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“Critical border zones and anti-extractive thinking: perspectives from the Andean world”  
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### **Abstract**

While the notion of the Anthropocene signals the urgency for a climate transition, it stops short of restructuring the anthropocentric principles of the dominant economic and societal model. Pluri-versal decolonial designs that are being debated and practiced in Latin America take shape from the crisis of the current civilizational model by treating it as an opportunity to propose alternatives that seek to reconceptualise the ways in which we organise social life. This paper brings to light non-dualistic epistemologies and argues that the anti-extractivist designs that are needed for building regenerative futures go hand in hand with anti-colonial epistemic resistance. A central part of the analysis focuses on Aymara-Bolivian thinker Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, whose relational ontology allows us not only to confront the colonial legacy of the Anthropocene but also to acknowledge the global diffusion of coloniality. Through the Aymara linguistic concept of *ch'ixi* – a parallel coexistence of difference – Rivera Cusicanqui proposes new ways of building community beyond colonial dualisms and around socio-ecological knowledges.

### **Keywords**

Anthropocene, anti-extractive thought, Aymara, Bolivia, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

### **Contributor's note**

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### **Introduction**

While the notion of the Anthropocene signals the urgency for a climate transition, it stops short of restructuring the anthropocentric principles of dominant economic and societal models. The strategies that have arisen from the interpretative lens of the Anthropocene offer solutions that continue to be both human-centric and epistemically centred in the north.<sup>1</sup> For Colombian political ecologist Arturo Escobar, current transitional projects do not advance beyond the idea of de-scaling existing models even in their more ambitious expressions – for instance, through frameworks like de-growth or sustainability, where the core paradigm is reframed rather than reconstituted.<sup>2</sup> For example, by replicating neo-liberal understandings of wilderness and conservation, reforestation policies are often vehicles of displacement and land loss.<sup>3</sup> According to sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, we need “a prudent knowledge for a

decent future, a knowledge that [...] opens the space for a new kind of order, a noncolonialist or decolonial order.”<sup>4</sup> Many intellectual and social movements in Latin America reformulate relational structures across human and non-human worlds. This paper seeks to retrieve systems of knowledge embedded in Bolivia’s Andean and Amazonian community life of Aymara and Quechua provenance. These have been pushed beyond the “abyssal line” of modern thought, the colonial severance that discards and makes irrelevant all non-western thinking, and have been made invisible through histories of genocide and epistemicide.<sup>5</sup> Extractivist systems are far from being relegated to a colonial past. They are increasingly diffused as demonstrated, for instance, by the rate at which polluting industries affect ethnically and economically marginalised communities in the global north.<sup>6</sup> Anti-extractive designs are needed for building regenerative futures, and they go hand in hand with anti-colonial epistemic resistance.

The term extractivism originated in Latin America in the 1970s to describe the expansion of mining and oil industries.<sup>7</sup> It is rooted in the idea of taking something out of its natural place by force and without consent.<sup>8</sup> The violence that ensues from this irreparable act of taking apart what belongs together reverberates through other forms of violence: ethnic, social, economic and cultural. Recent scholarship has widened the geographical and analytical scope of extractive practices, by looking for example at the ways in which financial and digital extractivisms disrupt more traditional modalities and geographies of mining social and economic value.<sup>9</sup> The core meaning of extracting implied but not addressed by these approaches is the gesture of disconnecting and cutting off. The condition of separation that sustains extractive societies is, on the one hand, external as humans are set apart not only from the non-human world but also from other humans through forms of racialization and social disintegration. On the other hand, it is reflected in the subjective state of alienation in experiencing, for example, work and time as abstract entities that are determined by external social forces. Contemporary Andean visions of communal life are defined in this paper as anti-

extractive because they develop along networks of relations based on coexistence and acceptance instead of dualistic exclusion.

The first part of the paper lays out the framework of *critical border zones* as a way of envisioning the epistemic spaces where colonial and post-colonial struggles have given rise to distinctively critical approaches. It examines how the notion of the post-colonial south as *periphery* within the modern world-systems model is being reconstituted through new conceptualisations of difference. An activist thinker who has propelled new scenarios of coexistence since the 1970s is Aymara-Bolivian feminist sociologist and intellectual activist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (La Paz, 1949). The second section of the article will delve into Rivera Cusicanqui's anti-colonial *indigenous modernity* in the context of Bolivia's indigenous and peasant movements that culminated in the MAS (Movimiento Al Socialismo) movement of the early 2000s. An analysis of the resistance of pre-Columbian oral and visual modes of narration will show that forms of anti-extractive thinking exist that may engender novel articulations of socio-ecological projects. Concepts like work, power, time and place can be reimagined through a reconfiguring of value-making processes. The third and final section will analyse the notion of *ch'ixi*, an Aymara term that encapsulates the possibilities of a pluri-versal organisation of both individual and communal assemblages.<sup>10</sup>

