

## CAN THE SUBALTERN(IZED) RESEARCH?

PODE O/A SUBALTERNO/A(IZADO/A) PESQUISAR?

¿PUEDE LO/A SUBALTERNO/A(IZADO/A) INVESTIGAR?

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### ABSTRACT:

Reframing and expanding Spivak's significant contribution to decolonial critique, I present some reflections on the experience of being a researcher on the periphery of the world. Here, I appeal to the understanding of subjectivity as a basis to learn about experiences that have been silenced and erased by perspectives of knowledge limited to the spectrum of colonial formality that underpins our universities and our research and researchers. I outline a development path for the text that is organized into three topics: (1) Experiences from the Global Periphery, (2) Decoloniality and Research: Between Ideal and Real, and (3) So that the Subalternized can research. In summary, it is possible to affirm, based on the theories and concepts discussed in this text, that the relationship between (de)coloniality and research is complex and full of symbolic violence, or the so-called epistemicide, and the need to overcome it. The colonial structure of Western universities, both in the periphery and in the center, prevents popular and marginalized epistemologies from being known and debated, alienating researchers and their research and carrying elements that perpetuate the coloniality of knowledge and being.

**Keywords:** decoloniality; academic research; university.

### RESUMO:

Reenquadrando e ampliando a contribuição significativa de Spivak para a crítica decolonial, apresento algumas reflexões sobre a experiência de ser um pesquisador na periferia do mundo. Aqui, apelo à compreensão da subjetividade como base para conhecer experiências silenciadas e apagadas por perspectivas de conhecimento limitadas ao espectro da formalidade colonial que fundamenta as nossas universidades e as nossas pesquisas e pesquisadores. Traço um caminho de desenvolvimento para o texto que está organizado em três tópicos: (1) Experiências da Periferia Global, (2) Decolonialidade e Pesquisa: entre o ideal e o real, e (3) Para que os/as sabalternizados/as possam pesquisar. Em síntese, é possível afirmar, com base nas teorias e conceitos discutidos neste texto, que a relação entre (de)colonialidade e pesquisa é complexa e repleta de violência simbólica, ou o chamado epistemicídio, e da necessidade de superá-la. A estrutura colonial das universidades ocidentais, tanto na periferia como no centro, impede que as epistemologias populares e marginalizadas sejam conhecidas e debatidas, alienando os investigadores e as suas pesquisas, e carregando elementos que perpetuam a colonialidade do conhecimento e do ser.

**Palavras-chave:** decolonialidade; pesquisa acadêmica; universidade.

**RESUMEN:**

Replanteando y ampliando la importante contribución de Spivak a la crítica decolonial, presento algunas reflexiones sobre la experiencia de ser un investigador en la periferia del mundo. Aquí, apelo a la comprensión de la subjetividad como base para conocer experiencias silenciadas y borradas por perspectivas de conocimiento limitadas al espectro de la formalidad colonial que sustenta nuestras universidades y nuestras investigaciones e investigadores. Trazo un camino de desarrollo del texto que se organiza en tres temas: (1) Experiencias de la Periferia Global, (2) Decolonialidad e Investigación: entre lo ideal y lo real, y (3) Para que los/as Sabalternizados/as puedan investigar. En resumen, es posible afirmar, a partir de las teorías y conceptos discutidos en este texto, que la relación entre (de)colonialidad e investigación es compleja y llena de violencia simbólica, o el llamado epistemicidio, y la necesidad de superar él. La estructura colonial de las universidades occidentales, tanto en la periferia como en el centro, impide que las epistemologías populares y marginadas sean conocidas y debatidas, alienando a los investigadores y sus investigaciones, y llevando elementos que perpetúan la colonialidad del conocimiento y del ser.

**Palabras clave:** decolonialidad; investigación académica; universidad.

## Introduction

*"Graduate students gotta suffer."*

The sentence in the epigraph of this introduction is a common saying that has been heard many times by this author and, I believe, by many other people in universities like mine. When I first heard that, feelings of revolt and indignation dominated me, so I decided to write this essay. What the words in that sentence reveal, and these are problems and ideals that I will address throughout this text, is the violence and oppression that shape the university on the periphery of the world. Here, I mean violence in its symbolic and discursive sense. A type of violence that silences knowledge, people, and experiences. A kind of oppression that perpetuates power relations between professors and students, between academic research and popular knowledge, and between peripheral universities and universities in the center. The great challenge I set myself in this text is related to the answer to the question: can the subaltern(ized)<sup>1</sup> research?

