

Afro-Ecuadorian Women, Territory, and Natural Resource Extraction in Esmeraldas, Ecuador

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Abstract

Afro-descendant women in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, are amongst the most marginalized groups in the country. Living in a region severely affected by environmental degradation due to multiple and overlapping forms of resource extraction, they also face the impacts of drug trafficking conflicts crossing the Colombian border, as well as institutional and everyday racism. Many of these conditions are rooted in a long history of colonialism. In this article, we highlight the relative absence of Afro-Ecuadorian women's voices, histories and experiences from research on resource extraction, and argue that Black feminist theoretical approaches provide an essential tool for understanding intersections of gender, race and activism, as well as (alternatives to) development, and the impacts of natural resource extraction in Ecuador. In so doing, the paper proposes a theoretical framework to open up spaces that situate Afro-Ecuadorian women's knowledges at the centre of efforts to resist marginalization and extractivism.

Keywords: Esmeraldas, Ecuador, Black Feminism, Marooning Feminism, Natural Resource Extraction

Introduction

Whilst key development indicators have greatly improved in Ecuador over recent years, the province of Esmeraldas, which has the largest concentration of the country's Afro-descendent population¹, continues to suffer from high degrees of deprivation and marginalization. Levels of illiteracy, poverty and lack of access to clean water remain significantly higher than the national levels, and the province, and its population, remain politically and socially liminal to the Ecuadorian national imagination, reflecting its historical and present-day experiences of coloniality. Furthermore, the province of Esmeraldas is particularly affected by multiple types of large-scale resource extraction, drug-trafficking and gang-related violence, as well as climate-change induced environmental degradation (Colectivo Mujeres de Asfalto and Amandla Medio, 2022; GADPE Prefectura Esmeraldas, 2015; Grupo de Diálogo Provincial de Esmeraldas, 2013). In this context, the RECLAMA project (which stands for *Harnessing Afro-Ecuadorian Women's Heritage* in Spanish)² aims to harness the rich heritage of Afro-descendant and Black women in Esmeraldas Province to promote the recognition of historically marginalized and invisibilized voices as a central part of an anti-racist agenda. Working with young Afro-Ecuadorian women peer researchers, our research project uses participatory and creative methodologies to explore, make visible and celebrate the memories, experiences and knowledges of Afro-Ecuadorian women living in this precarious and marginalized context (see also Francis et al. (2021); Zaragocin et al. (2023)). Drawing on these ongoing activities, this article aims to highlight and respond to the absence of Afro-Ecuadorian women and their experiences from academic research.

Before proceeding, it is important to emphasize the different positionalities of members of the research team. Juana is a Black woman activist and researcher from Esmeraldas and co-founder of the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective, Sofia is a *mestiza* woman and researcher working at a university in Ecuador, and Inge and Katy are white European women working at a university in the UK. In this article, we combine existing literature with the first-hand writing, knowledge and experiences of Juana seeking to foreground Black feminist theorising and knowledge production, and recognising Juana's

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role in this vital work, whilst avoiding the appropriation of these knowledges by the white, European members of the team. To do so, we argue that visibilizing historically excluded knowledges is key to understanding intersecting issues of gender, race, and natural resource extraction in Ecuador/Latin America, emphasizing the concept of marooning/*cimarronear* feminisms central to the work of the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective. The paper is therefore framed by our collective experiences of undertaking oral history research with Afro-Ecuadorian women in the province of Esmeraldas, and the ongoing activism and lived experience of Juana and the women of the Mujeres the Asfalto Collective. It is also important to state that amongst the team, Juana has the ultimate decision-making power (in dialogue with the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective) in relation to what is included in our articles and how the ideas are developed.

Despite the growing body of academic work examining the intersections of resource extraction and socio-environmental conflicts with gender, Afro-descendent populations' experiences of large-scale resource extraction in Latin America remain notably absent from the literature, reflecting a wider gap identified by Moreno Parra (2019). This paper adds to the literature on the gendered consequences of extractive industries (see for example Ahmad and Lahiri-Dutt, 2006; Boudewijn, 2020, 2021, 2022; Caretta et al., 2020; Caretta and Zaragocin, 2020; Deonandan and Bell, 2019; García-Torres et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2014, 2015, 2017; Jenkins and Rondón, 2015; Lahiri-Dutt, 2012, 2019; Lutz-Ley and Buechler, 2020; Morales, 2019; Perks and Schulz, 2020; Ulloa, 2016, 2020; Zaragocin et al., 2018), but places race at the centre of the analysis. In particular, we propose an intersectional framework that brings to the fore the experiences of Afro-Esmeraldeña women. Discussions of the intersections of gender and extractivism in Latin America have recurrently focused on ecofeminist and feminist political ecology perspectives. Race, and in particular Black feminism stemming from places like Northern Ecuador – and notably Black feminist practices such as marooning feminism – have been severely sidelined in these literatures. As such, we lay out a theoretical framework that brings intersecting ideas and political proposals around race and gender into dialogue with critiques on extractivism. We begin by critically exploring how multiple types of resource extraction are present in Esmeraldas, particularly emphasising the ways in which these activities overlap, exacerbating their impacts and creating an accumulation of negative impacts that are particularly felt by gendered and racialized bodies. With these overlapping extractivisms and their gendered and racialized impacts in mind, we then articulate these debates with historic and contemporary organizing around race and racism in Latin America, Ecuador, and Esmeraldas, before engaging with Black and maroon feminisms from Esmeraldas, in order to put forward a theoretical framework that situates Afro-Ecuadorian women's knowledges and practices at the centre of efforts to resist marginalization and extractivism.

