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Decolonising Oral History: A Conversation

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Abstract

In late 2019, a team of researchers and activists from Ecuador and the UK began a new oral history project, accompanying Afro-Ecuadorian women living in the province of Esmeraldas, as they interrogated and articulated their history and heritage. The impact of coronavirus, which has hit Ecuador particularly hard, delayed the workshops and oral history interviews we had planned, but also created the space for an extended exploration of the ethics of the project. Over email and video calls, the research team debated how to ensure that our work was truly led by its Afro-Ecuadorian participants. How would we secure recognition for their creative and intellectual work and avoid appropriation of their ideas? And how would we facilitate a collective, community-based methodology when most eurocentric oral history is so rooted in individualist approaches? The result of this process is a collectively authored document, which stands as our ethical agreement and baseline, and a record of our joint commitment to decolonise the research process. This wide-ranging conversation between community activists and scholars explores the complex, painstaking negotiations required to create a truly decolonial and feminist practice in transnational oral history work.

Is oral history a useful tool for decolonising our discipline? Many of the signs are auspicious, given oral history's decades-long association with questions of inequality and authority. But despite these promising foundations, this conversation suggests that decolonisation might unsettle some of our core assumptions about power and oral history, most crucially by revisiting the individualist approach that underpins much of our work. The contributors to this discussion, both activists and scholars,

are members of a transnational research team based in Ecuador and the United Kingdom. Among them are women who self-identify as Afro-descendant, white, *montubia* and *mestiza*.¹ Our project's starting point is a methodology developed with and designed for Afro-descendant women in the Ecuadorian province of Esmeraldas. The pandemic delayed our research, but it also created a valuable space to reflect on the eurocentricity of standard research ethics. As the effects of coronavirus in Ecuador and the UK became ever more horrific, we devoted ourselves to discussing research methods and the existing scholarship, thinking through our differences in unprecedented detail.² This intercultural conversation gives a sense of the discussions that brought us to this point, providing a window on the complex, painstaking negotiations required to create a truly decolonial and feminist practice in transnational oral history work.

HILARY FRANCIS, NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY

We were asked to begin our conversation with an overview of the field for those readers less familiar with oral history, but the decolonial aims and ethos of our project make this apparently straightforward brief rather more complex. The majority of work in the field as I know it is credited to scholars whose origins and universities are in the English-speaking global North, even if the research itself happens all around the world. I will make some reference to wider decolonising efforts in oral history, but I will leave the more detailed discussion of the Latin American scholarship to my colleagues. Instead, I will settle for provincialising those of us who are based in the North, and positioning English-speaking oral history scholarship from the North (hereafter ESOHSN) as a single element in a much more complex global picture.³

ESOHSN emerged from its positivist roots and (at least superficial) commitment to the objectivity of the researcher in the early 1970s, when feminist oral historians promoted oral history as a tool for empowerment and the inter-subjective exploration of women's thoughts and feelings.⁴ There was an emphasis on the commonality of women's experience that later critiques of second-wave feminism would deride, but there was also an entrenched political commitment and a fierce attunement

¹ *Mestiza* (or *mestizo* in the masculine form) refers to a person of mixed European and Indigenous descent. The Montubios are an Ecuadorian ethnic minority concentrated in the coastal provinces to the south of Esmeraldas.

² BBC, 'Coronavirus: Ecuador struggles to bury its victims', 12 April 2020, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-latin-america-52234127>> [accessed 26 April 2021].

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2008); my use of global North here does of course include Australia and New Zealand, both important sites for the EHOSN literature I describe.

⁴ Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, 'Who's afraid of oral history? Fifty years of debates and anxiety about ethics', *The Oral History Review*, 43/2 (2016), pp. 338–66; Alistair Thomson, 'Four paradigm transformations in oral history', *The Oral History Review*, 34/1 (2007), pp. 49–70.

to the lives and stories of narrators (the commonly accepted term for oral history interviewees).⁵ By the late 1980s, oral historians had become uncomfortable with the failure to account fully for difference and power imbalances in the interview relationship, and Michael Frisch's *Shared Authority* suggested a mutual respect for the historian's and the narrator's knowledge as a way through this dilemma.⁶ Frisch's work remains a standard reference point for the field, though he has since noted that he meant to highlight the complexities of shared authorship within oral histories themselves, while much of the work inspired by Frisch is more concerned with the wider challenges posed in organising collaborative oral history projects.⁷ However shared authority is defined, ESOHSN is still preoccupied with the need to balance the goals of oral historians with the views and desires of narrators.⁸

When we embarked upon this project it became clear that the Ecuadorian team members had something more in mind when they talked about collaborative oral history. In the tradition of Bolivian oral historian Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, our colleagues assumed that success required those of us from the North to 'cede control to the collective being researched: not only to cede control of the direction of the resulting scholarship, but also to share in all aspects of the process, from the selection of themes, the design of the interviews, ways of working, systematic return of transcripts and the purpose and use of the resulting materials'.⁹ The UK-based team members would facilitate the collection of oral histories that would serve the Afro-descendant community in Esmeraldas, but research goals and methodology would be defined by the community. We would relate to and serve a community first and foremost, rather than privileging individual narrators, and we would recognise the community as the intellectual authors of the work, not simply experts on their own experience.