Initially, the answer is simple: yes, subalternized people research. Despite the countless institutional, governmental, and financial difficulties, universities on the periphery of the world have made increasing progress in their discoveries, inventions, and advances. Of course, they are always placed at a lower level because the people and institutions that classify the best universities in the world and create important rankings are all in the center. It's hard to expect

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<sup>1</sup> Despite understanding the relevance of the concept of subaltern in Spivak's work, I choose to problematize the term by reflecting that we are not ontologically subalterns, but subalternized by colonial and imperial dominations since modernity and its project.

that universities on the periphery will ever be considered as good as universities in the center because the metric that analyzes them is the metric of imperialism. While these external issues are equally important to reflect on, my focus is on the subaltern(ized) subjects found in universities on the periphery, looking at the internal oppression in the global periphery. This subject does research, but on what? What methods do they use? What are their ethical and political commitments? Do researchers from the periphery understand themselves as subalternized? When considering these questions, I generally comprehend that the answer is no. Subalternized researchers, in the context of decolonial awareness and commitment to liberation, do not conduct research in the conventional sense. This is because the training and knowledge production paths they follow often diverge from the specificities of their realities. Many issues cross the constitution of the subject, subalternized by colonization and silenced by coloniality. Here, of course, I do not forget about the examples of resistance that exist and resist in the periphery, doing the hard mission of working with marginalized themes and non-legitimized methods. My choice to generalize that subalternized people do not research aims to criticize the hegemonic models, methods, and research perspectives developed in the global periphery.

Spivak (1988) discusses the challenge for subalterns to be heard within the structure of inequality rooted in the colonial configuration of society that underpins contemporaneity. In this sense, I will place Spivak's reflections in the context of the education process of being and becoming a researcher, on academic research, and in the context of a university as a dominant institution whose structure and approach are based on an understanding of knowledge and research that is founded on the project of modernity. The purpose of this text is to reflect on some of the concepts and theories of thinkers linked to transmodern movements of thought and praxis and those confronting colonialism and coloniality, seeking to problematize and analyze them in the light of the paradigm of liberation and the problem of silencing, based on the contributions of authors and researchers linked to decolonial thinking on knowledge, relating these perspectives to the issue of academic research and its colonial implications. Methodologically, the arguments that I defend here are based on my personal and collective movements as a researcher in the global periphery, the epistemologies I have been touched by, and the implications of the suffering and resistance I have been through. The structure of this essay is divided into three topics: (1) Experiences in the Global Periphery, (2) Decoloniality and Research: idealizations and reality, and (3) Epistemologies from the Periphery and the construction of other praxis. They are followed by the final considerations, in which I appeal

that the decolonial transformation of academic research, which seems to be enormously complicated, is only possible through embracing subjectivity.

## Experiences in the Global Periphery

*Today's universities are great systems of authoritarian control.*  
(Mbembe, 2016, p. 1)

If Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) speaks of an Epistemological South that is not geographical, I want to position my writings in this text in an *existential* South. The experiences of (trying to) become a researcher from the reality that forms this South where I live. With this in mind, in this topic, I begin the ideas I will develop by problematizing the very notion of Global South, popularized by Boaventura's works and currently used in various contexts and theoretical fields to configure counter-hegemonic pieces of knowledge that oppose what was built by colonialism and is perpetuated by coloniality. I choose to think that I speak, write, and research from the *periphery* of the world, as Enrique Dussel's (1977) philosophy of liberation proposes. Thinking in terms of periphery and center instead of thinking merely in terms of north and south is the most viable approach when the aim is to understand the configurations and specificities of the superiority-inferiority relationship established globally since modernity. Thus, this relationship cannot be understood in purely geographical terms but rather in terms that carry (geo)political, economic, social, and cultural meanings.

Despite rejecting, to a certain extent, the generic way in which the concept of the global South is constituted and has been used, I turn to what Santos (2018) proposes to think about the relationship between knowledge and knowledge production in the context of this peripheral South. The Portuguese thinker states that the emergence of Epistemologies of the South represents two major problems: (1) the effort to establish themselves as valid knowledge and, in establishing themselves, (2) the way they evoke other ways of existing and other configurations of being. Both problems approached by Boaventura are related to legitimacy and our struggle for legitimacy means to be part of a journey that challenges suffering as a category of existence and becoming.

