



## MINGAS DE LA PALABRA

### WORD MINGAS

## A book on modern Indigenous literatures [1]

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*-You are now the author of numerous books and articles on the study of Indigenous languages. How did you decide this would be your field of research?*

I've written prose and poetry since I was seven years old, and maybe even before that, so I learned to play games with words, and as we know, children take games very seriously. The wonders and mysteries of nature have always inspired and educated me in a sensorial way. And well, who is our first and last teacher if not Mother Earth herself? Three days after my ninth birthday I wrote a poetic dialogue with the volcano, Nevado del Ruiz, after the catastrophe in 1985 when its eruption caused four avalanches, burying thousands of people alive in the Andean town of Armero and the surrounding area. My older sister, Pilar, asked me to read the poem on a late night radio show. And that's where I first experienced the value of the intimate, shared word, just as we're doing right now. When I was still a kid, I heard some of the Indigenous mythical stories and was interested by their cosmological reflections on the relationship between man and nature. However, my collaborations with the Indigenous communities would begin concretely when I was a teenager, in a field linked to the healing and consecratory exercise of the poetic word: traditional medicine.

Since the mid-90s I've had the opportunity to learn a little from, and marvel a lot at, the profound wisdom of the taitas and shamans of the Colombian-Amazon piedmont. Around that time, when I was an undergrad accompanied by a philosopher friend and some lit major friends, we founded an international conference of art and religions from around the world. We invited a few Indigenous wise men and women to speak, discuss and walk with Islamic, Hindu, Jewish and Christian spiritual leaders, among other denominations. I should mention that, at that time, the complex geo-cultural configurations of Colombia and South America as a whole had an inexplicable magnetic pull on me. Because of this, one day I decided that, instead of going to class, I would grab the first regional bus leaving the terminal that day, to arrive the next day, by chance, or better yet, by synchronicity, in San Agustín, a town nestled in a privileged corner of the Andes and in the vicinity of the celebrated pre-Columbian monoliths of the werejaguar and the double self.

I spent a few days reflecting in solitude and ran into a farmer who told me a wonderful story about the Páramo de las Papas, the hydrographic star and source of some of the country's main rivers (the Magdalena, Cauca, and Caquetá). So, without thinking twice and despite little preparation, I decided to walk for several days on a road that took me through the daunting mountains, lakes, moors, and dormant volcanoes of the country's Andean southwest. As I walked, my first book took shape: *Escritos del hambre* (Notes on Hunger). I titled it so because I was basically hungry all day every day, though each night I was usually the beneficiary of some farmer's generosity. When I got back to Bogotá, I wasn't the same, I was someone else. So, as I continued to study literature and backpack through Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, the Colombian Andes, I realised through personal experience that the Indigenous wisdom, their education style, spirituality, sciences and verbal arts were less known to us even than the contributions made by the cultures of the Far East. Academia now seemed to me excessively eurocentric, some of its very foundations, colonized. This is how I arrived at writing my graduate work on the symbolism of the hero in the Popol Vuh, the Huarochirí, the Watunna, the Ayvú Rapytá, the Zroara Nebura and other Indigenous verbal arts (the book was published in 2004 with the Andrés Bello Convention and The University of the Andes).

So, that's how my career began, in some ways as a bridge between different loose threads but always as an apprentice and working to create, without always knowing it, individual literary works with a collective character to them (I've recently finished my book *Andadas, pequeñas prosas viajeras / Adventures: Short Travel Passages*). In fact, the stories I would hear along the way convinced me of the importance of pointing my reflection and my consciousness inward as well as toward my home. I now agreed with José Martí when he affirmed, prophetically, in his book *Our America, 1891*, that "The European university must give way to the American one. We should learn the history of America, from the Incas through now, like the back of our hand. Though it may mean not learning about the Greek archons, our Greece is preferable to the one that isn't ours. For us, it is much more important."

With this, near the end of the 90s, I wrote an essay on the novel *Los Ríos Profundos* by the Quechua Peruvian José María Arguedas. That text won me support from the Andrés Bello Convention and I began my master's studies in Cusco, Peru. There, I was surrounded by students and professors from all over the continent, including educators and creators from Indigenous communities. In those years, at the dawn of the new millennium, I had the opportunity to travel by bus, boat, and on foot through the heart of the continent, and with that privilege, I was able to get to know more closely some of the deeper realities of the agricultural, Indigenous, urban, rural, afrodescendant, and mixed-race communities. On returning to Colombia, I founded the American Literature and Folk Literature courses at the Universidad Javieriana to promote the academic, intercultural study of contemporary Indigenous thought. A few years later, after some weeks traveling alone in Mexico and Guatemala (and presenting my first book to Indigenous students in Texcoco and Mexico City in collaboration with the Mayan poet Jorge Cocom Pech), I took on the job of coordinating the National Intercultural Education Program at the Universidad Externado de Colombia. From 2004 to 2012, I collaborated intensely on the creation of university grants for young Indigenous researchers, on supporting their writing processes and epistemological acceptance, and on the co-creation of the Chair of Indigenous Communities as well as in the publication of a book co-written with the students from the communities and other collaborators from Peru, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico.