This approach unsettles ESOHSN in all sorts of ways, some of them quite heartening. Leading a project like this is a considerable undertaking for the community involved, and colleagues in Esmeraldas are prioritising oral history work because they believe it has considerable political, educational and material importance. For ESOHSN scholars who often wonder if narrators benefit from the process, the strength of this conviction is a revelation. The difference stems in part from divergent

⁵ Sherna Berger Gluck, 'What's so special about women? Women's oral history', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 2/2 (1977), pp. 3–13, at p. 5.

⁶ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, NY, 1990).

⁷ Michael Frisch, 'Commentary-sharing authority: oral history and the collaborative process', *The Oral History Review*, 30/1 (2003), pp. 111–13.

⁸ Lorraine Sitiza, 'A shared authority: an impossible goal?', *The Oral History Review*, 30/1 (2003), pp. 87–101.

⁹ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, 'El potencial epistemológico y teórico de la historia oral: de la lógica instrumental a la descolonización de la historia', in *Teoría crítica dos direitos humanos no século XXI* (Porto Alegre, 2008), pp. 154–76, at p. 172.

ideas about what oral history is. In the co-authored ethics document that became the basis for our discussions, our Ecuadorian colleagues began by noting that ‘the objective of oral history is to record oral memory’, suggesting a commensurability between the two that echoes Maori scholar Nepia Mahuika’s recent work.¹⁰ For Mahuika, all of the reflexivity and methodological agony we associate with oral history is also present in indigenous oral traditions, and the northern tendency to separate the field of oral history from the knowledge inherent in oral traditions is indicative of a failure to appreciate the intellectual work that takes place within community oral cultures. Since few of us would doubt the importance of these oral traditions for marginalised groups, reconnecting oral history and oral culture also promises a renewed faith in the value of oral history itself.

Elsewhere, the clash of intellectual traditions is a bit more daunting. Recent ESOHSN has been increasingly concerned with projects in crisis, and major initiatives related to 9/11 and Katrina set the stage for a number of Covid oral history projects now under way. This work has been heavily influenced by psychoanalysis and a ‘first do no harm’ approach has emerged as a unifying theme.¹¹ For our Ecuadorian colleagues, this focus on trauma is sometimes frustrating, too reminiscent of what they jokingly call the ‘bloody mangroves’ narrative: an external, usually white and male account of Afro-descendant culture that emphasises the suffering and victimhood of Black women. Instead, colleagues insist on the need to create space in oral history work for joy and happiness, seeing joy as a crucial component of resistance (or *re-existencia*, a key concept that I will leave it to my colleagues to explain). The ESOHSN literature has relatively little to offer in relation to joy, and we might wonder whether our preoccupation with trauma is partly a result of our tendency, as northern researchers, to fixate on our own fear of getting things wrong.¹² Decentring our emotions, and shifting the focus more authentically to the needs of narrators might prompt a different approach, but it is also truly daunting, given that much of what we know about ethics of care as ESOHSN scholars is predicated on a two-person historian–narrator relationship and the insights provided by the equally individualist literature on trauma itself.¹³

The contribution which follows, from Juana Francis Bone, suggests a way forward, in its integration of the experiential and the theoretical,

¹⁰ Nepia Mahuika, *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition: An Indigenous Perspective* (Oxford, 2019).

¹¹ Jennifer A. Cramer, ‘“First, do no harm”: tread carefully where oral history, trauma, and current crises intersect’, *The Oral History Review*, 47/2 (2020), pp. 203–13; Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan, *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (Oxford, 2014).

¹² One recent exception is Alistair Thomson, ‘Indexing and interpreting emotion: joy and shame in oral history’, *Oral History Australia Journal*, 41 (2019), pp. 1–11. Erin Jessee has noted the ways in which the trauma frame might be limiting and unhelpful: Erin Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History* (London, 2019).

¹³ Both Graham Smith and Sherna Berger Gluck have commented on this ‘gross individualism’: Sherna Berger Gluck, ‘Has feminist oral history lost its radical/subversive edge?’, *Oral History*, 39/2 (2011), pp. 63–72, at p. 67.

the traumatic and joyful, and the individual with the collective. At the moment, of course, we have no idea how we will make any of this work in practice. But this imposed hiatus has given us an opportunity to think through our differences in an unprecedented way, and these discussions have been extremely productive for us. We hope they will be of interest to other scholars grappling with the multiple challenges of decolonising the discipline, in oral history and beyond.

JUANA FRANCIS BONE, MUJERES DE ASFALTO

When I was 14, I had to leave Esmeraldas for the city of Guayaquil. I had a stutter and had difficulties communicating with others. The recommendation was that I study theatre to improve my diction. Before that, I had never felt my Blackness in any context, and obviously the act of migration, even if it was within my own country, was and continues to be something that makes me feel like a foreigner. Between secondary school and university, I spent more than ten years in Guayaquil, which was obviously hard because I had no father, no mother. On top of that, I had to study and go to theatre school. Amidst all this, I also got involved with an organisation that worked on human rights and the struggle against corruption. It was the first time that I participated in an organisation. From that time on, I've always been the only Black person in certain spaces. Rather than seeing it as a privilege, I always saw it as a very lonely space, because there was nobody else, and not because they didn't exist but just because not everybody had the same opportunities. There were always women, but we weren't visible. They didn't give us the microphone or the space or anything to be able to speak. We were there just to take care of logistics.

