Epistemic countercolonial possibilities in collaborations between grassroots and universities: a Favela da Maré study (Brazil)

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Abstract

Identifying knowledge with power geometries and the possible constructions of it – the epistemological field – with domination, this essay looks into colonialism and coloniality to explore countercolonial epistemological possibilities. Drawing from the Afrodiasporic-Indigenous confluence richness, we first explore pathways and strategies for conducting countercolonial research in the global South. Second, we argue that an ontological turn is underway in the peripheries, where subjects have been making themselves visible within and from their territories. This is to say that countercolonial bottom-up knowledges and epistemologies emerge from marginalized inhabitants who may be the central agents of collaborative knowledge production with universities and other institutions. In order to demonstrate such possibilities, the paper presents the Redes da Maré organization and its territorial engagement methodology through a knowledge co-production project example, analyzing the emancipatory role of a double ontological and epistemological turn.

Identificando la conoscenza con le geometrie del potere e le sue possibili costruzioni – il campo epistemologico – con la dominazione, questo saggio analizza il colonialismo e la colonialità per esplorare le possibilità epistemologiche controcoloniali. Partendo dalla ricchezza della confluenza afrodiasporica-indigena, esplora innanzitutto percorsi e strategie per condurre la ricerca controcoloniale nel Sud globale. Di seguito, sostiene che una svolta ontologica si sta verificando nelle periferie, dove i soggetti si sono resi visibili all'interno e a partire dai loro territori. Ciò significa che conoscenze ed epistemologie controcoloniali dal basso emergono da abitanti marginalizzati, che possono essere gli agenti centrali della produzione collaborativa di conoscenza con università e altre istituzioni. Per dimostrare tali possibilità, l'articolo presenta le Redes da Maré e la sua metodologia di impegno territoriale attraverso un esempio di progetto di coproduzione della conoscenza. Infine, analizza i ruoli emancipatori di una doppia svolta ontologica ed epistemologica.

Keywords: ontological turn; grassroots process; knowledge co-production.
Parole chiave: svolta ontologica; processi dal basso; co-produzione di sapere.

Introduction

The so-called 'scientific knowledge' construction in Europe has historically been marked by epistemic hierarchies that marginalize and silence everything that has not fallen within its rationalist frameworks – from social groups to ways of knowing and relating. Since knowledge is associated with power and epistemology is linked to domination, the political possibility of independent praxes is shattered (Jameson, 1998: 107): «making all forms of knowledge and measurement […] into forms of discipline, control and domination» essentially eliminates the political recognition of the other and of negotiation in knowledge building. Within the context of the «coloniality of knowledge» (Quijano, 2005), the knowledge produced by universities – especially in the Global North – has been regarded as the only valid and legitimate form. Other ways of knowing, particularly those rooted in Indigenous (Latin American, African and Afro-diasporic) worldviews, have been subordinated and devalued in the development of 'scientific knowledge'.

This article proposes a discussion of the political possibilities embedded in scientific production carried out *desde abajo* – that is, whose protagonism is centered around everyday practices of marginalized communities who have undertaken an ontological turn, by seeing the world from their territories (Viveiros de Castro, 1998), and have questioned the epistemic hierarchies and power relations shaped by social and historical contexts. Pursuing such practices requires openness to diverse ontologies and epistemologies, acknowledging the significance of locally generated readings and marginalized communities' critical worldviews (Cusicanqui, 2008).

Research aimed at transforming power relations within and through knowledge production can become both an instrument for expanding scientific understanding and, more importantly, a tool for countercolonization processes. Drawing from Bispo dos Santos' advocacy, our objective is to explore pathways and strategies for conducting countercolonial research, questioning whether and how it is possible to decolonize the university as an institution. The *Construindo Pontes* project, a research initiative led by Redes da Maré in partnership with research groups from five different universities, will help us explore their relationship and positionality in regards to a situated ontology and a bottom-

up epistemology.

Redes da Maré is a paradigmatic grassroots organization with a widely respected history of advocacy activism (Farage and Barros, 2022; Montuori, 2022) that we were fortunate enough to have access to, given the fact that we are non-black academics. Our data were collected from secondary products developed by the institution and the researchers involved in the project. Although we have previously developed other initiatives in dialogue with Redes da Maré, we are not members of the organization and did not participate in this specific project; therefore this paper does not aim to represent the voices of the community but follows a critical interpretive approach to reflect on how such processes expand the possibilities of doing research that subverts academic centrality and shows that critical knowledge production can emerge based on different centralities. Rather than reconstructing and evaluating the project empirically, the objective is to draw epistemological lessons from its processes and discourses.