Articulating race, gender and extractivism in Esmeraldas, Ecuador

Territory plays a particular role in Afro-Ecuadorian identity and resistances in the province of Esmeraldas. It is important to recognize that the Black population of Esmeraldas is a maroon population, that is, descended from African peoples who were fugitives from slavery, but who were a free Black population. Ecuador, and in particular Esmeraldas, has been absent from discussions on Black geographies and in particular maroon territorial configurations in the Americas which have focused on the US, Brazil and Colombia (Berman-Arévalo, 2021; Bledsoe, 2017; Guillen, 2022). The territory of Esmeraldas was never directly colonized by the Spanish, feeding into stereotypical imaginaries of the province as 'wild' and uncontrolled, existing outside of the imaginary of the nation-state (Belkin et al., 1993; Cedeño, 2017; García Salazar, 2009; Johnson, 2007; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). In 1997, the Proceso de Comunidades Negras del Ecuador (1997) published the 'Proposal for the creation of a territorial region for Black people in the province of Esmeraldas'³, where a range of Afro-Ecuadorian communities and organizations argue for setting apart land in the north of Esmeraldas as a territorial space for the Afro-Ecuadorian population, focusing heavily on land as a collective ownership and responsibility. Esmeraldas is part of the Pacific biodiversity hotspot Tumbes–Chocó–Magdalena, and the Proceso de Comunidades Negras del Ecuador (1997) emphasizes that the

natural richness found in these cantons comes from having always cared for the land based on ancestral knowledge. Similarly, García Salazar and Walsh (2010) consider that setting apart of land as the least the state could grant due to the history of slavery, as Afro-descendants were not colonizers, nor did they arrive in Ecuador voluntarily.

Nevertheless, the northern cantons of Esmeraldas continue to be a site of ongoing struggles between communities and state and private interventions (Cedeño, 2017). Indeed, García Salazar and Walsh, (2010; also Walsh and García Salazar, 2015) identify deterritorialization resulting from land grabbing for natural resource extraction, as the main threat to the Afro-descendant people of Esmeraldas. The marginalization of Esmeraldas in general, and the northern cantons in particular, is further exacerbated by ongoing conflict along the Ecuador-Colombia border and the impacts of drug trafficking (Federación de Centros Chachis de Esmeraldas (FECCHE) et al., 2017; García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Walsh, 2011; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). The region is considered the most insecure in the country, suffering exceptionally high levels of violence. Furthermore, Afro-Ecuadorian women in Esmeraldas face significant levels of gendered violence, as well as *'an increasingly masculinized and patriarchal culture, typical of zones of resource extraction (Segato, 2016) leading to rising levels of commercial sex work, the objectification of women, and increased possibilities of sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy, and sexual violence and abuse'* (Federación de Centros Chachis de Esmeraldas (FECCHE) et al., 2017: 19, translation ours; see also GADPE Prefectura Esmeraldas, 2015; García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). A recent report by SISA Mujeres Activando (2020) highlights that many young Black women from Esmeraldas indicate they are hugely impacted by teenage pregnancy, sexual harassment in universities, colleges and public spaces, child labour, labour exploitation in care spaces, and the invisibilization of their political participation in decision-making spaces.

Insecurity and gang-related violence have increased sharply across Esmeraldas in recent years, particularly during 2022 which saw record numbers of violent incidents and deaths (Colectivo Mujeres de Asfalto and Amandla Medio, 2022). Roa Ovalle (2012) noted that the continued economic marginalization and conditions of extreme poverty experienced by inhabitants of Esmeraldas further drive the expansion of illegal activities in the region, as well as leading to internal migration (also García Salazar and Walsh, 2010). The province continues to face significant challenges in human development: access to sanitation and clean water is limited, healthcare provision is poor, and the province is marked by the widespread absence (and negligence) of the State (GADPE Prefectura Esmeraldas, 2015; Moreno Parra, 2019; Zaragocin, 2019, 2020). 57 percent of people report their basic needs are unmet; outside of the province capital (Esmeraldas City), this figure is over 80 percent (GADPE Prefectura Esmeraldas, 2015). Luque et al. (2013) highlight that these widespread unmet basic needs, alongside overall state neglect, exacerbate Esmeraldas city's vulnerability to climate change. The Mujeres de Asfalto Collective emphasize that this situation has only become more marked in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing political and social crises affecting the province.

The abundant natural resources in Esmeraldas province have also led it to become a site of extractivist struggles (García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Moreno Parra, 2019; Walsh, 2011; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). A recent report to the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, describes Esmeraldas' Afro-descendant and indigenous populations as experiencing a situation of exceptionally grave emergency and violation of rights, due to the uncontrolled impacts of mining, palm oil cultivation and forestry, highlighting the disproportionate impact on women (Federación de Centros Chachis de Esmeraldas (FECCHE) et al., 2017; see also GADPE Prefectura Esmeraldas, 2011; García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Walsh, 2011; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). Nevertheless, relatively little research specifically explores the gendered and racialized impacts of natural resource extraction in the province (Zaragocin, 2019). We argue that the marginalization and deprivation experienced by Esmeraldas' predominantly Afro-descendant and indigenous population, and in particular Afro-

descendant women, should be understood in relation to the cumulative impact of multiple and overlapping socially and environmentally damaging large-scale extractive activities within the province⁴. Below, we outline these overlapping forms of large-scale extractivism and their accumulative and intersecting impacts, providing a critical exploration of the gendered and racialized nature of environmental inequalities produced in this context.