Ecuador is a very conservative, racist, xenophobic country. Someone said to me, 'but you're there, there's you'. It is not enough that I'm there. It's not. It's uncomfortable and painful to be the only one. And the other thing is that you always need to be overqualified in order to be there. It's the famous 'white pass' that gives you access to a space. In Ecuador, this happens often: Black women need this white pass. To what extent are you an ally or part of the problem? Because you always need to be legitimised in a political or social space. You always need to be legitimised by a white-*mestizo* person who vouches for you, who validates your voice, right? As feminists we need to be present in those activist spaces that are called 'social', because our absence legitimises the idea that those spaces are complete without us.

It doesn't just happen that today I wake up and they call on me [to get involved] and tomorrow practices will change. At the time, when I was younger, and just beginning to recognise the importance of my activism, the problem was my youth. Then it was my lack of university degrees; then it was because I laughed too much; and then I was too Black for the photo. For women, but especially for women from *nacionalidades* and *pueblos*,

there is always a 'but'.¹⁴ You must stop being who you are to fit a pattern, a social and political mould imposed by white hegemony. Some of these ways of interacting are so normalised that they have become embedded in the collective imagination.

The *Mujeres de Asfalto* [Women of Asphalt] collective was created twelve years ago. It was a collective of migrant women who had survived violence and so we made spaces for collective construction using art and poetry circles. Later we began to work on political issues like violence and making Black and indigenous women visible. Something that happens in Ecuador is that there aren't anti-racist groups, or very few, and it's not because of a lack of interest, but because people are afraid to say that their struggle is an anti-racist struggle. After that we began offering free legal counselling to women who had survived violence. Two years ago they killed Gavis Moreno B., a public servant. They killed her when she was leaving work. She didn't have adequate protection. She didn't have the protections or the guarantees that, according to protocol, were due to her because of her job. We decided not to pursue individual cases because impunity won in Gavis' case and that made us afraid of the risks involved. The state took away all of Gavis' protection. She had been director of the women's jail. When she was murdered, they had taken away her armoured car. She didn't have a bulletproof vest. It's outrageous. What does it mean to be a Black woman in public office, in an important position, in a high-risk job, without basic safety measures, with no adequate protection? It's because you are a Black woman from a working-class background, [so the state thinks] you need no protection. That would be the state's thinking. They never gave her the protection she needed. That's why we say that Gavis' case is a femicide by the state. So we stopped doing certain things. We stopped taking on cases and decided only to observe the wider discourse in order to denounce what's happening with women.

We share painful memories that keep being repeated, and I'm not sure we will heal them in 100 or 400 years. This burden has not allowed us to grow as we should. We are in the middle of a decade that hurts because so many of us die because of the government's neglect. At times like this, I would say that collective memory sustains us. I'm here in Esmeraldas and yesterday we drove through most districts. The level of poverty you see; people have no opportunities, and this deficit is also a painful burden, of exclusion. But at least you have the memory of resistance, you know that you can free yourself and others, because the history of Esmeraldas is not about enslaved Black people, but precisely the opposite, it was a territory of free people. That's the motor for thinking about a different society. Unfortunately, we continue to hold on to painful memories, but we should also challenge ourselves to have a memory that heals, that allows us to build. I also believe that grabbing holding of our history at this moment is the only way to mark out a better future. They have always denied us

¹⁴ This is a reference to the fourteen different nationalities and the eighteen indigenous peoples that coexist in Ecuador.

our history, and I believe that telling it resignifies it, so that we become the narrators and protagonists of our own history.

We are sustained by our memory, especially certain collective elements. When trying to fit in a *mestizo* world, you start to question which memory is your collective memory, which is your core memory. They uproot you. So you begin to deny the existence of other ways of knowing, because all this noise makes you deny that there is knowledge there, there is technology, there is spirituality. There is everything here. That's why I also believe that academia is cruel, because these constructions aren't made here. They come from a hegemonic culture that always tries to be the centre, to be above, that is always white, *mestizo*, always colonising. So decolonising that part of the academy means that there is resistance, where you speak of what you know. I don't want to be in that box because unfortunately they do not let me be myself, and the territory needs to be itself, so that we can explore knowledge from the other side.

It's also necessary to let others know what we are doing. Because one of the things that I think feeds any racist, xenophobic or discriminatory action is people's stupidity. We don't want to go round with a marker pen, educating everyone, but I do see this as an opportunity for people to know what we are trying to do and why we do it. The [oral history] resources that have been created through other means ended up becoming a cultural appropriation, which is also cruel. Within a territory, researchers extract the information and leave without returning the material they've explored. This happens all the time here in Esmeraldas. That's why I think it's important to leave those tools in the communities: how to do it, what to do. It's fundamental because that's how you allow future generations to have a way of sustaining that collective memory.

For a project to be really decolonial, it must be fully transparent about information, about what will be done with it, how data is being collected, what is left in the communities and how we leave these communities. There's always that hegemonic gaze over our territory, but we must try to create a responsible research practice. It's a real shame. I think the only way to create a different process at this juncture is to position ourselves as equals. To recognise that we all have diverse knowledge and that this diversity will allow us to build something different in social spaces. Everything will flow differently from there, because when you find yourself among equals, there are no unnecessary silences, only sincere questions and necessary answers. Ubuntu needs to be a practical methodology.¹⁵

It's worth asking if our struggle is a transnational struggle, if the issues that concern us are global issues. With regard to environmental fascism, for example, the pollution of our lands, we were left without our land because mineral extraction turned our green forests into deserts. With the George Floyd issue other things started to happen in Esmeraldas.

¹⁵ Ubuntu is originally a Bantu word, meaning that a person only exists through relationships with others. It is a widely used concept in Afro-descendant political thought in Latin America.