To begin with, I take the first problem as the focus and basis of my argument here. Thinking about the effort of these epistemologies to emerge includes denouncing the colonial exercise that suppresses them and classifies them as non-being (Dussel, 1977). It is, therefore, necessary to look at the place that modernity makes responsible for the production and validation of knowledge: the university. Its historical and social constitution, on the periphery

of the world, is marked by complex processes of perpetuating power relations. Professors and researchers become responsible for making these environments elitist and exclusionary to enforce what they understand to be excellence in the academic training of individuals, even though, in our contexts, we do not even have the same resources and socio-economic conditions as people in countries from which we inherited this university model. In their training and work processes, professors at universities on the periphery reproduce with their students what they have experienced in their education process. From this challenge, it is possible to understand the manifestation of coloniality as an alienation (Oda; Lautert, 2020) of teaching and research practices. Thus, problematizing these practices of inequality is essential to understanding the difficulty of connecting to peripheral knowledge because this is how coloniality works: they reject our subalternized identities to deny our knowledge. This is how Tirado (2009) defines epistemic violence: a series of discourses and practices that do not tolerate alternative epistemologies and are always organized to deny the other's alterity and subjectivity, oppressing their knowledge and justifying social, cultural, and epistemological domination. Thinking about epistemic violence, which is strongly connected to our existential suffering and need for resistance, Castro-Gómez (2005) alerts us about how these modern/colonial theories have long guided how we have theorized about knowledge in Latin America.

In this way, students and researchers enrolled at universities on the periphery are surrendered to the elitist formality and colonial-modern standards of knowledge production. By training within and based on this alienation, subaltern(ized) students distance themselves from their identities and are led to become extractive and exploitative scientists and researchers, as we can think from what Grosfoguel (2016) tells us. In this sense, I also evoke Smith's (1999) critique when she analyzes the cultural formations of Western(ized) research and how its methods represent the oppression and exploitation of Indigenous people. Here, I draw attention to the fact that reflecting on how Western(ized) research oppresses other categories of subjects marked by historical relations of inequality set through coloniality is also necessary. In Latin America, for example, we have so many different categories of identity of people that each face their own challenges against colonial oppression. My ethical concerns are related to understanding my role in developing ways of doing research that dialogues and is guided based on what Indigenous and Afro-Latin thinkers have been saying, writing, and sharing with us. These epistemologies are the paths we need to follow, considering the vast and diverse heritage background that shapes our identities as Latin Americans - which all carry the implications of colonialism and coloniality, even considering all the differences, specifications, and identities.

It is difficult for epistemologies from the periphery to establish themselves as valid knowledge because the metric that globally defines knowledge is the modernity metric, based exclusively on Eurocentric perspectives. This is the epistemological preponderance of the center: creating standards of knowledge that only classify as knowledge what is produced on the colonizers' land. This is what resistance looks like within the decolonial exercise: searching within ourselves, along our territories, and with our ancestors for the knowledge that was once silenced and must now be the target of our affirmation and the basis of our thoughts.

## **Decoloniality and Research: Between Ideal and Real**

Reflecting on the second problem posed by Santos (2018), which concerns how the emergence of epistemologies of the South evokes other ways of existing and other configurations of being, has therefore brought me back to thinking about the relationship between knowledge production, the university, and peripheral experiences/knowledge. I claim that, between positivism and postmodernism, knowledge from the periphery continues to be erased, silenced, and diminished. Even when investigated, they are often formalized in ways that fail to engage with the people and contexts being studied. The works and perspectives mentioned above, such as those of Linda Smith (1999), for example, despite being more than twenty years old, are still unknown by many universities in the West and do not occupy the canon of "classic" theorists on the foundations of research methods, especially in peripheral contexts. This is the problem of colonial hegemony: everything that does not belong to the conservative tradition of the modern university is excluded. While the Eurocentric perspective of doing academic research defines what we will study and do in our training processes as researchers, the critique of post/anti/decolonial perspectives and practices is not mentioned. In general, the decolonial paradigm is still not part of research practices in peripheral countries like mine, even when the objects of study are populations crossed directly by the oppressions of colonialism. This alienation can be explained by what Quijano (2005) tells us about coloniality, which prevents us from absorbing experiences of knowing-with (Santos, 2018) and from collectively building research that respects other pieces of knowledge.