### **Critical border zones**

Bruno Latour describes the concept of *critical zone* that scientists use to identify the surface of the earth as *critical* because vulnerable and as a *zone* because the complexity of the biochemical networks that keep it alive is still largely unknown.<sup>11</sup> Recent Latin American scholarship offers new conceptual frameworks for understanding the kinds of knowledge situated in the critical zones that have constituted themselves from histories of imperialism and colonialism. The production of knowledge in these border zones results from responses to multiple intersections

of violence through which colonial projects determined who was included and who remained on the other side of the epistemic frontier. These borderlines become places of hybridization and reconstitution, giving rise to epistemic conditions that elude western and non-western barriers. For Mignolo and Tlostanova, “if border thinking is the unavoidable condition of imperial/colonial domination, critical border thinking is the imperial/condition transformed into epistemic and political projects of de-colonisation.”<sup>12</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa’s work on mestiza identity in the US-Mexico borderlands was foundational in setting the border as a space of linguistic and cultural proliferation due to its incommensurability with the homogenizing forces of the nation-state.<sup>13</sup> By not equating post-colonial regions with the periphery of the global order, border thinking also helps avoid the risk of reducing them to sites of local knowledge. Unlike critical theory, critical border thinking recognises that every knowledge originates from specific localities and temporalities and that “local histories are everywhere.”<sup>14</sup> Critical border thinking can be further enriched by the ecological notion of critical zone, the surface most depleted by human activity. Together, they are suggestive of a state of fragility as well as of the possibility of finding new languages of resistance in the eco-cultural systems that have been plundered by colonial and neo-colonial exploitation. *Critical border zones* are, therefore, post-extractivist in that they are constituted by coexisting identities at once, and relational because they reject dualistic identities established by either inclusion in or exclusion from the nation.

Examining Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s work demonstrates how critical border zone frameworks elucidate ways of understanding and responding to the diffuse character of *coloniality* in late capitalism. Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano defined coloniality as “a more general mode of world domination after colonialism as a manifest political structure has been brought down.”<sup>15</sup> Coloniality continues to reverberate through processes such as labour and climate migrations or the dependence of the digital and food economies on commodities

sourced, processed and transported across continents. Forms of coloniality are not recognisable exclusively in post-colonial regions. Injustice is diffused; coloniality is everywhere. The category of *decoloniality* evolved following the emergence of the epistemic turn in Latin American critical thought the late 1990s.<sup>16</sup> Decolonial theorists have drawn from grassroots movements across Latin America including the Zapatistas in Mexico and the indigenous struggles in which Rivera Cusicanqui was a leading figure.<sup>17</sup> The latter's work touches on many of the questions of decolonial scholarship, but is often critical of the mainstream decolonial project that speaks largely from the global north academy.<sup>18</sup> Her intellectual anti-colonial stance is embedded in her life-long commitment to workers' and peasants' movements. As discussed in the following sections, her engagement with the cultural and political significance of indigeneity is one of her most original contributions to the possibility of reconstituting modernity from its legacy of both violence and resistance.

Rivera Cusicanqui was forced to leave Bolivia twice during Hugo Banzer's military regime (1971-1978) and lived in Mexico, Colombia, and Peru. She started to learn Aymara intermittently in those years, moving for a while to her ancestors' province of Pacajes close to the Chilean border. Once back from exile, she fully immersed herself in the Aymara linguistic and cultural training and started to develop her ideas about colonialism and to practice a self-sustaining way of life.<sup>19</sup> In the 1970s, Rivera Cusicanqui was actively involved with the *Katarista* indigenous movement led by Quechua-Aymara intellectual Fausto Reinaga (1906-1994). In his 1969 book *La revolución india*, Reinaga rejected the concept of class, which in his view was used by the creoles and mestizos to identify Indigenous people as lower classes and to promote a project of national homogenization. The movement reclaimed an indigenous identity that had been supplanted by reducing indigenous communities to *campesinado* (peasantry) since the 1952 revolution; for a long time, the notion of indigenous was used to identify isolated communities in the Bolivian lowlands. The movement came to control the

principal workers' national unions, which were instrumental to ending the military governments that lasted until 1982. By the early 1990s, indigenous communities from different regions demanded their own recognition as *originary peoples* of Bolivia.<sup>20</sup>

Rivera Cusicanqui, however, became increasingly critical of the new manifestations of colonial power that recreated ethnic divisions through new forms of purism, such as that of indigeneity. At the end of the 1990s, together with historian Rossana Barragán, she published the first translation of works from the School of Subaltern Studies in India.<sup>21</sup> The notion of the subaltern has allowed her to avoid getting stuck in replicating colonial dualisms, such as class and race, and to recognise new subjects of subalternity emanating from proliferating forms of coloniality also affecting people of white and mixed ethnicity. "Gramsci's 'subaltern'," states Mignolo, "included not only the working class of the industrial revolution, but all those for whom the 'progress' made by the industrial revolution created the conditions that left them out of the game."<sup>22</sup> Gramscian tools of socio-economic analysis have been highly influential in many Latin American countries as they are fitting to their geographical and social diversity. Rivera Cusicanqui's critique of multiculturalism falls within this understanding of global relations of coloniality as homogenising forces that are at work in the interest of centralised powers. This has also led her to counter the notion that Latin American societies are characterised by hybrid identities resulting from a juxtaposition between tradition and modernity.<sup>23</sup> Instead, post-colonial societies are formed by historical layers where conflict is never completely subsumed. Accepting the colonial legacy of difference, she suggests, can lead to new solutions of co-existence.