Extractive activities have extended over time in Esmeraldas, dating back to the massive expansion of banana plantations in the 1950s (Cedeño, 2017; Gerlach, 2003; Moreno Parra, 2019; Zaragocin, 2019). The impacts of resource extraction are therefore deeply entrenched, embedded in longer colonial histories and presents. This, Walsh and García Salazar (2015) argue, indicates a targeted approach by the state, representing the territories as 'empty land' (in other contexts, see de la Cadena, 2010; Li, 2009), and acting illegally by denying ancestral rights to territory, disregarding the rights of Afro-descendant populations set out in the 2008 constitution (see below). Once territory is lost, it also becomes impossible to claim other, associated rights (García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). Bolados García and Sánchez Cuevas (2017) discuss this phenomenon in terms of 'sacrificial zones', produced as an apparently accepted side-effect of the quest for 'progress', whilst various authors observe a high degree of correspondence between territories of indigenous peoples, and areas that have been concessioned for natural resource extraction (Bebbington, 2010; Cuba et al., 2014; Romero Toledo et al., 2017).

Although the available literature is relatively sparse, there is widespread agreement that expansion of extractivism has not led to increased prosperity for the inhabitants of Esmeraldas (García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Roa Ovalle, 2012; Valdivia, 2017, 2018; Zaragocin, 2019). Quiroga (2003) highlights that Esmeraldas has experienced multiple periods of economic expansion based on extractives, and how these are interspersed with periods of subsistence activities and recession. He argues Afro-Esmeraldeños experience these periods of economic expansion as '*spaces and times of disorder and disruption*' (p. 155). In this light, Rival (2003: 496) outlines the government's historic approach to managing Esmeraldas' natural resources, stating: '*Forty years ago, most of the province's land was virgin forest nominally owned by the national government [...] Any individual could claim a piece of Esmeraldas forest by deforesting it and legalising the land title for a modest survey and registration fee.*' As a result, it is estimated that, since the 1950s, 95 percent of virgin forests in the province have been transformed into agricultural land for crops and pasture (GADPE Prefectura Esmeraldas, 2011). An enormous 60 percent of Esmeraldas' cultivable territory is now dedicated to palm oil production. This massive expansion of palm oil production has not led to improved living conditions for inhabitants of Esmeraldas; instead, it has led to increased contamination and associated health issues, loss of flora and fauna, violation of human rights and conflicts (Hazlewood, 2012; Roa Ovalle, 2012).

Additionally, both legal and illegal mining activities, dating back to colonial times, are present in the province (GADPE Prefectura Esmeraldas, 2011; Mestanza-Ramón et al., 2021; Moreno Parra, 2019). As in other contexts, such activities are accompanied by significant and long-term environmental degradation, including tailings ponds and abandoned mine workings, with concomitant impacts on livelihoods and ways of life of communities who rely on these lands (Cedeño, 2017; Mestanza-Ramón et al., 2021).

The substantial impacts of extractive activities on water quality are also evident (GADPE Prefectura Esmeraldas, 2011; García Salazar, 2009; Roa Ovalle, 2012; Zaragocin, 2019), with aluminium, mercury and agro-chemicals entering watercourses as a result of both mining and palm oil plantations (Correa Cruz et al., 2015; GADPE Prefectura Esmeraldas, 2015; Hazlewood, 2012; Moreno Parra, 2019). Much of the water in the province is now polluted and not of suitable drinking quality, an issue of particular importance given that in parts of the province a majority of households are not connected to a water supply, relying on river water for their daily subsistence needs (Moreno Parra, 2019; Zaragocin, 2020).

Furthermore, decreasing water quality negatively impacts the livelihoods of those who depend on aquatic resources, as well as having consequences for subsistence and reproductive activities. Such scenarios tend to disproportionately impact women, who are usually responsible for the collection of water for household use, as well as for daily subsistence activities and food preparation that depend on the availability of clean water. Such pollution also results in high levels of contamination in fish, shellfish and turtles - and in some cases the complete disappearance of these forms of aquatic life - on which many Esmeraldeños depend for sustenance (Correa Cruz et al., 2015; García Salazar, 2009; Roa Ovalle, 2012).

Fishing and shrimp farming have themselves also become commercialized over the last 50 years, leading to extensive environmental impacts and significant mangrove deforestation as well as the loss of communal fishing grounds, and the encroachment of people from outside the communities (Beitl, 2012; Ocampo-Thomason, 2006). Ocampo-Thomason (2006) specifically explored the impact of commercial shrimp farming on traditional livelihoods, communal marine grounds, and the gendered division of labour in relation to the mangrove ecosystems in the north of Esmeraldas⁵. She notes that whilst fishing was previously almost exclusively pursued by men, with women often gathering cockles, increased shrimp farming was pushing men out of fishing and into cockle-gathering after selling their land to prawn companies, or due to lower yields of fish, alongside equipment becoming more expensive. Furthermore, young men from other communities also arrive with better boats to search for cockles, having themselves often been displaced or lost their sources of livelihood, due to other natural resource extraction - such as logging activities to make way for palm oil plantations – an example of the ways in which impacts accumulate across different types of extraction.