In Ecuador we were dealing with a militarised pandemic in the poorest, Blackest areas. This is not accidental. It is the result of a state that continues to see Black people's bodies as the incarnation of danger. Esmeraldas still has a drinking water crisis. In the midst of the pandemic, families were left up to three weeks without access to water. In a pandemic that is a public health crisis, instead of water they sent the military, they beat up Black people from the *barrios*. So these things happen and Ecuadorians, white-*mestizo* people, will talk about the violence perpetrated against George Floyd, but here in Ecuador the same things happen, things that are equally violent, equally racist, there is the same excessive level of policing. So, it gets to you, you know? It affects you. Ecuador still has some very heavy colonial burdens.

Something that's happening now here in Esmeraldas, and which makes me really happy, is that young people are eager to know what their elders have to say. And there is an older generation that is recognising the need to pass on their knowledge. I think that if we can bring that balance of generations together, we can make this project work. There is something I insist on: using the power our collective memory derives from its knowledge of liberation. The only way to connect with a better present and future is by maintaining collective memory and giving it the same value as science, right? To give it the value it deserves. It is important always to have in mind the possibility of building by looking at ourselves, by recognising one another, as the Ubuntu concept says. This also allows us to build from the gaze of the other, starting from a position of equality. For this to work, we must be willing to be ourselves.

SOFIA ZARAGOCIN, UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO

How can we create a dialogue between the theory of oral history and memory and the lived experience of the members of our research group? The group's starting point is an acute reflexivity, where we seek to go beyond the weaker form of reflexivity that merely considers positionality. Each step in the research process has been debated, discussed and agreed by consensus. But in spite of the care we have taken, the power relations that are inherent in the research are still present, a result of academic structures and existing norms that dictate what is considered legitimate knowledge. It is within this context that we began our collective work, creating a research ethics document. The document is evidence of our attempts to create equal working relations in the context of the persistent coloniality of transnational research projects. A project that brings together people from many walks of life to do transnational research creates multiple inequalities. We had to reflect collectively on the way we interacted within the project, from the perspective of feminism, decoloniality and anti-racism.

One of our collective goals was to understand how to bring together these different perspectives on oral history, drawn from theory and

praxis. Our starting point was a recognition that the oral history of Black Afro-descendant communities is inseparable from a connection to place and territory. Our analysis draws on *re-existencia*: a school of Latin American decolonial thought that sees communities' struggles for land rights as the common factor that shapes their different ways of life.¹⁶ In epistemological and methodological terms, we have distanced ourselves from oral history as ethnography and moved towards a dialogue between oral history and the work of *re-existencia*. In putting together this conversation piece, one of the questions we wanted to tackle was the relationship between theory, praxis and reflection in our work. Not all of the members of the project team are academics, nor do they want to be. We come from different places, and in some cases our different backgrounds place us on opposite sides of territorial divides, not just North–South, but also centre–periphery, rural–urban. How then might we understand the inherently place-based nature of processes of *re-existencia*? And how would we connect that work with oral history?

In epistemological terms we have chosen to emphasise gender, but also race and decoloniality. This means recognising that although the ways in which we construct knowledge are different, they all have equal value. In that context, Hilary's and Juana's contributions here should not be understood as representing theory on one hand and practice on the other. As recent scholarship on decoloniality from the United States shows, the habitual distinction between theory and practice is neither obvious nor necessary.¹⁷ We are also opposed to the kind of knowledge extractivism whereby theorising is based on an appropriation of the lived experience of certain communities. For that reason, this conversation should be read as a tapestry of reflections that have been woven together, in which each person's knowledge has equal epistemic weight. This approach is the result of a collective decision, but it also reflects recent knowledge construction efforts within decolonial feminism in *Abya Yala*.¹⁸

The epistemic critiques coming out of decolonial feminism in *Abya Yala* question those approaches to feminist methodology and epistemology that prioritise gender, but do so from a rationalist and eurocentric perspective.¹⁹ These critiques argue that feminist epistemology and methodology also need to be decolonised, because feminist knowledge construction should not prioritise gender alone. The *re-existencia* of Black Afro-descendant women cannot be understood from an exclusively gender-based perspective. The construction of knowledge within oral history must be rooted in a sense of place, and must be feminist, anti-racist and decolonial. The decolonial critique of

¹⁶ Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves, 'Da geografia às geo-grafias: um mundo em busca de novas territorialidades', in Ana Esther Ceceña y Emir Sader (eds) *La guerra infinita: Hegemonía y terror mundial* (Buenos Aires, 2002), pp. 217–256.

¹⁷ Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (eds), *Theorizing Native Studies* (Durham, NC, 2014).

¹⁸ *Abya Yala* is a decolonial term for Latin America and the Caribbean.

¹⁹ Yunderkys Espinosa-Miñoso, 'Una crítica decolonial a la epistemología feminista crítica', *El Cotidiano*, 184 (2014), pp. 7–12.

the feminist construction of knowledge shows us that well-established approaches within feminist theory like situated knowledge or strong objectivity are not enough, so long as we continue to consider gender without thinking about race and coloniality. In order to truly share the same analytical plane it is not enough to think about our shared gender: our consideration of race and coloniality deepens both the analysis we can carry out and the feminist potential that we share.