Colonialism, coloniality, and countercolonialism

For Quijano (2005), colonialism can only be understood with its counterpart, coloniality. Colonization refers to the historical process of conquest, control and exploitation of territories and peoples, mainly during the period of European expansion that began at the end of the 15th century. Coloniality refers to the structures of power, control and forms of knowledge that emerged with colonization and that persist in contemporary societies. According to the author, three hierarchical mediators carry out the continuation of colonialism into coloniality: 'being', whose hierarchy is based on race; 'power', whose foundation is in the capitalist mode of production, constituting a hierarchy based on class; and 'knowledge', which helps to reproduce the two hierarchies while compelling a third, a supposedly legitimate knowledge that subjugates other forms of knowledge. That is, through ontological, economic and epistemological domination, the capitalist-colonial model privileges the European knowledge matrix and perpetuates epistemic colonialism into the «coloniality of knowledge» (Quijano, 2005). The supposed neutrality of science is a construction that masks its intrinsic connection with colonial social and economic dynamics (Quijano,

2005; Cusicanqui, 2008).

For Cusicanqui (2008), the colonial inheritance is structural, interscalar, and at the same time quotidian – macro and micro-political in its power distribution. Colonial power, though many times forgotten or disguised, underlies our society's structure and ethnic Other. It

- defines colonized identities from the outside, «condemning systematized conceptualizations generated from within to silence and untranslatability» (Cusicanqui, 2008: 160);

- neglects multiple identities, keeping most intellectuals, including locals, from understanding intersectionalities, particularly regarding global South ethnicities;

- drives intellectuals to a flattening and homogenizing view of labor and modes of production;

- leads social scientists to believe in a «social and cultural homogeneity, nonexistent in our countries due to the continuity of colonial structures of domination and discrimination [and from there in] the interchangeability of experiences, that is, the fundamental translatability» of colonized lives (Cusicanqui, 2008: 165); and

- reproduces the epistemic hierarchy between subjects and objects «instrumentaliz[ing] the needs and demands of popular sectors toward collective goals» (Cusicanqui, 2008: 165) in formulas that have little attachment to local cosmogonies and wishes.

The need for research to be responsive to the subjects' interests has only surfaced in the 1970s, and it was still interpreted by exogenous academics, while indigenous movements were already fighting for «ethnic self-awareness» and to be subjects of their own narratives, «displacing intellectuals and social scientists […] from their role as intermediaries» (Cusicanqui, 2008: 160) and rewriting their own history, an authentic ontological turn.

Ontological turn and countercolonial research

Countercolonialism «is simple: you want to colonize me, and I refuse to be colonized; it is me defending myself», writes Bispo

dos Santos (2023: 58). It is about a set of practices embedded in ways of living that resist colonial logics and propose relationships among people and with nature in which colonial hierarchies are replaced by organic relations. In Bispo's work, "counter" implies the invention of new possibilities. The word «countercolonial [comes] into play to weaken colonialism. We [...] are extracting the poison of colonialism to turn it into an antidote against itself» (Bispo dos Santos, 2023: 58).

As Bispo dos Santos argues, «any government that governs this state will be a colonial government, because the state itself is colonialist» (Bispo dos Santos, 2023: 74). By the same token, we question if any university research is colonial or if it is possible to conduct countercolonial research within universities. Following Bispo dos Santos ideas, we would need to countercolonize the structure of university research itself.

A counter-colonial research practice must actively explore alternative ways of producing knowledge, inventing new methods and pathways. More than simply connecting the university and the community as distinct entities, this approach demands weaving them together – transforming the university into the community and the community into the university. Ideally, undergraduate and graduate programs, research laboratories, and academic faculties should be composed of individuals from *favelas*, quilombos, and Indigenous territories, just as it is equally necessary to foster and support research infrastructures within these communities themselves.

Countercolonial research is an ethical commitment inseparable from everyday life. It does not fit into the rigid frameworks of field reports, academic calendars, or funding agencies' protocols. It aligns itself with a cyclical, situated, and inconclusive understanding of knowledge, an ongoing process of 'beginning, going half the way, and beginning again' (Bispo dos Santos, 2023). As Bispo dos Santos suggests, it best resonates in oral exchanges, conversations, and informal dialogues. It is also a tool for the effective decolonization of knowledge and scientific practices and works as an active agent in dismantling colonial structures and repositioning academia to empower subaltern communities and construct ontological narratives that reflect their own realities.