Across the different types of resource extraction activities discussed, and across several decades of research, common themes of land and water degradation and dispossession emerge (García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). It is evident that the expansion of large-scale natural resource exploitation has led to widespread displacement of people and communities, as land has been acquired (both legally and illegally) for extractive purposes (see for example García Salazar, 2009; Hazlewood, 2012; Rival, 2003). Theorizations of settler colonialism, and in particular Zaragocin's (2019; 2020) research with Epera indigenous women in Esmeraldas, are particularly important in understanding the contemporary context and the gendered and racialized processes of deterritorialization. Similarly, in her exploration of how such patterns have manifested in relation to the experiences of the Afro-Ecuadorian community Wimbí, in the north of Esmeraldas, Moreno Parra (2019) characterizes the devaluing and discrimination faced by the Afro-Ecuadorian population as a form of 'slow death' (see also Rodríguez Aguilera, 2022; Zaragocin, 2019, 2020). She notes that the environmental degradation and impoverished everyday living conditions they face are an indictment of the lack of value placed by the state on Black and indigenous racialized bodies, observing that *'racism functions here as a way of maintaining existing inequalities between the Afro-Ecuadorian and white-mestizo population, in order to secure the development of agro-industry and industrial mining.'* (106, translation ours). These structural inequalities underpin the contemporary capitalist project of extractivism and the violences it perpetrates (see also Moreano Venegas and van Teijlingen, 2021). In this process, the devaluation of non-white bodies is essential to capitalism in order to justify actions that lead to environmental inequality and suffering. More attention is therefore needed to highlight the role the environment plays in inequality and marginalization (Moreno Parra, 2019; Pulido, 2017).

It is in this context that García Salazar and Walsh (2010; also Walsh and García Salazar, 2015) argue that the transmission and collection of collective memory plays a key role in struggles over and claim to territory, highlighting ancestry, history and continuity of Afro-descendant presence in Esmeraldas. In particular, Walsh (2011: 59), drawing on García Salazar (n.d.), highlights four elements that help us to *'understand the ways that the ancestral weaves with collective territoriality to build and order a life project and vision'* in relation to oral memory in Esmeraldas: history (on-going settlement),

establishment of a communal space of ancestral occupation (allowing for cultural reproduction in line with ancestral knowledge), co-existence or ancestral inheritance (living in solidarity with other peoples) and handling of natural resources (living harmoniously with nature). This collective memory in Esmeraldas highlights territory as a site of social, spiritual and cultural reproduction, and contains knowledge and wisdom about sustainable relationships between people and nature (see also Cedeño, 2017; Proceso de Comunidades Negras del Ecuador, 1997). Walsh and García Salazar (2015: 81) argue that territory is intimately connected with oral memory as:

‘Collective memory and oral traditions are historically based there, they are part of those experiences, practices, and pedagogies of thinking, feeling, being, becoming and doing, that afro-descendant people have sown and cultivated on initially foreign lands, land/territories made their own in the struggles involved in trafficking, re-existence and liberation.’ (translation ours).

In other words, territories and those who inhabit them constitute each other; the territory *is* collective memory, connections to ancestry, and so, the right to territory must be preserved to ensure continuity, belonging and identity are shared with future generations (García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). In the following section, we situate these struggles for territory in the wider context of Afro-descendant movements in Latin America and critically explore the important link between oral memory, ancestry and territory in Esmeraldas.

Afro-descendant populations and political organising in Latin America

Latin American national and trans-national Afro-descendant movements have ebbed and flowed throughout the 20th century and beyond, drawing upon a long history of resistance dating back to enslavement, and striving for freedom, recognition, citizenship and equality in a context where an identification with nation-state over race was generally promoted in the aftermath of colonial empires. In such contexts, attempts to organize around ‘race’ were often dismissed as ‘foreign importations’, invisibilizing the specific contexts and lived experiences of Afro-descendant populations (Abramo, 2022; Cárdenas, 2012; Curiel and Pión, 2022; Davis et al., 2012; Echeverri-Pineda, 2020; Rahier, 2012). Afro-Latin American transnational alliances gained greater visibility and recognition in the 1990s. A key moment came during the third World Conference Against Racism in Durban (2001) where they gained unprecedented recognition that racism and racial inequality exist in Latin American countries (Abramo, 2022; Cárdenas, 2012; Davis et al., 2012; Echeverri-Pineda, 2020; Rahier, 2012). Currently, the 2015-2024 UN decade of Afro-descendants aims to tackle issues regarding respect and human rights and the disadvantaged position of Afro-descendant people across the Americas in terms of chronic poverty, education and public representation. However, concerns about the outcomes of the decade are growing as it draws to a close (Johnson, 2021).

Afro-descendant and Black women have long played a role in the emergence of Afro-Latin American international alliances. In 1992, the Network of Afro-Latin American and Caribbean women (*Red de Mujeres Afrolatinoamericanas y Caribeñas*) was established with the aim of organizing Black women activists across Latin American borders (Davis et al., 2012; Echeverri-Pineda, 2020). Afro-descendant women often organize in response to concerns such as the differentiated impacts of racism for women, and the patriarchal structures within some existing Afro-descendant organizations (Asuntos del Sur y la Organización de los Estados Americanos, 2017; Curiel and Pión, 2022; Davis et al., 2012). The Activist Agenda of Afro-descendant women in Latin America (*La Agenda del Activismo de las Mujeres Afrodescendientes en América Latina*, by Asuntos del Sur y la Organización de los Estados Americanos, 2017) highlights how Black and Afro-descendant women on the continent face invisibility, a lack of representation, barriers to education, and the impacts of structural inequality, on top of gender-based violence, sexism and machismo. The document also highlights that women may face additional threats or violence as a result of being part of organizations advocating for Black and Afro-

descendant women's rights. Furthermore, they assert that Black women can also face racism within women's organizations, notably in feminist groups led by lighter-skinned women, highlighting the invisibility of race in feminist analyses of Latin American women's circumstances. Finally, the document also highlights that there are big differences between Afro-descendant women themselves, their organizations, and their priorities, emphasising, for example, that in contexts where women have difficulty meeting their basic needs, they cannot prioritize political participation. (Asuntos del Sur y la Organización de los Estados Americanos, 2017); see also Curiel and Pión, 2022; Gonzales, 1988).

