

BOOK REVIEWS

**Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (translated by Molly Geidel),  
*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of  
Decolonization***

**(Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), pp. 89, £40.00, £12.99 pb;  
€45.20, €14.70 pb**

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Every Bolivianist knows Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and her work as an academic, public intellectual and activist. She is renowned for her penetrating theoretical and political critiques, her unwavering commitment to her students, and for not suffering fools or pulling any punches. She is a bilingual thinker who writes on the colonial tyranny of words. Her work on the sociology of the image and as co-founder of the Taller de Historia Oral Andina (Andean Oral History Workshop) uncovers the meanings which are erased or rendered ambivalent by the imposition of a colonial conceptual scheme. The title of this recent translation of her work foregrounds her defining conceptual contribution – the Aymaran notion of *ch'ixi* – the unification of opposites that breaks with the law of non-contradiction that is at the centre of Western logic: if something is *ch'ixi* it both is and is not simultaneously. The logical potential of this 'trivalence' has fascinated linguists – Umberto Eco describes Aymara as a perfect language (*The Search for the Perfect Language*, 1995) – and computer programmers have used Aymaran syntax to challenge the restrictions of Boolean algebra (*New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/12/01/world/old-andes-language-finds-niche-in-computer-age.html>). By contrast, Silvia Rivera develops *ch'ixi* ethnographically, drawing on work with people – Aymaran traders, worker-artisans and the women, '*cholas*' and '*birlochas*' – who are negotiating the contradictions, ambivalences and conflicts of colonialism on a daily basis. She also reflects on her own experiences of defying categorisation, as she puts it, of being an 'unidentified ethnic object' (p. xii). Silvia Rivera hence presents *ch'ixi* as a norm of everyday life rather than an exotic intellectual curiosity, and so demonstrates what decolonisation actually means – changing the way we think and behave in the academy, rather than using Others' ideas to maintain the same hierarchies and conversations.

This translation into English of a sample of Rivera Cusicanqui's work is part of Polity's *Critical South* series curated by the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs based at the University of California, Berkeley. The series 'seeks to foster new cross-regional discussions and publications and to expand

the spatial and linguistic sense of contemporary critical theory' (<https://criticaltheoryconsortium.org/publications/critical-south-book-series/>), and Rivera's work sits alongside translations of other scholars from the Global South who up to now have been conspicuous by their absence from Anglo debates in institutions of the Global North, where the power to designate which scholarship counts as 'theoretical' has tended to be presumed. The series includes classic scholars who have been central to the development of Latin American thinking, such as Bolívar Echeverría, Néstor Perlongher and Bento Prado, as well as contemporary theorists from the Global South including South African Tendayi Sithole and Argentine María Pia López. The series is timely given the belated recognition of the imperative to decolonise the academy that has been prominent in recent years. In Rivera's work, readers will find a compelling argument for decolonisation as a 'doing' and a 'practice' (p. viii) based on her in-depth anthropological work, her engagement with Bolivian and Aymaran theorists whose contributions have also been overlooked, her development of visual sociology to escape the logocentrism of the academy, and her scathing critique of self-proclaimed decolonial theorists based in the United States who are in effect recreating the power hierarchies which they pretend to deconstruct.

The volume starts with a skilful introduction by sociologist and political theorist Verónica Gago, who places the translated chapters in the context of Rivera Cusicanqui's intellectual trajectory. Gago's introduction entwines Rivera's theoretical influences with biographical details in a way which is true to the grounded and reflexive approach to intellectual work that is perspicuous in the subsequent chapters. The introduction presents Bolivian theorists who have been hugely influential in Rivera's home country, including Fausto Reinaga, whose reading of Frantz Fanon – *La revolución india* (1969) – has been central to the development of Bolivian decolonial theory and praxis, and René Zavaleta Mercado, whose description of Bolivian society as 'motley' [*abigarrada*] was reinterpreted by Rivera as *ch'ixi*. Readers are introduced to Silvia Rivera's main works including *Oppressed but not Defeated* (1987) and *Bircholas: Trabajo de mujeres* (2002) as well as her activism as a co-founder of the Taller de Historia Oral Andina.

Gago also gives biographical details which greatly help to situate Rivera's voice in academic debates. She was brought up by a maid *de pollera* (wearing the pleated skirt that marked her as urban Indigenous) who taught her Aymara which she then promptly realised was a forbidden language. Gago explains how this experience epitomised the acute sense of alienation and self-hatred generated by imperialism which Rivera used to develop her work on 'internal colonialism', *mestizaje* and 'the permitted Indian'. She studied in Paris, where she discovered 'European provincialism' – the fact 'that the English don't read the French' (p. xix) – and engaged extensively with one of her favourite theorists of modernity, Walter Benjamin. One particularly interesting detail is that Rivera was postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translator when she visited Bolivia. Along with Spivak, Silvia Rivera stands out for insisting on a genuine engagement with the power hierarchies of how knowledge is generated – which has led to both intellectuals often being accused of being 'difficult' in every sense. Rivera has been highly critical of the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement towards Socialism, MAS) administration in Bolivia, and it should give pause to the international Left, who

tend to hold Bolivia as a talisman, that Rivera's penetrating critique of what she calls the fraudulent MAS administration – its extractivism and highly centralised, charismatic leadership despite claims to decolonisation – has been dismissed from the characterisations of the 2019 election which rapidly fell along fraud/coup lines.