When elaborating on directly experienced facts, relationships,

and situations, bottom-up groups of actors reconstruct translocal logics and interdependencies that change both their self-perception and their perception of the Other, leading to a transformation in how individuals recognize their right to express themselves both individually and in relation to Others (Barbosa and Pereira, 2018) – another facet of an ontological shift that builds the foundation for critical engagement with the city as a whole and with the underlying power structures. Work undertaken in and through these groups has bolstered neighborhood residents' capacities to live, create, and reinvent their plural existence in the city, whether in terms of knowledge and economic skills, the creation and enjoyment of their cultures, or in supporting their fight for full citizenship. This has given rise to a contemporary and widespread ontological turn that starts with marginalized citizens' presentation in and from their territories, and continues through a collective emancipatory path to visibility and recognition (Capanema-Alvares, Cognetti and Silva Martins, 2025).

The ontological turn in grassroots-academic relationships

Academics who engage in research-action to produce shared knowledge through encounter and situated stories (Doucet and Frichot, 2018) generally aim to connect specific demands rooted in local aspects of social life with an understanding of how these are linked to broader structural processes. While this approach fosters active collaboration, where both parties contribute to and learn from the knowledge co-construction – potentially challenging traditional power dynamics in scientific research – it still risks implicitly preserving a separation between the researcher and the phenomenon under study. It is therefore essential to avoid reproducing the figure of the researcher as an external agent motivated by condescension or purely academic interests and be attentive to pre-established analytical categories that reduce complex practices and phenomena into theoretical labels that inadequately translate lived realities.

For Cusicanqui, only if «the communities and movements investigated actively participate in all phases of the research, the complexity and richness of the ways of thinking and visions of history generated by the actors themselves in their life experience will be revealed» (Cusicanqui, 2008: 173). Moreover,

driven by the urgency of daily demands, community grassroots organizations function at a faster pace than academic research (Anhorn, 2021). As Fernandes emphasizes, the key to fostering "rhythmical synchronies" between grassroots movements and research institutions lies in academia's willingness to recalibrate its own rhythms to align with the communities' temporalities and urgencies[1].

Notwithstanding the asynchronies and supplanting the coloniality of knowledge, grassroots groups in Latin America have reached new levels of self-determination and empowerment through the search for their restitution as subjects of the act of knowing. In a double-entry approach (Harvey, 2012), community leaders have entered universities and graduate programs and have learned global North research tools and knowledge systems, constituting themselves as mediators of different worldviews while remaining in their communities exchanging grassroots and indigenous knowledge, and building on strategies that collectively question and challenge dominating knowledge systems and institutions.

Decentralizing the researcher's vantage point implies epistemological redistributions in the sense of knowledge production, validation, and the construction of different frames and critical literacy. This requires the training of popular researchers, both young and adults, to construct knowledge itself (autonomously and collectively) and the recognition of the situatedness of popular researchers as actors deeply engaged in proactive critique as a reference for securing rights. In confronting socioeconomic inequalities and the corporeal distinctions of rights, impoverished residents learn to value their territory of speech and action in order to build autonomous rights agendas through multiple forms of collective organization.

Using the example of Redes da Maré, we attempt to 1) bring *desde abajo* another way of building knowledge that stems from grassroots organizations instituted by peripheral inhabitants[2], and 2) demonstrate possibilities for situating the production of knowledge in the concrete terrain of everyday experiences of

1 Personal communication from Ana Fernandes during the International Conference "The Role of the University in Fragile Territories", Politecnico di Milano, Milan, May 6, 2025.
2 In Lefebvre's sense, including all residents with rights to the city, no matter their legal status.

populations subjugated by the colonial domination strategies. In this regard, our intention is not to validate theory through empirical confirmation, but rather to allow this experience to inspire and challenge theoretical frameworks. As external researchers engaging with the realities of Maré, we also acknowledge our positionality within the broader coloniality diagram and remain aware of the limitations that this brief intervention entails.

Contextualizing Maré and Redes da Maré

Located in Rio de Janeiro's northern zone, the Maré Complex is the city's 12th most populous neighborhood with approximately 130.000 residents (IBGE census, 2022), distributed across 16 distinct communities (*favelas*). Maré's formation is closely tied to two historical processes: the waves of internal migration in Brazil since the 1940s, and the large-scale evictions of slums located in Rio de Janeiro's wealth neighborhoods between the 1960s and 1980s. During these periods, while a small number of families were relocated to newly built – yet structurally precarious – public housing projects, the majority settled through squatting in marshy, low-lying areas and landfills.