In 2012, conscious of the need to keep preparing myself in the context of intercultural processes that were flourishing back then, and which continue to do so all over the world, I accepted a doctoral grant from the University of North Carolina (UNC), where I had the opportunity to study and collaborate with the Mayan intellectual Emilio del Valle and a Cherokee critic Christopher Teuton; to get to know the work of decolonial thinkers Catherine Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo; to found a film club with my wife Alejandra and my friend Miguel Rojas; and also to invite to campus and translate the work of Indigenous writers from Colombia and Chile, as well as the poets Carlos Miguel Gómez and Juan Carlos Caicedo Mera. The Spring of 2015 was especially meaningful for me because I was invited to the Institute for the Study of the Americas at UNC to teach a course on current film and video produced by different Indigenous organizations. I was deeply moved by the reflections of the Chicano students as well as those of Indigenous migrants in the United States. This started a new phase of cooperation for me, which continues to mature since my recent return to Colombia as we organize an intercultural network of support for writers, graffiti artists, and audiovisual education for urban, afro-descendant, Romani and Indigenous students with the support of Centro Ático, The Department of Literature, and The Department of Social Sciences at Xavierian University, in association with other professors, writers, and documentary filmmakers from Colombia, the United States, and Mexico: [www.mingasdelaimagen.org](http://www.mingasdelaimagen.org) [1796]

*-What is your book, Word Mingas: Oralitegraphies and Mirrored Visions on Oralitures and Indigenous Contemporary Literatures, about?*

Mingas de la palabra is a study of contemporary Indigenous writing in Colombia from the 90s to present day and in the continental creative literary context. The book exposes and puts into practice two theoretical notions of reading: oralitegraphic textualities and mirrored visions. The oralitegraphies are composed of creative textual confluences of several different forms of oral communication, literary alphabetic writing, and meta-alphabetic graphic writings (maps, masks, textiles, semasiograms, etc.). The second notion refers to the possibilities of interpretation of a group of texts and images in which the self-identified Indigenous authors have constructed representations of institutions, practices and people which they refer to as non-Indigenous. With this order of ideas, the book seeks to offer connections and interpretations amongst works from diverse genres and origins.

All of the above will be in dialogue with cultural and literary criticism written, in many cases, by Indigenous intellectuals from around the continent as well as India, Africa, and Aotearoa/New Zealand. In Mingas de palabra, the texts aren't perceived as independent creations, rather, they are seen as being in constant relation and co-creation with networks and intercultural projects.

Latin America is going through a difficult time, especially as regards the political situation in certain countries such as Argentina and Venezuela. With this context in mind, in what sense can the study of Indigenous literature make a positive contribution?

It's important to keep in mind and also contextualize numerous Indigenous intellectuals' critiques of the mere idea of Latin America, given that structurally and politically it's a fact that certain alignments and practices perpetrated by countries in the region have reiterated colonization processes which the Indigenous communities seek to transform and debate by every means possible. In this sense, it's more and more common to hear the name Abya Yala ("Fully Mature Earth" in the chibcha gunadule language) spoken by a growing sector of Indigenous communities, to refer not only to Latin America, but to the entire continent. Even so, the current discussion implies, among other challenges, transcending mere rhetorical disagreements as well as considering the voices and public spaces of those of us who were not born in the heart of an Indigenous community to be equally valid, to learn to build better cooperative ties and intercultural solidarity together.

Maybe this will help us to understand that our work is not about reinventing Indigenismos, but about weaving community, critical perspective, and relational ontologies that, as Professor Arturo Escobar has proposed, would permit us to rise above the binary crises of nature-culture, civilization-barbarism, high culture-pop culture, spoken-written and other such dualisms that tie us down, with their chains of misunderstanding, in a world that needs joint initiatives in order to draw common horizons as we simultaneously acknowledge our differences anew.

Another current debate which can positively contribute to the study of these oral traditions and literatures is about the room for critique of the homogenizing character of these projects that only understand the region as a mixed conglomeration of cultures without parsing the profound ethno-social differences which thankfully still survive today.

Unlike some radical postcolonial sectors, the way I see this struggle, it isn't about continuing to generate denials and exclusions because, as problematic as the European and Arab contributions may be for some people, we must recognize that they are key and also belong equally to us if we really want to construct pluriverses and worlds inside which many more worlds may exist.

We must remember that the border between Colombia and Venezuela has been closed for several months. Though there are few borders in our countries where crime doesn't have some impact, as authorities will point out, it's also worth noting that, with these political decisions, we don't only upset the free relations between families and friends on both sides of the border lines, we also attack the sovereignty of the Indigenous communities that existed long before the creation of our countries, like the Yukpa and Wayuu, among many other nations now fragmented by modern borders. Incidentally, the contemporary wayuu literature is one of the most dynamic and questioning of any on the continent.

We know that the first novel written by a self-described Indigenous author in the region was written by the Wayuu Antonio J. López in the 1950s. López was born on the Colombian side but he published his book on the Venezuelan side. In his historic novel, *Los dolores de una raza* we find a critique, as much of the armed clash between Wayuu clans as it is of the Venezuelan and Colombian legal systems' impositions on the Wayuu territory.

*-What does it mean to you to have won the Casa de las Américas Prize?*

This prize is, above all, a deserved international recognition of the great words of the communities whose mingas, yanamas, or community work, are civilizational models of exchange, collaboration and the building of enduring social fabrics. For me, the prize is a lightning bolt that illuminates a bend in the road in the 500-year-long night, for those of us who have built, side by side with the native peoples, recognizing our millennial ancestor in our mixed nature, we have the good fortune of learning by think-feeling and naming the world in many languages, as well as reeducating ourselves in the sharing of sapiential narratives that are thread, flesh, and bone of the socio-natural latticework of these sacred lands. And these experiences of intercultural solidarity also invite us to recognize and relearn the multiple pasts and presents that link us to the Arab world, the Europes, Africas, Indias, Oceanias, the Abya Yalas... in brief, to recognize them as a living, moving part of the gorgeous human fabric which we weave with all other planetary species.

*[1] On the occasion of the recent appearance of Word Mingas in English, UNC Press, 2021, we publish an excerpt of the interview with Colombian writer Miguel Rocha Vivas by María Alejandra Casanova García regarding his Casa de las Américas Prize win in Havana, Cuba, in 2016.*