While it is important to note that not all Black women's organizations, or Black women activists, identify as feminists, the women of the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective, including Juana⁶ reflect on their resistance and social organising through the practice of '*cimarronear*' feminisms (to maroon feminisms, drawing upon the concept of *cimarronaje*/marronage to inform their continued struggle). They argue this form of feminism recognizes tools, practices, experiences and rural knowledges which go beyond those included in other forms of Black feminism. Lozano Lerma (2016: 179) describes organizational *cimarronaje* as '*the practices conditioned by all colonial history that lead Black women to seek autonomy actively and creatively*' (translation ours). Those developing the concept of '*cimarronear* feminisms' draw on bottom-up community feminism, refuting the need for academic expression or legitimacy, and seeking to avoid academic appropriation of knowledge and practice. The *cimarronas* have a long history of resistance to slavery, the root of anti-Black racism in the Americas. Authors such as Lozano Lerma (2016) review the role of Afro-Colombian women during the processes of maroon resistance, rescuing their histories that are generally invisibilized as male voices are centred in these accounts and histories. These processes were carried out by Black women during enslavement, through nano-insurgencies but also in the leadership of marooning processes, as well as by women who *cimarronear* feminisms based on organizational practices. Political activism since the late twentieth century draws on the work of Black women in Colombia, like Polonia, who led a group of 150 *palenqueras*⁷ in the sixteenth century, and organized to defeat a settler in the territory of Malambo; or Agustina, who, when a ruling was made in favour of a slave owner who did not allow her to have an abortion, retaliated by burning several houses and factories in her town; or Ana María Matamba, who refused to bear the surname of her enslaver in order to maintain her native name from Angola (Lozano Lerma, 2016). In Ecuador, there was María Chiquinquirá, who initiated a lawsuit against her master to obtain her daughter's freedom, and Martina Carrillo, who fled the hacienda to demand better working conditions; among many other *cimarronas* who were invisibilized by history. Thus, those who today self-define as *cimarronas* build on a long history of Afro-descendant resistance.

In Ecuador, Afro-descendant communities have organized around race, culture and identity, as well as issues of human rights and leadership, since at least the middle of the last century, with movements particularly gaining numbers in the 1990s (Johnson, 2014). A constitutional reform in 1998 contained the first formal recognition of Afro-Ecuadorians and their rights to identity and tradition, spirituality, culture, language, politics, economy, territory, biodiversity and the management and conservation of natural resources in territories. A further, more expansive, reform in 2008 enhanced the official rights and recognition of Afro-descendant Ecuadorians, including the right to ancestral territory, prior consultation, and to not be displaced (Johnson, 2014; Moreno Parra, 2019; Rahier, 2012; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). However, it has been argued that this was a change in discourse but not in practice, resulting in few tangible improvements in the daily lives of Afro-Ecuadorian populations (Rahier, 2012; Rahier and Dougé-Prosper, 2012; Walsh, 2011). This is evidenced in the wide range of natural resource extraction activities occurring in the province without prior informed consent of the populations, and with devastating impacts on environment, territory and rights to land, as discussed in the previous section. A notable example is a mining law, passed shortly after the 2008 Constitution, favouring the rights of mining companies over those of communities (Walsh, 2011). Furthermore, Walsh and García Salazar (2015) emphasize that the state's inclusion of Afro-Ecuadorian rights in law

within the 2008 Constitution does not negate its general absence in their communities, nor the need for historical reparations.

As in other Andean countries, Afro-Ecuadorians suffer from processes of invisibilization; Afro-descendant populations are missing from 'official' accounts of national history, such as those taught in schools and museums, and understandings and representation of the nation state fail to mention Black populations' participation in, and contributions to, the nation: '*Within this conception of national identity Afro-Ecuadorians are not deemed worthy of study because they do not represent a separate culture*' (Johnson, 2014: 118). Devaluation of Afro-descendant and Black knowledges is thus common in Ecuador. This absence and silence on Blackness has implications for how people see themselves and their Blackness. The invisibility and absence of Afro-Ecuadorians within the school curriculum means that, unlike indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants may lack information about their history and struggles in Ecuadorian history, making it harder to find a (common) foundation for their struggles. Furthermore, where Black and Afro-descendant people are represented in media, education and public spaces, racial stereotyping is often evident; for Black women in particular, this means they are often represented as unrefined and hypersexualized, as well as subjected to beauty standards that favour whiteness (Beck et al., 2011; Johnson, 2014, 2021; Rahier, 1999). Furthermore, the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective identify that Black women have been objectified through an emphasis on their pain and suffering in media and cultural narratives.

Collectives such as *Re-existencia Cimarruna*, organized around anti-racist struggle, have proposed a relational and intercultural approach to understanding racism within Ecuador (Barboza and Zaragocin, 2021). Alongside an invisibilization of race, the ideology of *mestizaje*⁸ has led to an invisibilization of racism, stereotypes and discrimination in Ecuador, as in other Latin American countries. This trend has been reproduced in academia and development initiatives, leading to a focus on class inequality over racial inequality (Greene, 2012; Johnson, 2014; Lezama, 2012; Rahier, 1999, 2012; Reiter, 2012; Walsh, 2008; Whitten, 2003). A quantitative study in 2011 found that awareness of racism was generally low across the Ecuadorian population, including amongst marginalized groups; however, it was higher for Afro-Ecuadorians who did ascribe negative experiences in their lives to racism (Beck et al., 2011). In Esmeraldas city, Johnson (2007) found that students were aware of discrimination against Black people, but diminishing or denying the significance of race was also common. Furthermore, due to negative stereotypes associated with being Black, several participants distanced themselves from Blackness, '*through the claiming of a mestizo/a identity or choosing romantic partners whose skin color was lighter than their own.*' (48; see also the work of Curiel and Pión, 2022). Indeed, the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective highlights that some women in Esmeraldas do not identify as Black or as Afro-descendant, having been made to believe they are *mestiza*. Pineda (2017), an Afro-Venezuelan author, characterizes this denial in the process of self-recognition as *endo-racism*, which '*is racism from within, a self-discrimination emanating from the subject who suffers and experiences prejudice because of his ethnic-racial belonging.*' (12, translation ours), expressing the opportunity Black feminisms have to '*contribute in some way to the process of de-alienation in favour of the eradication of racism, endoracism and consequently the strengthening of different forms of resistance*' (55, translation ours).