INGE BOUDEWIJN, NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY

The commentaries so far show the team's commitment to centralising the decolonising potential of oral histories for resistance and education, and in doing so, challenging dominant narratives and power relationships within academia and society. This, as Hilary has pointed out, meant the concept of 'oral history' itself had to be examined thoroughly by the research team who – on top of all their other differences, explained by Juana and Sofia – work across disciplines, from history to sociology, human geography and activist backgrounds, as well as languages (the issues of English as an academic lingua franca has long been noted and we are working in Spanish where possible).²⁰ As Hilary and Juana mentioned, in the context of the Covid restrictions, we found a space to share in-depth discussions about visions, methodologies and philosophies underpinning this research project, culminating in our document on internal ethical agreements. This document, based on reflexive work, sets out agreements and aims for approaching the research, data collection and project publications in a decolonial fashion. We recognise that the practice of decolonising research starts long before data collection; it is a continuous, communal and personal process. However, as we continue to be bound by protocols, bureaucracies and procedures linked to institutional expectations of what it means to 'do research', clashes occur.

How can we reconcile, for example, the requirements of two different universities' ethics committees with the commitments made in the team's internal document? While the universities' ethical clearance processes serve an important function, existing structures do not necessarily support decolonial ways of working.²¹ Exley, Whatman and Singh, for example, describe issues they came across when balancing the ethical processes of their Australian universities with the needs, priorities and desires of indigenous communities. These communities could not be consulted on research design until after the ethical approval process – requiring an in-depth plan of action – had been concluded. Indigenous community members thought they should have been involved much sooner, to ensure

²⁰ Caroline Desbiens and Sue Ruddick, 'Speaking of geography: language, power, and the spaces of Anglo-Saxon "hegemony"', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24 (2006), pp. 1–8.

²¹ Beryl Exley, Susan Whatman and Parlo Singh, 'Postcolonial, decolonial research dilemmas: fieldwork in Australian indigenous contexts', *Qualitative Research*, 18/5 (2018), pp. 526–37.

the research plan benefited them. Furthermore, several standard forms required by the university did not make sense in the reality of the research. Here we find another example of standard ethics procedures not necessarily supporting a decolonial research agenda: the notion of informed consent, which has been critiqued for taking its starting position in ‘the individual’, reproducing and normalising the hegemony of western ways of thinking.²² Indeed, the importance both of the communal and of challenging normalised notions within academia has been commented on throughout this article. Regardless, we spent a long time writing and revising our information sheets, the basis for individual informed consent, to ensure they met the various requirements of both universities.

I appreciate the seeming paradox in following such regulations and institutional bureaucracies with a colonial aftertaste, in order to continue our work in a decolonial fashion. Even so, we are taking all possible steps to push the boundaries of what is possible for our oral history collection and research. We shared our internal ethics document with the universities as an appendix to our ethics applications, covering discussions of individual versus communal ownership of knowledge, and the need to prioritise the Afro-Ecuadorian communities of Esmeraldas’ wishes, visions and practices of oral histories. We are collecting oral, not written, consent, uncommon at one of our universities in particular, as we consider this more appropriate for the context. While naming sources is more common for historians, social scientists generally anonymise participants, highlighting this to ethics boards as one of the ways in which they are protecting them.²³ However, the importance of ownership of oral histories is becoming increasingly debated, and the social scientists among us are starting to depart from the assumption that anonymising is always in participants’ best interest.²⁴ Instead, the team decided to give participants the choice of whether or not to be named in relation to their oral histories and contributions, drawing on our experience from a previous project.²⁵ Collected oral history recordings will go into a permanent archive, owned by Mujeres de Asfalto on behalf of the Afro-descendant community of Esmeraldas, ensuring their continued communal access to these stories. Participants may opt out of having the research team use their oral history for any academic or other purpose, in which case it will be archived for the community only. We are also planning to publish podcasts from selected

²² Tina Miller and Mary Boulton, ‘Changing constructions of informed consent: qualitative research and complex social worlds’, *Social Science and Medicine*, 65/11 (2007), pp. 2199–2211; Anne O’Connell, ‘My entire life is online: informed consent, big data, and decolonial knowledge’, *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice*, 5/1 (2016), pp. 68–93.

²³ Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London, 1991).

²⁴ Kate Mukungu, ‘“How can you write about a person who does not exist?” Rethinking pseudonymity and informed consent in life history research’, *Social Sciences*, 6/3/86 (2017), pp. 1–9.

²⁵ Katy Jenkins and Inge Boudewijn, ‘Negotiating access, ethics and agendas’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 82 (2020), 102407.

interviews online – of course with the participants' explicit permission. These actions represent a further deviation from anonymity, instead reflecting the notion of oral histories as a communal resource explored by Juana, and the right for stories to be shared as they were told, rather than interpreted, which is important in collection of Afro-Ecuadorian oral histories.²⁶

We hope that sharing some of these practical considerations and reflections will contribute to the discussion of how to decolonise not just data collection, but all steps and practicalities involved in research projects involving oral history collection. Non-standardised methodologies must be recognised and made accessible to increase equality in the research process and appreciate different ways of knowing.

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The epistemic practices of both the state and the Marxist left have expropriated communitarian historiography in the Andes, an interlocution that silences borderland meanings in favour of official history. At the borderland, however, operative meanings are corporeal and *sentipensante*, producing thought from the heart: any attempt to translate these meanings risks engaging in a game of parody, with 'the world of distorting mirrors that constitutes colonialism in a way'.²⁷ In this space of semantic struggle, an intermediate, *ch'ixi* space of encounter inhabits women's bodies as they move from communitarian to national memory.²⁸ While perceived as others, these women manage to challenge the instrumental logic that underlies ethnographic work through translation in intermediate spaces of encounter.