A vocal critic of Evo Morales's presidencies (2006-2019), Rivera Cusicanqui was a first-hand witness of how the administration used colonial tropes about barbarity to discount the opposition of lowland indigenous communities who marched against the TIPNIS highway and were opposed by indigenous campesinos in 2011.<sup>24</sup> Tensions between indigenous groups

in Bolivia remained largely invisible until 2011, when work began on the controversial 300-kilometre highway through the lowland TIPNIS national reserve to connect the city of San Ignacio de Moxos in the department of Beni to the town of Villa Tunari in Cochabamba.<sup>25</sup> While essentialising indigeneity has been strategic both to ensure the government's legitimacy and to politicise identity-based claims, it has also given rise to serious conflict in Bolivia over the past decade, as indicated by Rivera Cusicanqui's own shifting alliances.<sup>26</sup> In the 1980s, Rivera Cusicanqui co-founded the Taller de Historia Oral Andina THOA (Andean Oral History Workshop) with her students at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés where she taught sociology for over three decades. The group uses Aymara and Quechua epistemologies to build alternative communities based on the principles of self-sustenance and reciprocity of the socio-economic unit of the Andean *ayllu*. A political wing to this intellectual project was constituted in 1997 as the CONAMAQ, the National Council for Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu, with the mission to reclaim indigenous territories based on Andean socio-economic organisation. CONAMAQ was part of the movement that led Morales to gain the presidency. However, in 2011 it sided with the constitutionally recognised indigenous communities threatened with expropriation and displacement by Morales's road development project.<sup>27</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui was on CONAMAQ's side and criticised the government's centralizing policies. Being anti-colonial means that plural networks of relations should replace top-down patriarchal and extractive dualism with synergies across feminine and masculine, human and non-human, modern and non-modern modes of being. An anti-extractive politics is a local politics of everyday life.

### **Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's anti-extractive knowledge**

Formerly colonised countries continue to use racial hierarchies to justify forms of extraction of land and labour. Sociologist Pablo González Casanova calls this *internal colonialism*.<sup>28</sup> The



linguistic unconscious that underpins internalised colonial conditions is countered by other modes of thought and narration. Oral and visual counter-cultures still need to be understood.<sup>29</sup> The survival of non-alphabetic languages in colonial societies occupies much of Rivera Cusicanqui's methodological reflections. These reveal non-binary, non-exclusionary, and relational possibilities of organised life. She devotes several of her works to analyzing alternative narrative frameworks that decenter the constitutive power of writing to interpret colonial histories. These methodological propositions are discussed in *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Decolonization* (2010), one of her most influential works and her only book-length publication translated into English (2020). Here, Rivera Cusicanqui focuses on the *First New Chronicle and Good Government* (*El primer nueva crónica y buen gobierno*), an illustrated chronicle about one thousand pages long completed in 1615 and addressed to the king of Spain by “the last Quechua khipukamayuc”,<sup>30</sup> the master khipu maker, Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala. In her semiotic analysis of the chronicle, Rivera Cusicanqui succeeds in showing the ways in which Guamán Poma's interpretation of colonial life exemplifies an alternative world order to that of the Spanish ruling conquistadores in which food and productive labour have a central role in the organisation of society.

Rather than examining the written parts in Spanish interspersed with Quechua terms, Rivera Cusicanqui focuses on the drawings that represent scenes of communal life and of colonial power relations. “Despite having adopted a Gregorian calendar,” she writes, “the sequence shows us another order, that of the relations between humans and the sacred world, which accompanies productive labor as much as communal existence and state rituals.”<sup>31</sup> At the beginning of the chronicle, different orders are illustrated by Guamán Poma, including the ritual calendar. For Rivera Cusicanqui, this means that Guamán Poma seeks to draw the significance of the ritual calendar onto the structure of the monthly calendar in order to emphasise a balanced relationship with the earth and the cosmic order. This is matched by a

complex system of relations between humans and animals, families and communities, and communities with the state. The activity that corresponds to each month is also situated specifically in a particular place to which specific objects and rituals are associated. The ways in which communal produce and activities are depicted in the illustrations about the monthly rituals contrast heavily with how manual labour is represented in the drawings where the colonial hierarchies are critically presented.