The roles of aesthetics, gastronomy, and practices around health and spirituality, as well as their links with ancestry with roots in Africa, have long been mobilized by Afro-descendant women in Latin America as practices of resistance and reinforcing Black identity (Curiel and Pión, 2022). Similarly, collective memories and story-telling have been highlighted as key elements of Afro-descendant identity-building and struggles for the respect of their rights across Latin America (e.g. Bonilla-Escobar et al. (2017) in Colombia, Concha-Holmes (2012) in Cuba). In the same way, daily life and practices can be an important source of identity and resistance for Afro-Ecuadorians (Abad, 2012; Johnson, 2014; Walmsley, 2005; Walsh, 2011). Because the written word has never played a key role in the transmission of information, stories and philosophies within Afro-Ecuadorian communities (Walsh and

García Salazar, 2015), recognizing the scientific work and knowledges of Afro-Ecuadorian women in community oral cultures has been central to our research. Johnson (2014: 125) explains:

‘Through oral tradition Afro-Ecuadorians have guarded and preserved their history of struggle and resistance to colonial and national structures. As Afro-Ecuadorian youth attend state institutions of education they learn little to nothing about their social and historical location within the nation. Through the collective knowledge found within oral tradition Afro-Ecuadorians can reconstruct their identities and their social and historically denied location within the nation’

The contribution of Ecuadorian intellectual Juan García Salazar is particularly pertinent in this regard. He began by writing about *décimas*, a form of poetry, and exploring how African traditions, culture and religion were widely suppressed, ridiculed and discouraged under colonialism and afterwards (García Salazar, 1984). The Latin American *décima*, while performed in Spanish and often containing Christian motifs, is based on African traditions of oral storytelling and poetry, dealing with African themes. García Salazar found that the tradition of performing *décimas* was dying out, especially in the southern cantons and the more urbanized parts of Esmeraldas. While he did not think he could reverse this process, he started writing down *décimas* to ensure they would at least be preserved (García Salazar, 1984). García Salazar went on to be a prominent writer, collector and activist in the field of Afro-Ecuadorian practices and heritage, particularly oral traditions and ancestral, collective memory. In later work, he describes collective memory as:

‘the reaffirmation of what tradition teaches us, of what our ancestors teach [...] Collective memory is collectivized knowledge; for us, collective memory is consolidation, it is the verification of ancestral fact [...] collective memory is not an ephemeral account of the past, but rather a construct and a lasting record that signifies, feeds, builds and sustains the belonging, existence and continuity of the present with the past. In this sense, the older generation has always been key.’ (Walsh and García Salazar, 2015: 84, translation ours; see also García Salazar and Walsh, 2010).

Collective memory, he states, is in danger of being lost over time, as older generations pass away, alongside younger generations losing the interest to listen. Instead, knowledges from outside sources (e.g. ‘universal truths’ based on western traditional knowledge and cultures, as taught in schools) become accepted as facts, negating and erasing Afro-Ecuadorian knowledges, ontologies and truths. Walsh and García Salazar (2015) argue this leads to a risk of communities ‘forgetting’ their rights to reparation and ‘accepting’ inclusion/equal opportunity on the part of the state as ‘sufficient’ compensation. They argue that this is how modernity seeps in as a form of coloniality of the mind, endangering, for example, the historically important sense of the ‘collective’, in favour of the ‘western’ ideal of individualism (García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Walsh, 2011; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). This is why it is pertinent to collect and write down collective oral memory. As these are recorded and transcribed for future generations (exactly as they were spoken, which is important in this cultural context), they can be utilized to strengthen intergenerational understandings and a sense of belonging. Such recordings are not considered *individual* knowledge, but rather are representations of *collective* memory (Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). Furthermore, preserving traditional knowledge in writing is about more than preserving traditions and traditional knowledge; it is also about maintaining the link between communities and territories, which are understood to have created and continue to create each other; this is therefore particularly important in the context of growing resource extraction in the north of Esmeraldas (García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015), as outlined above.

García Salazar's work shows there has always been resistance against oppression in Afro-Ecuadorian communities, expressed through stories, *décimas*, riddles and songs, and his active work of collecting the stories of elders in the communities revived interest in them amongst young and old (Abad, 2012; Johnson, 2014; Kley Meyer, 2019). Ethno-education has become particularly important in these contexts; some schools now offer Afro-Ecuadorian education programmes focusing on cultural and racial identity and ancestral knowledge; this type of education is a continuation of struggles and resistance that began with colonialism (García Salazar, 2002; Johnson, 2014; Walsh, 2008). (Ethno)education and Afro-Ecuadorian resistance is often categorized into '*casa adentro*' ('in-house'/internal) and '*casa afuera*' (out-of-house/external) – two processes that are heavily interlinked. *Casa adentro* refers to Afro-descendants' self-recognition of unique values, ethics and practices, exploring the impacts of their relative invisibility in, and absence from, state narratives (as outlined above), as well as highlighting how identity, ancestry and knowledge are interlinked, and can be strengthened as a source of pride by all in the communities (Abad, 2012; García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Johnson, 2014; Walsh, 2011). For García Salazar, the *casa adentro* process is intimately linked with the practice of collecting and writing down collective memory, outlined above (Walsh and García Salazar, 2015). *Casa afuera*, on the other hand, refers to entering into dialogue with wider Ecuadorian society (and beyond), highlighting these unique aspects of Afro-descendant peoples in the country, and arguing for recognition and inclusion of their practices (Abad, 2012; Johnson, 2014). Here, collected and written down ancestral memory can be a tool for offering different visions, and resistance against dominant state-led narratives and impositions (Walsh, 2011; Walsh and García Salazar, 2015).

