

## FOREWORD

### Intellectual work and research strategies

Gladys Tzul Tzul

AMAQ INSTITUTE

**Translated from Spanish by Patience L. Epps, University of Texas at Austin**

These six articles, all fruit of the work of Indigenous researchers, come to us at an important moment, feeding the existing debates on “fieldwork” led by Indigenous researchers in the social sciences generally. Yet the volume *Theoretical reflections around the role of fieldwork in linguistics and anthropology: Contributions of Indigenous researchers from southern Mexico* is a pioneering study into the critiques, discourses, and limitations associated with fieldwork and research in the places where we live and where our families live. This critical edge must be considered when thinking about fieldwork and research in general.

For several years, Indigenous researchers have sought to understand communal political logic; to write about and record Indigenous history; and to document and valorize the linguistic structures of the places where our grandparents lived and where the next generations of our families will grow up. This condition presents a series of difficulties and challenges for research, while at the same time it has forced us to imagine research strategies that combine critical rigor with care. Herein lies the importance of this volume, as it presents six reflections from the points of view of five women and one man who have overcome the difficulties of documenting, recording, and interviewing in social and linguistic research.

Here Zapotec, Chatino, Tseltal and Tsotsil researchers offer us a vigorous reflection into their material and symbolic conditions. It is these conditions that have shaped their strategies for addressing the challenges presented by time constraints, gender relations, and working conditions in carrying out their research, and have at the same time driven political processes of language revitalization. For this reason and in this sense, it is useful to contrast the male Indigenous researcher's unique experience of the research and fieldwork process; this volume offers the reader an opportunity to analyze these differences.

Accordingly, these articles offer us a view of the material and subjective conditions associated with academic research and documentation, and also of the strategies that communities themselves develop for labeling and interpreting the world, and for preserving and curating their knowledge.

From the start, as investigators of our own struggles, we have insiders' perspectives on social intrigues, political disputes, and the complex and contradictory nature of community histories. Our status as internally positioned researchers thus forces us to consider the critical horizons and political implications of what we wish to promote through our research: to support the political demands of our communities, and to reassess theoretical approaches to characterizing native peoples.

The authors of these six articles have all been trained in research methods and are involved in multiple theoretical and political debates. In their academic careers, they publish and present their research at academic conferences, like any other researcher.<sup>1</sup> In several of these debates, they have had to swim against the current, pushing back against hierarchical and racist structures that prevail in academia, both in Latin America and the United States. Moreover, these authors were born into and remain entwined within the communal networks that organize their lives collectively with their nuclear and extended families; they are a part of the community organization of festivals, funerals, forest stewardship and the various other activities that take place in this communal world.

For this reason, there is a *double source of power* from which their research proceeds — power in both methodological and theoretical terms — which broadens the horizon of debates concerning what is generally known as “fieldwork in our communities of origin”.

Some of the fundamental issues addressed across the articles, relating to fieldwork as a component of research, are indicated below:

- a. The authors dialogue and converse with various studies addressing the issue of fieldwork in Indigenous communities. I refer to Linda Tuhiwai

---

<sup>1</sup> I had the opportunity to attend the session that gave rise to this volume at the Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), in May 2019 in Boston.

Smith (1999) and her work '*Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*', and many other sources that parallel her research.

- b. Fieldwork is not an abstract place; it is the place of family, of festivals, of relationships, of disputes, of obligation. For this reason, fieldwork is also the political work of interpretation.
- c. As researchers, their work is under constant scrutiny from community members, which may generate both mistrust and expectations (Margarita Martínez Pérez; Hilaria Cruz Cruz; Isaura de los Santos).
- d. The conditions for doing fieldwork are linked to the historical background of the families to which we belong. Just as the research will be questioned, depending on the results, the family also will be examined (Hilaria Cruz Cruz; Ana D. Alonso Ortiz).
- e. Research resulting from investigation based on fieldwork in the researcher's own community has been discounted by the corporate academy. Opinions from within the institutional academy concerning the intellectual work of researchers who investigate their own struggles are based in racist and classist arguments. At the same time, the work of Indigenous academics generates debates within these communities themselves (Emiliana Cruz Cruz).
- f. Fieldwork carried out by researchers who study their own communities is potentially profound, and sidesteps the clumsiness and confusion that are often experienced by researchers who are outsiders (Jaime Pérez González).

The articles in this volume contribute to the continued exploration of key postulates of the general social sciences: How does one investigate? What are the effects of this research on the researcher? Authors who initiated this debate focused, for example, on the notion of the subject and object of research, and the power relations that accompany this relationship. Rabinow (1977) problematizes his research and fieldwork through his knowledge of himself as an outsider in Morocco, and observes that this puts him in a relationship of power over the subjects. In contrast to Rabinow, we have the methodological turn proposed by Rivera Cusicanqui in *Sociology of the Image* (2015), a book in which the sociologist presents her students from El Alto, in La Paz, Bolivia, with strategies to investigate the stories, struggles, and geographies in which they themselves are inserted. This author discusses research techniques, participation, and observation — fieldwork — and observes that “participation is not an instrument at the service of observation, but rather its prerequisite”. On the other hand, Spivak writes in *Studies of Subalternity: Deconstruction of historiography* (1985), that in her work as a Hindu woman, scholar, and writer, she simultaneously occupies the position of subject and object in the research process.

This set of articles expands and elaborates on this discussion of the ethical, political, and epistemological foundations of social research: How and in what ways

are linguistic theory and science produced from Indigenous communities? What implications does research have for Indigenous researchers, when this is sited in their communities of origin? These are key questions, and here we have six voices that address them through contextualized stories.

Finally, I observe that research is a job, and as such we are subject to criticism. While in our communities, we are frequently the targets of questions such as ‘how much do you earn from this work?’, and of comments concerning whether we ‘accumulate profits from our research’. Yet I think we must recognize that also present in our communities are merchants, farmers, carpenters, bricklayers, who likewise work and may be criticized for their trades and their outcomes. In the same way, we too will be criticized as researchers.

In fact, this condition brings our research process much closer to reality. It pushes us to be more reflective and reveals parts of the critical apparatus of the self-regulating networks in which we have lived. Intellectual work is also a *tequio* — a communal duty — and as such it will be collective, measured, criticized...

## References

- Rabinow, Paul. 1977. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. A Quantum Book. University of California Press.
- Rivera Cusicanqui, S. 2015. *Sociología de la imagen. Miradas chi'ixi desde la historia andina*. Tinta Limon Ediciones/ Traficantes de Sueños: Buenos Aires.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing methodologies*. New Zealand: ZED books.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1985. “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”. In Ranajit Guha (ed.). *Subaltern Studies IV: writings on South Asian history and society*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 330-363.