One image shows a male Catholic religious figure holding a stick while standing over a young woman, who is sitting at a weaving machine, and looking down on her with reproaching eyes. The caption explains that widows and young unmarried women are forced to spin and weave as a punishment for allegedly having lovers, which is used as an excuse to exploit their free labour.<sup>32</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui compares this scene to the calendar scenes in which the ritual meaning of work is shown in its embeddedness within the economy of place, arguing that this contrast emphasises Guamán Poma's critique of the Judeo-Christian notion of labour as punishment. "Between weaving as a sign of maturity and prestige," she argues, "and weaving as a sign of coercion at the hands of doctrinaire priests lies an abyss [...]"<sup>33</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui explains that this and other images of oppression are represented through the physical visualisation of belittling, of making the other look smaller. Guamán Poma does not hone in on descriptions of physical punishment or physical pain; instead, he succeeds in making the internalisation of the colonial wound tangible through his drawings, even when he reveals his own colonised unconscious by using abstract concepts of *work* or *oppression* which are absent in Quechua.<sup>34</sup>

According to Castro-Klaren, "how Guamán Poma was able to become conversant with the entire discursive complex of the conquest-cum-evangelization and redeploy it to critique the conquest and colonial rule [...] is a feat that remains unequalled in the history of colonial and modern letters."<sup>35</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui argues that he was able to achieve this through the

articulation between alphabetic writing and visual language. The communal and ritualistic significance of the weaver's work is dismissed as a menial activity in the same way as the system of communication created through the knotted cords known as *kipus* was largely destroyed during the colonial period and has, until recently, been denied epistemic value beyond numerical record keeping. There has been increasing recognition that the *kipus*—the knotted cords weaved in the Andes using different textures, colours and levels of complexity that inspired Guaman Poma's chronicle—collect and recount knowledge equivalent to a language system.<sup>36</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui's analysis of the chronicle highlights how colonial hierarchies dismissed the indigenous ritualistic order that conjugates the practice of manual work with the practice of intellectual creation is dismissed, thereby creating what Guamán Poma called “the world upside down”. The ritual as a frame for social organisation determined ensuing processes of value-making in the human relationship with power, work, food, objects, place and time.

Rivera Cusicanqui focuses on the “knowledgeable astrologer poet” as a pillar image, which offers both a scathing critique of the colonial dis-order and a model for ecological governance. An indigenous man, walking while leaning on a stick in one hand and holding a *kipu* thread in the other, is a poet “in the Aristotelian sense of the term: creator of the world, producer of food, expert in the cycle of cosmos,”<sup>37</sup> as the caption explains. Rivera Cusicanqui stresses the notion of *poiesis* as an act of creation that encompasses both material and intellectual life. The astrologer poet is crossing plains and mountains while carrying the threads of memory materialised in the *kipu*. His perception of time is, however, deeper than human memory: he stands between the sun and the moon, which points to his knowledge of the cosmic cycles that allow him to grow food. For Rivera Cusicanqui he is a figure that breaks colonial boundaries and who holds the subversive potential necessary to bring about an ecological turn in western thought. One of the details that she points out is the fact that Guamán Poma drew

him wearing a Spanish hat.<sup>38</sup> Most of Rivera Cusicanqui's work highlights the importance of recognising colonial violence and of acknowledging the accumulation of multiple memories in order for post-colonial societies to lead alternative paths to those of essentialising dichotomies. If she could draw the knowledgeable poet astrologer today, she would draw an androgynous figure, she explains.<sup>39</sup> "From ancient times through the present," she argues, "it has been the weavers and astrologer-poets of the communities and villages who have revealed to us this alternative and subversive thread of knowledges and practices capable of restoring the world and setting it on its rightful course."<sup>40</sup> The poet astrologer does not learn about the world as an outside observer to gain access to it and extract what he needs from it; rather, he takes part in the preservation of its regenerative cycles from within.

In her analysis of Guamán Poma de Ayala's subversive juxtaposition of written text and visual concepts, Rivera Cusicanqui opens up the possibility of developing a new kind of anti-extractive thinking. The self-sustaining system of interdependence between the human and non-human worlds is capable of transforming its own constitutive conflicts into productive forces. As examined below, the emphasis on the coexistence of difference is central to Rivera Cusicanqui's approach to the multi-layered crisis that is the inevitable result of the systemic extractivist model. One of the critical stances that characterise her work is her timely reflection on how value is attributed. In her book *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible* (2018), she contrasts the colonial exploitation of the town of Potosí as a key mining site for the Spanish empire with the preservation of the mountainous area of *P'utuxsi* by the Incas as a sanctuary devoted to the solar deity. While the Incas extracted silver from the nearby mine of Porco, they had preserved the mountains due to their essential ecological function as well as for their strategic frontier role. The colonial disconnection of silver and gold mining from ritual meaning corresponded to the disconnection between the human order and the cosmic order, with the ensuing release of the forces of chaos.<sup>41</sup> If we stay within the critical confines of the Anthropocene, we are

bound to assume an inevitability in the depletion of mineral and fossil deposits for the conservation of human societies. An anti-extractive commons preserves a larger order of relations without which human life cannot be sustained. The khipus established a balance between what is taken and what is given through the knots, which indicated and kept count of a variety of activities and relationships. Without understanding this logic of reciprocity and continuity between the material and the spiritual realms, it is not possible to realise their significance for the climate crisis and the reproduction of life.<sup>42</sup> Through the khipus, memory has its own materiality; therefore, it has a bearing on the present through the experience of everyday life. Rivera Cusicanqui advocates political decentralisation particularly for a geographically and culturally heterogeneous country like Bolivia. She attributes the popular protests that took place in Bolivia in the early 2000s over corporate ownership and exploitation of water and gas to the political awareness and action of many local constituencies.<sup>43</sup>