Marooning feminisms to 'visibilize' Afro-Ecuadorian women's struggles

Despite an increased recognition and valuing of Afro-Ecuadorian oral culture and collective memory, the voices, perspectives and knowledge of Black and Afro-descendant women continue to be invisibilized in public, policy and academic contexts (see also the work of Hernández Reyes (2019) on Colombia). It is in this complex context that the RECLAMA project, aims to foreground Afro-Ecuadorian women's oral histories, narratives and practices, exploring how these provide a form of resistance to histories and presents of dispossession, devaluation, marginalization and deterritorialization linked to large-scale resource extraction. Furthermore, the work supports the preservation of oral memory by focusing on the often-overlooked contributions of women to this heritage, supporting the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective's *casa adentro* and *casa afuera* work and initiatives in Ecuador and beyond, increasing visibility and recognition and offering counternarratives to public perceptions and stereotypes of Afro-descendant women, as well as to dominant narratives of development. This resignifying, and the broader project of *re-existencia*⁹ being embraced and promoted by Black feminist organizations and activists in the region, is essential in acting as a counterpoint to the socially, culturally and environmentally destructive impacts of the expansion of large-scale extraction, tackling deeply entrenched inequalities, and foregrounding the voices, memories and experiences of Afro-descendant communities.

While a growing body of academic work focuses on Afro-descendant women, Black bodies, and territory (e.g, Berman-Arévalo, 2021; Mollett, 2021), we emphasize that little of this theoretical production comes from Afro-Ecuadorian women themselves, in spite of the existence of Black feminist spaces and works (see for example SISA: Mujeres Activando, 2020). We also recognize that the academy has acted with violence and appropriation of knowledge when it comes to the knowledges of Black women in Ecuador and beyond. We therefore underline the importance of turning to the communal work done by Black women inhabiting Black territories, who organize and work on a range of issues to improve the living conditions of Afro-descendant women, including the production and preservation of ancestral knowledge from community memory, artistic and cultural production of community outreach, ethnoeducation, the defence of territory, the recovery of ecosystems, and the articulation of new forms of economy or independent and partisan political advocacy.

As described above, the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective works from an explicitly Black and maroon feminist perspective, recognising existing community work and knowledges from the territory of Esmeraldas. Their work includes the documentary *La ruta de las Cimarronas* (2020), which explores testimonies of Black women, recognising their struggles and feelings as self-affirmation of diverse Black women as possessors of knowledge and cultural values, learning and teaching through ethnoeducation. Similarly, in the documentary *Arrullos, mujeres de Esmeraldas* (2010), women from different cantons of Esmeraldas give testimonies of the gender-based violence experienced in their communities, and the work they are doing to combat this, through education and culture - particularly *caso adentro* with young people. The documentary highlights how the ancestral tradition of music is used as a means of denouncing issues faced by women within the communities. The processes upon which the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective builds their work, including within RECLAMA, share similarities with various activisms by Black women in other Black territories, for example the project *Mujeres narran sus territorios*, where women from Afro-descendant territories in Colombia work together on culture and literature, promoting their narratives from their point of view as those who live and struggle from and for their territory. The Mujeres de Asfalto Collective highlights three key moments in the process of Black Feminism in Ecuador specifically, outlining the vital role of RECLAMA within this process:

The **first moment** was in 2018, which saw increased representation and recognition of the community work of Black women in Black territories, particularly in relation to the sustainability of communities, which came with an increased scope for public political participation. Much of this participation related to the preservation of memory through culture: songs, instruments, dances, the organization of spaces through care work, as well as the thinking involved in creating spaces directed towards these practices. At this stage, the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective recognized the importance of having Black community researchers in Esmeraldas.

The **second moment** was the start of the RECLAMA project in 2019; this led to a process of Afro-Ecuadorian women's self-determination as representatives of their political spaces. The work on RECLAMA in Esmeraldas reinforced the recognition that Black women felt alienated from 'feminist' ideas and priorities created by and for white women. The exclusion of Black women, and the lack of recognition of the roles of race and class in feminist spaces is not exclusive to Esmeraldas or Ecuador, but is a phenomenon observed across contexts (Ribeiro, 2020). This recognition led to work for self-representation with the aim of centring Black women's priorities and resistance from their position of Blackness, such as recognizing sexual abuse or gender violence within their communities, or access to drinking water, and talking about processes including desired motherhood in dignified conditions, the situation of contamination of their lands, and mangrove ecosystems, among others.