When I describe research centered on positivism as violent, I draw on critical perspectives on knowledge production, such as Vandana Shiva's (1987) concept of reductionist science. In her text, Shiva examines the relationship between modern science and violence against subaltern(ized) identities. Although the Indian thinker talks about a specific type of science, referring mainly to the natural sciences, her criticism can be extended to other fields of

knowledge production as places marked by an understanding of science that disregards categories of oppression.

The studies that have linked decoloniality and academic research mostly reflect on and problematizing the colonial structure of knowledge production and its exploitative and decontextualized character. Although there are some examples of methodological proposals (Asselin & Basile, 2018), they are still far from being consolidated as methods as they challenge the positivist structure of research. While we are often urged to propose concrete methods rather than merely reflecting on these problems, it is important to recognize that such proposals already exist. The urgent task now is to resist and make these methodologies feasible in our reality.

While debates about what it means to decolonize research are important, the focus must also be on understanding how to resignify the university itself. Doing research and producing knowledge are not separate from living and existing in the university (Peron et al., 2023). The many criticisms leveled at the university by decolonial theory could simply be answered with the question: if the university is such a place of oppression and silencing for our identities, why occupy it? This is a paradigm for us. The university, although oppressive, is also a refuge for us, as it represents a place of transformation and the preservation of knowledge. At university, people like me, the first in my family to join a research program, see some possibility of transforming their realities. This is the power that is not a problem when it is celebrated: the power of the university, in its freedom and autonomy, to fight for the construction of liberation projects that take into account the experiences of the people who live on the ground on which it is built.

Considering the decolonization of research as something that is not just about methods but also about objects of study, I propose that we think about how the decolonial exercise of academia represents for all areas the possibility of embracing local and regional contexts, welcoming the students' reality with a focus on acting on it to transform it; understanding peripheral knowledge not as needing formalization but as complete in itself in the way it is, constituting itself as other ways of knowing, valid, complex and important for us and for the construction of our subaltern identity. It is up to us to embrace subjectivity as a fundamental element in knowledge production.

Although in perspectives such as Vaitsman's (1995), we read that the relationship between subjectivity and science is the fruit of postmodern theories, I say that it is not in the postmodern project of the world, society, and science/production of knowledge that we will find actions and reflections that are significant to our project of liberation on the periphery. It

is, therefore, the transmodern projects that represent for us the overcoming of modernity and its imprisoning dimensions with colonized peoples. I develop this reflection in the following section.

### **So that the subalternized can research**

Something that Spivak (1988) points out, and this is what the transmodern critique warns us about, is that even theories that propose overcoming the modern/colonial structure of knowledge production fail to think about the specificities of the manifestations of oppression in colonized contexts. Castro-Gómez (2005, p. 91) reminds us that the concept of coloniality of power in Quijano “expands and corrects Foucault's concept of “disciplinary power.”. In postmodern theories, peripheral knowledge is not absorbed. Denying that knowledge exists on the periphery is the role of coloniality. In the exercise of decolonial critique, it is necessary always to affirm and reaffirm the place of our knowledge and to think that, contrary to what the totalizing perspective of modernity tells us, these pieces of knowledge have relevance, breadth, and complexity. All this, of course, without using the parameters of hegemonic Eurocentric philosophy and science, which brings out the complexity of such exercise. If Catherine Walsh (2007) defends that modern science is responsible for perpetuating superiority-inferiority relations between colonizers and colonized, we can also turn to her definition of what decoloniality is (Walsh, 2005) to think that research in our contexts must, in addition to considering "other ways of being, living, and existing," evoke other ways of configuring ourselves in the face of different paradigms and pieces of knowledge.

The full exercise of decolonizing academic research, considering that coloniality manifests itself from the consideration of paradigms (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021) to research practices in colonized contexts, only occurs when colonial oppression is seen as a problem to be overcome. Smith (1999) proposes that research objectives should be communitarian before being academic. Doing research in the periphery needs to break with academicism and the exclusion of content that separates the working/marginalized classes from what is written about them and that interests them, building non-extractivist methods (Santos, 2018) but collective ones.