The organisation of Andean societies had been founded on the connections between different ecological zones through intense networks of exchange.<sup>44</sup> The Tawantysuyu incorporated systems of exchange that did not rely on impersonal and abstract entities, but which instead promoted growing networks of redistribution and reciprocity not only in the form of objects but also of services and of ritual offerings to sacred entities.<sup>45</sup> This meant that value was internalised and experienced rather than external and abstract. “We should talk about disalienating or de-privatising the market rather than de-marketising society,” writes the author.<sup>46</sup> She suggests that the purpose should be to decolonise work and the market instead of “de-marketising modernity.”<sup>47</sup> Andean societies were based on the market as both an economic and an ecological system. Indigenous people’s agency should be enacted in the present instead of being frozen in an ahistorical past. For Rivera Cusicanqui, “[t]he project of indigenous modernity can emerge from the present as a spiral whose movement is a continuous feedback

from the past to the future – a ‘principle of hope’ or ‘anticipatory consciousness’ – that both discerns and realizes decolonization at the same time.”<sup>48</sup>

### **A *ch’ixi* world is urgent**

“Isn’t perhaps seeing the market as something sinful,” she asks, “a way of simplifying reality in search for the idyllic harmony of a ‘natural economy’, which is in fact another version of the European dream of the ‘good savage’? Is this not a way of denying that our complex histories could play in our favour? I think we need to move across different worlds at the same time.”<sup>49</sup> Her notion of *indigenous modernity* encapsulates the possibility of liberating indigenous people from all exclusionary politics which, from either side of the ideological spectrum, places them outside of the polis and continues to exclude them from decision-making spaces through purist and essentialising identities. For Dasseleer, “by going against the grain of exoticising discourses that essentialise indigenous people as ‘good savages’ who belong to the past, Rivera Cusicanqui suggests that their epistemologies are contemporaneous with western rationalism.”<sup>50</sup> The politics of everyday life is where the past and the future coexist through the creation of anti-extractive values in the structures of community relations, consumption and exchange. Rivera Cusicanqui repositions the role of indigenous narratives within histories of both violence and resistance, and thus makes a decisive contribution to current politics of indigeneity. As it has been argued, “indigenism today is a process; [...] a structure of power; a set of relationships; a matter of becoming, in short, and not a fixed state of being.”<sup>51</sup>

Rivera Cusicanqui recognises a truth in the impurity of ethnically mixed Bolivians, the *cholos*. She confronts Latin American traditional accounts of the *mestizo*, the mixed ethnicity creole, dating from the first half of the twentieth century in which the logic of violation became a metaphor of the conquest or the whitening of other *razas*. The canonical theory was

represented by Mexican author and education minister José Vasconcelos's notion of the *raza cósmica* (cosmic race), which emerged from the encounter of all ethnicities into a new *mestizo* race but which, in fact, concealed many contemporary assumptions about *blanqueamiento* (whitening). Instead, Rivera Cusicanqui's work points towards the potential to surpass ethnopolitics and recognise the coexistence of different historical temporalities, overcoming nineteenth- and twentieth-century established distinctions between, for instance, city and countryside or west and non-west. Currently, more than fifty per cent of Latin American indigenous populations are urbanised.<sup>52</sup> More broadly, most of the world's population and their livelihoods are connected to cities even when people do not live in urban areas.<sup>53</sup> New kinds of mobilities upset both internal and external divisions, which are not easy to understand by means of traditional sociological categories whereby national societies are considered to have stable and durable top-down structures. For Rivera Cusicanqui, the way to transform subjectivity is therefore not by creating further binaries but through a process of collective value-making that is able to build on conflict and difference. Materiality has an important role in this work of value creation: reconnecting intellectual and practical knowledge is key to promoting a new "politics of the body" in which manual labour goes hand in hand with intellectual labour.<sup>54</sup>

These reflections, which are embedded in her decades-long work of linguistic and cultural re-enacting of Aymara lived practices, have led her to develop a new linguistic concept from the Aymara term *ch'ixi*. The first time that she heard the word was from Aymara sculptor Víctor Zapana, who told her that *ch'ixi* entities truly exist (*ch'ixinakax utxiwa*), and that they are powerful in as much as they are indeterminate. *Ch'ixi* describes something of a grey colour, which, when observed from a close distance, reveals a myriad of black and white points. It is used in reference to entities like the serpent or snake who have the power to go across frontiers and borders and to embody opposites. Stones like granite are also *ch'ixi* because of their point-

like textures. *Ch'ixi* beings cross multiple identities: they are neither male nor female, neither from the sky nor from the earth, but move through different realms like the rain and underground rivers.<sup>55</sup> The human world and even human subjectivity can, then, be envisaged as interconnected with other-than-human entities, transcending the implicit dualism of the Anthropocene. To be *ch'ixi* means to inhabit the contradiction. As Rivera Cusicanqui explains, Víctor Zapana also taught her another notion, that of *wut walanti*, which means the irreparable and refers to a state in which something breaks and cannot be fixed, like broken stone. This is the recognition of the colonial rift, and the *ch'ixi* attitude starts from there, from accepting that it is not possible to either simulate or desire a lost cultural unity.<sup>56</sup>