The **third moment** was the recognition of Black Feminism as a political space, and the collective reconstruction of the meaning of *cimarronas/cimarronaje* as outlined above. RECLAMA is a part of this process, as the use of memory, articulation and exchange of knowledges gave practitioners and participants the chance to recognize themselves as Black feminists, and push back against the folklorization, caricatures and stereotypes they commonly face (as outlined above), using their dances, songs and music as a tool for resistance, affirmation and recognition. The women of the Mujeres de Asfalto Collective highlight how this has reaffirmed Black women's sense of belonging to the community, connecting this with the process of recognizing Black feminism as a political tool within their own spaces and communities. Finally, this contributes to learning not to force external visibility - these processes do not need to be seen or recognized by academia to be vindicated. This is why it was important for participants to decide on the narratives of the project; through paintings, *décimas*, music, aesthetics, and more. While acknowledging these practices also implies an exercise of recognition of pain, many of the young women who participated as peer researchers and/or

participants point out that spaces such as workshops and meetings, led by Black/*cimarrona* feminists, serve to build a social fabric, positively shaping their lives and reinforcing empowerment. Recognizing oneself as a *cimarrona* or a *feminist cimarrona* implies recognizing a conceptual deconstruction of how space is occupied; the practice of reflecting and revaluing knowledge of sustainability in their territories, and of what *cimarronaje* means in Black women's activism. Furthermore, through adopting this approach, it is possible to begin to analyse Black economies not simply from how they have been made precarious in cultural, domestic, or market economies, but also from a communal logic based on *cimarronaje*; asking how new economic strategies can be imagined to benefit communities. By speaking from multiple narratives, *cimarronaje* is a broad space which allows conversations on environmental, economic, social, political and cultural issues to take place, always with this fundamental centering of ethnicity and gender.

For this reason it is important to revindicate the political processes that Black women are leading in their territories, in contexts marked by racism and structural misogyny, in order to transform their realities. We therefore propose a framework that articulates Black and *cimarrona* feminisms with work that emphasizes the importance of orality and collective memory, situating these discussions within the wider context of Afro-descendant and Black political organising in Latin America. We argue that together these tools provide an opportunity to centre Black women's knowledge, community practices, and activism to understand the experiences of Afro-descended communities living in contexts affected by resource extraction. However, more than understanding their *experiences*, these insights allow us to go beyond recognising the violence and exclusions that are manifested in the context of Esmeraldas, providing an opportunity to bring to the fore the vital contribution of Black feminist activism and community work in *resisting* the dispossession and marginalization of Afro-descendant populations and their territories in contexts of extractivism.

Concluding Thoughts: *Cimarroneando* feminisms

Whilst there is an emerging recognition of the intersections of Blackness and Afro-descendance with territory and identity in different Latin American contexts (Berman-Arévalo, 2021; García Salazar and Walsh, 2010; Mollett, 2021; Rodríguez García, 2015; Zavala Guillen, 2021), this has rarely specifically drawn out the experiences of Black and Afro-descendant *women*. Similarly, issues of race and the experiences of Afro-descended populations have not received critical attention within the wider literature on gender and resource extraction (exceptions are the work of Barboza and Zaragocin, 2021; Gueso and Arroyo, 2002; Hernández Reyes, 2019; Moreno Parra, 2019). These silences have been especially acute within the anglophone, global North literature and within Development Studies. The precarious context of Esmeraldas, marked by state abandonment and overlapping types of socially and environmentally destructive large-scale resource extraction, alongside colonial histories and presents of violence and exclusion, provides a particularly stark example of exactly why these issues require urgent and sustained attention.

In this paper, we set out a research agenda that aims to open up spaces for Afro-descendant and Black women's knowledges to critically advance conceptualizations of the intersections of gender, race, memory and territory in the context of extractivism and its often violent (gendered and racialized) impacts. To do so, we acknowledge and foreground Black women's vital theoretical contributions, putting academic and activist knowledge on an equal footing in order to establish an anti-hierarchical, horizontal praxis of writing, which we consider part of the decolonial praxis underlying our communal philosophies of research. Within the RECLAMA project, we continue to take steps to decentre global North academia and acknowledge the wide range of factors influencing the complex context in which Black women in Esmeraldas find themselves, and propose this as a step contributing to building holistic, intersectional approaches to decolonial feminist theories and methodologies beyond our project. Specifically, we recognize and aim to 'visibilize' the collective memory and heritage of Afro-descendant women, and their embodied connections to particular territories and ways of life, as a

form of resistance to processes of extractivism, invisibilization and marginalization. Community-based conceptualizations of Black feminism, such as marooning feminism, are central to this process in simultaneously destabilizing the academic gaze and offering tools of resistance, aiming to open up spaces that situate Afro-Ecuadorian women's knowledges, experiences and collective memory at the centre of efforts to resist marginalization and extractivism.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ 44 percent of the population of Esmeraldas identify as Afro-Ecuadorian, versus a national average of 7 percent (INEC, 2010).

² The research took place between 2019-2022 and was funded by the British Academy/GCRF Global Challenges Research Fund.

³ *Propuesta para la creación de una comarca territorial de negros en la provincia de Esmeraldas.*

⁴ Whilst we focus here on Esmeraldas, scenarios of multiple and overlapping forms of resource extraction concentrated in a particular region are found across Latin America (for example in the Araucania region of Chile (salmon, hydro-electric, logging and mono-cropping), and across the Amazon region (logging, oil and gas extraction), as well as further afield (for example, Käkönen and Thuon, 2019) in relation to the Cardamom Mountains in Cambodia).

⁵ Whilst this and some other sources on which we draw are now quite dated, they remain important sources given the paucity of up-to-date research and information on these issues across the province.

⁶ Whilst in the interests of finding a coherent voice for this article we write about Black Afro-Ecuadorian women as 'they', for Juana this should be expressed as 'we'.

⁷ inhabitants of a *palenque*; a settlement of free Africans, starting during the colonial era

⁸ Literally referring to 'racial mixing', *mestizaje* has been used in many Latin American countries as a nation-building exercise in post-colonial contexts, promoting cultural as well as racial mixing in the process of creating a national identity (Bodenheimer, 2019)

⁹ See Gabbert and Lang (2019) for a useful overview of the concept of *re-existencia*.

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