Its colonialist repressive history started back in 1947, with a military unit installation nearby and the consequent control of residents, required to pay fees and prohibited from building permanent housing, which led to the creation, in *Morro do Timbau* (the first Maré's community), of the first neighborhood association in Rio de Janeiro. Residents' associations, notably led by female leaders, were crucial in their continuous struggle for access to basic rights and paved the way for other, more encompassing organizations. Although Maré is marked by deep historical inequalities, systemic state neglect, and constant rights violations by the police, it is also characterized by strong social mobilization, vibrant cultural production, and the development of community-based resistance technologies against institutional and paramilitary violence.

The creation of a preparatory course for university entrance in order to overcome residents' difficulties in accessing the neighboring universities in 1997 further engaged young leaderships with grassroots community mobilizations, a process that led to the foundation of Redes da Maré and its formal establishment in 2007. The organization's core mission is to guarantee and expand

the rights of Maré residents by overcoming both the internal inequalities within the neighborhood and those that exist between Maré and the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Over the years, Redes da Maré has significantly expanded its activities, becoming one of the most prominent community organizations in Brazil. It currently runs more than fifty projects and programs, directly impacting around 8.000 people per month and indirectly reaching the entire complex. Its activities are structured around five thematic pillars: 1) Right to Education; 2) Right to Art, Culture, Memory, and Identity; 3) Right to Public Safety and Access to Justice; 4) Urban and Socio-Environmental Rights; and 5) Right to Health. They are supported by five cross-cutting operational sectors: Social Mobilization, Internal Training, Monitoring and Evaluation, Communication, and Administrative and Financial Management. This framework enables the organization to operate in a cohesive, sustainable, and methodologically consistent manner, currently through ten community facilities spread across the territory, in addition to its main headquarters.

A key factor that distinguishes Redes da Maré in the local and national community ecosystem is its unique methodology – their "way of being and doing", based on research about the territory as the central axis of all actions and working in the intersection of continuous research, community mobilization, and advocacy. This territorial approach is emphasized in the last organization's Annual Report (Redes da Maré, 2023), which highlights the synergy between knowledge production and social mobilization, resulting in long-term programs and initiatives that directly influence public policies and have tangible impacts on the community.

Through this interconnected set of actions, Redes da Maré consolidates an authorial methodology in which the territory is the starting point and the ultimate goal (Sousa Silva and Heritage, 2021), beginning with residents' concrete needs to co-create solutions that are both localized and transformative while integrative and focused on strengthening local networks. Citizens themselves create the essential institutions for collective action and full exercise of citizenship recognizing knowledge, practices, and organizational strategies that emerge from within the community, and challenging top-down development models that often ignore the specific realities of marginalized territories.

The ontological and epistemic turns in practice: example of a knowledge co-production project

The collaborative approach adopted by Redes da Maré strengthens both human resources and the social technologies developed within the community, while its partnerships with other third-sector, public, private and academic institutions both in Brazil and abroad are firmly anchored in their local ontologies and concrete needs.

Conducted between 2019 and 2021, the *Construindo Pontes* (*Building Bridges*)[3] project's primary objective was to map challenges and resources mobilized by Maré residents in addressing mental health issues in a context shaped by armed violence, insecurity, and systematic rights violations. Its design and implementation involved community leaders informed by local residents needs and were marked by a broad collaboration, involving four universities from two countries and seven research groups with expertise ranging from statistics and cultural economics to mental health, social work, and the social sciences. The People's Palace Projects, a research group affiliated with Queen Mary University of London, had previously collaborated with Redes da Maré on initiatives related to public safety and the prevention of violence against women, and made it to the main international partner.

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, ensuring a contextually grounded understanding of residents' experiences. The methodology was built on the Redes' experience from its own 2013 Community Census, breaking with traditional academic research models and repositioning the favela as the subject of knowledge production. These processes directly address ontological and epistemological questions such as «who is authorized to produce knowledge, and who defines what constitutes knowledge?» (Anhorn, 2021: 60). Oliveira also emphasizes that the research «anchored all methodological and thematic sophistication within the popular territory» (Oliveira, 2021: 35), placing the favela at the core of the investigative process. The interviewer group, composed primarily of women from Maré and other *favelas*, combined robust academic training with deep

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3 The original project's title was *Building the Barricades*, evoking historical imagery of civil uprisings and defense. It was changed to *Construindo Pontes* (*Building Bridges*) to avoid warlike connotations and highlight the project's relational and collective focus.

lived experience in the territory. This dual expertise was essential for establishing a qualified and empathetic listening process, creating a trust-based environment unlikely to be achieved by external researchers, and addressing sensitive topics like grief, fear, violence, and trauma. Altogether, they ensured the survey's rigor and validity.