In the mining town of Oruro, near Potosí, a Quechua-speaking area, the specialised worker who is in charge of the machinery is referred to as *ch'iqchi*, which means stained grey, a term which is etymologically related to the Aymara *ch'ixi*.<sup>57</sup> The geographical and historical specificity of the origin of this linguistic concept in the indigenous mining communities of the Bolivian Andes attests to the centrality of the lived conditions of particular localities in the intersections of historical events that have a global scope such as colonialism. The project of indigenous modernity is, therefore, not only a “project of long temporality”<sup>58</sup> but also a process through which the interconnections and overlaps between global history and local histories materialise. Therefore, *ch'ixi* identities avoid mirroring and reproducing the colonial racialised stereotyping of indigeneity as a pure ahistorical entity as well as helping to show the pervasiveness of both violence and resistance. This notion is very productive when trying to go beyond “paralyzing aporias”<sup>59</sup> as it allows us to overcome both universalising ideas of assimilation and homogeneity and the explosion of conflict at many levels of both individual and collective identity. It does not pursue a synthesis, because according to Rivera Cusicanqui looking for unity means to perpetuate a Manichean view of the world. Instead, to live in an



intermediate space (*taypi-ch'ixi*) means to be prepared to accept difference, to learn to unblunt the edges.

The intellectual and activist work that Rivera Cusicanqui has done within this framework has been developed in the *Colectivx Ch'ixi* (Ch'ixi Collective), which she co-founded in La Paz in 2008.<sup>60</sup> The Collective coordinates initiatives of small scale agroecological farming, urban agriculture, food markets, networks for recycling and exchange, cultural training, and artistic and creative events. In addition, Rivera Cusicanqui collaborates with other community organisations in Bolivia and other Latin American countries, like the Colectivo Situaciones and the Colectivo Simbiosis in Buenos Aires. In 2013, the La Paz-based Colectivo 2, which has been focused on combining manual and intellectual work, including building with clay using ancient oven techniques, farming and clearing waste, founded the Tambo cultural centre which hosts a library and organises academic course and creative activities. Rivera Cusicanqui has been one of its main supporters. In the words of sociologist Ruth Bautista, another member of Tambo, “[w]e believe in a *ch'ixi* world [...], [where] our European and indigenous ancestry are not in contradiction with each other but instead complement each other.”<sup>61</sup> The *tambo* was a small Andean warehouse found along the main commercial paths where travellers could stop to rest and stock up food. “What we are doing is the opposite of the dominant world system where everything is disposable and meant to become quickly obsolete,” another member explains.<sup>62</sup> This intellectual practice is part of the work through which Rivera Cusicanqui has distanced herself from the redistributive extractivism of the Morales administration, condemning its capitalist mystification of the principles of *Buen Vivir*.<sup>63</sup>

“Perhaps,” she writes, “it will be possible to weave a *ch'ixi* epistemology of planetary value that will enable us to fulfil our common duties as human beings. At the same time, however, it will allow us to become even more rooted into our own local communities,

territories and bioregions in order to build networks of meaning and ‘knowledge ecologies’ [...].”<sup>64</sup> Recognising the co-existence of alterity does not impede working towards common goals; in fact, different groups often share similar social demands for the common good. While a *ch’ixi* world does not erase contradiction, “[t]he discourse of multiculturalism and the discourse of hybridity [...] both obscure and renew the actual practices of colonization and subalternization. Their function is to supplant the indigenous populations as historical subjects and to turn their struggles and demands into elements of a cultural reengineering and a state apparatus in order to subjugate neutralise them.”<sup>65</sup> The danger with the homogenization of difference led by the state is that the new languages of social movements expressed, for instance, as rights of nature, are taken over by green capitalism unless they are met with everyday practice within different communities.<sup>66</sup> Acknowledging the impure and contradictory nature of modern societies, where new forms of colonialism emerge across north-south boundaries, means to move beyond the tree-like structure of western thought. While the latter claims a common foundation from which different branches spring out, a new epistemic ecology grows like a rhizome, which develops unpredictably in every direction without a beginning or an end.<sup>67</sup>

Rivera Cusicanqui’s contribution to establishing non-colonial ecological frameworks that do not replicate extractive thinking revolved around a rejection of all forms of essentialism. In so doing, it brings out the heterogeneity of global modernity and signals the urgency to think and act across boundaries. She has described her perspective as the *peripheral perspective*, which does not refer, as we might expect, to the margins of the modern world, but in a very evocative way to the perspective “of the vagabond, of the poetic figure of the *flaneur* that Benjamin evoked, as a capacity to connect heterogenous elements, thanks to the mode of passing through, transiting, wandering. The peripheral perspective incorporates a *corporeal perception*. It envelops an alert state.”<sup>68</sup> The parallel that she draws here is between the

condition of the modern, taken from Walter Benjamin's analysis of the poet as the quintessential modern (wo)man who wanders through the city observing and taking in its fast-changing surroundings. By once again avoiding the dualism of centre and margins, she describes an experiential state of being which, in an unexpected subversion of paradigms, she associates with inhabiting the critical border zones of the colonial extractivist system. In these geographies, attention must be heightened because one experiences a very real, a physical rather than symbolic, state of being between and across multiple layers of histories. As critical border zones expand and proliferate around the world, constantly replicated elsewhere through the structures of coloniality, a *ch'ixi* approach can enable non-hegemonic perspectives which are situated in the politics of the everyday to permeate the structures of organised life.