A decolonial ethics of oral history begins with a recognition of Afro-descendant and indigenous peoples' re-existence and of the sustainability of life within racialised spaces.²⁹ Juan García Salazar conceives Esmeraldas as an autonomous space, a 'nation-territory', where concepts passed down from ancestral cultural heritage must be considered 'philosophies and doctrines for life and death'. Using his imaginary character, Abuelo Zenón, García Salazar emphasises that this

²⁶ Catherine Walsh and Juan García Salazar, 'Memoria colectiva, escritura y estado: prácticas pedagógicas de existencia afroecuatoriana', *Cuadernos de Literatura*, 19/38 (2015), pp. 79–98.

²⁷ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible: ensayos desde un presente en crisis* (Buenos Aires, 2018), p. 121.

²⁸ Rivera Cusicanqui (ibid., p. 34) defines *ch'ixi* as the ontological duplicity of those in Bolivia who inhabit two contradictory worlds, the Aymara and the white-*mestizo* worlds, so it is a multidimensional space where worlds encounter each other.

²⁹ The term appears in Carlos Walter Porto-Goncalves, 'De Saberes y de Territorios: diversidad y emancipación a partir de la experiencia latinoamericana', *Polis: Revista de la Universidad Bolivariana*, 8/22 (2009), pp. 121–36, but the author uses it as theorised by Adolfo Albán Achinte, as daily life practices that encode a 'system for the creation of re-existence and decolonization'. Adolfo Albán Achinte, 'Comida y colonialidad: tensiones entre el proyecto hegemónico moderno y las memorias del paladar', *Calle 14: Revista de investigación en el campo del arte*, 4/5 (2010), pp. 10–23, at p. 20.

accumulation of daily practices is stored in the hearts and souls of people living in free Maroon territories. It is engraved ‘in the souls of Black folk’, as W. E. B. DuBois claimed in another time-space of resistance, during Jim Crow.³⁰ Thus, García Salazar concludes that ‘this rich culture is born from resistance, memory, and word ... through music, poetry, house remedies, agricultural practices, and a thousand other secrets about life and death, so the guardians of tradition come into being again and again ... birthing the [African] diaspora in the land of Esmeraldas’.³¹ He takes this idea of coming into being *again and again* from Adolfo Albán Achinte, who conceives of these daily practices of re-existence as a decolonial praxis in a system ‘where Blacks, Indians, Maroons, and Roma ... must adopt behaviours from a project that assimilates them in conditions of stigmatisation and as minorities’.³² Re-existence, on the contrary, is a daily strategy to bring life into all aspects of experience and defy the constant premise of the non-existence of Blackness in every space.³³ Orality protects the physical and symbolic integrity of the land against the threat of the mineral extraction and colonial dispossession that ‘devour’ Esmeraldas and its memory.³⁴

Oral history as re-existence and not as ethnography – which inevitably reproduces eurocentric stereotypes of otherness – recentres life so that it aligns instead with the *Sumak Kawsay*, living well in community, not better (than others).³⁵ This indigenous constitutional concept – literally, the great life – has spread like wildfire among communities that defend their land and the rights of nature in Ecuador. In a context where the concept of life has become politicised, even fetishised, the sustainability of life itself depends on the long memory at the heart of communities and on people’s daily re-existence as a decolonial praxis. Unsurprisingly, Diana Taylor claims that, in the Andes, ‘the history of survival’ lies in the oral repertoire, and not in historical archives.³⁶ In their daily practices

³⁰ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 2018).

³¹ Juan García Salazar, ‘La cultura afroecuatoriana en Esmeraldas’, *VR Afro*, 1 June 2011, <<https://www.vidadelacer.org/index.php/comisiones/vr-afro/1492-la-cultura-afroecuatoriana-en-esmeraldas-una-aproximacion>> [accessed 22 March 2021].

³² Adolfo Albán Achinte, ‘Interculturalidad sin decolonialidad? Colonialidades circulantes y prácticas de re-existencia’, in Wilmer Villa y Arturo Grueso (eds) *Diversidad, interculturalidad y construcción de ciudad* (Bogotá, 2008), pp. 64–96, at p. 71.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁴ Javier Pabón, ‘Ora-literatura afroecuatoriana: narrativas insurgentes de re-existencia y lugar’, *The Latinamericanist*, 60/1 (2016), pp. 95–113, at p. 109.

³⁵ The 2009 Ecuadorian Constitution adopted the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* at its core. Article 14 recognises people’s right to a healthy environment, one which guarantees ‘the sustainability and living well of *Sumak Kawsay*’. Article 275 explains that ‘communities, peoples, and nationalities’ must effectively enjoy these rights in order for *Sumak Kawsay* to exist. Antonia Carcelén-Estrada, ‘What does Sumak Kawsay mean for women in the Andes today? Unsettling patriarchal sedimentations in two Inca writers’, in Juan Ramos and Tara Daly (eds) *Decolonial Approaches to Latin American Literatures and Cultures* (New York, 2016), pp. 57–75, at p. 59; Albán Achinte, *Prácticas Creativas de Re-existencia: más allá del arte ... el mundo de lo sensible* (Barcelona, 2018); Sofía Zaragocin, ‘Feminismo decolonial y buen vivir’, in Sofía Zaragocin and Soledad Varela (eds) *Feminismo y buen vivir: utopías decoloniales* (Cuenca, 2017), pp. 17–25.