The complexity I see in the decolonizing process of knowledge production and research is related to Smith's (1999, p. 1) perspective on how “the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism.”. If we, in fact, assume a decolonial lens, we need to start a search for terms and meanings of knowledge production that somehow are significant



for us and our people. In this sense, I look at Arias's (2010b; 2012) call for the understanding of *corazonar* (to heart/heartening) as the revolutionary act of embracing the subjectivity of *sentipensar* (to feelthink) as a way of knowing. Arias defends that coloniality is responsible for how we separate our feelings and identities from what we understand by knowledge. But one of the most important points established by Arias (2010a) is that our struggle to define our knowledge using Eurocentric terms is to fight against coloniality using colonial instruments. Rather than defending our “epistemologies,” it is better to understand them as *sabidurias* (*wisdoms*).

In search of insurgent proposals, we find in Mbembe's (2016) reflections that lead us to think about what it means to decolonize the university. I find a refuge and a fortress in the writings of the Cameroonian philosopher to think about ways of transforming the problems we encounter as subalterns in universities on the periphery of the world. Mbembe states that decolonizing the university means rethinking assessment methods, reframing students' views, and expanding policies on access and permanence in higher education. Decolonizing research also means fighting for dignity while researching the periphery and considering, for example, the reality of the researcher-worker (Mazzetti et al., 2019). Mbembe also turns to the epistemic question and its relationship to the search for real emancipation in our universities, mentioning a point that I have already discussed at length throughout this text: how the hegemonic/Eurocentric pattern, which represses

Decolonial knowledge and its perspective on pluriversality are crucial at this point. We should also look to other theories and epistemic fields for perspectives that consider these issues. Truly considering our identities and the inequalities that run through us is the way to strengthen ourselves, our university work, and the social change projects that we crave and claim to fight for. Sometimes, the legitimacy we seek is located in ourselves and the people who, like us, are challenging academic-colonial formality and building bridges of alterity and inclusion. In this sense, I find the reflections of Millora and Still (2020, p. 27), which propose the categories of relationality, situatedness, and reciprocity as ways of decolonizing research that “involves understanding research as a continuous process of ethical engagement with communities and places of research, and treating research as a process of relationship-building, negotiating difference and sameness” and the most important “cultivating conversation and of sharing knowledge and struggle.”

But what is always urgent in this process of occupying the academic space is to understand the relevance of taking on the epistemologies of the periphery in our work and their transformative dimensions for who we are and what we do. Seeking other possibilities for

epistemological foundations does not mean continuing to develop theories and concepts without commitment to the re-signification of practice, but rather the opposite: as Dussel (1977) teaches us, our theories must be committed to the real liberation of our people, and this is not mere idealization but represents an ethical-political commitment to all of us, people from the periphery. We have learned this from Freirean wisdom, theory, and practice as transformative categories to achieve and reframe the paths to our liberation - something inherent to pedagogical practice committed to emancipation (Fortuna, 2016).

## Final Considerations

The place where we, the subalternized, research is a place that acts violently towards us. When we occupy these spaces to contest them, we deal with the challenge of making them listen to us, locally and globally. When subalternized researchers, aware of their condition, research, they need to seek refuge in themselves and their epistemologies so that their processes of resistance can be solidified. Spivak and Castro-Gómez teach us that Foucault did not consider our specifications when discussing power relations. European postmodernity does not include our paradigms. And decolonial theories, our refuge and fortress, are far from having a place in the university.

It is therefore necessary to (d)enunciate that subalternized, if we understand and consider their identities, need to rethink their identities as researchers. They need to understand how coloniality is reflected in their research. In exercising what they do, they do not consider who they are and the knowledge and experiences that form them. When they assume decolonial postures and overcome the logic of academic exclusion, they will face the challenges of being invisibilized by academia, which insists on making knowledge products.

It is also necessary to learn with the wisdom of our lands. Understanding the importance of valuing our trajectories of resistance not aiming to romanticize our suffering but to notice how they are examples of colonial oppression and, at the same time, examples of epistemic and methodologic disobedience. Hearing the voices of those who have resisted before me and made me able to be where I am, I say: let's not fear our subjectivity. Embracing it is starting our decolonial revolution.

Finally, I call for an understanding that liberation projects that do not include our voices and knowledge do not truly liberate us. Decolonizing the peripheral university is possible and is underway, even if decolonial researchers are not the keynote speakers at major academic events. A knowledge revolution is emerging from the ground that gave birth to us.

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