## **Conclusion**

By discussing the work of Aymara-Bolivian activist scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, this article suggests that a post-Anthropogenic world requires an anti-extractive mode of thinking. The existential and sociological rift of modern subjectivity is founded in the disconnection between thought and action: "There can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice," Rivera Cusicanqui states.<sup>69</sup> In her anti-colonial theory-in-praxis, an alternative to the Anthropocene demands an approach to knowledge as an everyday practice of lived memory geared towards building and maintaining a relational structure across social, economic and ecological levels. Therefore, the value of work, money, or objects is not inherent but, instead, it is integral to a set of relationships that guarantee the reproduction of life – not just of human life. Rivera Cusicanqui's emphasis on the danger of dualisms also comprises a rejection of attitudes that compress indigenous people into neo-colonial identities. As a response to the proliferation of conflict-engendering essentialisms, the author proposes embracing the irreparably fragmented texture of life through

the notion of *ch'ixi* in order to give rise to systemic transformative processes. As both a leading actor and a scrupulous observer of Bolivian politics, Rivera Cusicanqui has often denounced top-down washed out appropriations of indigenous language in the face of, for example, rising environmental degradation resulting from the intensification of mining.<sup>70</sup> Bolivia holds the world's biggest reserves of lithium, essential for building new battery-powered technologies such as solar panels, wind turbines and electric cars. Morales's plans to bring in foreign corporations for the extraction of lithium were cancelled due to mounting protests a few days before he was ousted in November 2019. In 2021 his successor Luis Arce announced that he was resuming plans to open to corporate investors. The lithium-hungry technologies at the heart of the widely championed "green transition" raise the issue of the enormous environmental and human costs involved. An anti-extractive worldview shifts the focus from the short-term continuation of economic expansion to the long-term preservation of ecological wealth.

Upholding a *ch'ixi* world allows us to imagine a web of relationships that cut across human and non-human categorizations as well as to avoid oversimplified ideas of a pristine environment to be preserved from human interference. Instead, it makes it possible to recognise that the co-existence of difference is what constitutes life itself and it therefore calls for shared responsibility in participating in a life-supporting system of relations. In this sense, the idea of *saving the planet* is functional to the status quo in that it does not entail structural change and it effectively feeds into the existing structures.<sup>71</sup> Far from being another form of shallow environmentalism, the *ch'ixi* project disrupts the colonial power structures by revealing the relations of meaning between social, economic and biological life and, as a result, the implausibility of an economic system isolated from the life forms on which it sustains itself. The draft of the first chapter and the summary for policymakers from the IPCC report that was leaked in the summer of 2021 prior to its final release in the spring of 2022 speaks, for the first

time, of the lifestyle changes without which the mitigations that can be achieved through technology are highly likely to be insufficient to reach the sustainable development goals.<sup>72</sup>

The embodied relationality of Rivera Cusicanqui's knowledge-building project functions as an anti-extractive epistemological alternative to the Anthropocene. Escaping a dualistic view of the world through anti-extractive ways of knowing means to build communities in which identities are mobile and relationships replace hierarchies through networks of interdependence and mutual preservation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The category of the *Anthropocene* is widely debated and has been interpreted from a number of historical, philosophical and geographical perspectives. To cite only a few examples, related notions that have been proposed include: *Plantationocene* (Haraway, Shikawa, Gilbert, Olwig, Tsing, & Bubandt, "Anthropologists are talking;" Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene"); *Chthulucene* (Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene;" Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*); *Capitalocene* (Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*).

<sup>2</sup> Despite its radical anti-capitalism, the de-growth movement also remains human-centred.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Van Horn and Hausdoerffer, eds., *Wildness: Relations of People and Place*. The conservation industry has been under scrutiny for its "fortress conservation" model responsible for forced displacements of and violence against indigenous and local communities. See, for instance: "WWF accused of deceit, cover-ups and dishonesty in US Congressional Committee hearing."

<sup>4</sup> Sousa Santos, de, *Epistemologies of the South*, 259.

<sup>5</sup> Sousa Santos, de, *Epistemologies of the South*, 270-72.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Kashwan. "Climate Justice in the Global North." The global north comprises countries north of the equator and the global south those countries that lie south of the equator – with few exceptions including Australia and New Zealand. However, this map is much more diverse when measuring, for example, levels of inequality in the US, western Europe or Asia. For a discussion on the emergence of the north-south divide in global governance, see: Held and Hale, eds., "Editors' introduction," 1–36.

<sup>7</sup> Durante, Kröger and LaFleur, "Extraction and Extractivisms," 21.

<sup>8</sup> Durante, Kröger and LaFleur, "Extraction and Extractivisms," 22.

<sup>9</sup> Gago and Mezzadra, "A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital;" Mezzadra and Neilson, "On the Multiple Frontiers of Extraction;" Shapiro and McNeish, eds., *Our Extractive Age*.