The first translated chapter from Rivera's oeuvre is 'Another Bicentennial'. The piece succinctly brings together key elements of Rivera's thought as she draws connections between the rebellion of 1781, in which Aymaran leader Tupaq Katari led mass demonstrations against the *reparto* system (by which colonial authorities appropriated the profit and surplus from Andean markets), and the uprisings in early twenty-first-century Bolivia. In drawing these connections Rivera disturbs the concept of time, in keeping with Andean ontology, and identifies these protests as an 'insurgency of a past and a future' (p. 2). She also portrays – both in text and image – how the experience of these protests can be erased. The 'delirious moments of collective action' and 'intense process of politicization of everyday life that occurs in ... moments of rebellion' (p. 3) are rendered invisible by descriptions of protest which attribute agency solely to individual leaders – *caudillos*. The way in which Tupaq Katari's execution is exhibited in Bolivian museums and prevailing interpretations of these representations are deconstructed to highlight not only political biases, but also different ideas of power and the body. The illustrations which end the chapter contrast the 'dismal premonitory vision' of the beheading of Tupaq Katari with depictions from seventeenth-century Quechua chronicler Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, including a portrait of an 'Astrologer and Poet Indian', who can 'navigate the world beyond the contingencies of history' (p. 8).

The second chapter explores the sociology of the image to expose what Rivera has termed 'internal colonialism' – the way that 'unsaid meanings and ... beliefs in racial hierarchy ... continue to incubate in our common sense' (p. 13). The image can break through these silences and Rivera has used 'the transit between image and word' as an inclusive pedagogical practice with her students at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés in La Paz. Guaman Poma's ink drawings are further examined to illustrate Andean epistemologies that are not served by translations into European languages. The relationship between time and space, the dichotomy between order and disorder and the relationship between people and nature are all disrupted to present a 'world turned upside down' (p. 14) by the trauma of colonialism. Rivera shows how these images can become powerful political critiques as she anachronistically applies ideas from film studies to Guaman Poma's images and 'flashes back' to recover the experience of the trauma and humiliation of colonialism that words, even those generated by critical theory, fail.

The third and final chapter of the eponymous volume develops the concept of *ch'ixi* in relation to an Indigenous modernity created in spaces of counter-hegemonic resistance to 'successive waves of recolonization' (p. 46). With reference to Benjamin, Rivera describes examples of Indigenous markets, production technologies and taxation systems which establish that 'we indigenous were and are ... contemporary beings' (p. 47). Andean notions of time are again referenced as 'the past-future is contained in the present' (p. 48) and used to critique post-modernism as an alien conceptualisation of progress and liberal notions of inclusion as a mirage that reproduces colonial privilege. The attempts of North

American universities to engage with postcolonial theory receive excoriating reproval for being devoid of political urgency and for creating a jargon which separates the academy from society. Argentine semiologist Walter Mignolo receives particular reproach for ‘appropriating’ ideas from the school of subaltern studies in order to create a ‘small empire within an empire’ (p. 51). Rivera then turns her critical attention to Kymlickan liberal multiculturalism which, when applied to Bolivia, rendered Indigenous people essentialised ‘multicultural adornment[s] to neoliberalism’ (p. 53).

Bolivianists have long known the power of Rivera’s work – and it is impossible to even begin to understand Bolivia without engaging with her theory, political commentary and praxis. This translation will further establish Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui as an intellectual of global significance, who offers us the conceptual resources, praxis and ethics which are necessary to truly decolonise the academy.

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## **Shannon Speed, *Incarcerated Stories: Indigenous Women Migrants and Violence in the Settler-Capitalist State***

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Indigenous women migrants to the United States from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras find themselves *vulneradas* in multiple ways, that is, subject to layers of intersecting and mutually reinforcing dynamics of racism, exclusion, exploitation and violent misogyny on both sides of the Rio Grande. Shannon Speed uses the stories of women held in a migrant detention centre in Texas – ‘incarcerated’ or hidden narratives that she has carefully pieced together during years of visits – as a means of illuminating the intertwined structures of gender-based violence, settler-colonial states and neoliberal regimes. Although the horrors visited on those desperately fleeing from multiple forms of violence are now familiar to us, Speed makes her claims to originality through analysis that seeks to integrate fields and concepts that have been disconnected in academic discourse and in policy responses to this human tragedy of forced migration, detention and deportation. In particular, she argues that the conditions of settler colonialism, and their impacts on racialised others, in the United States and in Latin America, are more similar than different, as neoliberal capitalist regimes both actively promote the expulsion of the unproductive (poor and Indigenous communities) from land ripe for capitalist exploitation and extraction, and enable the exploitation of the labour and bodies of those so expelled, who must be maintained in a state of liminality, uncertainty