translation for Spivak's term *double bind*, Rivera instead came up with an exact equivalent in Aymara: *pä chuyma*, which means having the soul divided by two mandates that are impossible to fulfil.' Rivera says that these translation exercises reveal that all words are being questioned today: 'This is a sign of Pachakutik, of a time of change.'

Talking with Rivera spontaneously about this event, she told me that most people in the audience were Aymara speakers, which alerted her to the convenience of translating the idea of the *double bind* to Aymara rather than Spanish. On the spur of the moment and without any kind of previous preparation, Rivera began to talk about the *pä chuyma* in Aymara, explaining to the public what Spivak had said. Spivak, *double-bind-thinker* par excellence, immediately incorporated the Aymara *double-bind-pä chuyma* in her own English speech, which according to Rivera was a very sympathetic gesture: 'Spivak once told me that she makes theory with the guts, so she fully understood' (we laugh). Rivera continued explaining to me that the Aymara have a three-way logic: something can be and not be at the same time, which is tantamount to the possibility of having an included third—completely at odds with Aristotelian logic. 'I think that is what makes possible such a compatibility with Gayatri. She also thinks that one needs to live with the *pä chuyma*, that it is necessary to coexist with the contradiction, and that the contradiction must be converted into a purposeful referent rather than an obstacle to the subject's integrity. For Bateson, the contradictory subject is schizophrenic, and it is a collective schizophrenia that produces a sort of paralysis. Instead, for Spivak, the contradictory subject embodies an incomparable creative power', Rivera added.

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