³⁶ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham, NC, 2003), p. 193.

of re-existence, women in resistance challenge the historical sediments of those patriarchies that impede the development of life grounded in the rights and meanings of the peoples.³⁷ The experience of life for Black women is gendered and racialised, so a decolonial oral history must be anti-patriarchal.

Most renowned Afro-Ecuadorian voices on orality are men, like the great master Juan García (1944–2017), who, in his thesis at Johns Hopkins, spoke of the South Pacific as the land of the Maroons and composed Esmeraldas' collective memory in academic prose.³⁸ Or Juan Montaña, famous musician, guardian of the word, and mason of the self-determination movement, who used a critical Maroon lens to study capitalist labour and developed a vision of Afro territory as a zone of flight and resistance.³⁹ Oral memory in Esmeraldas is much more than just these works: it encompasses a world-vision that is greater than any one individual, where orality connects territories with magical-religious practices and the struggle for rights.⁴⁰ In the case of Ecuador, women use word-magic, as Abuelo Zenón would say, to pass on their heritage. The Great Shire of the Pacific [*la Gran Comarca*], the territory of the Great Chocó, 'is for Black women to continue and perpetuate their heritage from within' as communitarian leader Maria Isabel Padilla says when reflecting on ethno-education.⁴¹

One clear example of word-magic is the *décima*, a 44-verse poem made up of a four-verse stanza followed by four ten-verse stanzas. It is a form that is widely used and studied.⁴² According to Lindberg Valencia, a marimba player, there is orality for healing, for farming, for marimba music, and for lullabies.⁴³ In each rebirthing practice of midwives, in each leaf that neutralises poison, in every *Tunda* or dwarf apparition, orality channels behaviour and disseminates the myths that preserve the life of people and all living creatures of the mangrove. Women play a fundamental role in passing on the heritage of ancestral codes. Collective

³⁷ Carcelén-Estrada, 'What does Sumak Kawsay mean for women in the Andes today?', pp. 57–8.

³⁸ The term Maroon comes from the Spanish *cimarrón*, enslaved people who ran away and built autonomous communities. Juan García Salazar, 'Cimarronaje en el Pacífico Sur: historia y tradición. El caso de Esmeraldas, Ecuador', Master's thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 1989; Charles Beatty Medina, 'Caught between rivals: the Spanish–African Maroon competition for captive Indian labor in the region of Esmeraldas during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries', *The Americas*, 63/1 (2006), pp. 113–36.

³⁹ '460 años de cimarronaje', *El Telégrafo*, 26 May 2013, <<https://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/carton/1/460-anos-de-cimarronismo>> [accessed 27 April 2021].

⁴⁰ Yaima Lorenzo Hernández, 'Imaginarlos cimarrones: orígenes de la cosmovisión y prácticas mágico-religiosas de los afroesmeraldeños', *Revista de el Colegio San Luis Potosí*, 6/12 (2016), pp. 258–75.

⁴¹ Personal communication. The Chocó region, which spans the Pacific Coast of Colombia and Ecuador is mostly Afro-descendant.

⁴² See, for example, Laura Hidalgo Alzamora, *Décimas esmeraldeñas: recopilación y análisis socio-literario* (Madrid, 1990).

⁴³ Lindberg Valencia Zamora, 'El patrimonio musical y poético afro-esmeraldeño', in Ferran Cabrero (ed.) *I Congreso Ecuatoriano de Gestión Cultural: hacia un diálogo de saberes para el buen vivir y el ejercicio de los derechos culturales* (Quito, 2013), pp. 223–33, at p. 224.

knowledge begins with the womb, in chapbooks, through song. Women root the repertoire of the guardians. They gift the next generation the extensive *oraliteratura* of Esmeraldas.⁴⁴ For that reason, this project draws on the extensive knowledge and experience of Black women, while documenting their heritage as well as Esmeraldas's repertoire.

Finally, I wish to differentiate between orality, memory and narrative. Orality 'organises ancestral memory and the universal chaos behind the foundation of any society and its patterns of migration'.⁴⁵ Memory, for its part, is manifested as ecphrasis, a materialisation of words in an image that connects us with the origins of language and life.⁴⁶ Cultural memory is rehearsed on the stage of orality. The narratives wander from generation to generation, displacement after displacement, and give life to the dead and to memory, which contains the pasts that refuse to die.⁴⁷ Afro-descendant women in Esmeraldas resignify Blackness through communitarian activism. Like *Mujeres de Asfalto*, these women speak from their own experience, with a creolised, twisted tongue, *entundada* as they say, a *ch'ixi* tongue, if you will, that inhabits the epistemic space of the mangroves and rivers of Esmeraldas, a fluvial nation-territory. In this UN Decade for People of African Descent (2015–24), marked by the return of fascism to the region and the continent, I insist on mobilising a memory that is both Black and female.

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For me, the process of decolonising our research takes place in a productive space of tension, contradiction and discomfort, and is a profoundly personal and always incomplete – and imperfect – process.⁴⁸ It is an unfolding conversation, an unlearning, a journey in which I feel privileged to have the patience of a group of committed and collegial feminist collaborators. As my colleagues have discussed above, the collective drafting of an ethics agreement formed a concrete first step in facilitating these sometimes uncomfortable conversations across disciplines, countries and identities – what does it really mean in practice to recognise the collective ideas of Afro-Ecuadorian women, and how can this be achieved within the confines and requirements of an academic research project? How do we envisage the Afro-Ecuadorian population

⁴⁴ A term coined by Juan Garcia, to refer not to the creation but to the recreation of oral memory for the possibility of self-determination. See, for example, his 'Cuentos afroecuatorianos', *Letras del Ecuador*, 184 (2002), pp. 40–51.