As Eliana Silva, one of the Redes' founder states, «the more we hire people from the favela, the better the knowledge we are able to produce, because these are people who identify with and have lived or are living similar realities» (Sousa e Siva and Heritage, 2021: 41). A resident and collaborator sentences: «The important novelty is the promotion of a worldview in which the residents' experiences are the cornerstones. [...] It is necessary to bring to light their diverse experiences to build and continue their struggles» (Silva, 2025: 147).

The knowledge generated by the *Construindo pontes* project returned to the community in the form of tangible actions, including dialogue circles, workshops, cultural activities, and collective understandings that continue to fuel social mobilization and transformation, besides yielding academic reports and publications. It exemplifies how research practice can become a strategy for residents to value their territory of speech and to enact epistemological redistributions, fostering the construction of different frames and of critical countercolonial literacy.

The practices developed by Redes da Maré exemplify how grassroots initiatives can lead the ontological and epistemological turn that this article seeks to discuss. The organization invents its own pathways for research and collective learning, producing knowledge that emerges from the life of the territory and not from institutional mandates. This inversion – where *favelas* become both a site and an agent of theory – challenges the very notion of where legitimate knowledge is supposed to come from.

The organization promotes a reversal of hierarchical positions between university and community. Partnerships with academic groups occur on an equal footing, with the university entering the *favela* to learn – not to extract data. The *favela*, in this sense, becomes an epistemic reference rather than an object of study. Also, the invention of new research methods and pathways demonstrates that epistemologies can originate from community needs rather than disciplinary protocols. The documentation

produced within the *Construindo Pontes* project, for instance, reflects an effort to make research a tool for political action and everyday transformation, rather than a detached academic exercise or a quantifiable showcase, despite the numbers brought by its reports[4].

Knowledge production is thus relocated to informal environments taking place in open spaces, schools, community centers, and everyday conversations, thus becoming part of collective life. Finally, Maré's practices are rooted in their epistemic production of everyday life in the territory. Knowledge is generated through dialogue, daily experience, and situated observation – processes that intertwine with personal histories, material conditions, and collective struggles, constitutive of a rootedness that forges the very ontological dimension of the turn.

Conclusion

Countercolonial research emerges as a radical paradigm for the production of scientific knowledge, provoking ontological and epistemological redistributions that cannot be accommodated within deeply entrenched colonial structures. It represents a profound transformation of the power geometries underlying knowledge production, and demands both the epistemological and the ontological shifts. The first one involves confronting and dismantling traditional scientific knowledge through the self-translation of community-based forms of knowing, while the second requires a deep reassessment of the research context and situatedness, which leads to an openness to the multiplicity of ontologies embodied in diverse cultures, destituting academic and colonial protagonism.

The experience of Redes da Maré illustrates how these shifts can be enacted in practice. The organization invents new research pathways and methodologies grounded in the territory's everyday life, transforming the *favela* from an object of study into a subject of theory building. Through projects such as *Construindo Pontes*, the Maré community promotes an inversion of the hierarchical relationship between universities and local actors: rather than receiving external knowledge, the community generates it, offering situated understandings that later reach academic spaces. Finally,

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4 See the project's webpage, https://www.redesdamare.org.br/br/info/63/construindo-pontes.

its work roots knowledge production in the territory, linking epistemic creation to the rhythms, memories, and struggles of everyday life. These practices demonstrate that decolonial and countercolonial research should operate simultaneously in both epistemological and ontological fields, revealing the production of knowledge outside academic centrality as a condition for the renewal of critical thought itself.

Despite the transformative potential of such collaborations, the relationship between social organizations and universities is marked by contradictory temporalities and unequal resources. Their rhythms seldom align as academic research follows long cycles of reflection, funding, and publication, while community organizations operate under the pressure of immediate social needs. Creating "synchronies" between these timescales becomes both a challenge and a limitation. At the same time, the very conditions of social exclusion – lack of time, resources, and sometimes trust – limit broader participation of residents in research activities, reducing opportunities for co-authorship and shared authorship of knowledge. Such conditions may be determinants of another difficulty, related to scaling local organizations' actions up to include the whole community and, maybe, the city. Their relationships with universities in general also reveal a very restrictive gatekeeping policy, an objecting mistrust, given the historical extractive role adopted by the latter, which may distance a variety of valid questions. These asymmetries reveal one of the central dilemmas of countercolonial practice: how to translate situated knowledge into wider academic and political arenas without erasing the material constraints and everyday struggles that give it meaning within the territory.

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