<sup>10</sup> Phonetic transcription of *ch'ixi*: ʃ i:xi:

<sup>11</sup> Latour, "On CRITICAL ZONES."

<sup>12</sup> Mignolo and Tlostanova, "Theorizing from the Borders," 211.

<sup>13</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*.

<sup>14</sup> Mignolo and Tlostanova, "Theorizing from the Borders," 218.

<sup>15</sup> Quijano, "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad," 14 (my translation). See also: Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality."

<sup>16</sup> Quijano, "Colonialidad del poder;" Dussel, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism;" Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn."

<sup>17</sup> Mignolo, "The Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution."

<sup>18</sup> The decolonial movement has branched out into many directions since its original group. There have been a number of academic and activist inflections throughout Latin America, with a prominent feminist and ecological orientation. To cite only a few examples: Argentine intellectuals María Lugones, Rita Segato and Karina Bidaseca; Bolivian activist-scholars María Galindo, Julieta Paredes, Rafael Bautista and Simón Yampara; Lorena Cabnal, Aura Estela Cumes and Gladys Tzul Tzul in Guatemala; Afro-Dominican anthropologist Ochy Curiel.

<sup>19</sup> Sarmiento, "Genealogía de la motivación;" Sagárnaga, "Silvia Rivera: 'Descolonizarme es un proceso de todos los días'."

<sup>20</sup> Lalander, "Transmodernidad," 56-58.

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- <sup>21</sup> Mignolo, “El potencial epistemológico de la historia oral,” 205; Gago, “Introduction,” xiv.
- <sup>22</sup> Mignolo, “On Subalterns and Other Agencies,” 385.
- <sup>23</sup> García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas*.
- <sup>24</sup> Canessa, “Paradoxes of Multiculturalism in Bolivia.”
- <sup>25</sup> Canessa, “Indigenous Conflict in Bolivia.”
- <sup>26</sup> See also: Coletta and Raftopoulos, “Latin American readings of Gramsci and the Bolivian indigenous nationalist state.”
- <sup>27</sup> Fabricant, “Good Living for Whom?;” Canessa, “Indigenous Conflict in Bolivia;” Burman, “Black Hole Indigeneity.”
- <sup>28</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 12-13; González Casanova, “Internal Colonialism and National Development.”
- <sup>29</sup> See, for instance: Cornejo Polar, *Escribir en en aire*; Frassani, ed., *Visual Cultures and Indigenous Agency in the Early Americas*.
- <sup>30</sup> Castro-Klaren, “Memory and ‘Writing’ in the Andes,” 113.
- <sup>31</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 15.
- <sup>32</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 42.
- <sup>33</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 20. See also Rivera Cusicanqui, “La universalidad de lo ch'ixi.”
- <sup>34</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 21.
- <sup>35</sup> Castro-Klaren, “Writing the Andes,” 135.
- <sup>36</sup> Castro-Klaren, “Memory and ‘Writing’ in the Andes,” 107-113.
- <sup>37</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 28.
- <sup>38</sup> “Silvia Rivera analiza esta imagen de Poma de Ayala (2015).”
- <sup>39</sup> “Silvia Rivera analiza esta imagen de Poma de Ayala (2015).”
- <sup>40</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 28.
- <sup>41</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 63-65; Harris, “Ecological Duality.”
- <sup>42</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 60-61.
- <sup>43</sup> Weinberg, “Indigenous Anarchist Critique.”
- <sup>44</sup> Cuvi, “Indigenous Imprints and Remnants in the Tropical Andes,” 71-72.
- <sup>45</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 45-47.
- <sup>46</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 66 (my translation).
- <sup>47</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 67 (my translation).
- <sup>48</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 48.
- <sup>49</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 70 (my translation).
- <sup>50</sup> Dasseleer, “Identidades ch'ixi en el Borderland,” 11 (my translation).
- <sup>51</sup> De la Cadena and Starn, “Introduction,” 10.
- <sup>52</sup> Peters and Andersen, *Indigenous in the City*.
- <sup>53</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*.
- <sup>54</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 73.
- <sup>55</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 79-80.
- <sup>56</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 81.
- <sup>57</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 16.
- <sup>58</sup> Brighenti and Gago, “La hipótesis del mestizaje en América Latina,” 48.
- <sup>59</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 83.
- <sup>60</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 17 and 58.
- <sup>61</sup> Pau, “Tambo Colectivo.”
- <sup>62</sup> Pau, “Tambo Colectivo.”
- <sup>63</sup> Carvajal, “Silvia Rivera.”
- <sup>64</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 81.
- <sup>65</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 56-57.
- <sup>66</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible*, 18.
- <sup>67</sup> Elbirt, “Historias manchadas,” 112-113.
- <sup>68</sup> Gago, “Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui: Against Internal Colonialism.”
- <sup>69</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*, 56.
- <sup>70</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui, “Evo and the Movements.”
- <sup>71</sup> Price, *Stop Saving the Planet*.
- <sup>72</sup> *Leaked IPCC Report*, “Summary for Policymakers, First Draft.”

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