⁴⁵ Antonia Carcelén-Estrada, 'Oral literature', in Kelly Washbourne and Ben Van Wyke (eds) *Routeledge Handbook of Literary Translation* (New York, 2018), pp. 131–45, at p. 132.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'On the concept of history', *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2/1 (1974), <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>> [accessed 27 April 2021].

⁴⁸ Anjana Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism: Performing Decolonial Solidarities* (London, 2017); Amber Murrey, 'Constant questioning on-and-off the page: race, decolonial ethics and women researching in Africa', in Max Kelly and Ruth Jackson (eds), *Women Researching in Africa* (London, 2019), pp. 171–92.

of Esmeraldas will benefit from this project and what do we need to do to ensure that this is indeed the case? Questions of authorship, voice and ownership have been crucial here, and negotiating these issues is seldom straightforward. As PI on the project, I have perhaps felt these tensions particularly keenly, struggling to marry up our strongly felt commitments as a research team with the often inflexible bureaucracies of institutional practices. As we wrote the ethics agreement we were also finalising the project contract between our institutions; I often felt as if I was trying to square the circle, finding ways to maintain our commitment to decolonising research without committing to something that contradicted the formal institutional agreements or risked creating future misunderstandings.

Recognising the long history that Juana mentions, of extraction of information, data, and ideas from indigenous and Black communities in the global South, we are committed to ensuring that any benefits generated by the project accrue to the Afro-Ecuadorian women participants whose life histories provide the foundations for the project. While it seems extremely unlikely that there will be any commercial benefits from a project such as ours, it felt important to write a commitment to this into our ethics agreement. However, this stood in direct contrast to the legal collaboration agreement which stated that, as lead institution, Northumbria would benefit from any intellectual property generated. We agreed we would approach the legal team at Northumbria to negotiate an amendment to the contract to better reflect the project's ethos and intentions. This felt an important step in decolonising not only our research but also our institutions – making visible the power inequalities and colonial logics embedded in bureaucratic ways of working. Though we were not able to push this as far as we might have liked, we brokered a new clause in the contract that agreed to 'discuss and attempt to agree a way in which to work together' to exploit the research commercially, should an opportunity arise, with all parties agreeing terms in 'good faith'. Similarly, we agreed that all data would be stored permanently by *Mujeres de Asfalto*, as a resource for the community, and only temporarily by the two academic institutions.

We discussed at length issues around authorship and voice, and the vital importance of recognising and attributing the contributions of Afro-Ecuadorian women whose life histories we are hoping to work with. In our discussions, I found a nuance which didn't readily translate – my Ecuadorian colleagues used the idea of authorship (*autoría* in Spanish), which I tend to associate with written publications, in relation to the oral histories. For me, this referred more to attribution, though perhaps this reflects my own academic biases towards written knowledge production versus orality. It was also important to recognise collective authorship in relation to Afro-Ecuadorian women's knowledge, and in the end we agreed to distinguish between attribution of the oral histories – either to named individuals or anonymised as appropriate, as Inge discusses above – and authorship of the research outputs (which will always be

collective across the research team), as well as recognising that at times it would be appropriate to reference ‘el pensamiento de mujeres afrodescendientes que habitan el territorio de Esmeraldas’ [ideas of Afro-Ecuadorian women who live in the territory of Esmeraldas]. Being open to discussing such disconnects in meaning, across languages and contexts – and the practical and intellectual implications that flow from them – has been key as we establish the project, and no doubt will be fundamental as the research unfolds.

The need for this careful translation work is amplified by the entirely virtual nature of our interactions as a research team in the context of the ongoing Covid pandemic, and it is important to reflect upon this in terms of thinking through our commitment to decolonial ways of working. Especially as a geographer, I find it deeply unsettling to be leading a research project in and about a place which I have not actually visited. It feels like the ultimate disembodied, colonial gaze, that as a white UK-based researcher I might never travel to Esmeraldas during the research. To sit with, and listen to, our peer researchers; to sense, smell, and experience Esmeraldas; to be with, and learn with colleagues, in person and as equals, all seem to me to be fundamental to decolonial ways of working, yet out of reach in this current moment. But the potential upside is the opportunity to unsettle established ways of working, to force me as Primary Investigator (PI) to cede control, to open up spaces where my absence, as a white scholar from the global North, is necessary and fundamental to the success of the project. Nevertheless, this is a tricky balancing act – as PI I remain responsible for delivering the project, and accountable to the UK funder, with all the associated reporting requirements.

We should not underestimate, especially in the virtual context, the time that is required from all of us to make this work – a commitment to working collaboratively, across English and Spanish, comes with the need to translate, explain, reflect, revise and review, make mistakes, and above all to listen. As Murrey recognises, ‘Doing decolonial work – *trying* to do decolonial work – means continually thinking, rethinking, pausing, and resolutely pushing forward in and during moments of encounter’.⁴⁹ Trust is at the heart of this endeavour, and my hope is that the enforced delays of Covid have given us time and space to begin to build trust and ways of working that will enable us to undertake the oral history project in a way that has integrity and is aligned to the priorities of Juana’s organisation and the Afro-Ecuadorian women she works with in Esmeraldas.

PEER REVIEW

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⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 188.